

CAFÉS OF THE BELLE EPOQUE

THE LATE 19TH century saw a flowering of café culture throughout Europe but most especially in France, Germany and Austro-Hungary. This happened in conjunction with the industrial transformation that stimulated a modernisation of the city landscape by a new class of wealthy merchants and entrepreneurs. In both Western and Central Europe, the urban metropolis was being re-imagined and redesigned, sometimes brutally, sometimes with a velvet glove, as a showcase for the affluent. Paris, Berlin, Prague, Budapest and Vienna were all revamped, rebuilt and repaved. Narrow, rat-infested alleys were replaced by magnificent boulevards lined with grandiose cafés, each one more resplendent than the next (though the new, pseudo-classical architecture was seen by some as more of a testament to the fragility of empire than serious homage to the Greco-Roman styles they tried to emulate).

But there was another side to this massive urban renewal project that laid waste to centuries of workers' housing and ancient settlements. Though airier and more sanitised, there were those who saw something frighteningly antiseptic about all the stiffly straight avenues that radiated from flawless

roundabouts like the wheel spokes of a military juggernaut.

If the 'Belle Epoque' gloried in the nouveau riche, there was a counter movement as well. A massive influx of peoples had flooded through the city gates into these new, dynamic worlds bringing with them many different ways of seeing. The fabulous wealth produced by the vast industrial projects that had been launched in the mad dash to the century's end, created a world that was filled with both delight and danger. It might have been the bourgeoisie who planned the new metropolis, but it was the workers who built it – and that was something the builders weren't about to let their apparent masters easily forget.

Many fantasies were played out over this time and cafés became the place in which to play them. With the gentrification of city life came a flowering of the arts – young men (and some young women) aspired to sup with the gods on terms they defined for themselves. The café, in all its many guises, became their rendezvous.

It was especially in the cities of the short lived Austro-Hungarian Empire – Vienna, Budapest, Prague – where cafés played a vital role of bringing together the multicultural phantasmagoria that came with the many and various peoples drawn from the steppes of Crimea, Ruthenia, Moravia, Bosnia and the Ukraine. We tend to focus on the cafés that

certain well-known artists and writers frequented but these weren't necessarily the places where the energy buzzed back then. Nowadays these cafés are simply museums that are visited primarily for nostalgia but during their glory days they were home to ordinary folk who might have aspired to fly or not but came there to soak up the vitality and intellectual vigour fuelled by endless cups of caffeine.

As Georges Mikes commented in his splendid introduction to a photographic tour entitled *The Coffeehouses of Europe*, the Central European coffeehouse wasn't merely a place; it was a way of life:

'Every profession used to have its own coffeehouse and its *stammtisch*, the regular table of regular guests. Every shade, faction or sub-group of each profession had its own coffeehouse... In addition to the well-known tables of artists, there were coffeehouses for textile merchants, dentists, horse-dealers, politicians and pickpockets among many others. The world of criminals was as much subdivided as every other sphere. A mere pickpocket would not be accepted by the table of self-respecting safe-breakers any more than a small money-lender would be tolerated at the table of top bankers...'

In a Viennese coffeehouse, according to Mikes, there were twenty-eight varieties of coffee drinks. The customer had a choice of a small, medium or large cup; served strong or weak, short or long depending

on the amount of water added; in a glass, or in a little copper pot, with or without milk or even whipped cream. The descriptive vocabulary for coffee drinks was splendidly rich, including terms like 'Kapuziner', a reference to the dark cassock worn by Capuchin friars.

Mikes found it surprising that the Central European coffeehouse should have developed first in Vienna and not in Hungary as Hungary had been part of the Ottoman Empire for so long. The Magyar peasants, though, were never integrated into the Turkish culture and, in fact, watched the Turks drink coffee at the end of each meal with bemusement. There is a saying in the Hungarian language – 'The black soup is yet to come,' which Mikes claims was a reference to the Turks' 'masochistic habit of inflicting the punishment of black coffee on themselves.'

Yet one would hardly guess that was the case (if, indeed, it was) seeing the subsequent cafés of Budapest and the enduring relationship with coffee that accompanied the Hungarian diaspora. Indeed, when I was living in London back in the early 1970s, one of my favourite cafés was a marvellous place in South End Green which was a hangout for chess obsessed Hungarian refugees who lingered over their endless coffee while pondering some brilliant Budapest gambit. And I remember one of the regulars telling me that it took nothing more than a chessboard, a cup of freshly brewed coffee and a

smoky café to make any displaced Hungarian feel at home.

Whereas in Vienna and Budapest the coffeehouse was primarily for consumption of the coffee drink in all its myriad of forms, the cafés of Paris were based around alcohol with coffee as an expected supplement. The great age of Parisian bohemia had as much to do with the ingestion of brandy and absinthe as caffeine; which is not to say that coffee wasn't taken seriously by the high-strung artists and writers who made certain cafés their home. In fact, there's a lovely story that Henri Murger relates in his roman à clef, *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, where the proprietor of the Momus Café, at the end of his tether after having been pushed to the razor's edge by the antics of his rag-tag clientele, pleads with them to desist from making their own coffee on a portable burner they had shamelessly brought into his establishment under the pretence of his coffee having been doctored with chicory. (As if to emphasise his fascination with coffee and its stimulating nature, Murger also has one of his bohemian characters whisper seductively into the ear of his friend's young wife, 'Madame, the coffee plant is a native of Arabia, where it was discovered by a goat. Its use expanded to Europe. Voltaire used to drink seventy cups a day. I like mine without sugar, but very hot.')

The smaller workers' cafés stood out in stark contrast to the grand cafés whose well-dressed clientele displayed themselves like haughty peacocks bathed in gas-lit celebrity. There the high and mighty, along with the not-so-mighty boulevardiers, gathered to see and be seen by others who were part of that puffed-up parade – or those who wished to be – in an unbridled voyeuristic ritual.

Here tuxedoed waiters ruled the roost, every bit as haughty as those they served. Out of the limelight, though, were the thousands of little places where the everyday people of Paris collected for their morning coffee and brioche. Usually family-run operations, these workers' cafés popped up on almost every street, providing a safe and cosy space to read and write and gossip and explore; each of these cafés establishing its own personality along with its unique clientele.

In post-Haussmann Paris, rich and poor lived cheek by jowl in a vertical arrangement that had the bourgeoisie inhabiting the ground floor of apartment blocks where each succeeding level had a lowering of social status with the attic reserved for the most hungry and destitute. This, of course, was when stairways were the only method of ascending to the upper storeys, so gout-ridden bankers were quite happy to forgo viewing the beauty of a Parisian skyline in exchange for easy access (even if later generations would have it just the other way, with the

rich above and the poor below – which they saw as more in line with the natural order of the cosmos). What that meant was quartiers or neighbourhoods were fairly mixed as far as social class and occupation. Local cafés often reflected this diversity.

In contrast to the coffeehouses of Central Europe, the drink served up in Paris cafés was usually quite straightforward (even if the beans, as Murger hinted, were often mixed with grain or chicory). Coffee was served either black or white without any pretence. But morning coffee had become a defining part of the culture – so much so that the impressionists, who frequented the cafés in the unpaved streets of Montmartre, made stylised portraits of coffee paraphernalia almost into a genre.

Parisian bohemia at the fin de siècle created a mythology of paint splattered canvasses exchanged for coffee and brandy by dirt-poor artists living one day to the next at the behest of kind-hearted patrons who subsidised their drinking habits. How often this actually happened is neither here nor there as the image is, in fact, what counts in fuelling one's historical imagination. But for generations of youthful artists who consumed these stories about the 19th century gallery of greats staining their smocks with coffee along with colourful oils, the fantasy of the bohemian cafés as adjuncts to their cramped studios and workplaces redolent with the scent of coffee and tobacco, is what matters. Many have sought them out only to find they existed in the realm of fanciful

legend. But once established, the romance of the Parisian café with its dark roasted coffee in a white porcelain cup exciting the bristles of an artist's brush persists as a compelling vision that beckons through the mist of timelessness.



Parisian Café, Gaetano de Las Heras 1903