

# Coffee, Discourse and Democracy

Elizabeth Franko  
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## **I**ntrouction:

The early coffee house of Western Europe is a contested, utopian domain. The coffee shops, particularly those of eighteenth-century England and France represent an idealized public sphere, one in which democratic practices and Enlightenment rationality were supposedly enacted through free and public debate. Jurgen Habermas offers us perhaps the most famous and often cited notion of the coffee house as the ideal representation of the burgeoning European public sphere. For Habermas, “ “by public sphere” we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is granted to all citizens.” (Habermas, Encyclopedia) Indeed, this idea of equal access is critical to understanding why the coffee shop represents such a mercurial space for social theorists. Inside the imagined walls of early coffee houses, men learned the rational discursive practices and social strategies that would transform them from willing subjects of the monarchies of Europe to engaged and revolutionary citizens, capable of putting the philosophies of Enlightened humanism into practice.

Through the utopian imaginings of the coffee house, “Habermas constitutes the historical category of the public sphere (in an) attempt to draw from it a normative ideal.” (Calhoun, 39) While obviously sanitized, the idea of the coffee house has transcended its actual historical conditions and come to represent a powerful ideal of democratic and civil engagement. In this light, an investigation into the discourse about the coffee shop helps to illuminate assumptions about the function of public spaces, free associations and

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assumed historical practices which contribute to a functioning democracy. The coffee house, for Habermas, and many other theorists represents a perfect public sphere, and “Habermas’s idea of the public sphere is indispensable to critical social theory and democratic political practice.” (Fraser, 111) “The public sphere is the site where struggles are decided by other means than war,” (Negt and Kluge, ix) and the coffee shop comes to stand as the public space where individuals learned the strategies for revolutionary speak. Rhetoric about the coffee shop as public sphere tends to be unashamedly positive, represented by Ray Oldenberg who states that, “early coffeehouses were enthusiastically democratic in the construction and composition of their habitués.” (24)

Coffee shop customers learned how to talk, and how to use these rational communicative practices to engage in further reaching civil associations. As stated by Tocqueville in his treatise on the United States, “civil associations therefore facilitate political associations.” (215) Several historical conditions enabled the coffee houses to serve such a supposedly critical social function. Coffee shops opened along with the rise of the press, well-documented by such thinkers as Michael Warner, and emerged hand in hand to serve the larger and more prominent bourgeois class of merchants and middle-range capitalists in European urban areas. Coffee houses have been imagined as eminently educational, with such assertions like “a penny was the price of admission to its store of literary and intellectual flavors.” (Oldenberg, 185) Those regular café goers were a literate and mercantilist group, and “the coffeehouse brought together a wide variety of information sources and the customers who could make use of them.” (Sommerville, 8) These bourgeois men were exploring their newly formed economic stations, and in some sense, the coffee shop was a perfect representation of these new

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capitalist dynamics. Born in the East, coffee and the coffee shop were introduced to the merchant classes through trade, and product of Western encounters with global marketplaces. To drink coffee and to sit in conversation and discussion in coffee shops was an Eastern practice, and the European models were direct copies of this model. The coffee shop out of trade and cosmopolitan bourgeois interactions in the global community. Habermas details the rise of the capitalist classes as the revolutionary momentum necessary for the dismantling of older monarchic power relations. “Elements of early capitalist commercial relations, that is, the traffic in commodities and news, manifested their revolutionary power...in the mercantilist phase in which, simultaneously with the modern state, the national and territorial economies assumed their shape.” (Habermas, 17)

Classically, the coffee shop operates in tandem with these revolutionary tendencies, existing as the physical space where men could learn of their own autonomy from that state, and where “those excluded for the “political nation” presumed to sit in judgment of politics.” (Klein, 43) Despite the fictitious and overly heroic descriptions, the coffee shop is critical as an idealized and normative space in Western political and sociological thought. Several key tropes emerge in the body of writing on the emergence of democracy, the public sphere and the coffee house. Coffee house talk as education and communicative practices in these public spaces as essentially democratic, progressive and instrumental in political practice are major themes in the writing on coffee houses. Furthermore, notions about civility and the function of public spaces in the learning of rules for supposedly free and open discourse underlines most of the work on coffee houses. While only tacitly acknowledged at best, clearly these environments were rule

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bound and normative, despite the attempts to emphasize the transparency, freedom and accessibility of coffee houses.

Coffee houses emerged at a time when European man was redefining his role in economic, social and political terms. The ideas of public and the potential of the public sphere for developing meaningful civil associations was being dusted off and revived from long-abandoned Greek and Roman practices. Revolutions and the eventual undoing of the monarchy was at hand. The United States was developing and setting the standard for revolutionary discourse and the representation of Enlightenment ideals in political practice. As Tocqueville stated, “the social stance of the Americans is eminently democratic,” (34) and the key to this democracy was voluntary associations, formed in such places as the coffee house. Clearly, the vaulted coffee house rhetoric is out of line with actual historical conditions, however, the function of the coffee house as an ideal public sphere speaks volumes about the longings of social and political theorists.

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## **B**rief History of the Early Coffee Houses:

The origin of the first European-based coffee house is clouded by legend, with several conflicting reports about just where and when the institution of the coffee house came into existence. Coffee and the practices of grinding, boiling and drinking it originated in the Ottoman empire, and came to mainland Europe through the conflicts and trade with the Turks. Turkish scholars and thinkers were said to have frequented coffee houses, mimicking the customs of their more Arabian neighbors. Turks have made claim to opening the first equivalent of the modern day coffee shop, and several sources note that “the world’s first coffee shop, Kiva Han, opened in 1475 in Constantinople.” (New Internationalist) “The early Eastern coffee house was an exact prototype of the institution as it afterwards existed in Europe,” (Robinson, 31) in format and in custom.

Coffee itself was praised for its virtues and, “coffee came to be regarded as the very antithesis of alcoholic drinks, sobering rather than intoxicating.” (The Economist) Coffee houses sought to distinguish themselves from pubs, promoting themselves as loci of rationality, civility, and discussion. Even the furnishing of the coffee houses was unique, and “they were adorned with bookshelves, mirrors, gilt-framed pictures and good furniture, in contrast to the rowdiness, gloom and squalor of taverns.” (ibid) Coffee, as a beverage, was attributed with medical, mystical and even magical significance, and popular rumor held that “coffee possessed a sort of magic power for the cure of drunkenness.” (Robinson, 63) Building off of ancient Arabian lore, coffee and the practices of its consumption were associated with scholarship, literacy and study. An

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(anonymous) Arabian poem, that circulated in eighteenth century London read, “Oh Coffee! Thou dost scatter all our cares, thou the object of the vows of him who devotes himself to study.” (13) Much contemporary literature on the coffee house touts these virtues, stating that “for the price of a cup of coffee, you could read the latest pamphlets, catch up on news and gossip, attend scientific lectures, strike business deals, or chat with like-minded people about literature or politics.” (The Economist) In this rhetoric, the coffee house functions as a sort of crude networking tool, and in fact, the coffee shop was closely aligned with business and particular bourgeois trades.

The first coffeehouse in Western Europe is traced to Vienna, a city where the institution proliferated, and is much praised as the core of the intellectual and political life of that city. As the popular story goes, “in 1683 Franz Koshitsky, a former prisoner of the Turks, bought up all the coffee beans left behind at the siege of Vienna, when the Turks were beaten by the King of Poland. Koshitsky opened up the first coffee house in Vienna and soon headed a chain of establishments throughout Central Europe.” (New Internationalist) The coffee house emerged from the new commercial and trade practices of mercantilist Europe, marked by violent encounters with the Eastern world and a sort of global exchange.

The coffee house quickly migrated throughout Europe, taking firm hold in England. Habermas cites the origin of the first English coffee house as; “around the middle of the seventeenth century, after not only tea – first to be popular – but also chocolate and coffee had become the 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

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group of regulars.” (32) Coffee houses were closely associated with different trades, and “one of the most famous coffeehouses belonged to Edward Lloyd; it of course became Lloyd’s of London,” (Harper’s, 57) the famous insurance firm. Brokers from Lloyd’s of London used the coffee shop as a way to listen for news and upcoming events and adjust their insurance rates to follow suit. In this manner, “the café (was) a medium where business (was) conducted and news (was) exchanged, and where there (was) an opportunity to share reactions to events.” (Drucker and Gumpert, 301)

As socio-political theory about the coffee houses emphasizes, the coffee houses were a ‘third place’, as well as a place for civil associations set apart from both the state and the economy. “The third place is a generic description for a great variety of public places that host the regular, voluntary, informal and happily anticipated gatherings of individuals beyond the realms of home and work.” (Oldenberg, 16) While Oldenberg details the function of the coffee house as a place to engage with members of a voluntary public, the third space of the coffee house refers, perhaps, more significantly to “a ‘public sphere’...(which) refers both to a public forum independent of government and to private associations beyond the household where people come together to discuss public affairs.” (Schudson, 12) Distinct from both the state and the economy, the coffee house supposedly functioned as a counter-weight and a regulator of both of these spheres. After researching both the origin and the function of the coffee houses, it is questionable if the coffee shop was and is distinct from the economic space, as many of the cafes served explicit business functions. However, what is seldom debated, and often affirmed, is the function of the coffee houses in developing a public autonomous and critical of the state.

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While the visitors to the coffee house were overwhelmingly male, and of a particular class station, a point well-made by Nancy Fraser in her rebuttal of Habermas, women were present in these institutions. As noted in archival research into women's employment in eighteenth century London, "the commonest shared occupation (between men and women) was running a food and drink outlet, no less than 11 of the 26(% of working women) work(ed) in a tavern, victualling house, cook-shop, or strongwater shop, while another 3(%) were bakers or pastry-cooks." (Earle, 338) Women were servants and even proprietors in the English coffee houses, and their participation in discussion is occasionally referenced. A description of the typical coffee house notes the presence of the barista: "the coffee-room was dominated by a long central table, around which customers assembled...a large cauldron of coffee is set over the fire in the background...Behind a cubicle or bar sits the manager of the room: a woman dressed in an outlandish headdress. The coffee-woman – a typical site in most coffee houses – took care of the management and daily operation of business: her conversation was also valued as a part of the sociability of the business" (Ellis) Clearly, while their role was cursory, women were not all-together excluded from the dynamic in the coffee house.

The coffee shops developed in a unique symbiosis with the burgeoning urban centers of Europe. For the new merchant classes in these cities, who made most use of the coffee shops, "the coffeehouse functioned as a meeting place." (Vartabedian, 212) "As the cities grew, ... networks of sociability (developed) independent of direct royal control, places where strangers might regularly meet grew up...It was the era in which coffeehouses, then cafes and coaching inns became social centers....urban amenities were diffused out from a small elite circle to a broader spectrum of society, so that even the

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laboring classes began to adopt some habits of sociability.” (Sennett,17) These learned habits of sociability were combined with increasing literacy and the new and growing economic practices of the city. As identified by Habermas, “the “town” was the life center of civil society not only economically; in cultural-political contrast to the court, it designated especially an early public sphere in the world of letters whose institutions were coffee houses, the salons, and Tischgesellschaften (table societies).” (30)

As especially well-documented in England, “the coffee houses were considered seedbeds of political unrest.” (59) The government became fearful of all that rational talk and put measures in place to make the functioning of coffee houses more difficult. The coffee shops were closed by official royal decree, only to be reopened one week later after public outcry. A lesser measure restricted the circulation of the small change needed to purchase coffee. However, in an interesting counter-maneuver, “the shortage of legally minted small change prompted the coffeehouses to issue their own coins or tokens, which were generally honored by all the shops in the immediate area.” (Oldenberg, 185) The creation of a coffee house currency reified both the independence from the state and the financial autonomy of these establishments.

This assertion of sovereignty translated into the social practices that took place within the coffee shops themselves. Talk and dialogue were explicitly valued, with newspaper editor and coffee house figure, Richard Steele stating: “It is very natural for a Man, who is not turned for Mirthful Meetings of Men, or Assemblies of the fair Sex, to delight in that sort of Conversation which we find in Coffee-houses. Here a Man, of my Temper, is in his Element; for, if he cannot talk, he can still be more agreeable to his Company, as well as pleased in himself, in being only a Hearer.” (No. 49, April 26 1711)

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(Ross 286) According to legend and documented in the periodicals of the day, the coffee houses held debates, internally regulated dialogue, and even held the first votes outside of the court and using a ballot box. These practices, in essence, “transferr(ed) terms heretofore associated with the court to a public setting,” (Klein, 34) allowing those citizens excluded from official participation to exercise the practices that would come to define democratic engagement.

The coffee house came to prominence before the institution of the House of Commons in England and during the time of the corrupt Stuart Kings. Therefore, “the coffee house chiefly as a political institution ...came into collision with the tyrannical government of the later Stuart Kings.” (Robinson, 140) The movements and discussion begun in coffee houses translated into the rhetoric and practices of the Glorious Revolution. The relationship between these reforms and the coffee shop is obviously much exaggerated. However, some citizens of greater London began to question the rule of the monarchy, and “a battle for freedom of speech was fought and won over this question at a time when Parliaments were infrequent and when the liberty of the Press did not exist.” (169) This seems to implicate that men used other mediums to develop the language and mechanisms of this popular revolution, and the coffee house stands as the strongest example of this usage of public places.

## **T**erms of Inquiry: Public and Private:

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In the Western world, in the eighteenth century, men and women began to view themselves, and their place in the larger societal whole differently. The self was redefined, and the boundaries between public and private and public man and private man were redrawn. Richard Sennett, in his book, The Fall of Public Man, sets up the distinctions between the terms public and private, noting that “the first recorded use of the word “public” in English identifies the “public” with the common good in society.” (16) Sennett goes on to say that the “public (w)as that which (was) manifest and open to general observation.” (ibid) Public and public life was set apart from private and private life which signified by the home. “By the time the word public had taken on its modern meaning, therefore, it meant not only a region of social life located apart from the realm of family and close friends, but also that this public realm of acquaintances and strangers included a relatively wide diversity of people.” (17) By casting the net of the public to include a more general citizen and peer, the public also stood as a representation of the people, and a counter to the privatized state. “Private was here used to mean privileged , at high governmental level.” (16) The individual, the citizen, the public man was excluded from the private realm of state power. As Habermas explains, ““private” designated exclusion from the sphere of the state apparatus.” (11) Habermas then goes on to explain how the public became a referent for a counter-sphere in opposition to the state: “for “public” referred to the state that in the meantime had developed, under absolutism, into an entity having an objective existence over against the person of the ruler.” (ibid)

For Habermas, the coffee shops became representations of this newly conceived public assembly. Coffee houses could be described as a location where “individual

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people come together in a space that is intimate and thus private, but also open, and thus public.” (Ellis) Habermas would affirm this definition, and he further sets out our own contemporary notion of what the public sphere is. “The bourgeois public sphere may be conceived above all as the sphere of private people come together as a public.” (27) Key to this idea of the public sphere its permeability by and to all citizens. “The public sphere (i)s the illusory synthesis of the totality of society,” (Negt and Kluge, 56) meaning that all citizens can participate in this public space. While social, historical, gendered and racist distinctions undermined the actual comprehensiveness of the public sphere, the term “public” was grounded in its inclusivity. This openness defined the type of acceptable discourse appropriate for the public sphere. “The very idea of the public was based on the notion of a general interest sufficiently basic that discourse...need not be distorted by particular interests (at least in principle) and could be a matter of rational approach to an objective order, that is to say, of truth.” (Calhoun, 9) Public speak was about more than any individual interest and appealed to ideas about the common good.

The public stood in sharp distinction from the family and the home. “The public was a human creation; the private was the human condition,” (Sennett, 98) and this dichotomy meant that the public was malleable and appealed to human logic, whereas the private was naturalized and excluded from rational debate. “The line drawn between public and private was essentially one on which the claims of civility – epitomized by cosmopolitan, public behavior – were balanced against the claims of nature – epitomized by the family. (Modern man) saw these claims in conflict, and the complexity of their vision lay in that they refused to prefer the one over the other, but held the two in a state of equilibrium.” (18) Home and hearth were the “natural” counter balance to the public

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sphere. This distinction extended to views of men and women in eighteenth-century society. While the “public is that which is open, manifest, common, and good (and) a public man is one who acts in and for the universal good; a public thing is that which is open to, and may be used by, or shared by all members of the community...(therefore) a public woman is a prostitute, a commoner, a common woman.” (Landes, 3) Women were supposedly intrinsically aligned with the private sphere of family, and their participation in the public realm violated norms and called into question the moral dichotomies upon which society revolved. It was widely thought that “women’s silence in public reflected their natural condition of domestication.” (Landes, 202) “The public as an immoral domain meant rather different things to women and men. For women, it was where one risked losing virtue, dirtying oneself, being swept into a “disorderly and heady swirl” (Thackery). The public and the idea of disgrace were closely allied. The public for the bourgeoisie man had a different moral tone. By going out in public, or “losing yourself in public”...a man was able to withdraw from those very repressive and authoritarian features of respectability which were supposed to be incarnate in his person...so that for men, the immorality of public life was allied to an undercurrent of sensing immorality to be a region of freedom, rather than of simple disgrace.” (Sennett,23) The male public was a place for exploration, for further developing the “self”. “Public behavior is a matter, first, of action at a distance from the self, from its immediate history, circumstances, and needs; second, this action involves the experiences of diversity.” (87) Men used their public anonymity as a tool for understanding their individual nature, and in turn, popular notions of human nature. Going “out in public” meant transgressing from the private self. “Out in public was where moral violations occurred and w(ere) tolerated; in public one

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could break the laws of respectability...the bourgeoisie (man) continued to believe that “out in public” people experienced sensations and human relations which one could not experience in any other social setting or context.” (Sennett,23) Thus, the public sphere was a tool for developing a fuller conception of the individual self, and how this new self, autonomous from family and state might interact within the larger social context.

For women, however, a public life meant a lifestyle that violated moral norms. Richard Steele, famed editor of The Tattler and The Spectator, important eighteenth-century British newspapers, printed a letter from a woman proprietor of a coffee house. “While women were not explicitly barred from the coffee-house, the regime of the coffee-house made their presence uncomfortable or untenable,” (Ellis) however, many coffee houses were run and/or staffed by females. In a letter to Richard Steele, the self defined coffee-shop woman expresses her concern about polite perceptions of her based on her interactions in that ultimate public space of the coffee shop. The woman correspondent pleads with Steele: “what I ask of you, is, to acquaint my Customers (who are otherwise very good ones) that I am unavoidably hasped in my Bar, and cannot help hearing the improper Discourses they are pleased to entertain me with. They strive who shall say the most immodest things in my Hearing.” (Ross, 290) The proprietor continues, please “say it is possible a Woman may be modest, and yet keep a publick House.”(ibid) This exchange represents the moral ambiguity women, who were now becoming participants in the public sphere of commerce, faced. Moreover, it demonstrates the boundaries erected around what was “public” and who was welcome in the supposedly open and common “public sphere”.

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Towards the middle of the eighteenth-century, Richard Sennett notes the rise of more exclusive domains of discourse. “The first institution created specifically for private speech was the men’s club.” (83) In contrast to the supposedly common coffee house, these clubs were open only to their members, and homogeneity was the rule. “The clubs of the mid 18<sup>th</sup>-c were based on the idea that speech gave most pleasure when one had selected the audience, excluding those whose personal lives were distasteful or alien. In that sense the clubs were private. Privacy meant speech was agreeable only when one controlled whom one was speaking to.” (84) Thus, speech was re-privatized and removed from the public domain. However, despite this popular movement, conceptions of what the public sphere was and what happened in that common domain were forever altered. Man had begun to distance himself from the private and the home and develop a life outside of the confines of the family. This new freedom led to notions of the self as autonomous and individual. These ideas underpin some of the most fundamental tenets of Enlightened humanism. Scholars from Habermas to Schudson and Sennett argue that this Enlightened self was the seed of democratic revolution.

## **H**istorical Conditions at the Roots of the Coffee Shop Movement: Capitalism and Literacy in Eighteenth-Century Europe:

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“The coffeehouses arose at the same time that newspapers first appeared,” (Robinson and Keen, 26) and coffee houses and coffee house talk are strongly tied to the rise of the popular press. The coffee houses functioned as nexuses for trade of information, and were utilized by the new bourgeois merchant classes for the exchange of news. “Rumors, news and gossips were carried between coffee-houses by their patrons, and sometimes runner would flit from one coffee-house to another.” (The Economist) As Habermas notes, “this... “bourgeois”...was a reading public,” (23) and made use of the burgeoning printing presses and periodicals. In the coffee houses, “there were pamphlets, which appeared at a rate of five per working day,” (Sommerville, 9) and coffee houses, such as those in London, functioned as locations to both read and discuss information, and as such, “the great trade cities became at the same time centers for traffic in news.” (16)

Coffee house talk and reading are linked to notions of civic rationality and critical Enlightened thought, as expressed by Habermas: “privatized individuals coming together to form a public also reflected critically and in public on what they had read, thus contributing to the process of enlightenment which they together promoted.” (51) Newspapers, pamphlets and other letters were the spark for the conversations and debates that took place in the coffee houses. Beginning with discussions of business and relevant news, these conversations supposedly began to attack politics and the institutions of power. “In *The Structural Transformations of the Public Sphere* (1962) Jurgen Habermas made one of the most powerful arguments that printing led to a change in the political life of the West. He describes a set of institutions that he calls the bourgeois public

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sphere...In this new public sphere political discourse could be separated both from the state and from civil society, the realm of private life (including economic life). It could therefore regulate or criticize both. Because of this autonomy, this space that allowed critical regulation, the bourgeois public sphere played a key role in bringing about both the democratic revolutions of the eighteenth century and the nation-states that followed.” (Warner, x)

Major players in both the coffee house movement and the revolutionary dialogue in both France, England and the United States considered themselves men of letters, as validated by Michael Warner: “actors in the Enlightenment roughly as they thought of themselves: as members of a republic of letters.” (ix) Reading became a means not only of transmitting ideas, but became synonymous with enlightenment. For American colonist and political theorist, John Adams “republican enlightenment and printing...are identical.” (4) Reading was equated with political participation in a public sphere which stood in opposition to the state. “Reading was relevant in a new way because print discourse was now systematically differentiated from the activities of the state.” (x) The rise of the press both cultivated and was dependent on an active and engaged public to debate the printed word. Habermas theorizes that “literature had to legitimate itself in (the) coffee houses.” (33) Clearly, democratic and civic engagement are closely linked to literacy and the notion of a free press. Thus, historic accounts of the rise of democratic engagement are dependent on the concurrent rise of publicity. Furthermore, the press is cited as helping to form and define the public and give the public sphere a sense of legitimacy. As Alexis de Tocqueville tells us, “newspapers make associations, and

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associations make newspapers,” (in Schudson, 122) tying together public sociability and reading.

In turn, the press described and defined what the public sphere was, and “the public sphere was initially constituted in the world of letters, which paved the way for (its) orientation to politics.” (Calhoun 10) Again, when the American colonist “John Adams describes print, he assumes it to be coextensive with the public sphere.” (Warner 34) The world of letters, the public sphere and political revolution commingled, each needing the others. In practical terms, revolutionaries needed the press. “To seize power they must seize the word and spread it – by journals, almanacs, pamphlets, posters, pictures, song sheets, stationary, board games, ration cards, money, anything that will carry an impression and embed it in the minds of the...people, many of them bent under poverty and oppression, many sunk deep in ignorance, many incapable of reading the declarations of their rights.” (Darnton and Roche, xiii) The press functioned here as a tool for revolutionary engagement, however, the press itself set out the intellectual terms of the political movements. “The textuality of print determined the character of political culture,” (Warner xii) defining the rules and types of conversation. “Print discourse was a cultural matrix in which the definitions of “individual”, “print”, “public”, and “reason” were readjusted in a new set of ground rules for discourse.” (xi)

Models set out in print publication defined both the terms and the types of dialogue in which the public engaged. Letters even set out to define this public, giving this newly formed mass of citizens a sense of their own legitimacy. “The public was constructed on the basis of its metonymic embodiment in printed artifacts.

...(N)ewspapers were being published regularly in the major towns and were sustaining

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an abstract but local political discourse.” (61) News media linked together and gave shape to the rather motley and uncertain public, providing a unified set of vocabulary and the terms of engagement. Accordingly, this public, unified by the press, was able to formulate and sustain social and political revolution. “Letters ... bec(a)me (the) technology of publicity whose meaning...is civic and emancipatory. It will be recalled that the struggles leading to the colonial revolution were largely undertaken by writers.”

(3) Michael Warner here addresses the American revolution, but the same was true in France and England. New democratic movements used writing as a way to legitimize their projects. “Democracies put a great store in the power of writing to secure, verify, and make public. Democracies require public memories; writing greatly enhances the capacity of public memory. So talk in democracy is civil, public, and oriented to the explicit, available, transferable communications found in print and broadcasting.”

(Schudson, article, 305) For the United States colonist, the ultimate declaration of legitimacy was the written constitution, for “the supreme means of deriving force over the will of others, however, is to win the appeal to a written text...For the Americans of the Revolutionary period the written constitutions was a way of literalizing the doctrine of popular sovereignty.” (Warner, 97)

Print and literacy became a tool to both define and legitimate the new public man. It should be noted that this “republic of letters” was an exclusive male, literate domain. Men were the writers, and “the male collectivity formation of writing meant also that the metonymic link between the pen and the gendered body carried over even into print discourse.” (15) The pen and the phallus were linked, both tied to ideas of potency and power. Furthermore, only certain citizens had access to both education and the presses

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themselves. Habermas has been roundly criticized for his unexamined assumption of accessibility. “His account belies the Enlightenment claim that print allows any person to communicate his thoughts to the public.” (12) The reading public was a small and elite group, and in the case of the United States, “American colonists of the eighteenth century were not well read. If they owned a book at all, it was the Bible.” (Fraser,150) Yet, despite these limitations, the press, the coffee house and revolution are linked in a chain of Enlightened humanism and civic revolution.

The press and the bourgeoisie classes arose simultaneously. Historically, “the traffic in news ...developed alongside the traffic in commodities. With the expansion of trade, merchants’ market-oriented calculations required more frequent and more exact information about distant events.” (Habermas, 16) Merchants visited the coffee houses to learn the news of the day, and “it was in coffee-houses that commerce and (the) new technology (of printing) first became intertwined.” (The Economist) Journalist and business men formed a symbiotic relationship. In the case of London, “early British businessmen met in coffeehouses to discuss matters of trade, including the “news”, which was coming into ever-wider circulation. London had 3,000 coffeehouses by the first decade of the eighteenth century, each with a core of regulars. The conversation of these little circles branched out into affairs of state administration and politics. Journals of opinion were created, which linked the thousands of smaller circles in London and throughout the country. These were often based at particular coffee houses and replicated in their contents the style of convivial exchange.” (Calhoun, 12)

Coffee houses were a medium particularly well suited to business relations, and differed from the pub in both the clarity and rationality of discussion. “It is argued that

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commercial matters cannot be properly conducted in an ale-house, where the continued sipping...flies at last to the head.” (Robinson, 130) As the market economy continued to develop in urban centers, coffee houses also proliferated as a place to engage in business. Because “the city’s growth meant it lost a center, a focus,” (Sennett, 55) citizens utilized coffee houses in much the same way as the town square of a smaller village. However, different from the dynamics of a small community, the new urban centers were made up of strangers, new public men forming new associations and identities. “In the population ...of ...cities, a special sort of stranger played a critical role. He or she was alone, cut off from past associations.” (Sennett, 51) This new stranger was separated from the strictures of sort of Gemeinschaft identity, and a participant in the rising market economy. As Richard Sennett explains, “the... bourgeoisie knew they were something new, but not what they were.” (Sennett, 57) Market capitalism reoriented the market outside the home, and “the economic activity that had become private had to be oriented toward a commodity market that had expanded under public direction and supervision; the economic conditions under which this activity now took place lay outside the confines of the single household; for the first time they were of general interest,” (Habermas, 19) As it is classically conceived, the coffee house functioned in this environment as the that third place, outside the home and away from the state where men could explore their newly formed autonomous identity. However, the coffee house was not a sphere separate from the marketplace, and in that way, does not fulfill the definition of a third place. The coffee shop functioned as a place for business exchange, and “it was specifically a part of “civil society”, which at the same time established itself as the realm of commodity exchange and social labor governed by its own laws.” (Habermas, 3) Habermas

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references here the distinctions between the new market economy and the state. By setting itself apart from the state, the market and the bourgeoisie became emancipated from royal control. While, “the ancien regime refers to the 18<sup>th</sup> c, specifically to the period when commercial and administrative bureaucracy grew up in nations side by side with the persistence of feudal privileges,” (Sennett, 47) these feudal structures would soon be swept away as men asserted their autonomy economically and in turn politically and socially. Habermas reminds us that public man learned about his new autonomy through participation in a privatized economic sphere. “The social precondition for this ‘developed’ bourgeois public sphere was a market that, tending to be liberalized, made affairs in the sphere of social reproduction as much as possible a matter of private people left to themselves and so finally completed the privatization of civil society.” (74) Coffee houses are the place where men learned how to engage in these new socio-economic processes. “The new sociability, together with the rational-critical discourse that grew in...coffee houses...depended on the rise of national and territorial power states on the basis of early capitalist commercial economy. This process led to an idea of society separate from the ruler (or that state) and of a private realm separate from the public.” (Calhoun, 7)

Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, in their Marxist attack on popular notions of the public sphere, cite “the public sphere as the organizational form of the “dictatorship of the bourgeoisie. This is the network of norms, legitimations, delimitations, procedural rules, and separation of powers that prevents the political public sphere, once established, from making decisions that disturb or nullify the order of bourgeois production. It is the organized obstacle to the material public sphere and politics – the opposite of the

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constitutive public sphere.” (55) Ideas about the public sphere, capitalism and bourgeois legitimacy are tightly bound. Through the public sphere, market capitalism was naturalized. The ideology situated itself behind “the laws of the market, (which)of course, prevailed because they were intrinsic; this was precisely why classical economics endowed them with the appearance of an *ordre naturel*.” (Habermas, 80) In classic political and economic thought, man as citizen and man as bourgeois became entwined. Man began to perceive himself as autonomous from the state, and as a member of the new market economy. He expressed his individuality in the public sphere. Again, Negt and Kluge counter that “the public sphere (is) a form for expressing use values as they are determined by the bourgeoisie.” (56) Nancy Fraser further attacks the perceived autonomy of the public sphere from both the state and from economics by saying, “the political, economic, and cultural worlds were wholly intermeshed , belying bourgeois self-definitions of a public sphere oriented around reason not power.” (Landes, 43) Despite these critiques, the market revolution affected man’s understanding of himself as citizen and individual. This reorientation had a dramatic effect on public life, with men leaving the home and developing public lives and personas. The classic coffee house figured prominently in this new public life, as a place of business, information gathering, and discourse.

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## **T**alk as democracy, Communication as Solution:

Familiar in the rhetoric about the historic coffee house, and the public sphere it cultivated, is the idea that dialogue is democracy. Talk is seen as essential to the democratic process, and often these “conversation as solution to social ills” models are left relatively unexamined by social and political thinkers. The coffee houses themselves are thought to embody this constructive dialogue, and the social interaction supposedly inherent to the coffee house space comes to represent a sort of democratic participation. Coffee houses were thought to educate their patrons, with such common proclamations as, the “coffeehouse (i)s the poor man’s university.” (Klein, 36) As defined by Ray Oldenberg, the coffee shop represents the ultimate third place, away from work and family, and defined by “conversation. Nothing more clearly indicates a third place than that the talk there is good.” (Oldenberg, 26) In this description, the act of social speech itself represents some sort of common good. Common understandings of democracy seem to also reference this concept of the potential and positivity of talk. As identified by Michael Schudson, these definition describe “conversation itself as a model of good government.” (Schudson, article, 300) Democracy is bound up in idea of conversation as social good, and thinkers like John Dewey clung to the virtues of talk. “For (John) Dewey, democracy could not exist without participation, and conversation was the hallmark of the participatory.” (Schudson, article, 300) This talk took place in a public space, such as a coffee house, and “the centrality of conversation to the movement” (Vartabedian, 215) highlights the importance of a democratic public sphere. Dialogue

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was essential to the development of Enlightened political practice for “what democracy requires is public debate, not (just) information.” (Mills, 72) In the theories of Habermas, Sennett and other theorists of the public sphere, “conversation is granted an exceedingly important political role. (And) democracy is, at it has often been called, government by discussion.” (Schudson, article, 297) Contemporary communitarians, such as Robert Putnam, “plac(e) conversation at the center of public life and the restoration of a public at the heart of the contemporary task of democratic society.” (Schudson, 298)

Talk was attributed the power to incite political change, and Habermas identifies “the claim to power presented in rational-critical public debate.” (28) For many thinkers, “some version of communicative action lies at the heart of both the theory and practice of democracy. The rights and duties of citizens are in large part defined in terms of freedom of assembly and freedom to impart and receive information. Without such freedoms it would be impossible for citizens to possess the knowledge of the views of others necessary to reach agreements between themselves, whether consensual or majoritarian, as to either social means or ends.” (Garnham, 364) This democratic talk takes place in the public sphere, where it is transparent and open to all. Democratic ideology revolves around this permeable public place. “Both the initial theory and subsequent related ideologies (about democratic communication) (a)re based upon face-to-face communication in a single physical space.” (365)

Ideal democratic dialogue involved citizens from all sphere of life, who were united in their pursuit of the common good. “Democratic conversation is conversation not among intimates nor among strangers but among citizens who are acquainted by virtue of their citizenship.” (Schudson, article, 306) Historically, the coffee houses represent a

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place where this type of ideal speech takes place. The famous newspaper editors and frequent coffee house goers of eighteenth-century London describe these sorts of dialogical processes in their printed news reports. “Much of the discourse in Addison and Steele’s reports on coffeehouse talk is not only a product of their minds, but an accurate report of the kind of speech that permitted people to participate on a common ground.” (Sennett, 82) Understanding these sorts of discursive models is important to understanding the ideals of the democratic movement, for “the discourse of these movements became the seeds of social transformation.” (Vartabedian, 212)

Bound up in the ideas about talk as social good is the idea that this discourse is (inherently) reasoned debate and that this “reason is the product of a collaborative, communicative, intellectual exertion on the part of those members of society who are qualified for this task.” (Negt and Kluge, 9) Talk is thus not neutral, but the work of active and qualified citizens acting for ideal purposes. This type of discussion embodies “the mode of sociability called public spirit, and thus (does) not tak(e) the form of interested debate or collective conflict resolution.” (Warner, 36) Democratic speech was equated with rational-critical debate, the domain of autonomous man. Women, the under-educated, and socially degenerate were excluded from this plane of talk. Despite their historical role in fostering collective debate, “woman, especially salonnières, were accused repeatedly of artifice and authorship of stylized discursive practices in conflict with nature.” (Landes, 28) Good conversation was plain and straightforward, the practice of Enlightened man.

Richard Sennett describes the use of talk as a means for public man to develop himself socially and intellectually. Men needed the company of other autonomous

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citizens in order to develop oneself. “Experience gained in the company of strangers came to seem a matter of urgent necessity in the formation of one’s personality. One’s personal strength might not develop if one did not expose oneself to strangers.” (Sennett, 24) In the company of strangers, man was expected to engage in impersonal and collected debate, the speech itself being disinterested and rational. “It was activity at a distance from the self.” (Sennett, 87) In this ideal, man is participating in something larger than himself. “The principle of participation, far from being antithetical to modernity, is one of its chief prerequisites.” (Benhabib, 86) This participatory act is the chief foundation of democratic thought.

Michael Schudson critiques this model of talk as social good and communication as democracy, by stating that “conversation provides no magic solution to problems of democracy. Democracy has little to do with intimacy and little to do with community. Democracy sometimes requires withdrawal from conversation.” (Schudson, article, 307) Instead, Schudson puts forth two models of ideal dialogue. “One ideal could be termed the sociable model of conversation, the other the problem-solving model.” (299) The sociable model is conversation where civility, respect and inclusion is the top priority. On the other hand, “the problem-solving model is more ambitious...it insists on a degree of sociability, or, at least, civility but also on the capacity of the conversation to translate the sociable into the public.” (304) In the problem-solving model, conversation is directed towards debate and disagreement, with the aim being a fuller understanding. Schudson thus complicates the equation of talk with democracy, asserting that much of the conversation in the public sphere, including the dialogue in coffee houses, is based

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around the sociable model, where civility is prioritized over democratic and productive debate.

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## **Civility: Rules, Tolerance and Respect:**

The institution of the coffeehouse, aligned with ideas about equality of speech and democracy has come to represent a sphere supposedly open and free. This emphasis on freedom seem to deny what is also essential to the coffee house space, internal regulation. The coffee houses had rules and were governed by norms of civility, that were enforced tacitly and internally. Denying this regulation undermines actual historical conditions. Civility means that norms of protocol were established, and those crossing outside of those boundaries were punished for their transgression. By viewing the coffee house as a rule-bound environment, a fuller notion of how democratic talk and public participation actually works can be developed.

Because of “mixture of company so characteristic of the early coffee houses,” (Robinson, 150) many theorists and historians have assumed that “the coffeehouse is (therefore) democratic...and the coffeehouse is pluralistic.” (Robinson and Keen, 24) In these formulations, the coffee shop embodied equality. “All were to be equal under its roof.” (Oldenberg, 186) The talk occurring in these coffee houses was also supposed to represent free and equal communication. “The...models of conversation emphasize the equality of conversational partners. Inside the conversation, equality, civility and fairness reign.” (Schudson, article, 300) However, as represented by Schudson’s quote, these norms of equality were governed by models of civility. In fact, the coffee houses have

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been discussed as locations where “a mode of civility outside the court” (Klein, 50) was enacted. Coffee houses had their own rules, sometimes explicitly posted. “Those guilty of swearing paid the house a twelve-pence fine and those guilty of starting a quarrel were obliged to treat those whom they had offended.” (Oldenberg, 186) Both talk and action are regulated in order to create the supposed “site for a conversable sociability conducive to the improvement of society as a whole.” (Klein, 33) “The coffee-house established (a)...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.” (Ellis) However, sociability does and did not necessarily equate to equality or democratic ideals of discourse.

Moreover, civility is not, in itself, a neutral process. “The civilizing process”, (is) a restructuring of (the) human personality in the direction of discipline and constraint, especially with respect to the body and the emotions.” (Klein, 33) The coffee houses themselves reinforced these norms. In the eighteenth century, “the coffeehouse was being discussed as a tool for the construction of a “polite public”,” (32) and this politeness reinforced social and hierarchical values. “The term politeness had many uses in this period. (I)t referred most directly to the protocols of good conversation.” (47) Good conversation did not necessarily mean open and democratic debate. Eighteenth century citizens were immersed in a culture of politeness, represented by “a vast pedagogical literature that instructed men and women on the proper rules for family life and then tutored them on their parental duties in the business of childrearing” (Landes, 62) While

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people from different realms of life may have been present in the early coffee houses, “(the coffeehouses) required a kind of playacting; elaborate rituals of speech developed in an attempt to disguise the class of the speaker.” (Harper’s, 57) Here differences were not accepted, but rather disguised behind models of artificial speech.

Scholars who do acknowledge norms of civility in the public sphere, and in the coffee shop as an ideal model, emphasize the importance of these rituals of politeness for maintaining a diverse environment. “Playacting in the form of manners, conventions, and ritual gestures is the very stuff out of which public relations are formed.” (Sennett,29) Further, “the importance of the public sphere lies in its potential as a mode of societal integration.” (Calhoun, 6) “Societal integration” seems to reference a strive for social cohesion at the expense of difference and disharmony.

The ideal of the coffee house is one where diverse groups of men come together in rational-critical debate. However, actual historical conditions means that strangers assembled in a controlled public space. “The initial social bond was established by forms of courtesy based on a recognition that people were “unknown quantities.” (Sennett, 62) Models of speech meant “that it became difficult to place “who” a stranger was.” (Sennett, 58) The new class of bourgeois citizens was unbound from familial associations, and set apart as public man. Certain norms were necessary to integrate this new rootless public, and these norms of civility were enacted in the public sphere. Joan Landes describes, “the civilizing influence of civil society,” (35) referencing the way in which the public sphere integrates individuals into standard, social norms. Because, as Tocqueville theorized, “democratic government (attempts to) bring the idea of political rights down to the lowest citizen,” (95) rules are necessary to regulate this diverse public.

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“The Greeks has a notion of public space as a place for political education,” (Harper’s, 52) and the value of education and strive for the common good trumped notions of universal inclusion. Public debate was not neutral, and “public opinion (was) aimed at rationalizing politics in the name of morality,” (Habermas, 102) prioritizing rules and norms over open debate.

“The distinctive features of coffeehouse sociability were egalitarianism, congeniality and conversation,” (Ellis) however, there is conflict between ideas about egalitarianism and congeniality. A pleasant conversation organizes itself around standards of polite protocol, not rational and challenging discourse. Richard Sennett argues that civility is necessary for productive public engagement, noting that “uncivility... is burdening others with oneself; it is the decrease in sociability with others.” (265) Sennett conflates the ideas of civility and sociability, emphasizing again that “civility exists when a person does not make himself a burden to others.” (269) Civil talk is talk removed from individual interests, and thus focused on disinterested public engagement. For Sennett, it is civility which makes this detachment from the self possible. Tocqueville affirms this idea, noting that “when citizens are forced to assume responsibility for public affairs, they are necessarily removed from the milieu of their individual interests and drawn away, from time to time, from looking at themselves.” (207) By shifting focus from the self and individual interests, man becomes more engaged in civil society and the public good. For Sennett, this turn away from the self is regulated by norms of civility, necessary for the construction of a functioning public.

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Norms, rules and civility are not neutral. They are enforced, punitive and exclusionary. The model for a good, sociable conversation, regulated by codes of politeness, is different than that of true democratic speech. “Democracy may require a withdrawal from civility itself. Democracy may sometimes require that your interlocutor does not wait politely for you to finish.” (Schudson, article, 308) There can be no conversation without some standard of civility, however, norms of politeness can be restrictive to debate. The talk of historic coffee houses, which allowed for diverse groups of people to become integrated into the larger social fold, necessitated rules of engagement. These rules insisted on a standard of civility that may have been antithetical to democratic engagement.

Selya Benhabib proposes multiple public spheres, in contrast to the ideal of one unified public space for debate and dialogue. She suggests that “the public sphere comes into existence whenever and wherever all affected by general social and political norms of action engage in a practical discourse, evaluating their validity. In effect, there may be as many publics as there are controversial general debates about the validity of norms.” (87) For her, multiple public spheres is the true essence of democracy, and perhaps this splintering of public interest allows for more diverse debate. “Small groups have always been the locus of change,” (Mills, 68) and perhaps individual interest groups allow for more democratic talk than the larger social whole, which is dependent on norms of civility for its maintenance.

The ideal coffee house is a space where a diverse public comes together, newly unbound from social and economic divisions. These small groups develop a sociable intimacy, which translates into rational-critical debate, compounding into burgeoning

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democratic ways of being. Once these citizens understand how to debate and how to use the public sphere as a counter to state power, they are ready for democratic revolutions, designed to undue the authoritarian monarchies. It is Enlightened humanism in action. However, several theorists have sliced holes in the usefulness and idealism of the coffee house, questioning the supposed equality of these spaces.

In the ideal, “every regular was once a newcomer, and the acceptance of newcomers is essential,” (Oldenberg, 34) indicating a regular mixing of social classes. Habermas restates this ideal: “the coffee house not merely made access to the relevant circles less formal and easier; it embraces a wider strata of the middle class.” (33) Classes were mixing, therefore contributing to the diversity of talk. “Talk was governed by a cardinal rule: in order for information to be as full as possible, distinctions of rank were temporarily suspended ; anyone sitting in the coffeehouse had a right to talk to anyone else, to enter into any conversation, whether he knew the other people or not, whether he was bidden to speak or not.” (Sennett, 81) Sennett, Oldenberg, Habermas and others stress this permeability. “Habermas’s account of the bourgeois conception of the public sphere stresses its claim to be open and accessible to all.” (Fraser, 118) For thinkers such as Tocqueville, democracy was based on the tenet that “each individual is...assumed to be as enlightened, as virtuous, as strong as any other of his fellow men.” (50) However, in contrast to these ideals, conversation works best when it is regulated by social norms and modes of civility. Schudson reminds us that “the more talk is among true equals, the more it fails to make assumptions clear, fails to state premises, fails to be accessible to all, lapses even into silence.” (article, 298) This type of dialogue is not open, and a newcomer to this dialogue “must have “cultural capital” to participate effectively in

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conversation.” (ibid) The conversational partners must be enough alike for the communication to be easy and effective. For Schudson, this sort of talk is sociable, and the maintenance of civility is paramount. “Sociable talk takes place among social equals, not necessarily intimates, in clubs and coffee houses.” (306) Sociable talk also “should never be about matters serious enough to disrupt sociability.” (304) This insistence of norms of politeness also means that this sort of talk is “non-utilitarian,” (299) and not the stuff of transcendent democratic engagement.

Unlike “truly public” conversation, (where) citizens talk with other citizens who may not share their views of values,” (300) coffee house speak was most likely bounded, restricted and essentially sociable. Trends in eighteenth century thought, and the conditions of the coffee houses themselves confirm the exclusivity of these cafes. Nineteenth-century historian, Edward Robinson describes these social distinctions enacted in physical space. In “the coffee houses, guests were not always upon an equality. Will’s (in London) like many of the early establishments, was up one flight of stairs. Here there was a regular gradation; its balcony, or a seat near the fire place during winter months, being the coveted place of honor.” (205) The coffee house themselves regulated and distinguished among classes, despite their claims to equality and fair mixing. Public figures in the eighteenth century were, in fact, disturbed by the supposed mingling of social classes, and the “erosion of social distinction” (Klein, 35) in the coffee houses, and sought to reestablish a hierarchy of values.

Coffee house talk was based around “the assumption that it is possible for interlocutors in a public sphere to bracket status differentials and to deliberate as if they were social equals.” (Fraser, 117) Habermas goes on to state the ideal as a “disregard(ing)

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(of) status altogether. The... replac(ing) (of) the celebration of rank with a tact befitting equals.” (36) While status may have been bracketed off, at least on a limited basis, in the sociable talk of the coffee houses “the object of the meeting was order not representation.” (Schudson, 18) Voices which violated social norms were excluded or silenced by norms of civility. Benhabib reiterates this concern: “the model of public dialogue based on conversational restraint is not neutral...and...leads to the silencing of the concerns of certain excluded groups.” (82) Norms of civility may have allowed diverse groups to interact in the newly defined public sphere, however these same norms squelched true democratic discourse, instead preferencing sociability among perceived equals.

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## **C**onclusion: What is the use-value of the coffee shop ideal?:

The coffee shop model sets up an idealized notion of what the public sphere was and what it might be. While clearly over-simplified and fanciful, the historic coffee shop model represents the strivings and revolutions of newly Enlightened man against a totalitarian feudal system. As newly bourgeois and public man came to understand his own autonomy from the state, he also developed a functioning civil society to counterbalance and wage revolution against the monarchy. The inclusiveness and permeability of this civil society, and of the coffee shops themselves is questionable. However, as an ideal, they have allowed intellectuals to conceptualize how the revolutions in Europe and the United States during the eighteenth century came about. Contemporary rhetoric about the viability of democracy has cast a long shadow upon the public sphere, questioning its feasibility and sustained use-value in our current times. The ideal public sphere of the coffee house has supposedly fallen from grace, undone by capitalism, individualism, and a general “vacancy in culture.” (Jacoby, 3) Habermas summarizes this breakdown in the public sphere; “the undermining of the foundations of the public sphere came about, Habermas suggests, through a “refeudalization” of society....Structural transformation came about, however, as private organizations began increasingly to assume public power on the one hand, which the state penetrated the private realm on the other.” (Calhoun, 21) The public sphere is no longer a space for

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pursuit of the common good, nor a viable counterbalance to the state, but rather, it is a place sullied by rampant individualism and the involvement of both the state and the market.

For Habermas, the very inclusivity that opened up the public sphere to the expanding bourgeois classes, was its undoing, “this inclusivity brought degeneration in the quality of discourse.” (Calhoun, 3) Habermas goes on to say that “because of the diffusion of press and propaganda, the public body expanded beyond the bounds of the bourgeoisie. The public body lost not only its social exclusivity; it lost in addition the coherence created by bourgeois social institutions and a relatively high standard of education.” (Habermas, Encyclopedia) The public sphere began to include more than just the bourgeois public, and in this supposed representation of a more democratic citizenry, undid its own viability.

Richard Sennett offers a counter-viewpoint that changes in the psychological state of modern man, particularly a sort of unchecked individualism, disabled man’s ability to act in the public interest. The romantic quest for personality turned men inward, and “changes...made the personal political.” (Schudson, 299) Sennett parallels the decline in the public sphere with the rise in the psychological space. “We know from the history of public life in the 19<sup>th</sup> c that the decline in this (public) realm was matched by a contradictory growth in terms of its opposite number – the psychological sphere.” (298) As man became more interested in the subconscious, the self and the personality, “the public realm of impersonal meaning and impersonal action began to wither.” (339) Popular discourse about the state of contemporary political and public engagement, especially in the United States is negative, and foretells the undoing of democratic

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practices. As Sennett writes, “today, public life has also become a matter of formal obligation.” (3) Contemporary intellectuals expound upon this doomsday scenario, noting that “in the sustained absence of a healthy and vigorous informal public life, the citizenry may quite literally forget how to create one.” (Oldenberg, 13) With the deterioration of the public sphere, and the supposed disappearance of public places, such as the coffee shop, many contemporary thinkers predict the end of democracy. By comparing current public practice to the early coffee houses of England and France, theorists have set up an ideal with which to lampoon the present state of affairs. However, the coffee shops were not egalitarian, not inclusive, and perhaps not even a very sustainable model of democratic talk. While useful as an ideal, and critical to understanding theories about the public sphere, the coffee shop does not stand up as a unequivocal ideal for healthy public life. We might turn instead to models for counter-public and multiple public spheres, each contributing to the discourse of democracy.

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