

SOCIETY

Coffee, Tea, and Colonialism

“The Essence of Commodification: Caffeine Dependencies in the Early Modern World” by Ross W. Jamieson, in *Journal of Social History* (Winter 2001), George Mason Univ., Fairfax, Va. 22030.

It’s astonishing to consider how much of early European colonialism had to do with the acquisition of “drug foods”: sugar, tobacco, and, in all its delightfully stimulating forms, caffeine. Yet the history of caffeine shows that the transactions between colonizer and colonized did not run only in one direction, writes Jamieson, an archaeologist at Simon Fraser University, in Vancouver.

Coffee, for example, was not even cultivated until the mid-15th century, when Arab growers in Yemen domesticated the wild Ethiopian plant and Muslim Sufi devotees began using the potent little beans in all-night religious ceremonies. Coffee’s popularity quickly spread throughout the region. Istanbul boasted more than 600 coffeehouses by the

1560s. When Europeans became involved in the trade in the 1610s, they competed with Arab traders for markets in the Near East and Asia rather than export coffee to Europe. By contrast, in the 16th century, the Spanish conquerors of the New World found a crop, cacao or chocolate, that the Maya, Aztecs, and others had esteemed and cultivated for centuries. The colonists soon developed their own taste for the drink, and they established cacao plantations and an extensive local trade in the bean—but for a century, none of that trade crossed the Atlantic.

Then, in the mid-17th century, caffeine drinks suddenly achieved enormous popularity in Europe. Jamieson thinks the craze sprang from social changes within Europe rather than shrewd marketing. Europe was urbanizing, and the old hierarchical social order was giving way to something new and as yet undefined. What better way to establish your social standing than to sip an exotic and expensive brew?

Along with caffeine, the Europeans imported social customs and habits from the colonial world. With coffee, for example, came the Arab coffeehouse, an exclusively male preserve, generally open to various social classes. Oxford had such an institution in 1650; within a few decades there were thousands throughout England. The coffeehouse “replaced the alehouse as a place for men to meet to discuss business and politics . . . and the caffeine beverages were associated with [bourgeois] sobriety and virtue.”

Cacao, however, was consumed by both men and women, as it was in the New World. Today’s latte lovers would find themselves quite at home with the special tools and rituals involved in its preparation—most of them borrowed from the Aztec aristocracy. (Cinnamon and



Coffee, tea, cacao: Europe’s three favorites in the 17th century

vanilla were often mixed in, as were chili peppers.)

Tea has a different history. China managed to maintain a monopoly on tea production until the 1830s, when the Dutch planted the first successful crop in Java. (Britain's Indian tea plantations were started two decades later.) Even so, business boomed. By the 1740s, Jamieson reports, "afternoon tea was an important meal in England, the Netherlands, and

English America." Women monopolized the drink and presided over the tea ritual, which brought families together and provided opportunities to teach children good manners and to demonstrate the decorum and respectability that were essential to status in the new social order. All of which makes one wonder what some archaeologist a hundred years hence will make of the sudden American passion for Starbucks.

Blame It on the 1920s

"Why We Don't Marry" by James Q. Wilson, in *City Journal* (Winter 2002), Manhattan Inst., 57 Vanderbilt Ave., New York, N.Y. 10017.

Despite the apparent stabilization of some social trends, one in five white children, and more than one in two black children, are born out of wedlock. Many critics blame "the '60s" for starting the trend, but Wilson, the noted social scientist and emeritus professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, points to an earlier decade—the 1920s—and roots that stretch back to the 18th century and the Enlightenment.

It is in the nations "where the Enlightenment had its greatest effect"—Australia, Britain, Canada, France, the Netherlands, and the United States—that families with an absent father are most common today, he points out. "It was in the enlightened nations that nuclear rather than extended families became common, that individual consent and not clan control was the basis of a marriage contract, and that divorce first became legal."

By enthroning human reason and discarding many ancient rules, the Enlightenment "gave us science, technology, freedom, and capitalism," says Wilson—but also over time undermined old beliefs. "Whereas marriage was once thought to be about a social union, it is now about personal preferences. Formerly, law and opinion enforced the desirability of marriage without asking what went on in that union; today, law and opinion enforce the desirability of personal happiness without worrying much about maintaining a formal relationship."

The change was slow and almost unnoticed, Wilson says. "The most important Enlightenment thinkers assumed marriage and denounced divorce." But things changed. By the late 19th century, the

notion that the public should support needy children whose mothers were widowed was winning acceptance, and slowly over the decades ahead the circle of "needy" fatherless children was broadened.

Meanwhile, the movement for the legal emancipation of women was gaining force. Nineteenth-century women "could not easily own property, file for a divorce, or conduct their own affairs. By the 1920s most of these restrictions had ended." Affluence and freedom proved a heady mix. The 1920s produced "an enthusiastic display of unchaperoned dating, provocative dress, and exhibitionist behavior. Had it not been for a time-out imposed by the Great Depression and the Second World War, we would no longer be referring to the '60s as an era of self-indulgence; we would be talking about the legacy of the '20s."

The '60s just "reinstated trends" begun earlier in the century, "but now without effective opposition." Affluent, upper-middle-class people reshaped the culture, with the poor paying the price. For example: "People who practiced contraception endorsed loose sexuality in writing and movies; the poor practiced loose sexuality without contraception."

These deep-rooted cultural changes are not easy to reverse, notes Wilson, and many, such as the advances in women's rights, should not be. Americans aren't even likely to accept tougher divorce laws. Still, the fact that Americans continue to get married and hope their children will too encourages Wilson. If marriage is to regain its former stature, it will not be through government policies, but "from the bottom up by personal decisions."