

‘A parcel of muddling muckworms’: revisiting Habermas
and the Early Modern English coffee-houses

Eric Laurier¹ & Chris Philo²

¹Institute of Geography, School of Geosciences, University of Edinburgh, UK;

²Department of Geography and Geomatics, Centre for Geosciences, University
of Glasgow, Glasgow, UK

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Abstract

In the context of a research project concerned with contemporary cafés, one in which coffee-shops have loomed large, it has been appropriate to revisit Habermas's famous 1962/1989 work on the transformation of the 'public sphere', wherein the figure of the Early Modern English coffee-house holds considerable significance. The outlines of Habermas's claims are inspected, and three lines of critique – to do with spatiality, sociability and practices – are held up against his depiction of coffee-houses as relatively contained and egalitarian spaces of calm rational-critical debate. Theoretical work is combined with a re-reading of Habermas's own fragmentary notes on the coffee-house, together with some borrowings from both secondary texts and republished primary sources. The chief aim is to develop critical materials to inform further inquiry into coffee-houses and similar establishments, past and present, as sites for the practical conduct of public life.

Key words: Habermas, coffee-houses, spatiality, sociability, practices.

Introduction

In the place I most usually frequent, Men differ rather in the Time of Day in which they make a Figure, than in any real Greatness above one another. I, who am at the Coffee-house at Six in a Morning, know that my Friend *Beaver* the Haberdasher has a Levy of more undissembled Friends and Admirers, than most of the Courtiers or Generals of *Great Britain*. ... Our Coffee-house is near one of the Inns of Court, and *Beaver* has the Audience and Admiration of his Neighbours from Six 'till within a Quarter of Eight, at which time he is interrupted by the Students of the House; some of whom are ready dressed for *Westminster*, at Eight in a Morning, with Faces as busie as if they were retained in every Cause there; and others come in their Night-Gowns to saunter away their Time, as if they never designed to go thither. ...

When the Day grows too busie for these Gentlemen ..., they give Place to Men who have Business or good Sense in their Faces, and come to the Coffee-house either to transact Affairs, or enjoy Conservation. ... Of these sort of Men consist the worthier Part of Mankind; of these are all good Fathers, generous Brothers, sincere Friends, and faithful Subjects. Their Entertainments are derived rather from Reason than Imagination: Which is the Cause that there is no Impatience or Instability in their Speech or Action. ... These are the Men formed for Society, and those little Communities which we express by the Word *Neighbourhoods*.

The Coffee-house is the Place of Rendezvous to all that live near it, who are thus turned to relish calm and ordinary Life. *Ebulus* presides over the middle Hours of the Day, when this Assembly of Men meet together. He enjoys a great Fortune handsomely, without launching into Expence; and exerts many noble and useful Qualities, without appearing in any publick Employment. His Wisdom and Knowledge are serviceable to all that think fit to make use of them;

Having here given an Account of the several Reigns that succeed each other from Day-break 'till Dinner-time, I shall mention the Monarchs of the Afternoon on another occasion, and shut up the whole Series of them with the History of *Tom* the Tyrant; who, as first Minister of the Coffee-house, takes the Government

upon him between the Hours of Eleven and Twelve at Night, and gives his Orders in the most Arbitrary manner to the Servants below him, as to the Disposition of Liquors, Coal and Cinders.

(in Ross 1982: 287-289)

This is ethnography eighteenth-century style. It is the abbreviated version of a piece that Richard Steele penned for *The Spectator*, the London-based satirical magazine that he founded in the early-1700s, and it captures the rhythms of a typical day spent in a busy coffee-house. ‘Steele explores the social space of the coffee-house by charting the ebb and flow of customers through the day in Mr Spectator’s favourite coffee-house’ (Ellis 2001: 29), and we hear about the differing constituencies of coffee-drinker who arrive in this space at different hours, inscribing upon it their own distinctive ways of conversing, interacting and dwelling there. Interestingly, these crowds vary in the extent to which their inhabitation of the space is ribald or mannered, and it might be argued that at root ‘Steele consciously revises the character of the coffee-house in his own reformatory image’, such that ‘[i]n his vision the coffee-house becomes the ‘Place of Rendezvous to all ... thus turned to relish calm and ordinary Life’’ (Ellis 2001: 29; see also Ellis 2004: 194-196). This does not mean that he forgets about those for whom such ‘calm’ is largely absent, but it does mean that a preference is shown for those men – and he means *men* – whose ‘Entertainments are derived rather from Reason than Imagination’. Steele’s ethnography hence reveals a fundamental tension between the coffee house as ‘the Place of Rendezvous to all’, whatever their demeanour, and its population by those ‘good Fathers, generous Brothers, sincere Friends, and faithful Subjects’ for whom the calm of reason should forever be the compass. It will be seen that this tension is central to what follows.

The context for the present paper is a research project concerned with the practical conduct of public life in contemporary cafés, one of our objectives being to use ‘ethno-archaeological’ (Laurier & Philo 2004) procedures in illuminating the commonplace practices through which specific social spaces occasion the routine accomplishment of an inclusive public life attentive to the needs of others.¹ Our investigations are grounded in the situated courses of shared action that constitute what might be termed ‘habitable cities’, wondering with Thrift (2005) about the affective dimensions of inhabiting the spaces of such cities. Within our project, coffee-shops, espresso bars and their like have loomed large, firstly for the contemporary significance of their growing presence across the cityscapes of Britain, Northern Europe, Australia, New Zealand and the USA (Allegra 2005), and secondly for the historical importance of their emergence as a place of urban conviviality. There is a particular theoretical resonance here, moreover, in that what were once

¹ ESRC funded project ‘The Cappuccino Community; cafés and civic life in the contemporary city’ (Reference No.R000239797). Further information about this project, including field reports and working papers, can be seen at www.geog.gla.ac.uk/~elaurier/dynamic/cafesite/.

called coffee-houses play a central role in Jürgen Habermas's well-known text translated as *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (Habermas 1989; henceforth *ST*). In a companion paper we bring Habermas's claims into direct contact with our empirical materials (Laurier & Philo 2005), while here we develop a three-pronged critique – to do with spatiality, sociability and practice – trained on what we regard as Habermas's reductive and theoretically over-stipulative treatment of located conversations in coffee houses. We begin by outlining his version of the public sphere, and we extract what he says about the coffee-house as the exemplification of his theoretical concerns, and we insert a little extra historical evidence to flesh out connections that he implies but never expands. We next examine critiques directed at his notion of the public sphere, and in the process rethink matters of spatiality, sociability and practice with a particular purchase on what he says about the coffee-houses. We then borrow from both secondary texts and republished primary sources to get closer to both the public sphere as an accomplishment and the life-world of these coffee-houses, the aim being to elucidate the emergent relations between coffee houses and publics (both in the plural).

Habermas, the birth of the public sphere and the coffee-houses: an outline

Habermas's book was published in 1989, a translation into English of the German version published in 1962 (for commentary see Calhoun 1992a; Hill & Montag 2000).² He discusses the emergence of what he terms the 'bourgeois public sphere' from the late-seventeenth century in Western Europe, seeing this as the product of a middle-class dependent on its own endeavours for wealth-creation, rather than on inheritance and land-ownership.³ He defines this entity as 'the sphere of private people come together as a public' (*ST*, 27), locating it in a process whereby 'private individuals' – in the sense of individuals and their concerns for the affairs of family and hearth – acquired a collective character through orientating their attention to matters with a measure of generality ripe for debate at length with others. The point is less that these individuals might hold positions of 'power' within society *requiring* them to take seriously matters of cultural and political concern, and more that they *elected* to do so, choosing to spend time with others in the mutual consideration of issues that in earlier centuries, arguably, they would not have tackled. They now

² The focus will be very much *The Structural Transformation* itself, and little attempt is made to relate it to later works by Habermas (eg. 1984, 1987) on the likes of the 'ideal speech situation', even though there is often a tendency to do so, sometimes to the detriment of taking seriously the historical-empirical content found here but less so elsewhere in Habermas's corpus (a point made by Hohendahl 1992: esp.100-101).

³ Habermas narrows his focus to 'the *liberal* model of the bourgeois public sphere', differentiating it from 'the *plebian* public sphere' associated with the French Revolution, 'the Chartist movement and especially in the anarchist traditions of the workers' movement on the continent', even if in various ways this sphere 'remains oriented towards the intentions of the bourgeois public sphere' (*ST*: xviii).

entered into discourse⁴ with the expectation that their views, as crystallising out of the public debate to comprise what ‘public opinion’, would circulate and even have some ‘consequence’ for the workings of state policy, domestic and foreign.

This is the transformation of the public sphere at the heart of Habermas’s book. It is a big story energised by grand theory, and a sizeable subtext is the extent to which this development was tied up with an extension of Enlightenment Reason, meaning the growing codification of rational principles in debate, inquiry and policy, throughout the social body (see also Calhoun 1992b: 17-18). Upon introducing the ‘basic blueprint’ of the bourgeois public sphere, for instance, Habermas insists that ‘[t]he medium of this political confrontation,’ meaning private individuals collectively debating the basis for public authority over the likes of commodity exchange and social labour (see below), ‘was peculiar and without historical precedent: people’s public use of their reason (*offentliches Rasonnement*)’ (ST: 27). Repeated reference is made subsequently to ‘rational-critical public debate’ (eg. ST: 28), as the vehicle for the educated bourgeois public – the ‘bourgeois reading public’ (ST: 85) – to make its claims in the face of dominating power. ‘The bourgeois public sphere institutionalised, according to Habermas, not just a set of interests and an opposition between state and society, but a practice of rational-critical discourse on political matters’ (Calhoun 1992b: 9). In this rational arena, so the logic goes, a ‘general interest’ that ‘need not be distorted by particular interests’ is permitted to flourish, guaranteed by an agreed ‘rational approach to an objective order, that is to say, of truth’ (Calhoun 1992b: 9).

The suggestion from Habermas is that an initial version of the public sphere appeared in the later-seventeenth century as a predominantly cultural-literary realm: the ‘public sphere in the world of letters’ (*literarische Offentlichkeit*). Subsequently, and of most interest to Habermas, this development paved the way for the emergence of ‘the public sphere in the political realm’ (*politische Offentlichkeit*) during the later-eighteenth century and into the nineteenth and beyond. As he writes, ‘[t]he public sphere in the political realm evolved from the public sphere in the world of letters’ (ST: 30-31), and in the process created that realm of public opinion which, in a deceptively simple sense, he suggests ‘put the state in touch with the needs of society’ (ST: 31). He elucidates ‘the historical and social location in which this self-interpretation developed’ (ST: 85), meaning the times and spaces carrying the growth of this public opinion through which the bourgeoisie came to know (and to represent) itself and its cultural-political concerns. Initially, it surfaced in the family home – as will be explained further in a moment – but it also flowed out into more public sites, as in ones where individuals could meet and discourse with one another outside of the

⁴ In what is effectively a gloss on Habermas’s claims, Sennett (1974: esp.81-82) emphasises the importance of *speech*, of rational discoursing, and a small part of his larger argument is that spaces like coffee-houses enabled a particular kind of ‘public speech’ to flourish away from the private intimacies of the home.

family home, notably the coffee-houses of London.

Habermas discusses how during the seventeenth century ‘courtly-noble society’ gradually ‘became independent from the monarch’s personal sphere’, separating itself from the court (in the royal residences) and moving more to ‘the town’. ‘[I]n town’, basically meaning London, the country’s capital, ‘[t]he bourgeois avant-garde of the educated middle class learned the art of critical-rational public debate’, precisely ‘through its contact with the ‘elegant world’’ (ST: 29) of this relocating courtly-noble society. It is here, then, that Habermas first spells out the importance of coffee-houses and other public spaces, positioning them all as urban phenomena:

The ‘town’ was the life centre of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated exactly an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were the coffee houses, the *salons*, and the *Tischgesellschaften* (table societies). (ST: 30).⁵

When discussing the British case, Habermas identifies a shift between court and town occurring after the ‘Glorious Revolution’ (the English Civil War and the removal, if temporarily, of the monarch). The court became ‘the residence of secluded royalty, pointed out from afar, difficult of access save on formal occasions of proverbial dullness’ (ST: 32); and instead the locus of cultural life, and increasingly also that of political debate, shifted to the institutions of the town that supported the emergent public sphere (with its bourgeois underpinnings but ‘humanistic-aristocratic’ associations):⁶

The predominance of the ‘town’ was strengthened by new institutions that, for all their variety, in Great Britain and France took over the same social functions: the coffee-houses in their golden age between 1680 and 1730 and the *salons* in the period between regency and revolution. In both countries they were centres of criticism – literary at first, then also political – in which began to emerge, between aristocratic society and bourgeois intellectuals, a certain parity of the educated. (ST: 32)

It is worth quoting at length a further extract where Habermas pursues empirical detail about London coffee-houses:

⁵ Habermas insists that there were important commonalities between and across the different public spaces mentioned here: ‘However much the *Tischgesellschaften*, *salons* and coffee-houses may have differed in the size and composition of their publics, the style of their proceedings, the climate of their debates, and their topical orientations, they all organised discussion among private people that tended to be ongoing; hence, they had a number of institutional criteria in common’ (ST: 36). Note the rather post-modern sounding reference here to publics, in the plural, which is potentially significant given certain ways in which he effectively downplays the differences between different clienteles of these spaces (wanting to stress a homogeneity to the emerging bourgeois public sphere, rather than identifying notable fractures in its constitution). See further discussion below.

⁶ Note also Sennett’s (1974: 17) claim that: ‘As the cities grew, and developed networks of sociability independent of direct royal control, places where strangers might regularly meet grew up. ... It was the era in which coffee-houses, cafés and coaching inns became social centres’.

Around the middle of the seventeenth century, after not only tea – first to be popular – but also chocolate and coffee had become the common beverages of at least the well-to-do strata of the population, the coachman of a Levantine merchant opened the first coffee house. By the first decade of the eighteenth century London already had 3,000 of them, each with a core group of regulars. Just as Dryden, surrounded by the new generation of writers, joined the battle of the ‘ancients and moderns’ at Will’s, Addison and Steele a little later convened their ‘little senate’ at Button’s; so too in the Rotary Club, presided over by Milton’s secretary, Marvell and Pepys met with Harrington who here probably presented the republican ideas of his *Oceana*. As in the *salons* where ‘intellectuals’ met with the aristocracy, literature had to legitimate itself in these coffee-houses. In this case, however, the nobility joining the upper bourgeois stratum still possessed the social functions lost by the French; it represented landed and moneyed interests. Thus critical debate ignited by works of literature and art was soon extended to include economic and political disputes without any guarantee (such as was given in the *salons*) that such discussions would be inconsequential, at least in the immediate context. (*ST*; 32-33)⁷

Habermas actually says little more all that explicitly about the coffee-houses *per se*, but there is no doubt that any attempt to envisage what he means when talking about the rise of the public sphere is assisted by the image of those educated representatives of the bourgeois discoursing enthusiastically about the big issues of the day over steaming pots of coffee in these smoky spaces of public opinion-forming spread across town (see **Figure 1**). Such, then, is the place of the coffee-houses, what one author once called the ‘penny universities’ (Ellis 1956: esp.Chap.9), in the fuller sweep of Habermas’s arguments (see also Howell 1993: 310).

A large number of coffee-houses did diffuse across London’s cityscape, and Lillywhite (1963) provides both a timeline of their development – following from the opening in 1652 of Bowman’s coffee-house known as Pasqua Rose in St Michael’s Alley, Cornhill – and a register of the many hundreds of establishments operated from the seventeenth into the nineteenth centuries. He demonstrates their progress from being regarded with suspicion, as in a Proclamation of 1675 calling for their suppression for being ‘places where the disaffected met’ (see also Ellis 2004: Chap.7), to being key vehicles ‘in the early postal development of London, which in time led to the organised delivery of letters, and the distribution of newspapers’ (Lillywhite 1963: 18-19). Habermas makes little of the connections with the post as a key element in spatially integrating ‘the public’ through reasonably assured vectors whereby citizens communicate with one another across physical distance, but the connection with

⁷Here Habermas draws upon a secondary history of literature and society in eighteenth-century London, two German-language works on the coffee-houses (1924 and 1958), and also an account of ‘The clubs of London’ in the *National Review* (April, 1857, p.301) that neatly describes how ‘[e]very profession, trade, class, party, had its favourite coffee-house’. We will return shortly to this point about differentiation in the coffee-house world.

newspapers and the ‘journalistic’ construction of public opinion is considered (see also Ellis 2004: 68-74; Sennett 1974: 81). Indeed, that the coffee-houses were linked together in a wider network stretching beyond in the individual nodes is itself empirically verifiable, as Habermas explains in a significant passage binding together several different elements of his account (notably sites such as coffee-houses with early forms of literary and political journalism):

When Addison and Steele published the first issue of *The Tatler* in 1709, the coffee-houses were already so numerous and the circles of their frequenters already so wide, that contact among these thousandfold circles could only be maintained through a journal. At the same time the new periodical was so intimately interwoven with the life of the coffee houses that the individual issues were indeed sufficient basis for its reconstruction. The periodical articles were not only made the object of discussion by the public of the coffee houses but were viewed as integral parts of this discussion; this was demonstrated by the flood of letters from which the editor each week published a selection. When the *Spectator* separated from the *Guardian* the letters to the editor were provided with a special institution: on the west side of Button’s Coffee House a lion’s head was attached through whose jaws the reader threw his letter.⁸(*ST*: 42)

This passage does indeed imply a London coffee-house society with some measure of overall cohesion, the patrons of these houses being bound together into a ‘society’ of sorts even though many of them would never meet each other personally, knowing only those who frequented the same coffee-houses as themselves. The periodicals, the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, arose within this society, reflecting its concerns, and expressly giving the impression of being written *from* coffee-house tables after coffee-house discussions. At the same time, they circulated around the coffee houses, being bought there, often read there and then commonly the subject of debate there, comprising a satisfying homology between form and content (between personnel, spaces, networks and the contents of things up for discussion and even decision: see also Mackie 1998: 15-17).

The first issue of *The Tatler* effectively set up the linkages between the coffee-houses, the ‘political’ domain of rational-critical debate, and the emergence of a public sphere. The magazine was published by one Isaac Bickerstaff, a pseudonym for Richard Steele, who provided this reasoning for his course of action:

Tho’ the other Papers which are published for the Use of the good People of England have certainly very wholesome Effects, and are laudable in their particular Kinds, they do not seem to come up to the main Design of such Narrations, which, I humbly presume, should be principally intended for the Use of Politick Persons, who are so publick-spirited as to neglect their own Affairs to look into Transactions of State. (in Ross 1982: 65;

⁸Tellingly, ‘the *Tatler* expressly addressed the ‘worthy citizens who live more in a coffee house than in their shops’’ (in the *Tatler*, 17th May, 1709: see *ST*: Footnote 36: 260).

italics in original)

Bickerstaff resolved to publish his ‘Advices and Reflections every Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday’, and, significantly, he decided to divide up the different sections of the magazine as if they were being written from different coffee-houses:

All Accounts of Gallantry, Pleasure, and Entertainment, shall be under the Article of White’s Chocolate-house; Poetry, under that of Will’s Coffee-house; Learning under the title of Graecian; Foreign and Dometick News, you will have from St. James’s Coffee-house; and what else I have to offer on any other Subject, shall be dated from my own Apartment. (in Ross 1982: 65-66; italics in original)

As Mackie (1988: 15-16) elaborates about the status of *The Tatler*, ‘[t]he paper’s design thus traces London’s social geography: its departments stand as newsprint analogues of actual places, public and private’. Arguably, Habermas could have explored these linkages further in securing his own claims, particularly given how readily the likes of Mackie (1998: 17; see also Ellis 2004: 185-196; Sennett 1974: 80-82, 222) conclude that it was precisely through the intersection of ‘institutions like the press and the coffee-house’ that ‘a new notion of the ‘public’ arose, one that was composed of private individuals who came together to debate and negotiate matters of public concern, to formulate ‘public opinion’.

Grounds of the public sphere: materials for a critique

Writing in 1992, Benhabib instigated discussion about what can be termed the *spatialities* of the public sphere as understood by Habermas, and it is pertinent that she refers to Habermas as thinking in terms of ‘discursive public space’ (Benhabib 1992: 73) or a ‘discourse model of public space’ (Benhabib 1992: 84).⁹ More

⁹ Benhabib counterposes Habermas to both Arendt and Ackerman in her rethinking of *ST* through the lens of public space, and much the same manoeuvre, explicitly drawing upon Arendt to spatialise the concerns of Habermas, can be found in Howell (1993), one of the few sustained treatments of *ST* by a geographer (see also Phillips 1995, esp.: 93-101). Howell (1993: 309-313) carefully deconstructs the tension in *ST* between ‘a normative ideal of popular, participatory political action’, boasting a supposed ‘universality [of] ... communicative rationality’, and ‘the particular, the local, ... the specific’ circumstances, times and spaces – ‘the recognisable contexts, real problems, and moral situations’ – in which the historical model or spur for such a normative projection arose in the first place. He thereby introduces the fractures of empirical historical geography as a qualifier of the extent to which Habermas can or should generalise his notion of the public sphere away from certain corners of Early Modern Europe, and in so doing he also notes possible lines of attack by ‘an anti-foundationalist communitarian political theory’ or, indeed, by ‘a contextual social theory’. He resists the full implications of such a shift, nonetheless, preferring instead to use Arendt as a vehicle in an argument recovering broader principles of ‘something very like a public geography in which the fullest human action, that is to say, political action, can survive and flourish’ (Howell 1993: 318). Here, moreover, he gestures to how an Arendtian refashioning of Habermas in *ST* allows us to retrieve ‘a geography of ‘the small hidden islands of freedom’ [quoting Arendt]’, meaning a plurality of public spaces which might include – although Howell does not make the connection – the likes of coffee-houses, past and present. Such a vision is actually very close to our own, both here and elsewhere (Laurier & Philo 2005).

specifically, she proposes that:

Public space is not understood ... as a space of competition for acclaim and immortality among a political elite; it is viewed democratically as the creation of procedures whereby those affected by general social norms and collective political decisions can have a say in their formulation, stipulation and adoption. (Benhabib 1992: 87)

We hope that this definition rings true given our brief exegesis above, but what we would now add is that her conception of public space remains somewhat metaphorical, only weakly specified in any relationship to the organisation and differentiation of spaces whereby people may actually meet to ‘have a say’ as members of the (or *a*) public. For Benhabib, the spaces involved are to do with the enacting of ‘procedures’, the practising of a certain ‘democracy’ in who can go through with the practical action of arriving and then speaking to others, free as far as possible from any threat of violence, coercion or undue exertion of dominating power. By hinting a little more at the interlinked procedural and practice-based dimensions, Benhabib usefully inflects Habermas’s position in the direction of foregrounding practices in a fashion akin to what we favour (see below). Yet the limited engagement with how spaces provide possibilities of habitation for new socio-historical entities (such as ‘the public’) cannot be denied, despite, in the simplest of senses, it being easy to envisage mapping across from what Habermas means by the public sphere, perhaps via Benhabib’s first attempt at spatialising the concept, to the spaces of ‘mundane reason’ (Pollner 1987) present in, say, the coffee-house. In his historical analysis, Habermas makes precisely the latter step, albeit without pausing to reflect on what he has done nor its possible implications; and hence our interest and the motivation for the present paper.

What is clear, though, is that Habermas’s public sphere cannot – and should not – be mapped straightforwardly on to features of the city that are routinely categorised as, and in effect collected by, the idea of public space. A key intervention is one by Montag (2000), who contrasts what Habermas means by the public sphere with how he deploys the figure of ‘the street’ in his 1962/1989 work. Montag starts from a single sentence of Habermas’s: ‘Laws passed under the ‘pressure of the street’ could hardly be understood as embodying the reasonable consensus of publicly debating private persons’ (translated from the German in Montag 2000: 133). What he concludes is that, for Habermas, the street is an unruly territory, a place of violent conflict consistently descending into the use of force to back up demands, and as such it departs from the peaceful spaces of the public sphere wherein the only force is that of the superior argument most thoroughly reasoned out for all present to hear, understand and (logically) accept. ‘To speak from the street’, Montag (2000: 141) glosses, ‘is to speak from outside the public sphere’; it is ‘in no way an alternative public sphere’, for ‘it is precisely not a sphere of rational critique or even discussion

at all'. The street and the public sphere are therefore fundamentally separate, even opposed, and ideally should be kept apart and devoid of mixing: 'The freedom [that] rational critical debate enjoys within its own realm depends upon its scrupulous observance of this territorial imperative' (Montag 2000: 141). The street, thus conceived, stands as a semi-metaphoric, almost materialised counterpart to Habermas's public sphere, and the image does present itself of the coffee-house, notably in its eighteenth-century guise, as the home of a calm public sphere removed from the churning irrationality of the street outside. What, though, is it about the street that prevents debate and reasonable consensus? In response, and as we briefly elaborate later, we might answer that it is simply too filled with flows, too open to interruption and disruption, too uncontrolled and it offers no place for rest and conversation beyond the stray shout. While all of society might be there in the street, they can in no way do all of the things that a community requires; and so what the spatial ordering of the coffee-house was offering at its moment of emergence, Habermas reminds us, is an architecture for extended good conversation amongst non-family members.¹⁰

Noting the exact location of Habermas's emerging public sphere in only certain new spaces brings us to a persuasive claim recently made by Bartolovich (2000). In a dense text, drawing upon postcolonial critiques of the 'localism' within famous works of cultural theory, Bartolovich (see also Eley 1992) questions the extent to which Habermas's public sphere tends to be conceptualised as emergent with the space of a nation-state, largely untouched by interactions with 'others' elsewhere. 'Habermas suggests that historically a 'public' forms itself 'within' and in relation to a *particular* 'bourgeois constitutional state'' (Bartolovich 2000: 15, emphasis in original), and that there is a 'diffusionist' logic – a 'tidy one-way diffusionism' – whereby the public sphere spreads from 'its ur-form [in] the northern and western European nation-state territories' to 'the 'belated states' of Italy, Germany and elsewhere (Bartolovich 2000: 17). Instead, Bartolovich (2000: 17) argues that 'the supposedly originary and autonomous European public spheres may have been 'stimulated from outside' as well', insisting on the 'transnational' character of the processes at work here. The details of her account need not detain us, but of moment is her insight into 'this problem of the production of the *space* of 'the public sphere(s)', proposing that, 'to understand the operation of its logic of inclusion/exclusion, we need to understand what I will call here its 'geo-graphy' – the writing of the world on which it depends' (Bartolovich 2000: 16, emphasis in original). In short, we must be critical of representations depicting the public sphere as dependent upon simple, contained and (en)closed material spaces, when much

¹⁰ Intriguingly, Sennett (1974: 84-85) argues that the later-eighteenth century street, or more generally outdoors public space, threatened or at least could not sustain the 'public speech' of coffeehouse life, precisely because it allowed too much 'open encounter', lending scant structure to sporadic and chance meetings in which conversations could not be anything but snatched and superficial.

evidence implies that such spaces were really much more complex, porous and fragmentary, criss-crossed by all manner of peoples, ideas, ‘forces’ and ‘impurities’ (Bartolovich 2000: 19; see also Howell 1993: 310). This being said, while Bartolovich’s critique reminds us that the ‘geo-graphy’ of the public sphere is not neatly contained but a fluid space of multiple encounters, what it does not supply is a solution to the problem of how the public is made possible when a continual through-flow of people would seemingly push it to the point of dissolution. The question then returns for us as to how the coffee house does provide, as a practical solution, a pocket of pleasurable order, a patch of convivial stability in the potentially liquifying and anonymising movement of peoples, ideas and materials? If Foucault (eg. 1970) has taught us anything in his general histories, it is that Reason, knowledge or indeed the public sphere cannot be universal constants guaranteeing the onward movement of total histories.

Rethinking the public sphere as a course of action rather than an over-arching grid is closely bound up with re-examining what might be claimed about the particular form of *sociability* upon which it allegedly depended. Habermas states that the public sphere ‘preserved a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing the equality of status, disregarded status altogether’ (*ST*: 37). Social standing, political influence and economic power were dismissed from the historical public sphere as irrelevances, so Habermas supposes, in that the force of the superior argument was all that would ‘carry the day’, rather than physical force, rank or judicial machinery.¹¹ In other words, the form of sociability envisaged here was egalitarian, the implication being less a total homogeneity in who contributed to the emerging discourse of public opinion, more a sense of enlarging possibilities for all sorts of people, from varying backgrounds, to be contributing to the critical-rational debate.¹² Unsurprisingly, critics have taken Habermas to task on precisely this assumption, rendering him ‘vulnerable to charges of ethnocentrism, sexism and abstraction’ (Howell 1993: 311). Fraser’s (1992) brilliant critique summarises much that is at stake:

... scholars like ... Landes [1988], ... Ryan [1992] and ... Eley [1992]

¹¹ This attribution or self-image of the scrupulously egalitarian coffee-house ties in with what Habermas argues about ‘the principle of universal access’ to the public sphere, and he speculates that this sphere was taken as ‘public’ in the strict sense that ‘all human beings belong to it’, or ought to be able to belong to it provided that certain conventions of rational argumentation were followed (see *ST*: esp.85). This claim is also at the heart of what Sennett (1974: esp.81-82) argues about the coffee-houses, in that he depicts ‘[c]offee-house speech [a]s the extreme case of ... a sign system of meaning divorced from – indeed in defiance of – symbols of meaning like rank, origins, taste, all visibly at hand’. ‘Distinctions of rank’ were ‘temporarily suspended’, then, and ‘[p]eople acted ‘as if’ the differences between themselves did not exist – for the moment’ (Sennett 1974: 322).

¹² He nonetheless admits to idealising this apparent egalitarian sociability: ‘Not that this idea of the public was actually realised in earnest in the coffee houses, the *salons* and the societies; but as an idea it had become institutionalised and thereby stated as an objective claim. If not realised, it was at least consequential’ (*ST*: 36).

contend that Habermas's account idealises the liberal public sphere. They argue that, despite the rhetoric of publicity and accessibility, the official public sphere rested on, indeed was importantly constituted by, a number of significant exclusions. For Landes, the key axis of exclusion is gender; she argues that the ethos of the new republican public sphere in France was constructed in deliberate opposition to that of a more woman-friendly salon culture that the republicans stigmatised as 'artificial', 'effeminate' and 'aristocratic'. ... Extending Landes's argument, ... Eley contends that exclusionary operations were essential to liberal public spheres not only in France but also in England and Germany, and that in all these countries gender exclusions were linked to other exclusions rooted in processes of class formation. ... [T]he elaboration of a distinctive culture of civil society and of an associated public sphere was implicated in the process of bourgeois class formation; its practices and ethos were markers of 'distinction' in ... Bourdieu's sense, ways of defining an emergent elite, of setting it off from the older aristocratic elites it was intent on displacing on the one hand and from the various popular and plebian strata it aspired to rule on the other. (Fraser 1992: 114).¹³

There is much to note about this passage, including a different take on the relationship between aristocratic and bourgeois factions to that implied by Habermas, as briefly covered above, but the chief message is that the 'actually existing'¹⁴ public sphere – that approximating Habermas's conceptualisation – was fractured by exclusionary lines scratched in the sands of social distinction.¹⁵ Moreover, Fraser (1992: 115) speculates about the existence of 'other, nonliberal, nonbourgeois, competing public spheres', and thereby makes the decisive move to pluralising Habermas's singular public, writing instead about multiple publics. The studies on which she draws show that 'the bourgeois public was never *the* public', and that 'virtually contemporaneous with the bourgeois public sphere there arose a host of competing counterpublics, including nationalist publics, popular peasant publics, elite women's publics and working-class publics' (Fraser 1992: 116; see also Aronowitz 2000; Daniel 2000;

¹³ Fraser offers further points about the public-private divide, powerfully theorising that gendered separation of the public and private spheres, the latter increasingly mapped on to the home spaces of domestic(ated) femininity, which is now a staple of feminist geography (eg. Bondi & Domosh 1998, as see pp.275-276 in this paper for some specific comments on Habermas's claims in *ST*).

¹⁴ Fraser repeatedly uses the term 'actually existing', indicating her wish to consider what might be the empirical referents for or correlates of Habermas's more abstract claims about the public sphere. Herein also lies her appeal to 'new revisionist historiographies', meaning work by the likes of Eley, Landes and Ryan, boasting a rich empirical basis to hold up against Habermas's theoretically-driven narrative.

¹⁵ In class terms, Habermas does admit that *de facto* criteria for admission to the public sphere, depending on education, could not fail to hinge as well on economic position: 'for formal education at that time was more a consequence than a precondition of social status, which in turn was primarily determined by one's title to property' (*ST*: 85). This was also a split of sorts between town and country, not just because the public spaces involved were predominantly urban-based, but also because the mass of the people in *both* towns but particularly the countryside were still woefully poorly educated: thus, '[i]n relation to the mass of the rural population and the common 'people' in towns, ... the public 'at large' that was being formed diffusely outside the early institutions of the public was still extremely small' (*ST*: 37).

Giroux 2000). Once this move has been made, an additional consideration is exactly when and *where* these counterpublics came into being, prompting questions about how the bourgeois public sphere as a course of conduct immediately, rhythmically or belatedly produces supplements, variations, alliances, splinters, opposition and indifference.

Now that the conjoint spatialities and sociabilities of the public sphere have been shown to be less than guaranteed by a transcendental theory of Reason and rational inquiry, so attention can also turn to the *practices* reckoned to be constitutive of this sphere on a daily basis. Habermas has little to say about practices as such, the effect being a somewhat *disembodied* account in which the results of writing and speaking are prioritised above what *doing* being members of the public sphere might involve. There is some sense of the former, with the public sphere often appearing as a highly ‘literary’ endeavour, but the reader is told little about the routines of bourgeois men moving around the townscape, perhaps walking or perhaps by carriage, meeting, sitting down together, gesturing, laughing, sighing, lifting food or drink to their mouths, talking to waiting staff, and so on. The reader might start to imagine these practices, the conduct of which cannot but be central to the accomplishment of anything resembling a public sphere, but they remain stubbornly absent from Habermas’s own text. There are two issues here, the first being the empirical one that actual practices in the sorts of spaces wherein Habermas’s public sphere arises – notably the coffee-houses – might depart considerably from the calmly ordered world of educated heads eloquently discoursing with one another, clearly separated from the street, which permeates his text at various points. There may be far more slamming down of mugs, shouting, fisticuffs and more embodied forms of persuasion, and more generally there may be many respects in which the disruptions and interruptions of the streets and the taverns intrude upon the socio-spaces of the public sphere. Appreciating the plenitude of action and procedural problems associated with Habermas’s public sphere is hence crucial to a recovery of the practices in play: practices that ‘can define briefly and locally, what it is all about’ (Latour, 1998, p197) from, whispered conversations, loud arguments, the comings and goings of countless different people and groupings across the threshold of this public sphere.

The second issue, following on, is more theoretical, and ties in with how Habermas might be subjected to a critique – it could be dubbed ethno-archaeological¹⁶ – for leaving covered over the arrays of practices, stumbled or shrieked conversations

¹⁶ It would also be easy to register a non-representational theory (NRT) critique of Habermas for so obviously prioritising the cognitive-driven, calmly-reflected upon rational-critical deliberations of those private individuals ‘making’ the public sphere. Our critique is more ethnomethodological, though, in part because we do not draw a hard and fast distinction between embodied practices and snatched conversations, the latter usually being totally enmeshed in a near-instantaneous flow of

included, that sometimes constituted, differed from, or at least supplemented, what is glossed as the polite conduct of rational-critical debate. Polite conduct itself is not enough to constitute reasoned argument, and indeed is often at odds with arguing as it is actually done. It is true that Benhabib (1992) configures Habermasian public space as one shaped by certain procedural ‘rules’ of discursive practice, in which case the focus on discourse is coupled with a weak notion of practice.¹⁷ It is also true that McCarthy (1992: esp.51-52) gives a lengthy disquisition on Habermas’s conception of ‘practical discourse’, which refers here to a sense that reasoning has to be situated – it, literally, has to take place somewhere – even if it always remains in tension with ‘the transcendence of situatedness required by his model of rational consensus’ (also Howell 1993). Such a reference to practical discourse still does not allow that rules and reason are embedded in ordinary practices of rule-following and reasoning, however, and, if anything, the tension that McCarthy identifies between situatedness and transcendence goes to the heart of what we find problematic about much of Habermas’s corpus down the years. ‘Whereas ethnomethodology and its cognate disciplines are interested in the situated production of intelligible utterances and actions – ie. in how participants *apprehend* the world –’, observes Bogen (1989: 53; italics in original), the ideology-critique work of Habermas ‘is devoted to the identification and specification of participants’ systematic *misapprehensions*’ (as measured against what they ideally *should* have known).¹⁸ While *The Structural Transformation* is arguably less concerned with ideology critique than is much of Habermas’s later writing, it would be pushing things to suggest that he is especially concerned here with the local-historical production of ‘apprehension’ amongst complexes of materials and human actions, by and for his private individuals, in the course of making an Early Modern public sphere. The practices, the conversations included, hence remain somewhat obscure, assumed but largely unquestioned, leaving a lacunae at the heart of his text that requires shoring up by his transcendental theory.

conduct and encounter (see also Laurier, 1999). NRT seems unsure about what to do with conversation, since it still seems just *too* representational (see Harrison, 2005).

¹⁷ In a different register, Sennett (1974: esp.79-82) draws links between *performance* and speech: ‘Using the same examples [as Habermas] of newspapers and coffee-houses, Sennett points not to rational rules of public discourse, but to the performative aspects of communication in these places. Speakers from different social classes adopted the conventions of the theatre in their verbal expression and bodily presentations. Rhetoric and the dramatisation of difference were made possible by the adoption of common, artificial modes of speech and action’ (Bridge 2004: 133-134). Such an insertion of performance into Habermas’s problematic certainly has parallels with what we are attempting here.

¹⁸ See also Bridge’s (2004: esp.133-136) ingenious recasting of the universalised sense of rationality found in *ST*, and more broadly in Habermas’s notion of the ‘ideal speech situation’, as he strives instead to conjoin the likes of Sennett (1974), de Certeau (1984) and others in a recovery of the ‘strategic rationalities’ arising at particular moments in particular places (‘speech places’) dispersed across the ‘unsettled city’. Such rationalities *do* possess a measure of stability realised in how people more-or-less successfully ‘signal’ to one another, not necessarily through the ‘portentous communication’ of Reason, but still in such a way that ‘rational’ choices of how to proceed become possible if transient and local. His work (see also Bridge 2005) is another thread paralleling our own

Pushed to its limits, this critique might even declare Habermas's whole approach to the public sphere misguided, proposing that the only way to advance a plausible inquiry into Early Modern 'public life' should commence by returning to the rough ground of embodied practices and vulgar conversation.

Burnt beans at the Early Modern coffee-houses

In his impressive recent scholarship, to which we are indebted, Ellis (2001, 2002, 2004) patiently and painstakingly uncovers the architectures, ambiances and crowds of the eighteenth-century coffee-houses, thereby rebuking Habermas for a lack of empirical-historical detail in his treatment of these sites upon which so much theoretical weight comes to bear. More specifically, Ellis critiques Habermas for basing much of his interpretation on the *uncritical*, often nostalgic histories of the coffee-houses given by earlier writers such as Macaulay and Stephen – as also deconstructed by Ellis – and for undertaking no primary research of his own.¹⁹ Ellis hence detects a failure to engage with the substance of arguments, boasts, exposures, deals, stories, gossip and jokes as they must have been played out, again and again, between all manner of coffee-house customers in order to 'deliver' the polite clientele in enlightened exchange. Although it is hard to recover with any certainty the micro-dynamics involved here, Ellis shows that a careful use of primary sources such as Steele's 'ethnography' may allow something approaching an ethno-archaeological glimpse of public city life as lived in these historically distant social spaces. Drawing upon his work, supplemented with other inputs, we now reflect upon the entangled spaces, societies and practices of London's Early Modern coffee-houses.

Considering the *spaces* of these establishments, it is possible first to look at what Ellis says about the arrangement of these spaces, following his notes about their 'physical architecture' – often dominated by a long table that customers shared, although coffee-houses with more separated-out 'bays' were also common – and about how 'the space of the coffee-house confirmed and established the kinds of sociability found there' (Ellis 2002: 4). Indirectly offering support for Habermas, Ellis (2004: 59) writes as follows:

work here, although we are more hesitant about his retention of rationality as a key construct, even if mobilised in this modest form.

¹⁹ 'As a student of his footnotes realises, Habermas appears to have used their research [that of the nineteenth-century historians] to formulate his own account of the coffee-house, a reliance that is, in the end, rather significant. Habermas relied on a restricted range of generalist secondary texts on the English coffee-house: making reference to English research by Stephen, Trevelyan and an anonymous, untraced popular historian, and two German works (both of which are heavily dependent on the nineteenth-century research of Timbs and Robinson. It is likely he did no primary research. It is, of course, unsurprising that Habermas's work on the coffee-house is under-researched (the work the book does is theoretical, as is appropriate in a *Habilitationsschrift*, or post-doctoral dissertation, submitted to a philosophy department). However, the manner in which his research is weak is central to the success of his argument (Ellis 2001: 44-45).

Arriving in the coffee-house, customers were expected to take the next available seat, placing themselves next to whoever else has come before them. No seat could be reserved, no man might refuse your company. This seating policy impresses on all customers that in the coffee-house all are equal. ... From the arrangement of the chairs, the coffee-house allowed men who did not know each other to sit together amicably and expected them to converse. In the anonymous context of the city, in which most people are unknown to each other, this sociable habit was astonishing.

The implication is that the coffee-houses were indeed spaces of equality, although it is evident that this equality was more an ideal than a reality, as Ellis acknowledges at many points and as we will examine shortly. In Habermas's vision, moreover, the coffee-house debaters would have to sit down in a relatively organised fashion, with a clear stability about who is present and contributing, whereas the evidence – as in the opening ethnography of Steele's, and as comes alive throughout Ellis's work – suggests a much more transient scene, with a constant stream of comings and goings through the coffee-house entrance.

Steele's account also reminds us that different groupings of men, boasting quite particular backgrounds, occupations, interests and the like, tended to congregate in the same coffee-house at different hours, one upshot of which might have been less discoursing between different groupings than envisaged in the Habermasian model. A coffee-house's internal social spaces were likely re-organised over the course of a day, arguably lacking the continuity and universality demanded by Habermas, a point on which Ellis (2004: 150-151) elaborates by considering the wider spatiality of the coffee-houses as linked to the occupational, professional and recreational geographies of the city:

Many of the specialised allegiances between coffee-houses and interest were determined by architecture and geography. The routines of everyday life in court and chambers brought lawyers, law students and clerks back to the same establishments located in clusters near the Inns of Courts: both Nandos and the Grecian were noted for their legal flavour. In different periods, Child's Coffee-House neat St Paul's Cathedral attracted clergymen, whereas the Chapter Coffee-House, nearby in Paternoster Row, was the haunt of booksellers and printers, and the hack writers they employed. Merchants, insurance agents and brokers met at Jonathan's and Garraway's coffee-houses in Exchange Alley. ... For wits and poets and important concentration of coffee-houses emerged in Russell Street, a broad street leading off the crowded piazza of Civent Garden, close to the theatres. The first of these was Will's Coffee-House ... (Ellis 2004: 150-151)

Ellis (2004: Chap.11) shows the quite specific coffee-house worlds that grew up around the merchants, who clearly did conclude significant transactions in the coffee-houses, notably those neighbouring the Exchange which 'became an extension of the trading floor ...', offering a warm and dry place where business could continue after

the official hours had finished' (Ellis 2004: 169). He does the same for the 'scientists', stating that other coffee-houses 'proved to be a remarkably hospitable habitat for the New Science' (Ellis 2004: 163), and also for the 'philosophers' (Ellis 2004: Chap.12), although in both of the latter cases he acknowledges that many contemporaries regarded the science and philosophy under debate in the coffee-houses to be a pale imitation of the real intellectual advances associated with Enlightenment Europe (eg. Ellis 2004: 165, 198-203). As implied, moreover, there was a definite geography to the coffee-houses frequented by these different constituencies, and Ellis (2004: 189-190) notes that the refined coffee-houses preferred by Steele – and hence those that most closely approximated Habermas's vision – were 'reflected topographically: all were located in the socially exclusive West End of London'. By extension, the remainder, occupying many other locations spread across the city, departed considerably from the ideal.

These observations have been at once about the spaces and the crowds of the coffee-house, but we can now say a few things more narrowly about the entangled *societies* occupying these indelibly social spaces. Habermas's over-reliance on *uncritical* histories of the coffee-house, as opposed to being more immersed in primary evidence, risks him seriously overplaying both the homogeneity of the coffee-house polite crowd – it becomes as massed, uniform, singular and rhetorical as the rabble crowd on the streets – and missing the extent to which many of the differences composing it involved people, groups and factions who were certainly not always polite, civilised and urbanely sociable to all others. Ellis (2002: 37) proposes that the sociabilities of the coffee-house were indeed much more mixed, not just in the sense of hosting the different constituencies just mentioned – the merchants, scientists, philosophers, and so on – but also quite a few 'counter-cultural' elements (recalling earlier comments about 'counter-publics'):

A diverse array of figures articulate this counter-culture coffee-house, amongst whom might be numbered the gambler and card-shark, the drunkard duellist, the projector (a promoter of mad-cap schemes), the philosopher and literary critic (given to extreme opinions), the buttonholer (one who literally seizes the observer by the buttonhole, in order to secure undivided attention) and the coffee-woman.

Ellis thus finds heterogeneous crowds, urban characters picked out amongst the throng, whose social and spatial dynamics were far more complex than those pictured in the polite Habermasian coffee-house. He delights in recounting tales of drunkenness, gambling, debauchery, lewdness and sexual encounters occurring in many of the less salubrious coffee-houses – little different from the taverns – as representatives of the 'low' classes came into contact with their supposed 'betters' (precisely *not* over a steaming coffee-pot for a debate on the pressing matters of the day). For instance, when drawing upon a 1740s tract about Moll Long and her

King's Coffee-House in Convent Garden, Ellis (2001: 36) describes a 'coffee-house ... transgressive not only because of its character as a place of resort for the sexual underworld, but also for its promiscuous mixture of high and low status groups'.²⁰ To put it another way, this coffee-house was Hogarthian, being illustrated in one of Hogarth's plates, embracing 'a boisterous sociability equated with promiscuity, tumult and poverty: a carnivalised sociability, more popular than polite' (Ellis 2001: 37). Ellis (2001: 73) duly concludes that it 'is clearly a different sort of coffee-house from that celebrated in its Habermasian model, with a significantly different and more subversive regime (boisterous, sexually promiscuous, heterosexual, status-obsessed and heterodox)'.²¹

On the question of the constitution of *the* public, and relatedly of its opinions, it should be obvious from much said already that, for all the impulses towards egalitarianism, those coffee-houses most akin to Habermas's model, and as preferred by someone like Steele, were relatively elite affairs wherein education, if not class or status *per se*, was a necessary accoutrement for attending. Furthermore, in response to the obvious gender-insensitivity of Habermas's account, Ellis (2002: 9) stresses 'the fact that the early coffee-house was not open to women in the same way as it was to men' (p.9).²² An implicit rule served to exclude women, '[t]here [being] no need formally to exclude them because it was assumed that no woman who wished to be considered virtuous and proper would want to be seen in a coffee-house' (Ellis 2004: 66). The kinds of topics debated in the coffee-house, 'science, commerce, politics', ones demanding the kind of education, knowledge and experience only open to men at the time, 'established it as a space for men and men only'. Ellis (2004: 67) goes so far as to suggest that, compared to other social spaces in a city like eighteenth-century London (the parks, playhouses, pleasure-gardens: cf. Ogborn 1998), 'coffee-houses were almost more than anywhere else male-orientated, gendered, almost exclusively masculine'. In fact, some coffee-houses *did* contain women, but as serving staff or even as owners (especially widows),²³ and in this

²⁰ Note the theme of transgressive mixings that features in the famous Stallybrass and White (1986) text, the coffee-houses being seen as one site for such mixings. To reiterate the point from the main text, this mixing would almost certainly *not* have arisen in the context of the refined debate that Habermas privileges as the egalitarian achievement of the public sphere.

²¹ The text drawn upon here by Ellis dwells on the so-called 'flash' spoken by Moll with her customers: this being 'an underground criminal lexicon which the text examines in a witty dialogue composed of almost impenetrable cant terms and phrases' (Ellis 2001: 37). Such a language, a highly embodied form of talk with scant connection to the 'philosophical' discourses of the Age of Reason, provides another neat instance of *disconnection* from the elite discoursing on which the Habermasian public sphere depended.

²² To be fair, Habermas (*ST*: 32) does acknowledge 'that only men were admitted to coffee-house society Accordingly the women of London society, abandoned every evening, waged a vigorous but vain struggle against the new institution'. The latter remark – see also *ST*: Note 11, 257 – refers to the 1674 'Women's Petition against Coffee', not least because it was thought that excessive coffee-drinking was making their menfolk 'as unfruitful as the deserts' (in Lillywhite 1963: 17).

²³ Perhaps repeating the ambiguous status of the 'mistresses' who ran the male-dominated salons or *conversaciones* so central to Enlightenment life (certainly in continental Europe).

respect Ellis (2002: 10; also Ellis 2001: 30-31) teases out the gendered organisation of the spaces involved:

This reminds us that the much-vaunted equality of the coffee-house only applied to its customers: and the coffee-house was subject to important social divisions and boundaries. Images of the coffee-house record two significant hierarchies: one of status dividing the workers from the customers, and another of gender, excluding all women but the coffee-women from the coffee-room. The spatial organisation of the room reinforces the hierarchical and gendered structure of the coffee-house: the boys inhabit the space around the table, while the women proprietor is separated off from the customers in her little booth.

Intriguingly, in August 1709 a new periodical called *The Female Tatler* made a brief appearance, in effect accepting that women – at least respectable women – should not be patronising coffee-houses, and the author declared that she would ‘date all my advices from own apartment, which comprehends, White’s, Will’s, the Frecian, Garraway’s, in Exchange Alley, ...’ (in Mackie 1998: 131). The image of this woman writing *The Female Tatler* while gazing out of her apartment window at the male-dominated coffee-houses is most instructive, as too was her wish to ‘tattle’, ‘since tattling was ever adjudg’d peculiar to our sex’, and hence ‘to prate a little to the town’ about sundry matters, events, fashions, scandals, woes and vices. The exclusion of women from the rational-critical debate of the public sphere, certainly in its Habermasian guise, is thereby most tangibly marked, although a more positive claim would be that the likes of *The Female Tatler* reveal the shadowy outlines of (one of) Fraser’s (1992) woman’s counter-publics.

When turning more explicitly to the *practices* in the coffee-houses, we can begin with the anonymous author of a Restoration tract who talks about the ‘phanatique theatre’ of a typical coffee-house, one full of ‘strange beasts’:

The Room stinks of *Tobacco* worse than hell of *Brimstone*, and is as full of *smoak* as their Heads that frequent it, whose humours as those of *Bedlam* and their discourse oft-times as *Heathenish* and *dull* as their Liquor; that Liquor, which by its look and taste, you may reasonably guess to be *Pluto’s Diet-drink* [another name for coffee]. (in Mackie 1998: 138)

The reference to ‘Bedlam’ is instructive, since this was the most notorious lunatic asylum of the age (Philo 2004: esp.Chap.6), very much a space of *unreason*, certainly not reason. Edward Ward’s text, *The London Spy*, published in eighteen monthly instalments from November 1698 to May 1700, has the following to say about Will’s Coffee-House, which was supposedly to become one of the most refined places of resort for the ‘philosophers’:

[It contains] a parcel of muddling muckworms ... as busy as so many rats in an old cheese-loft; some going, some going, some scribbling, some

talking, some drinking, others jangling, and whole room stinking of tobacco like a Dutch scoot, or a boatswain's cabin. ... Being half-choked with the steam that arose from their soot-coloured ninnny-broth, their stinking breaths and the suffocated fumes of their nasty puffing-engines, my friend and I paid for our Muhammadan gruel [again meaning coffee] and away we came (in Mackie 1998: 144, 148)

Mackie comments on the window opened here on to a space of embodied practices, rather than detached discoursing. Indeed, he talks about Wards's 'Spy' revelling in 'the carnivaleque life of the London streets, shops, coffee-houses, taverns, brothels and baths':

The pictures Ward draws of London life are marked by hyperbole, and aggressively 'low' style, and an almost obsessive occupation with the sensory world. Where Bickerstaff and the Spectator seem all eyes, Ward's Spy engages in the full repertoire of the senses – sight and hearing certainly, but also the more directly palpable perceptions of taste, touch and smell. ... [T]he whole mood of the experience is different. The feeling of immersion in the smoke and soot, the sheer strength of the sensations (in Mackie 1998: 144).

Mackie (1998: 137) suggests that the effect 'contrasts sharply with the picture that historical social theorists like ... Habermas draw of the coffee-house as a place of rational and genteel discourse', portraying indeed an environment that was indeed anything but the calm home of rational-critical debate. Ellis (2001: 37) agrees:

... the coffee-house was often anything but quiet, polite and business-like, and, moreover, that this disputatious simulation was a signal source of the customer's interest in attending the coffee-house. The unruly element was described in terms of babble, noise and smokiness, argument and faction.

Here, therefore, is not the quiet and contemplative polite crowd, but something noisier, more a cacophony of competing voices than a restrained turn-taking; something more quarrelsome, more Rabelasian, more akin to the cast of eccentrics, perverts and money-grabbers apparently found on the streets than the occupants assumed to ornament the interiors of the Age of Reason. Elsewhere, Ellis (2004: 62-53) underlines the perceived 'noise' of the coffee-house, an 'aural landscape [that] was a complex mixture of human voices and clattering busyness', and he recalls one satirist's description of it as 'an unintelligible buzzing' that commonly 'degenerated into squabble and conflict, precisely because there were no polite limits'.

Intriguingly, Ward's Spy comments on visiting the coffee-house looking for inspiration from 'the powerful eloquence which drops from the silver tongues of the ingenious company that frequent this noted mansion', but what he found there – to his surprise – was 'much company, but little talk', with the men there present remaining largely silent as if hoping thereby 'to be counted a man of judgement' (in Mackie

1998: 437). The men were probably less silent *per se*, however, more that they refrained from offering commentaries on weighty matters that might reveal their true ignorance. More common, so the evidence implies, was for the coffee-houses to be far from silent, as just noted, and in practice to be very noisy, full to the rafters with what might be judged as relatively idle conversation, not serious discoursing. Ellis (2004: 62-63) is in no doubt that '[c]offee-house conversation was certainly not always civil, rational and ordered', and in the tracts of the satirists like John Starkey '[c]offee-house discussion was repeatedly represented as catastrophically heterodox and ill-disciplined, and given to pointless and intemperate debate, swapping 'diverse Monster Opinions and Absurdities'. Ellis (2004: 63-64) even echoes Starkey in speculating that the 'clamour' and 'confused way of gabbling' typical of the coffee-house 'associate[d] it with gossip, conventionally gendered as feminine', and such a claim perhaps throws into different relief Steele's decision to call his periodical *The Tatler*. Such a naming arguably gestures to a feminised form of communication, one set at some distance from the image of men hard at work in self-serious discoursing that energises Habermas (supposedly based at least in part on the reality of Steele's coffee-house based organ *The Tatler*). In short, though, much of the empirical material covered here – to do with the conjoint spaces and societies of the coffee-house, all as bound up in a dizzying array of embodied practices, noisily conducted conversational tittle-tattle included – does neatly parallel the more abstract lines of critique directed above at Habermas's concept of the public sphere. At the same time, this material infers a rather different set of issues and questions that need to be asked about real coffee-houses as sites for the practical conduct of public life.

Conclusion

Ellis (2002: 6-8) speculates about the informal *rules* – his 'twelve principles of coffee-house conversation' – that ought to be oriented to by customers to allow the coffee-house to be successful in effectively converting the flowing structure of street crowd into the polite (Habermasian) cohort of rational-critical debate. Rules about 'openness to all comers', about discussion needing to be 'rational, critical, sceptical, polite, calm and reasoned', about voices not being raised and nobody being brow-beaten, about topics needing to be 'relevant, curious, focussed and interesting', and so on: all of these Ellis imagines to have been acknowledged, if not always or even often followed. His key statement, however, can be taken as a launching-off point for much that we are attempting in our own research as we seek to understand the public life of the café, today's Starbucks and Caffé Neros included:

These rules I have elaborated in some detail, much of which is worth taking with a pinch of salt. Nonetheless, what I want to point to here is how the coffee-house established an unstated set of relational group

dynamics which allowed it to establish and confirm what it did best, which was to create a distinct sociability. In the absence of explicit rules, it was able to define a fluid group management process, and use it to encourage participation in the congenial and conversational world of the coffee-house sociability. This is a lesson that we might apply also to other and similar open-context discussions and the sites or institutions that support them. Some places are particularly associated with discussion of this kind: places where people meet, accidentally or occasionally, where they meet and pass the time undisturbed or are able to pass the time together. (Ellis 2002: 7).

Ellis thereby puts an anthropological²⁴ sensibility into the historical claims made by Habermas about the transformation of the modern public sphere: he hints at what needs to be assumed (as really occurring) for the grosser structural claims to hold water; he makes anthropologically strange the ‘polite’ coffee house by showing how it could be riotous, criminal and a place of prostitution.

In this paper we have explored Habermas’s claims about the emergence of a bourgeois public sphere in Early Modern Europe, within which the figure of the London coffee-house plays an important role both conceptually and empirically. We have demonstrated that Habermas overstates the extent to which coffee-houses were relatively contained and egalitarian spaces of calm rational-critical debate, and we have proposed that an alternative account is needed: one that inquires into their stabilisation of *the* public and its others, and relatedly of public opinion and its alternates, out of the spatial and social fluidity, multiplicity and dissipation of the city. To return to the ethnography *avant la lettre* with which we began, just as Foucault brings to light the many self-serious statements, bureaucratic documents, surveys and reports that discipline the population of the state, so these descriptions of ‘the public’ found in coffee-houses are translations of yet another aspect of the city into the records. Steele, Warde and others like them could for the first time report on the public of the city and their opinions. Since one of the common problems of the city is that, unlike the village, opinions that represent it are hard to gather, its residents can only be ‘talked to; under special circumstances. Opinion gatherers could stay the day at one coffee-house and have a cross-section of city groups cross

²⁴ Given our aligning of Ellis’s approach to a loosely anthropological one, it is worth quoting at length the following: ‘Anthropologists have observed, in many societies people assemble habitually in particular places for unstructured social interaction: such as around a well in Medieval France, or a tofu shop in post-war Japan, or the porch of a general store in Texas. In each of these places there are no [explicit] rules governing their conduct for each participant knows the way to behave there and does not tolerate aberrant interlopers. The expected set of behaviour for each community location is in effect immanent in the practice of everyday life. For fear of looking odd, or out of place, people learn to obey the set of expectations established in each place. This fear of looking abnormal, odd or strange has been identified as one of the key ground rules for social behaviour in public and is especially associated with urban life according to the sociologist ... Goffman. Behaviour in public places like the coffee-house, Goffman argues, is governed by the imaginative and creative ways people can act with propriety and with the appropriate level of involvement’ (Ellis 2004: 61-62). It might be added that the reference to Goffman here, bringing to mind his writing on the ‘performance of everyday life’ (eg. Goffman 1959), also ties in with the performative focus of Sennett (1974): see Footnote 17 above.

their path, or travel from coffee house to coffee house to drop in on different crowds and their conversations. If we listen to these proto-ethnographers, though, the elegance, logic and Reason(ableness) of Habermas's account in *The Structural Transformation* begin to tarnish, as explained. All of this, even so, is not to decry everything Habermas writes in this important book. Rather, it is to take his provocations very seriously, and to suggest that there is still something valuable in his formulations about a public sphere materialised in specific social spaces – a form of public space that does enable more than life on the street; a mode of dwelling in public with others, particularly personally unknown others, which is civil, broadly tolerant and on occasion highly consequential (because of what it said, felt and done amongst others) – that must remain central to social theory, socio-historical and socio-geographical inquiry.

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