An introduction to the coffee-house: a discursive model

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<09> That coffee and conversation go together is now a commonplace that does not need repeating. Advertisements for coffee underline the associations coffee has with thinking and with talking: a coffee break allows you to step back from your work and reflect on your progress or the lack of it, or again, coffee provides the occasion for friends to gather and conversation to begin. Nonetheless, it is worth remembering that the practice of drinking coffee is of comparatively recent origin: it goes back only 350 years in Northern Europe, and only another century or so in Ottoman Istanbul. Before this time, coffee was unknown: neither ancient Rome nor the London of Shakespeare's time had ever tasted the drink. The associations that we have of coffee and conversation are then distinctively modern.

Historical notes: Coffee-houses in Istanbul and London

Coffee-houses were unknown in Istanbul before the middle of the sixteenth century. According to the Turkish historian Ibrahim-I Peçevi, who wrote in about 1635, the first coffee house was opened by 'two Men, nam'd *Schems* and *Hekim*, the one from *Damascus*, the other from *Aleppo*' in the year 962 in the Islamic calendar (1554/55), during the reign of Soleyman the Magnificent [Süleyman I, 1520-1566].[1] As translated by the eighteenth-century English historian James Douglas, Peçevi states that their 'Coffee-House' was situated near the bustling *kapan* or mart near the port and the shops around the Rustem Pasa mosque, and was 'furnish'd with very neat Couches and Carpets, on which they receiv'd their Company'. Schems and Hekem offered their coffee at 'an easy Charge': Peçevi reports that 'a Dish of Coffee cost but an *Aspre*', which Douglas reckoned was 'not an Halfpenny of *English* Money'.

The first coffee-house in London opened just under a century later, in 1652, by a Greek Orthodox servant called Pasqua Rosee, in St Michael's Alley, Cornhill, in the centre of the financial district of the City of London. It was sponsored by merchants from the Levant Company, the trading house that organised and regulated trade with the Ottoman Empire. These merchants had become accustomed to drinking coffee during their extended residences in the Company 'Factories' in the ottoman cities of Istanbul, Izmir and Halep (or Constantinople, Smyrna and Aleppo as they knew them). The coffee-house found a ready public in the disputatious political climate of the English Commonwealth, and survived to prosper after the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660. By 1708, there were a very large number of coffee-houses in London and the provincial cities (as many as five or six hundred in London and Westminster alone).[2] From the first, these early coffee houses were associated with a certain kind of social interaction — what sociologists might call a sociability — which they as businesses went out of their way to cultivate. <10>
The distinctive features of coffee-house sociability were egalitarianism, congeniality and conversation. Although there were important differences between the coffee-houses of Istanbul and London, there were also some intriguing similarities, including the manifestation of this distinctive sociability.

The first coffee-house customers of Constantinople, Peçevi relates, 'consisted most of studious Persons, Lovers of Chess, Trictrac [an early form of backgammon], and other sedentary

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[1] See Ibrahim Peçevi, *Tarih-i Peçevi*, 2 vols (Istanbul, 1874-67). The translation quoted here is James Douglas, *A Supplement to the Description of the Coffee-Tree* (London: Thomas Woodward, 1727), pp. 19-21. For a modern translation Bernard Lewis, *Istanbul and the Civilisation of the Ottoman Empire* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), pp. 132-33. The best account of the Ottoman coffee-house and its culture is Ralph Hattox, *Coffee and Coffeehouses: the Origins of a Social Beverage in the Medieval Near East* (Seattle and London: University of Washington Press, 1985).

[2] The best general account of the English coffee-house are Edward Forbes Robinson, *The Early History of Coffee Houses in England*, with some account of the first use of coffee and a bibliography of the subject (London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trübner & Co, 1893) but see also Aytoun Ellis, *The Penny Universities: a history of the coffee-houses* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1956).

Diversions; and as the generality of the Turks came soon to relish this sort of Meeting-Places, call'd in their Language *Cahveh Kaneh*, the number of them multiplied insensibly.' From the first, then, the Cahveh Kaneh were places in which customers found as much society as coffee. 'They look'd upon them as very proper to make acquaintances in, as well as to refresh and entertain themselves…. Young people near the end of their publick Studies; such as were ready to enter upon publick Posts; *Cadhis* out of Place, who were at *Constantinople* making Interest to be restor'd, or asking for new employments; the *Muderis*, or Professors of Law, and other Sciences; and, in fine, Persons of all Ranks flocked to them. At length even the Officers of the *Seraglio*, the *Pathas*, and others of the first Quality, were seen to go openly to the Coffee House; and as this serv'd to increase the Reputation, so it multiplied the number of them to too great an Excess.'[3] William Biddulph, chaplain to the English Levant Company Factory at Aleppo (in Syria) in the first decade of the seventeenth century, noted in a letter written published in 1609 that 'Their *Coffa* houses are more common than Ale-houses in England; … being full of idle and Ale-house talke while they are amongst themselves drinking of [the coffee]: if there be any news, it is talked of there.'[4] As Biddulph observes, coffee-houses are characterised most notably by their conversation.

The London coffee-house was similarly built upon principles of friendly and discursive sociability. The coffee-houses, a contemporary thought, were the 'most agreeable things in *London*'.[5] A French traveller, Henri Misson, in London in 1698, remarked that the 'Coffee-Houses, which are very numerous in London, are extremely convenient. You have all manner of news there; you have a good Fire, which you may sit by as long as you please; you have a Dish of Coffee; you meet your Friends for the transaction of Business, and all for a penny, if you don't care to spend more.'[6] Contemporary images of coffee-houses, such as the one reproduced here, from

[3] Douglas, *Supplement*, pp. 19-21.
[4] William Biddulph, 'A Letter written from Aleppo in Syria Comagena', in Theophilus Lavender, *Travels of certaine Englishmen into Africa, Asia, Troy, Bythinia, Thracia, and to the Black Sea* (London: Th. Haveland for W. Aspley, 1609), pp. 31-85. p. 66.
[5] Anthony Hilliar, *A Brief and Merry History of Great Britain, Containing an Account of the Religions, Customs, Manners, Humours, Characters, Caprice, Contrasts, Foibles, Factions &c., of the People. Written originally in Arabic by Ali-Mohammed Hadgi* (London: J. Roberts, J. Shuckburgh, J. Penn and J. Jackson), p. 22.
[6] Henri Misson de Valberg, trans. Ozell, *Memoirs and Observations in his Travels over England* (London: D. Browne et al, 1719), pp. 39-40.

A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink, called Coffee (1674) or *A London Coffee House* (c. 1705, British Museum),[7] both by an unknown artists, demonstrate the physical architecture of a typical coffeehouse of the early eighteenth century. The coffee-room was dominated by a long central table, around which the customers assembled. The men depicted in the surviving images are shown drinking coffee, of course, but also smoking their pipes, reading news-sheets and books, writing in their note-books and staring off into space. Those activities depicted are then supplemented by the implication that these men are talking and debating, about issues of note in politics, commerce and the social world (hence the news-sheets). Around the assembled clientele gather the coffee-boys or waiters, bringing pots of coffee and pipes of tobacco to the table. A large cauldron of coffee is set over the fire in the background, with the blackened pots ranged in front. Behind a cubicle or bar sits the manager of the room: a woman dressed in an outlandish headdress. The coffee-woman — a typical sight in most coffee-houses — took care of the management and daily operation of the business: her conversation was also a valued part of the sociability of the business. In this way, the space of the coffee-house confirmed and established the kinds of sociability found there. Beyond coffee, then, the central activity of the coffee-house is discussion, conversation, gossip and talk.[8]

Coffee-houses occasioned much excitement amongst writers — satirists especially — in the Restoration and early eighteenth century. A great many texts were produced discussing the effects of coffee and kinds of social encounters experienced in the coffee-house.[9] A glimpse of the kind of social life suggested by the coffee house from the following short, and ironic, poem, called 'The RULES and ORDERS of the Coffee-House' published on the broadsheet called *A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink, called Coffee, and its Incomparable Effects in Preventing or Curing Most Diseases incident to Humane Bodies*.

[7] 'A Coffee-House Scene', *British Museum Quarterly*, 6: 2 (1931/32), pp. 43-44.
[8] Markman Ellis, 'The coffee-women, The Spectator and the public sphere in the early-eighteenth century', in *Women and the Public Sphere*, ed. Elizabeth Eger and Charlotte Grant, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
[9] See Robinson, *Early History*; or Steven Pincus's '"Coffee Politicians Does Great": Coffee-Houses and Restoration Political Culture,' *Journal of Modern History*, 67, (1995), 807-34.

The RULES and ORDERS of the Coffee-House

Enter Sirs freely, But first if you please,
Peruse our Civil-Orders, which are these.
First, Gentry, Tradesmen, all are welcome hither,
And may without Affront sit down Together:
Pre-eminence of Place, none here should Mind,
But take the next fit Seat that he can find:
Nor need any, if Finer Persons come,
Rise up for to assigne to them his Room;
To limit mens expence, we think not fair,
But let him forfeit Twelve-pence that shall Swear:
He that shall any Quarrel here begin,
Shall give each Man a Dish t'Atone the Sin;
And so shall He, whose Complements extend
So far to drink in COFFEE to his friend;
Let Noise of loud Disputes be quite forborn,
No Maudlin Lovers here in Corners Mourn,
But all be Brisk, and Talk, but not too much
On Sacred things, Let none Presume to touch,
Nor profane Scripture, or sawcily wrong
Affairs of State with an Irreverent Tongue:
Let Mirth be Innocent, and each Man see,
That all his Jests without Reflection be;
To keep the House more Quiet, and from Blame,
<13> We Banish hence Cards, Dice, and every game:
Nor can allow of Wagers, that Exceed
Five shillings, which oft-times much Trouble Breed;
Let all that's lost, or forfeited, be spent
In such Good Liquour as the House does vent,
And Customers endeavour to their Powers,
For to observe still seasonable Howers.
Lastly let each Man what he calls for *Pay*,
And so you're welcome to come every day.[10]

From the cauldron of such satires, Augustan literary culture developed a great regard for the principles of urbane sociability encountered in the coffee house.[11] Moralists, reformers and historians from Addison and Steele's *Spectator* to Macauley's *History of England* lauded the coffee-house as the paradigmatic place of urban refinement. In recent years, this

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[10] *A Brief Description of the Excellent Vertues of that Sober and wholesome Drink, called Coffee, and its Incomparable Effects in Preventing or Curing Most Diseases incident to Humane Bodies* (London: Paul Greenwod, 1674).

[11] Lawrence Klein, 'Coffeehouse Civility, 1660-1714: an aspect of post-courtly culture in England', *Huntingdon Library Quarterly*, 59, 1, (1997), pp. 30-51.

construction of the coffee-house has been co-opted by multinational coffee chains such as Starbucks, and eulogised by the conservative American community-values theorist Ray Oldenburg.[12] Nonetheless, despite these recent re-appropriations, the sociability of the coffee-house is worth examining in more detail. There were no regulations or rules governing the coffee-houses (those quoted above are an ironic satire on the regulation of behaviour) — but it is clear that there was a kind of implicit regulation that had the effect of channelling discourse in the coffee-house.[13] The primary form of regulation was the expectation of other customers. A customer, when entering a coffee-house, might expect himself to behave differently to the way he behaved when he entered a tavern: a contrast that drinking the primary product only exacerbated (beer made you loud, rowdy and boisterous, while coffee made you intense and talkative). The expected set of discursive practices are reproduced by the coffee-house customers in their own behaviour, immanent rather than explicit, customary rather than constitutional.

Twelve principles of coffee house conversation

(i) Openness of the discussion to all comers. It is axiomatic that no one be excluded from the discussion by any quality they bring with them from outside such as status, wealth, power, strength or arms. As such, all speakers are considered equal within the coffee-house (there is an erasure of hierarchy). <14>

(ii) While entry is open to all, all who enter agree to behave by the discursive rules of the house.

(iii) The discursive economy of the coffee-house is inclusive: so that all opinions might be heard, even those which are diametrically opposed, unfashionable, unlikely to be persuasive.

(iv) Nonetheless, debate is not unregulated, but should be rational, critical, skeptical, polite, calm and reasoned.

(v) Politeness is not observed for the sake of a social propriety that exists outside the coffee-house, but in order for the discussion to be free and open. No-one to be brow-beaten by others into silence. Voices should not be raised. Incendiary rhetoric should be avoided. Each person should be allowed to speak, each person

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[12] Howard Schultz, *Pour Your Heart Into It: How Starbuck's Built a Company One Cup at a Time* (New York: Hyperion, 1997); Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place* (New York: Marlowe, 1998).

[13] Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, 'The Grotesque Body and the Smithfield Muse: Authorship in the Eighteenth Century' in *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression* (London: Methuen, 1985), pp. 80-118.

should only speak for an appropriate time, limiting themselves to allow for the inclusion of other voices.

(vi) That the discussion is rational, reasoned skeptical and critical implies that the principles of empirical observation of the eyewitness, of presentation of evidence, and of forensic argument will be adopted — rather than dogmatism, arguments from faith, or attacks on the character of other speakers.

(vii) Nonetheless, the discussion should be interesting, relevant, curious, focussed and interesting. Digression is not tolerated but amplification is. Contributors are encouraged to use interesting and diverting examples, but only when they are instructive.

(viii) Topics should matter: the issues debated should be ones of topical concern, on issues that engage with important debates of the day, or are informed by important principles.

(ix) That the coffee-drinkers have opinions about topics that matter is important in forming public opinion or debate: that is, the opinion of individuals matters in the creation of public opinion.

(x) Nonetheless, individual's should give way in the face of superior argument or better information (adopting a principle of anti-dogmatism and anti-relativism).

<15> (xi) Gossip and chit-chat should be eschewed, while satire and lampoon are permitted. Conversational commonplaces and irrelevant or inconsequential topics are not tolerated. Idleness (lurking), gabbling, incoherency, irrationality are rejected.

(xii) These rules are immanent, unstated, ubiquitous, omnipotent and unchallengeable.

These rules I have elaborated in some detail, much of which is worth taking with a grain of salt. Nonetheless, what I want to point to here is how the coffee-house established an unstated 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. This is a lesson that we might apply also to other and similar open-context discussions and the sites or institutions that support them. Some places are particularly associated with discussion of this kind: places where people meet, accidentally or occasionally, where they meet and pass the time undisturbed or are able to pass the time together. A good example would be the kinds of discursive communities that have developed in usenet or email discussion lists on the internet.[14] Anthropologists and sociologists have also offered extended studies of the gossip communities that develop around the world, including the well or watering hole in Africa,[15] the Tofu business in Japan,[16] or the barbershop in Spain.[17]

Coffee-house sociability and the public sphere

One of the reasons to be interested in the coffee-house is its privileged status in the work of a distinguished group of late-twentieth century sociologists and political philosophers, such as Jürgen Habermas, Peter Stallybrass, Richard Sennett, Terry Eagleton. In the accounts by these philosophers and sociologists, the social life of the coffee-house in the early eighteenth century seems to be a paradigm or model of the important transformations in English society in this period. As outlined by the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas, in his early work on the historical foundations of civil society called *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (written in 1962 but not translated into English until 1989),[18] innovative urban public spaces and institutions allowed the construction of what he has famously called the 'bourgeois public sphere'. In Habermas's estimation the public sphere is a distinctive feature of modern society (and as such, delineating its origins in the late-seventeenth and early-eighteenth century helps us understand how civil society operates in the modern era). The public sphere, despite its name, takes place in private, or in <16> certain liminal regions on the borders of the public and private. In this way, the coffee-house is a paradigmatic example, because in it, individual people come together in a space that is intimate and thus private, but also open, and thus public. Habermas notes an array of physical places that share this kind of 'architecture of sociability', such as theatres, debating rooms, and coffee-houses, but also notes the significance of the new infrastructure of social communication, such as the journalistic press, circulating libraries, and the post office. In such places people participate in 'rational-critical discussion', which is to say, rational *and* critical discussion. From such discussions, individuals are lead to the formulation of a rational, consensual sense of judgement, so

[14] Michele Tepper, 'Usenet Communities and the Cultural Politics of Information' in David Porter, *Internet Culture* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 39-54.

[15] A.L. Epstein, 'The Network and Social Organisation', *Rhodes-Livingston Institute Journal*, 29, (1961), p. 44.

[16] J.F. Embree, *Suye Mura: A Japanese Village* (Chicago, 1939), p. 53.

[17] D. Gilmore, 'Varieties of Gossip in a Spanish Rural Community', *Ethnology*, 17, (1978), p. 91.

[18] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger (Cambridge: Polity, 1992). See also Craig Calhoun, *Habermas and the Public Sphere* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: The MIT Press, 1992).

that they might judge of the effect of actions or opinions on their own private interests but also the public good. The public, in Habermas, are either a discursive concept expressing a normative ideal, or as an actually existing social reality.[19] As a ‘normative ideal’, the public sphere exists as a concept which is effectually accessible to anyone, anywhere, anytime: Habermas talks about how the public sphere might be constructed by individuals communicating in the world of letters (by reading, say, an individual might entertain a discussion in a coffee-house of the mind).

In Habermas's account, the public sphere is founded in its simple accessibility to individuals, who come together without hierarchy in an equality of debate. Through their discussions, first of literature, and later of news and politics, the individuals who assemble in the coffee-house come to form a new public culture. Habermas sees the new moral essays and literary criticism associated with periodicals like *The Spectator* as central to this discursivity. The coffee-house encourages such discussion through its institutional and spatial character, by facilitating a social interaction that disregarded status, fostered a toleration of a broad range of discussion, and was accessible to all. In this account, then, the coffee-house sociability achieves a number of important things: it encourages rational public debate on topics that matter between persons of
 different social status and wealth. These achievements are central to Habermas’s model of the operation of the public sphere in civil society.

Exclusionary mechanisms

Before leaving this model of polite discussion, however, it would be well to remind ourselves of some of the many limitations of the coffee-house model. Habermas argued that the coffee-house proposed ‘a kind of social intercourse that, far from presupposing equality of status, disregarded status altogether’[20] — but I think this is a polite fiction, local and impermanent, as hierarchy was translated into new forms. The most notable instance of this problem is shown by the fact that the early coffee-house was not open to women in the same way as it was to men.[21] While women were not explicitly barred from the coffee-house, the regime of the coffee-house made their presence uncomfortable or untenable. Recent research has suggested that that some women did go to coffee-houses: there is

[19] Keith Baker, 'Defining the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century France', in Calhoun, pp. 181-211.
[20] Habermas, ‘Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere’, p. 36.
[21] Emma J. Clery, ‘Women, Publicity and the Coffee-House Myth’, *Women: a cultural review*, 2: 2 (1991), pp. [168]-77.

certainly evidence that some aristocratic women did venture there (perhaps their high status overcame objections). But virtuous women of the middle station who wished to be thought well of would not go to the coffee-house. However, there were, as the image suggests, women in the coffee-house: those who were there as serving staff or employees. Many, if not most, coffee-houses had women serving staff (the coffee-woman behind her bar) — some were even owned by women (especially widows). In short, there were women in the coffee-house, but only under special circumstances, and not as equals. This reminds us that the much vaunted equality of the coffee-house only applied to its customers: and the coffee room was subject to important social divisions and boundaries. Images of the coffee-house record two significant hierarchies: one of status dividing the workers from the customers, and another of gender, excluding all women but the coffee-woman from the coffee-room. The spatial organisation of the room reinforces the hierarchical and gendered structure of the coffee-house: the boys inhabit the space around the table, while the woman proprietor is separated off from the customers in her little booth. It isn’t that they are powerless here, just that their power is of a different quality. It isn’t that status is disregarded altogether in the coffee house, but rather, that status is codified in new and unperceivable forms.[22] Similarly, the coffee house sociability habitually disregarded submerged costs of their beverage: such as the
slaves and agricultural labourers who harvested the coffee beans
and sugar in the colonies and Arabia. In this way, even a space that considered itself radical precisely because it was egalitarian, nonetheless established a space which surreptitiously re-encoded forms of hierarchy and prejudice without itself knowing it was doing so.

In this way, then, open-context discussion has more invidious exclusionary mechanisms. This is not the place, probably, to go into them in great detail. But satires on coffee-houses in the eighteenth century often depended upon developing the coherence of different interest groups within the coffee-house, and then playing them off against each other, especially using the foil of an ingenuous outsider (typically from the country, and thus unused to the urbane sophistications of the city). This kind of satire depends on the ignorance of the uninitiated or new-bee. By making fun of the new-bee, such humour we could be seen as an exclusionary mechanism: it suggests ways in which the uninitiated might get it wrong. Other readings might suggest, rather, that new-bee humour has a dual role, not only in forging group identity within the coffee-house, but also advertising the processes and possibilities of new-bee initiation and incorporation into the group. The techniques of

[22] Ellis, 'The coffee-women’, p. 22.

group management of the coffee-house or usenet discussion group thus do not have an explicit set of regulations, but rather an un-codified and implicit set of responses, a ‘cooperative anarchy’ as it is sometimes referred to.[23] Users — whether conversational drinkers in the coffee-house or contributors to internet discussion lists or discussants in a symposium — acquire the knowledge of how the group manages itself by an almost organic or life-like process (a sociology or anthropology of relational community identities).

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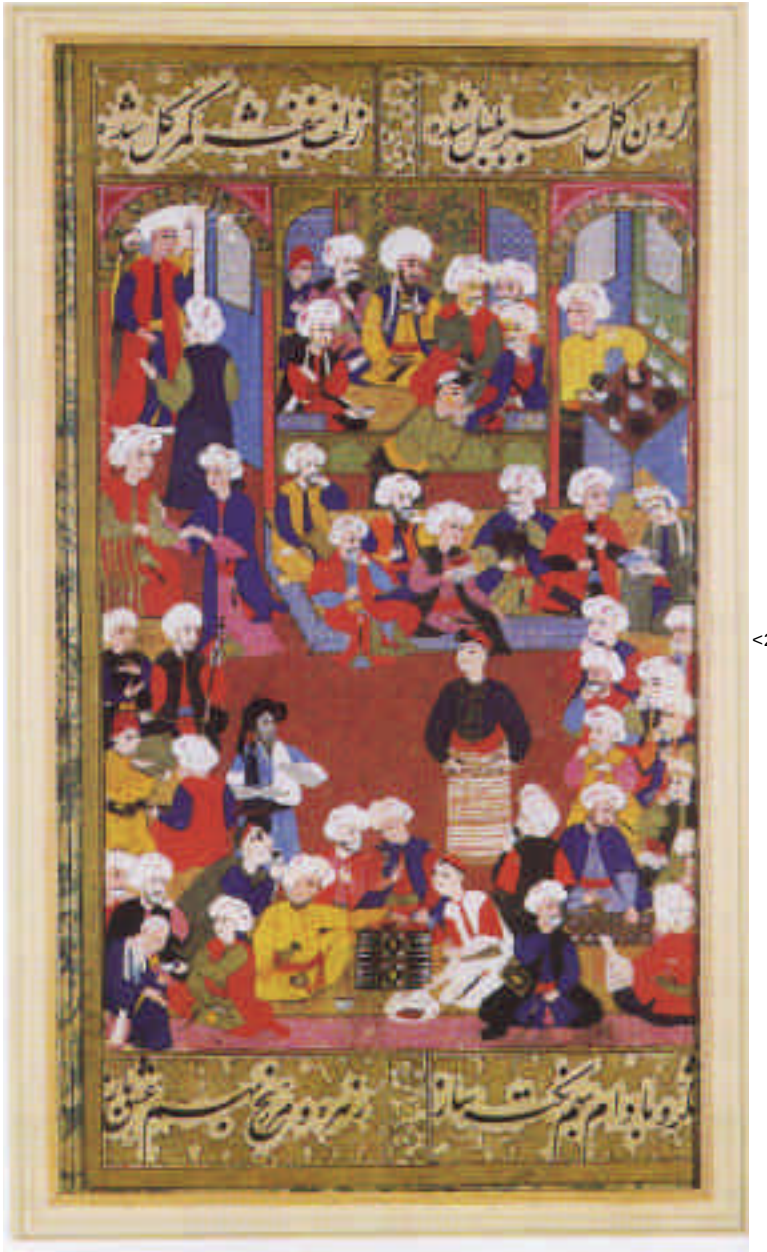
[23] Tepper, ‘Usenet Communities’, p. 42.



“Kâgıdâ Değâ Kahvehanesi”, Türk minyatürü, tahminen, 16./17. yüzyıl.