The Coffeehouse Culture in Eighteenth-Century Britain:
a Social Analysis of the Public Sphere Informal Discourse

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Summary

The subject of the following doctoral dissertation is the cultural transformation of British society, initiated by the popularization of the new-to-Europe drinks, coffee and tea, and the places where they were served, called coffeehouses. The new space of social integration created by the coffeehouses ensured the flourishing of free conversation, exchange of ideas and opinions, which bridged the differences between the participants in the discussion. Modern sociologists and political philosophers have recognized that a new social reality was created and developed in the coffeehouses.

Chapter One focuses on the analysis of social theories that regulate the formation of communities and social groups, systematize the relations between them and, consequently, form the public sphere in a civil state based on reason, law, as well as agreements (settlements) between citizens and state authority. The first attempts to justify the concept of justice and mutual agreement between people as the source of social structures were made in antiquity. Aristotle and Epicurus created independent theories on social evolution which focused on empirical knowledge, the search for happiness and respect for others. In the Renaissance era, Thomas Hobbes argued that the only way to establish and maintain peace and order among social communities was to create political institutions that would limit the freedom of citizens, but in return guarantee their security. The chaotic reality, which Hobbes called the State of Nature, was ordered by means of social agreements and contracts and the transfer of the right of "everyone to everything" to sovereign state institutions, which enjoyed almost absolute power. Unlike Hobbes, John Locke proposed the inviolable freedom of citizens in the face of the law, since, in his view, the legitimacy of public authorities comes precisely from the choice of the common people, who transfer their rights to the authorities. Locke also criticized the typical political system of 17th-century England, based on the monarch's divine right to absolute rule. He believed that the sovereignty of the state comes from the will of the people, and therefore it can be easily taken away and overthrown. Locke proposed to replace monocracy with a system that gives a balanced share of power to all members of the community. He came to those conclusions by observing the self-organizing communities of the British colonies. Locke developed a theory of republican government that reflected views of other classical

thinkers. Some passages from Locke's main work, the *Two Treatises on Government*, are quoted in full in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States. Additionally, the first chapter summarizes social theories of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Immanuel Kant, who, using the methodology of the State of Nature, argued that there is a clear boundary between the interests of the state and its citizens with the social contract being the source of political rights and civil liberties for the latter.

Chapter Two synthesizes the views of two modern theorists of the social contract, who focus on the mechanisms of creating impartial social structures based on contracts (settlements) among people, which prompted the emergence of socio-political obligations of citizens. In 1971, John Rawls, an American political philosopher, presented an abstract theory of the social contract, which demonstrated what conditions a person had to accept in order to live in a well-organized society. Rawls used Kant's philosophy to claim that people have the ability to evaluate rules and principles from an objective perspective. Rawls considered the principles of justice to be the primary object of the social contract. He advocated that people in the State of Nature were rational, disinterested in each other, and determined to search for the most efficient means to regulate agreements. In 1986, David Gauthier, a Canadian philosopher, undertook to verify Hobbes' moral and political theory, which indicated that both morality and socio-political structures were created by self-interested and rational people. Nevertheless, unlike Hobbes, who believed that a monarch was necessary to establish order and effective cooperation in the state, Gauthier argued that moral behavior can be achieved without external pressure from the ruler. Morality, according to Gauthier, flows from human rationality, a trait strong enough to influence people's intrinsic motivation to cooperate. Gauthier used a metaphor in which he compared a man to a Robinson Crusoe. He was convinced that each person lived on his/her island and independently worked for happiness and prosperity, but at the same time each individual was capable of interacting, negotiating and creating agreements with other Robinsons (i.e. people). The metaphor intended to convince people to foresee the benefits of cooperation.

Chapter Three is devoted to the work of Jürgen Habermas, a contemporary German philosopher, sociologist and political columnist, who focuses on the foundations of social theory as well as the analysis of democracy and the public sphere. He argued that the unique atmosphere of the coffeehouses created a model for social change on a broad scale and eventually established the bourgeois public sphere. He claimed that it is a space beyond state

control where individuals share opinions and knowledge, come together in conversation, and exchange their views by means of the print media. Habermas maintained that the informal critical dialogue was representative of the 18th-century coffeehouse and, more significantly, it embodied the whole public sphere. Unlike representative culture, the public sphere was accessible to anyone, anywhere, and at any time. According to Habermas, the coffeehouses initiated Great Britain's transformation into a liberal society at the start of the 18th century.

Chapter Four focuses on the rise of the periodical press, which has become a forum for public discussion and critical debate. It examines the basic principles of the Enlightenment with a strong emphasis on individual freedom. In the early capitalist societies, individuals played an important role in mediating between the spheres of the state and civil society. On the one hand, individualism, freedom of thought and criticism of authority were necessary to transform institutional and social structures at the turn of the 17th century. On the other hand, it was primarily done by means of letter writing - the most important communication tool among scholars, scientists and intellectuals of the Enlightenment era. Jürgen Habermas maintained that letters served personal contemplation, self-expression and an exchange of opinions among members of the middle class. Considerably, letter writing made long-distance communication possible and bridged political, cultural and social differences. The epistolary experience of the 17th century gave rise to the Republic of Letters, an international intellectual community of scholars whose members created an egalitarian space for the interchange of thoughts and ideas. Elisabeth Heckendorn Cook, an American scholar who specializes in Restoration and 18th-century literature, noted the close connection between the letter and the modern model of the social contract. According to Cook, letter correspondence forced people to take a critical stance and make personal assumptions. As a result, the notions of private and public were redefined, and it was revealed that those two apparently opposing concepts were closely connected.

Enlightenment literature and print culture were identified with freedom and provided a common ground for the unrestricted exchange of ideas. Interestingly, public appreciation of the periodical press fostered its ubiquity and diversity. Periodicals did not fit into any of the 18th-century literary genres; they were lost in the flood of news reports, political essays and epistolary novels. Although it could be argued that periodical press was not a literary genre, but merely an instrument for publishing essays, it ultimately achieved *magnum opus* and proved to be an outstanding contribution to world literature. Multi-volume collections of periodical essays were published repeatedly throughout the 18th century, proving the timeless value of periodicals

such as the *World* or the *Connoisseur*. The journals featured distinctive literary characteristics, and the most popular of them, the *Tatler* and the *Spectator*, were recognized as representatives of the genre. Chapter Four also describes the unusual conversational style used by Joseph Addison and Richard Steele which intrigued the growing middle class. The language of the periodical press was simple enough to be understood by a diverse audience, and symbolic enough to become an important source of information about the early development of modern society. Scott Black, a professor of English at the University of Utah, argues that 18th-century essayists developed a new literary form whose main domain was politeness. The *Tatler* and the *Spectator* supported formation of a new bourgeois culture. They offered a wealth of practical advice to their readers as well as a program of proper behavior, which Donald J. Newman, a professor of English at Texas-Pan American University, described as rules of conduct with due regard for social decency and sensitivity.

Chapter Five begins with the analysis of the transformation of the English social structure, which led to a significant development of the middle class. The newly formed social group, called the bourgeoisie, was identified with wealthy people who were not landowners and did not come from old aristocratic families. According to British historian and writer Peter Earle, industrialization and urbanization played a key role in the development of the bourgeois class. The significant growth of cities, the expansion of domestic and foreign trade, and the development of industry almost tripled the number of capitalists who invested their money in real estate, production or trade. The 18th century in British history is customarily identified with a period of peace, prosperity, refined education and the changes made in society. Culturally, the coffeehouses served as centers of social interaction, discussion and entertainment. They also played an important role in distributing up-to-date information. News and rumors circulated the coffeehouses, which were a source of gossip and sabotage activities as well. Any passerby, for 1 penny, could buy a cup of coffee and thus participate in the ongoing discussion. British coffeehouses were visited by a diverse clientele from all social strata, however, equality was maintained among all disputants, regardless of their background, social status or political orientation. Brian Cowan, a contemporary British historian, argues that Oxford coffeehouses, known as penny universities, provided an alternative to formalized forms of academic instruction. The discourse held there was informal in nature, dealing with politics, philosophy or the natural sciences in addition to local news and gossip. Oxford coffeehouses attracted patrons, called *virtuosi* or wits, such as Christopher Wren, Peter Pett and Thomas Millington.

Modern historians qualify coffeehouses as intellectual and cultural component of the Enlightenment. London coffeehouses, which gained popularity during the Restoration, had a slightly distinctive character. They were important meeting places for politicians and influential people of the political sphere, who discussed state issues over coffee. The Rota Club, a debating society formed during the Cromwell period, relocated political and philosophical debates to the public space. Rota Club members met at "Turk's Head," one of the most popular coffeehouses located in Westminster. The Rota Club was a well-organized and formalized society that promoted republican ideas. By the 18th century, coffeehouses became a widely accepted part of British social life, and their character was well established. People of diverse social backgrounds and ideological inclinations met in London's coffeehouses, which offered an easily accessible common ground for spontaneous conversation. The atmosphere of free debate about fundamental issues in a place that recognized equality of people made coffeehouses an important measure of the public sphere.

The purpose of the following dissertation is to determine the importance and the role the coffeehouses had in the formation of British society in the 18th century. It also attempts to prove the thesis that the appearance of exotic drinks of coffee and tea in Europe propagated free interaction, unbiased conversation and common integration of people regardless of their social status. In addition, the thesis examines to what extent the emergence of the coffeehouse reflected the Enlightenment ideas popularized at the turn of the century. A separate analysis of the role of the coffeehouse in a dynamically changing political situation in Great Britain is made. The dissertation proves that growing political and social consciousness resulted in gradual transformation of the public into a consumer society featuring public sphere in its structure. Finally, the coffeehouse' stance in Enlightenment literature, press, chronicles and diaries is analyzed. The dissertation is supplemented with a detailed bibliography of literary sources on the subject.

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