



Coffee, the Cornerstone of Capitalism

David Green, Jul 16, 2009

A good case can be made that coffee is the foundation of modern civilization, no not Starbucks, but the whole capitalist, democratic edifice. Coffee originated in Ethiopia and is first documented in the 9th century. There are several legends as to its discovery by the outside world, the most popular has it that a renowned Arab Sufi mystic, while traveling in Ethiopia saw goats jumping around after eating berries, he tried some and found that they were energizing. An Ethiopian variant revolves around a goatherder, named Kaldi, who made a similar observation, later immortalized in 'The legend of the Dancing Goats'.

The word coffee comes originally from the Arabic 'qahwat al-bun' meaning the wine of the bean, shortened to 'qahwa' it became 'kahve' in Turkish and 'caff  ' in Italian. Yemeni traders, ubiquitous to the shores of the Indian ocean, brought the beans back to Arabia, probably in the early 1400's, and the use of coffee began to spread. It is not documented as to who first decided it would be better to boil the roasted beans in water rather than just chew on them as the goats had done, but while Columbus was stumbling upon the Americas the Muslim world was discovering the delights of a good cup of coffee. As with every great advance in civilization, it was not without it's detractors; in 1511 the court at Mecca issued a ban on coffee, overturned a mere 13 years later by the Ottoman Sultan, Selim I. Similarly a fatwa issued in Egypt, In 1532, allowing coffee was quickly followed by a secular ban and the sacking of the coffee warehouses in Cairo. But you cannot stop the tide, in 1530 the first coffeehouse opened in Damascus.

Under Sharia law, followed by the Muslim world, the consumption of alcohol is forbidden. This ban meant that there was no corner bar, no cozy pub, no meeting place where people could congregate and discuss ideas without supervision and direction. The coffee-house provided that, with the added fillip of the stimulating drink itself. The Venetians, the greatest Mediterranean

traders of that time, soon brought the beverage and concept to Europe where it spread like wildfire. Initially marketed as a luxury for the wealthy, it was actually 'baptized', in 1600, by Pope Clement VIII, somewhat akin to the FDA seal of approval.

There are several claimants to the first English coffeehouse, the first one, notwithstanding the plaque adorning the wall in 'The Grand Cafe', Oxford, would appear to have opened in St. Michael's Alley, Cornhill, London. These establishments. Especially in London and Amsterdam, soon became meeting-places, often developing a particular following. Will's Coffee House, in Convent Garden was frequented by John Dryden and other satirists but probably the most famous was that run by Edward Lloyd which evolved into the insurance giant Lloyds of London. By 1739, it is estimated, there were over 500 coffeehouses in London frequented by specific groups; jobbers, writers, poets, men of fashion, lawyers, merchants, agents and, of course, every political faction in the spectrum. As the century evolved the private club grew more popular, coffeehouses being open to anyone, in an effort to separate the riff-raff from their 'betters'.

Given the stimulative effect of coffee, it is easy to surmise that these places deserve credit, at least in part, for the explosion of industry and commerce around that time. London and [Amsterdam](#) became the centers of mercantile power; coincidence? No, I don't think so. The Stock Exchange, Lloyds, the Bank of England, the growth of the East India Company and the Dutch East India Company all emerged from these establishments (the fact that women were banned from English and French coffeehouses may well explain the male dominance of these areas of business - especially considering that women were well-represented in other business ventures prior to this). Both Sotheby's and Christie's were founded by auctions being held in coffeehouses.

The first coffeehouse in America was founded in Boston in 1670, again quickly gaining popularity. Once more they became a place "where you have the right to read all the papers for and against the government," to quote Abbe Provost, and thus a breeding ground for revolution. By the early 18th century, coffee was being grown in the West Indies and by 1727, when the Emperor of Brazil dispatched an Ambassador to French Guiana to steal some plants, a venture he succeeded in by seducing the wife of the Governor so that she gave them to him as a gift, there was a plantation in Brazil. Production escalated to the point that it became a drink for the masses, a common staple. In 1893 plant was introduced to Kenya, an ironic twist as this was just around the corner from it's place of origin. With further irony, Vietnam is today the second largest producer of coffee; communism supplies the capitalist tool.

Sources :

Ellis, Aytoun (1956). *The Penny Universities : A History of the Coffee-Houses*. London : Secker & Warburg.

Burn, Jacob Henry, d. (1869). *A descriptive catalogue of the London traders, tavern, and coffee-house toke*. 2nd ed. London.

Cemal Kafadar, "A History of Coffee", *Economic History Congress XIII* (Buenos Aires, 2002)

Published by David Green