

Café Liberté: The Role of the Coffeehouse in the French Revolution

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The Parisian café of the late eighteenth century played a vital role in the French Revolution. Numbering more than eight hundred during the early days of the Revolution, the cafés of Paris provided a network from which information was spread, an atmosphere ripe for debating political ideas, and the means to control the opinion of a public on the brink of revolution; not to mention the drink that is, historically, the one most responsible for spurring rebellion: coffee. From the firing of the first rifle at the Bastille prison on July 14, 1789, until the fall of Robespierre in 1794 and beyond, the French café was the staging area for one of western history's most important political movements.



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At the National Library of France, there is an eighteenth-century colored etching of a busy room, filled with people engaged in conversations (see previous page). On the right, there is a group of three men listening as another reads from a newspaper; in the middle, a man is standing, gesturing to others at a table; a young boy, followed by a small, energetic dog hurries around the room selling pages of the newest gazette; in the back, political reading material is hung on the stovepipe for all to read; to the left, two men are reading from a newspaper, discussing the events

of the day, while a soldier leans in, eavesdropping on the conversation. The title of the piece is called *Les motionnaires au Caffé du Caveau* (Motion makers at the Café du Caveau). “Motion makers” was the phrase used to describe the groups of people responsible for writing motions to the National Assembly.¹ The location of this scene, the Café du Caveau, was one of several cafés that were the locus of the fury of the French Revolution, not only at its inception but also throughout the Reign of Terror as well. The Parisian coffeehouse of the late eighteenth century was fundamental in giving the French populace the public space they needed to gather and foment the ideas that brought about a revolution. More than an establishment to buy a cup of coffee and find a quiet place to read, French cafés were places of debate, as well as the exchange of information. In the years before, and even during the French Revolution, the cafés became places where liberal thoughts were put forth, radical ideology was preached, and revolutionary action was spurred.

Few scholars study, in any detail, the connection between the café and the French Revolution. Author Woodruff Smith, in one work, points out many reasons why these establishments were so popular, particularly at the end of the eighteenth century, while in another he explains why the beverage offered in the café, namely coffee, was the driving force behind the Revolution.² Jordan Goodman’s work on European coffee consumption focuses on France during the eighteenth century and explains how the French colonies in the West Indies were responsible for satiating their desire for coffee.³ Robert Darnton’s work on how information was disseminated during the eighteenth century makes the case that the café attracted people more for the daily news that was discussed there than for the beverage offered there.⁴ Finally, Thierry Rigogne’s article explains how the intensity of public readings in Parisian cafés formed public opinion in the early years of the French Revolution.⁵

In 1689, a Sicilian immigrant, François Procopio obtained a license as a *limondier*, or “lemonade salesman,” and opened the café that became one of the most important and most popular in all of Paris: The Café de Procope.⁶ The owner combined extravagant decor with a new

¹ Thierry Rigogne, “Readers and Reading in Cafés, 1660-1800,” *French Historical Studies*, 41, no. 3, (August 2018), 478.

² Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600-1800* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Woodruff Smith, “From Coffeehouse to Parlour: The Consumption of Coffee, Tea, and Sugar in North-Western Europe in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries,” in *Consuming Habits: Global and Historical Perspectives on How Cultures Define Drugs*, ed. Jordan Goodman, Paul E. Lovejoy, and Andrew Sherratt (New York: Routledge, 2007) 142-57.

³ Jordan Goodman, “Excitantia: or, how enlightenment Europe took to soft drugs,” in *Consuming Habits: Global and Historical Perspectives on How Cultures Define Drugs*, ed. Jordan Goodman, Paul E. Lovejoy, and Andrew Sherratt (New York: Routledge, 2007), 121-41.

⁴ Robert Darnton, “An Early Information Society: News and the Media in Eighteenth-Century Paris,” *The American Historical Review* 105, no. 1 (Spring 2000), 1-35.

⁵ Rigogne, “Readers,” 473-90.

⁶ Mark Pendergrast, *Uncommon Grounds: The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World* (New York: Basic Books, 1999), 9.

way to make coffee to provide Paris with a coffeehouse that stood as the ideal Parisian café.⁷ Large numbers of people constantly gathered in his establishment to drink his coffee and discuss intellectual topics at such a rate that Woodruff Smith calls the Café de Procope “the unofficial assembly room of the Enlightenment.”⁸ It is of interest to note that exactly one hundred years later, the coffeehouse of Paris went from being a place of exotic wonders to a place of unquenchable revolution.⁹ During the years 1789 to 1793, many of the events of the French Revolution had their beginnings either in or in the vicinity of the Parisian cafés.

The Golden Age of the café was the eighteenth century,¹⁰ as their popularity at that time is difficult to overstate. Even by twenty-first century standards, when we are inundated with Starbucks and specialty coffee shops seemingly on every corner, it is hard to comprehend the number of cafés available to the French, particularly those in Paris. The estimates vary a great deal, but even the most conservative claim that there were between 600 and 800 coffeehouses in Paris, alone, during the middle to late eighteenth century.¹¹

The demographics of these establishments were as varied as the places themselves were numerous.¹² Seemingly, each had a specific clientele to which it catered. The Procope, of course, appealed to the upper class, but many more looked to serve the more modest Parisian. This was especially true during the Revolution, as certain political clubs met in particular cafés to discuss and debate the topics of the day. The Dutch Café, for example, became “the haunt” of the Jacobites; the Café de Valois was where The Society of the Friends of the Constitution (The Feuillants) met, during their brief existence, to read the *Journal de Paris*; the Royal Drummer was notorious for its low-class and raucous crowd.¹³ There was even a café that stood out for nothing else other than being what the others were not: quiet. Wilhelm von Wolzogen, a visitor to Paris from 1789- 1791, wrote, “I went with [my friend] to the Café du Caveau.... The place is not particularly noisy. No café orator, no famous man around whom a studious author is gathered.”¹⁴ It is noteworthy that the Caveau was an outlier, because it did not have an orator giving a speech. The etching described

⁷ Federación Nacional de Cafeteros de Colombia, “Coffee and Politics,” accessed July 20, 2019, http://www.cafedecolombia.com/particulares/en/sobre_el_cafe/mucho_mas_que_una_bebida/cafey_politica/. Procopio was the first in Paris to use a filter to keep the ground coffee out of the drinker's cup.

⁸ Smith, *Consumption*, 143.

⁹ The Café de Procope opened in 1689. The French Revolution began in 1789.

¹⁰ Smith, “From Coffeehouse to Parlour,” 145.

¹¹ Smith, 145; William H. Ukers, *All About Coffee* (New York: The Tea and Coffee Trade Journal Co., 1922), 94; Julia Landweber, “This Marvelous Bean: Adopting Coffee into Old Regime French Culture and Diet,” *French Historical Studies*, 38, no. 2, (April 2015), 209 claims there were nearly two thousand cafes in Paris the 1780s.

¹² Ukers, *All About Coffee*; For a large, yet far from exhaustive list of cafés in Paris during the eighteenth century, see 100-02.

¹³ Ukers, 103; Jean Robiquet, *Daily Life in the French Revolution* (London: Macmillan Publishing Co., 1965), 39; Ukers, *All About Coffee*, 96.

¹⁴ Wilhelm von Wolzogen, *Journal de Voyage à Paris (1789-1791): Suivi du Journal Politique (1793) et de la Correspondance Diplomatique*, French trans. Michel Tremouza (Paris: Presses Universitaires du Septentrion, 1998), 29. Trans. using www.deepl.com, July 9, 2019.

at the beginning of this article shows groups of motion makers huddled together, no one commanding the entire room.¹⁵ Compare this with how one Revolutionary leader, Camille Desmoulins described the cafés of central Paris:

“[T]hose with stentorian voices,” Desmoulins wrote, “take it in turns to speak every evening. They stand on tables, people band together to listen to their speeches. They read out the most powerful writing of the day on current affairs. The silence is broken only by shouts of ‘bravo’ for the most stirring parts. Then [when they are finished] the patriots cry ‘more!’”¹⁶

While these cafés were spread throughout the city, there was one place where they were intensely concentrated. The Palais Royal was a district of central Paris, owned by a member of the royal family, Philippe Orleans, but was open to the public.¹⁷ It was a nearly enclosed courtyard with several large trees in the center, surrounded by buildings of various sizes and uses. The Palais Royal was comprised of several cafés. According to Diliberto, “As the epicenter of the Paris cafés, the Palais Royal housed twenty-five cafés.”¹⁸ Located here were two cafés that were instrumental in the French Revolution: Café de Procope and Café de Foy.¹⁹ It was for this reason that one revolutionary leader referred to the Palais Royal as “the patriot’s camp.”²⁰ It was here that the seed of the Revolution was planted.

In looking at the role the coffeehouse played in the French Revolution, there was a clear connection, though most may not be aware of it. Though certainly many events preceded it, most consider the beginning of the Revolution to be the taking of the Bastille prison by the mob on July 14, 1789, and for that they would not be entirely incorrect. The French themselves celebrate “Bastille Day” every year. The connection with the café, however, lies under the shade of the trees of the Palais Royal, and in the fiery speech of a young journalist named Camille Desmoulins two days before the bloody Revolution begun.

Of Paris in June, 1789, French historian Jules Michelet said, “The ground was burning and as if undermined; and, underneath, you might hear already the grumbling of the volcano.”²¹ That volcano needed the slightest of nudges to explode. That nudge came on Saturday, July 11, 1789, with the dismissal by the king of Jacques Necker, the popular comptroller-general of finances who

¹⁵ Rigogne, “Readers,” 478.

¹⁶ Camille Desmoulins, “Camille to Jean-Nicolas, Undated between June 24 and July 12, 1789,” *Letters*, trans. Simone Remy, Melkam Live Journal, <https://melkam.livejournal.com/6939>.

¹⁷ Denise Diliberto, “Cafés and Pamphlets of the French Revolution: Critical Components in the Dissemination of Revolutionary Discourse and Public Opinion,” (M.A. thesis, Southern Illinois University, 2018), 1.

¹⁸ Diliberto, 5.

¹⁹ Ukers, *All About Coffee*, 100.

²⁰ Desmoulins, “June/July 1789.”

²¹ Jules Michelet, *History of the French Revolution* (London: 1855), trans. Charles Cocks, ebook (Oxford: Oxford University Press), Feb. 10, 2009, 133.

had taken steps to make the financial information of the crown available to the public. The volcano erupted the next day, when news of the dismissal reached the public in the cafés. Michelet explains what happened:

On Sunday morning, July 12, nobody at Paris, up to 10 o'clock, had yet heard of Necker's dismissal. The first who spoke of it in the Palais Royal was called an aristocrat. It was then noon, and the cannon of the Palais Royal was fired.... A young man, Camille Desmoulins, rushed from the Café de Foy, leaped upon a table, drew a sword, and showed a pistol: 'To arms!' cried he... 'Let us hoist a cockade!' He tore down a leaf from a tree, and stuck it in his hat: everybody followed his example and the trees were stripped of their leaves.²²

After his speech, Desmoulins and about a thousand of his followers "marched away from the Café on their errand of Revolution."²³ That "errand" included a stop at the Hôtel des Invalides, where cannons and muskets were taken that were used against the Bastille on July 14. A few months later, Desmoulins wrote to his father, Jean-Nicolas, about the events that took place in the Palais Royal that day:

[N]othing can ever beat the happiness I felt on July 12 when I was not merely cheered by ten thousand people at the Palais Royal, but suffocated by their embraces mingled with tears. Then perhaps, I saved Paris from complete ruin and the nation for the most dreadful servitude.... In the revolution, I have written my name in bigger letters than all our deputies in Picardy.... I have been able to take my place among the writers, patriots, and men of character.²⁴

The connection between the café and the Revolution is clear. A ubiquitous establishment that provided, not only a beverage historically related to revolution, but also a gathering space for those (Desmoulins hyperbolically says "ten thousand") interested in ideals of the Enlightenment. In the common area outside of one of these establishments, Desmoulins found the courage to call to arms his countrymen. The leaves of the trees (and the later cockade) pinned to everyone's hat could easily serve as a symbolic nod to the cafés of Paris and the Revolution that they spawned. Without the former, there may have not been the latter.

The café filled a need that Parisians of the eighteenth century had. Up until the latter part of the century, the job of governing and foreign affairs was thought of as *le secret du roi*, or "the king's secret."²⁵ After the Revolution began, the French public looked beyond the king and the

²² Michelet, 133.

²³ Ukers, *All About Coffee*, 100.

²⁴ Camille Desmoulins, "Camille to Jean-Nicolas, September 1789," *Letters*, trans. Simone Remy, Melkam Live Journal, <https://melkam.livejournal.com/5996>.

²⁵ Darnton, "An Early Information Society," 4.

Church to see that they should be responsible for governing. Even before the first fuse was lit at the Bastille, public opinion, formed in the cafés, had turned sharply against the king.²⁶ During this turbulent time, as France was undergoing a dramatic and painful rebirth, the exchanging of ideas was slow, even by standards of the time. The main reason for this was the lack of publications and press. As Robert Darnton explains, “[T]he press was free; and it was also underdeveloped, if you compare it with the press in Holland, England, and Germany. The first French daily newspaper, *Le Journal de Paris*, did not appear until 1777.”²⁷ The lack of printed material, coupled with fact that less than half of the population could read, meant that the public needed other ways to communicate.²⁸ It seems that literacy rates did not affect the dissemination of information during the period. As Rigogne reports, “[e]veryone was informed... through other more reactive media, many which thrived in cafés. Information circulated faster orally as well as in a multitude of written formats, from private letters to topical songs and verses....”²⁹

The café spurred on the Revolution, essentially, because it served as a base for the exchange of ideas.³⁰ Coffee, entertainment, and other things offered there were aids to conversation in various ways, but were, at best, secondary to what was important to the Parisians of the day: information.³¹ “Coffeehouses were central locations for the interchanges among intellectuals that constituted much of the structure of the Enlightenment.... Why coffeehouses? In part because the consumption of coffee... promoted the sobriety appropriate for the discussion of important subjects.”³² Patrons of the café “did not just read silently or listen passively to gazettes... read aloud; they discussed, weighed, assessed, criticized, and formed opinions about their contents.”³³

The café continued to hold a prominent place, even after the Revolution began. The day after the taking of the Bastille, July 15, 1789, Georges Danton, a lawyer who became an early leader in the revolutionary government, gathered a mob at the Café Procope and led a march to city hall to continue the demands for change.³⁴ Nearly two years later, the National Constituent Assembly, fearing a rebellion, passed Le Chapelier Law on June 14, 1791, outlawing the meeting of guilds and other such organizations the Assembly deemed susceptible to rebellious conversation. The law effectively banned guilds from meeting in their official houses and halls.

²⁶ Darnton, 19.

²⁷ Darnton, 7.

²⁸ James Van Horn Melton, *The Rise of the Public in Enlightenment Europe* (Cambridge: University Press, 2001), 80-81.

²⁹ Rigogne, “Readers,” 481; see also 488.

³⁰ Smith, “From Coffeehouse to Parlour,” 145 says the late seventeenth century English socialite Samuel Pepys went to the coffeehouse “to engage in his two favorite hobbies: exchanging information and social climbing.” See Samuel Pepys, *The Diary of Samuel Pepys*, ed. Henry B. Wheatley (London: George Bell & Sons, 1893).

³¹ Augustin Challamel, *Le Clubs Contre-Révolutionnaires, Cercles, Comités, Sociétés, Salons, Réunions, Cafés, Restaurants et Librairies* (Paris: L. Cerf, 1895), 600-1.

³² Smith, “From Coffeehouse to Parlour,” 149.

³³ Rigogne, “Readings,” 488.

³⁴ Diliberto, “Café and Pamphlets,” 16.

As a result, the café became one of few places in all of Paris where people could legally meet.³⁵ Evidence exists of political clubs' meeting in certain cafés and taking up donations and club dues to finance the wars that were breaking out along the French border as result of the Revolution.³⁶

Because of its appeal to a broad range of Parisians, the café became the place where public opinion was formed. Desmoulins was not the last to use the political interest of café patrons to his advantage. The café was the key that opened the way for gossip and revolutionary fervor alike to be spread quickly to the populace. Political debates and public readings of newspapers in Parisian cafés meant that they “played a leading role...in the formation of public opinion...”³⁷ Not only were cafés the way to test the wind of public opinion, but were also the source of political policies, on some occasions. The decisions of the Assembly were many times made because of what those in the cafés thought. As nineteenth century French politician Narcisse-Achille Salvandy said, “No government can go against the sentiment of the cafés. The Revolution took place, because they were for the Revolution.”³⁸

The Reign of Terror is the name given to the violent months following the Revolution's beginning until the execution of its leader, Maximilien Robespierre in July 1794. As the favored meeting places for groups such as the Jacobins, the café was central to the Terror's leaders. It was from the cafés, in September 1793, that the pronouncement of Robespierre's Law of the Maximum was made known.³⁹ This law, controlling the price of food, was in response to counterrevolutionaries and grain hoarders, and the fact that the announcements were first made in the cafés assured that the vast majority of Parisians would be informed. This action, alone, illustrates how important and instrumental the cafés were during the French Revolution.

During the Reign of Terror there were several underground groups formed in rebellion to the new government. One such was called *Les Incroyables*, or The Incredibles, among other names.⁴⁰ This group was made up of “absentee conscripts, deserters and shirkers from military service, the sons of bourgeoisie” as well as journalists, legal officials, and employees of various shops and banks around Paris.⁴¹ *Les Incroyables*, also called The Muscadins, for their musky

³⁵ Diliberto, 5.

³⁶ *Journal de Paris*, August 29, 1791,

<https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015041821151&view=1up&seq=103>. According to the article, “The Café de Procope... the meeting place for... excellent patriots, sent a delegation with a donation of 50 louis (US\$500 in 2015) to buy rifles for the national guards.” Translated using www.deepl.com July 11, 2019.

³⁷ Rigogne, “Readers,” 475-76, 486.

³⁸ Ukers, *All About Coffee*, 100.

³⁹ Marc Bouloisea, “The Committee of Public Safety And The Reign Of Terror,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed December 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Maximilien-Robespierre/The-Committee-of-Public-Safety-and-the-Reign-of-Terror>. Will and Ariel Durant, in their book *The Story of Civilization: The Age of Napoleon*, 62-63 claim that this move by Robespierre sparked the Reign of Terror.

⁴⁰ François Gendron, *Gilded Youth of Thermidor*, trans. James Cookson (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1993), 14 mentions several, including “black collars,” “Society of Jesus,” “the gilded million,” and “*oreilles de chien*,” or “dog's ears” meaning earlocks.

⁴¹ Gendron, 12.

perfume they wore in defiance of The Terror, had a network of spies used to alert members in the event of emergency.⁴²

These young rebels found the best way to stay in contact, while at the same time blending in with the society that existed at the time was to be in the cafés. The Muscadins, according to François Gendron, “could mobilize perhaps some two to three thousand young men. Their rallying point was the Café de Chartres or des Canonniers, at the Palais Royal.”⁴³ Gendron later quotes one of the leaders, Louis Jullian who wrote

This [the café] was where we gathered to tell one another what we had learnt of the designs of the common enemy, discuss our plans and concerns, draw up our strategies. This was where we set out from whenever we had something major to undertake. This was the daily meeting place of muscadins from all over Paris.⁴⁴

The café continued to play a prominent place during this time, as well. The popularity of cafés attracted other businesses to their vicinity. One such business, located next to the Café de Foy was a cutlery shop where Charlotte Corday, a moderate sympathizer, bought a knife she later used to kill Jean-Paul Marat, one of the Revolution’s most outspoken leaders, while he was in his bathtub on July 13, 1793.⁴⁵

The café and the French Revolution are irrevocably joined. The Revolution started, primarily, in a coffeehouse because the café was a place where ideas were freely exchanged and news could be spread quickly. This was what drew people to the café.

This draw was so strong, that, even during the time of The Reign of Terror, the café continued to be a place where rebellious ideas could stir up the people.

On January 21, 1793, the people of Paris executed King Louis XVI by sending him to Antoine Louis’s invention, the “national razor,” better known as the guillotine. Two days later, in his journal, revolutionary leader Jean Paul Marat quoted a man named Cambon who said, “We have finally docked on the isle of freedom, and we have burned the vessel that brought us there.”⁴⁶ Without the public space and information-hungry populace the café provided, the movement known as the French Revolution may never have found the prevailing winds it needed to succeed. If the death of the king was truly the landing of a ship on an island, then at the very least, the café represents the dock from which she was launched. *Liberté, égalité, fraternité, et le café!*

⁴² Gendron, 14.

⁴³ Gendron, 14.

⁴⁴ Gendron, 14.

⁴⁵ Charles Lockwood, “In Search of the French Revolution in Paris,” *Chicago Tribune*, January 29, 1989. <https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-01-29-8903010121-story.html>

⁴⁶ Jean Paul Marat, “The Execution of the Tyrant,” *Journal de la République Française*, 105 (January 23, 1793), trans. Mitch Abidor, 2004, <https://www.marxists.org/history/france/revolution/marat/1793/tyrant.htm#n1>.