

THE VIENNESE CAFÉ AND FIN-DE-SIÈCLE CULTURE



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The café is a space intimately associated with the development of modern urban culture: a site of spectacle, consumption and sexual licence on the one hand, and on the other a site for the gestation of new political, social and creative ideas. From Jürgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in 1962, the link between the coffeehouse and the development of modern public discourse was established.¹ Despite the recognised significance of the café space, the informal, haphazard and ephemeral nature of café life has made it relatively resistant to scholarly enquiry.

In recent years there have been a number of works that have sought to address the coffeehouse and its contribution to European culture more directly. Ulla Heise's *Coffee and Coffee-houses* is a wide-ranging study exploring the evolution of the coffeehouse as a social and cultural institution across the cities of Europe.² The coffeehouse as the site for the birth of urban modernity in eighteenth-century England has been explored in Markman Ellis's *The Coffee House: A Cultural History* and Brian William Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*.³ Both these works trace in detail the social circles and the formal and informal institutions established in these venues, marked as they were by freedom of speech and association. Giving an alternative picture of the social life of the café, W. Scott Haine presents a fascinating insight into the role played by the café in communities of the working classes in Paris through the course of the nineteenth century.⁴ The coffeehouse as a designed space has been closely analysed in Christoph Grafe and Franziska Bollerey's *Cafés and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display*.⁵ These titles represent just a fraction of the books that have sought to commemorate and capture the coffeehouse as a space in the social and cultural lives of our cities.

In relation to Vienna, the central importance of the coffeehouse to Viennese culture is an established part of the city's history. The role of the coffeehouse in the lives of many of the key figures within Viennese modernism is a recurring theme in the literature devoted to Vienna 1900 studies. Formative works in the field of Vienna 1900 studies, such as Carl Schorske's *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* and William M. Johnston's *The Austrian Mind: An Intellectual and Social History, 1848–1938*, conveyed the importance of the coffeehouse in relation to the intellectual and cultural life of the city.⁶

The coffeehouse as a recurring theme in the literature of the period has also made its mark on German literary studies. As this arena of scholarship expanded in various disciplines over the preceding decades, the presence of the coffeehouse remained ubiquitous.⁷ Newer works have added to our understanding of the social make-up of the city and its impact on the development of the distinct modern culture of the city. Steve Beller's *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History* raised the important issue of the centrality of Vienna's Jewish communities to this history.⁸ Edward Timms' *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna*, and his explanation of the importance of the social and professional networks determining the circulation of ideas in Vienna, raised understanding of the importance of such personal contacts.⁹ The international dimensions of coffeehouse culture have been explored in Klaus Thiele-Dohrmann's *Europäische Kaffeehauskultur* and Michael Rössner's anthology of essays, *Literarische Kaffeehäuser*.¹⁰

The exhibition hosted in 1980 by the Wien Museum, then the Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, on the Viennese Coffeehouse was important in presenting the first synthesis of the coffeehouse as a physical space in the city, its history and its association with the development of Viennese modernism.¹¹ The fame of the Viennese café has also resulted in a host of publications intended for the general public which largely depend on the uncritical recycling of the same anecdotes and sayings.

Though the coffeehouse has, therefore, long been recognised as a site of importance in Vienna at the turn of the century, there has as yet been little scholarly investigation into how this site really functioned in relation to the broader culture and society of the city. In recent years there has been a great deal of active research in relation to the literature of the Jung Wien group and their peers, Jewish Vienna and the art and design innovations of the Secession. The essays collected within this volume are drawn from a number of different disciplines: art history, design history and cultural history, German literature and Jewish studies. The theme of the café occurs in all these areas, but often with relatively little cross-disciplinary contact and this is something our 2008 conference and this collection seeks to remedy. By bringing the varied methodologies and concerns of these disciplines to bear on the question of the coffeehouse, this volume provides a point of contact between these different

fields of research and allows them to mutually inform one another. Considering the theme of the coffeehouse as a site for the fruitful transgression of established boundaries, this book attempts to provide a comparable meeting place of ideas, finding new points of contact between different fields of research. This way of relating physical space and design with intellectual, social and cultural trends within a specific historical context has potential implications for research and the development of appropriate methodologies in the broader field of histories of metropolitan culture.

Our thematic concern with the coffeehouse as a site of urban modernity and cultural exchange has resulted in a focus that is primarily oriented towards the large, bourgeois coffeehouses of the city centre. This focus on these coffeehouses, patronised by a broad range of Vienna's professional, intellectual and artistic classes, nonetheless excludes a great many smaller cafés and inns that provided comparable services for Vienna's lower-middle and working classes out in the suburbs. This exclusion is also in large part a reflection of the comparative richness of available source material in relation to the grander coffeehouses, documented as they are in contemporary literature, guidebooks and journalism, postcards, photographs, design journals and so on. A detailed social history of the coffeehouse across all strata of Viennese society would be greatly welcomed, but lies outside the scope of this present volume.

The Viennese Café and Fin-de-siècle Culture represents both the final outcome of a three-year Arts and Humanities Research Council research project and a conference entitled *The Viennese Café as an Urban Site of Cultural Exchange* held in 2008. The research project, launched jointly in 2006 by Professor Jeremy Aynsley at the Royal College of Art and Dr Tag Gronberg and Professor Simon Shaw-Miller at Birkbeck, University of London, was constituted with the intention of exploring the Viennese café as a key site of turn-of-twentieth-century modernity. With a focus on an interior urban space, rather than 'the street' which usually serves as a metonym for the city, the project showed how the café offers a slower paced, but no less complex lens through which to understand urban modernity.

The challenge of editing this volume reflects the complexity of attempting to adequately address the many issues bound up in Viennese modernism and urban modernity at the turn of the century. The very fluidity and interrelatedness of the issues raised defies a simple, linear overview. A number of key themes arose repeatedly during the conference and reappear among the essays presented here, as outlined below. This repetition illuminates the points of convergence between different disciplines through the contrasts in the ways in which these ideas are handled, as imagery, as text and as historical source. Certain key texts, such as Habermas' and Fredrich Torberg's recollections of the coffeehouse, are referenced in a number of the essays.¹² The editors have decided to let this repetition stand as in each case these texts are used by different writers from different disciplines to make different points.

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The café offers a site where different perspectives can be tried against one another. Its place in the city exemplified the shifting ground of Viennese urban modernity, as it provided a key location for the blurring or breaking down of time-honoured hierarchies and social frameworks of exclusion and inclusion. In Vienna, where in many spheres archaic and restrictive social mores prevailed, the café stood out as an institution at the heart of the city in which such rules could be bent. This was, in part, a manifestation of the café's identity as a casual site of recreation. Though far from free of regimentation, tradition and the observance of class, race and gender boundaries, the perceived informality and triviality of coffeehouse life allowed it to become a space within the city where such boundaries could be temporarily transgressed. This is one explanation for why the coffeehouse became a 'home' for more marginalised groups within the city.

The relative inclusiveness and informality of coffeehouse life contributed to its importance for a number of groups. The coffeehouse as a 'home from home' is one of the recurring themes in discussions of the Viennese café. One of the aims of this collection is to subject such well-established ideas relating to the café to critical enquiry. Charlotte Ashby and Richard Kurdiovsky's essays both call on visual and textural evidence to explore how socially accessible and home-like the café really was. Steven Beller and Shachar Pinsker also examine this perceived homeliness in relation to the café as a space in which both the assimilated and newly-arrived Jewish communities in Vienna might 'belong'.

The Viennese café as a Jewish space in the city constitutes another strand of enquiry running through this volume. The café was constructed, often antisemitically, as Jewish in contemporary journalism. Subsequently, post-Second World War accounts of the Viennese café are often coloured by the traumatic destruction of pre-war café life, brought about by the forced aryanisation of cafés and the expulsion or murder of Vienna's Jewish inhabitants.¹³ The tourist culture of Vienna today is frequently at pains to gloss over this rupture and emphasise instead continuity with the pre-war tradition.¹⁴ The image of the Viennese café as the social hub of Viennese life is not a new one. The Viennese café was the subject of nostalgic myth-making and civic pride from the nineteenth century onward, as Ashby and Gilbert Carr explore.

The idea of the café as a fertile ground for literary innovation, based on its role as a site where young writers can meet and be encouraged by their older colleagues and connections between like-minded people can be forged and maintained, is also explored across the collection. In the essays by Ashby, Carr and Edward Timms, this is looked at in connection with Viennese literary modernism. Pinsker, Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius and Ines Sabotič approach the same question from the perspective of Hebrew and Yiddish writers in Lemberg, Vienna and Berlin, Polish writers in Kraków and Croatian writers in Zagreb.

Murawska-Muthesius, Ashby and Mary Costello examine the perception and realities of the accessibility of the café for women and the idea of the gendering of public space, also considered in Tag Gronberg's essay. By analysing these recurring themes from different perspectives the collection is able to get closer to understanding the mechanisms behind the myth that fostered the renowned creativity of the café.

In many ways the café encapsulated the complexity of urban life and the construction of urban modernity at the beginning of the twentieth century. While nineteenth-century cultural commentators, such as Baudelaire, were captivated by the pace and mutability of life on the streets of the city, the café provided an essential counterpoint to it. The anonymity of the pedestrian provided a certain kind of freedom. Anonymity within the Viennese café was up for negotiation: one could become a *Stammgast* (regular) and make oneself at home or remain a passing stranger. This extra level of complexity and individual agency provides an alternative manifestation of the modern urban experience, in which the desire for community is in conflict with the desire for personal freedom. Withdrawn from the pace of the street, but not wholly removed from it, the café provided a place for reflection and thus a potentially productive venue for the forging of new identities.

The book opens with Ashby's essay, which introduces the subject of the café and its relationship to the social and cultural life of Vienna. The famous role of the café as a centre of masculine intellectual life is set alongside its multifarious identities as a site of leisure and frivolity deeply rooted in the social life of the city. The reality of the limited accessibility of the café in terms of class and gender is nuanced by an exploration of the conventions and permitted transgressions hallowed by the café's long-established traditions. That the Viennese café did not quite achieve the heights of free and vigorous political debate idealised in Habermas' theory of the bourgeois public sphere is shown to be comparatively unimportant in relation to its versatility in embracing the richness and contradictions of public life in the city.

Carr's essay in turn introduces the intellectual space of the coffeehouse, examining the representation and construction of the legend of the Viennese café in contemporary journalism, nostalgic autobiography and fictional form. The fluidity of the identity of the café, in terms of time and space, presented here parallels the development of the literary modernism practised by its habitués. A fragmented, faceted picture of the café emerges, confirming the essential intangibility of the creative legacy of the coffeehouse. Carr observes that relatively few writers engaged with the café as a subject despite its purported importance to them and much of what he has uncovered reveals more about the memoir genre's realm of self-deconstructive myth-making than it does of the realities of café life.

This is followed by three essays which variously consider the café in relationship to the figure of the outsider. Beller's essay explores the question of the Viennese café as a Jewish space within the city. The nature of the coffeehouse – at the heart of the city, but outside the formal institutional framework of the city's hierarchies – is suggested as one of the factors that made it a congenial environment for Vienna's Jews who, although prominent within the city, were also often regarded as outsiders. Gronberg's essay explores the close association between the founding legend of the Viennese coffeehouse and the Viennese victory over the Turks in the 1683 siege in relation to the articulation of identities, for individuals as well as for the city itself. The ideas of progress and decline and the modernist or modernising perspective of the outsider that concerned many Viennese thinkers at the turn of the century can also be considered as part of this Orientalist discourse, which offers a new perspective on the cultural position of the café within the city. Pinsker's essay further explores the Jewish identity of the coffeehouses of Vienna. He shifts the focus from the highly acculturated Jewish figures of the Jung Wien group and Vienna's assimilated Jews to the emergent literary circles of the Hebrew and Yiddish-speaking communities. In this story of a far less well-known literary modernism, the coffeehouses again appear as vital locations providing a physical space in which communities could be constructed and fruitful networks established. Pinsker's essay expands beyond the boundaries of Vienna, to look at the comparable role played by cafés in other centres, notably Lemberg and Berlin.

This departure from Vienna is continued in the following two essays, which explore the parallel developments of café life elsewhere in the Dual Monarchy of Austria-Hungary. Murawska-Muthesius' study of a particular Krakówian café, Michalik's Den, presents a space in which modernity in the visual arts was explored alongside the emergence of a modern Polish identity. The medium of caricature was one which allowed artists to transgress conventional boundaries and engage in contemporary social and political debates. This transgression was literally played out on the walls and furnishings of the café and in the cabaret performances given there. Again the theme of the outsider recurs, as Murawska-Muthesius examines how Jews and women were represented within the imagery of Polish modernism. Ines Sabotić's essay presenting the development of the café as an institution in Zagreb in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides a valuable alternative paradigm against which to re-examine the institution of the Viennese café. The development of café culture in Zagreb was a reflection of its relationship to Vienna as the cultural centre of the lands of Austria-Hungary and the existence of a pan-Central European, German-speaking bourgeois culture. The importance of the coffeehouses for the emergence of literary modernism in Zagreb paralleled that of the coffeehouses of Vienna. At the same time, the emergence of

Croatian nationalism in the early twentieth century challenged the hegemony of German-speaking culture in favour of both localism and an internationalism oriented towards cultural centres, such as Paris, beyond Austria-Hungary. The dominance of the issue of national identity in Zagreb highlights conversely the cosmopolitan nature of Viennese café society in which the individual and not the nation dominated intellectual enquiry.

The similarities and differences between the café cultures of these different cities provide different perspectives which are mutually illuminating. Mary Costello's essay examines the gendering of the space of the café, through the case study of a noted alternative to the café, Adolf Loos's Kärntner Bar, and its reproduction as a space in the Senior Common Room of Trinity College, Dublin. Again, different perspectives are drawn on as Costello investigates the established opposition between Loos's modern, masculine bar and the Viennese café. The Trinity Bar provides a reflection upon the original and on how social spaces can be both mythologised and loaded with cultural values. The role of design in gendering space and the complexities and inconsistencies in the gendering of modernism and the city in the early twentieth century reveal a picture which is far more complex than the simple image of the coffeehouse as a site of masculine sociability.

The relationship of the cafés to design modernism is also the subject of the following two essays by Jeremy Aynsley and Richard Kurdiovsky. Aynsley's essay considers the Viennese café from a history of design perspective, through an examination of the visual representation of the café in print culture and signage. This essay provides a visual counterpoint to the question of the construction of the coffeehouse in journalistic and literary sources. Here the visual identity of the café, represented in advertisements, posters and as interiors in journals such as *Das Interieur*, is explored to examine the construction of expectations of a modern, urban café. Kurdiovsky's essay considers the interior design of Viennese cafés in order to interrogate their association with the home or living room. The points of similarity and difference to domestic interior design that he reveals are illuminating in relation to both the development of interior design in Vienna and the construction and performance of public and private identities in the city. Edward Timms' essay takes a reflective step back to consider the Viennese café in the light of a comparison to an alternative scene of urban, modernist, literary endeavour. He presents the role of coffeehouses, as public spaces, in the intellectual life of Vienna in contrast to the Bloomsbury group and the private, domestic space of the tea party. Alongside the dichotomy set up between Vienna's urban dynamism and Bloomsbury's domestic cosiness, Timms also presents parallels between these two discursive worlds in the way in which they relied on the cross-fertilisation of ideas across disciplines and on personal networks. Discussing both the theme of sexuality and the impact of Freud's psychoanalytic theory, through

the translations published by the Hogarth Press, Timms offers a case study of both the differences and the intellectual connections forged between these two famous sites of early twentieth-century modernity.

Notes

1. Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962), trans. Thomas Burger et al., Cambridge 1989. Habermas' theory of the public sphere in relation to the Viennese café is examined in more detail in Charlotte Ashby, 'The Cafés of Vienna: Space and Sociability' in this volume (Chapter 1).
2. Ulla Heise, *Coffee and Coffee-houses*, West Chester, Penn. 1987. Also published as *Kaffee und Kaffeehaus*, Leipzig 1987.
3. Markman Ellis, *The Coffee House: A Cultural History*, London 2005 and Brian William Cowan, *The Social Life of Coffee: The Emergence of the British Coffeehouse*, Yale 2005.
4. W. Scott Haine, *The World of the Paris Café: Sociability among the French Working Class, 1789–1914*, Baltimore and London 1996.
5. Christoph Grafe and Franziska Bollerey, *Cafés and Bars: The Architecture of Public Display*, Abingdon 2007.
6. Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*, London 1980 and William M. Johnston, *The Austrian Mind: An Intellectual and Social History, 1848–1938*, Berkley and Los Angeles 1972 (2nd edition 2000).
7. The emergence of the field of Vienna 1900 scholarship is mapped out in detail in the introduction and first chapter of Steven Beller (ed.), *Rethinking Vienna 1900*, New York and Oxford 2001.
8. Steve Beller, *Vienna and the Jews, 1867–1938: A Cultural History*, Cambridge 1991.
9. Edward Timms, *Karl Kraus, Apocalyptic Satirist: Culture and Catastrophe in Habsburg Vienna*, Yale 1989.
10. Klaus Thiele-Dohrmann, *Europäische Kaffeehauskultur*, Düsseldorf 1997 and Michael Rössner (ed.), *Literarische Kaffeehäuser*, Wien 1999.
11. *Das Wiener Kaffeehaus: Von den Anfängen bis zur Zwischenkriegszeit*, Historisches Museum der Stadt Wien, Vienna 1980.
12. Friedrich Torberg, *Die Tante Jolesch oder Der Untergang des Abendlandes in Anekdoten*, Munich 1977.
13. The image of pre-Second World War café life was created by Viennese émigré writers in the post-war period. Notable works include Stefan Zweig, *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography*, London 1943; Hilde Spiel, *The Dark and the Bright: Memoirs 1911–1989*, trans. Christine Shuttleworth, Riverside, California 2007; and Torberg, *Die Tante Jolesch*. The story of the Viennese café has resulted in a slew of popular histories and guides, which repeat largely similar information and anecdotes, and which are still regularly being produced. See for example, Helfried Seemann und Christian Lunzer (eds), *Das Wiener Kaffeehaus 1870–1930: Das Wiener Kaffeehaus in Zeitgenössischen Photographien*, Vienna 2000; Birgit Schwaner, *Das Wiener Kaffeehaus: Legende, Kultur, Atmosphäre*, Vienna 2007; Christopher Wurmdböbler, *Kaffeehäuser in Wien: Ein Führer durch eine Wiener Institution: Klassiker, moderne Cafés, Konditorien, Coffeeshops*, Vienna 2005.
14. See, for example, the web pages of the Vienna Coffeehouse Owners' Club: <http://www.kaffeessieder.at> [accessed on 7 May 2009].