Non-Technical Summary:
The Cappuccino Community: Cafes and civic life in the contemporary city

In the City of London, leaving their computer screens behind, a group of international bankers sit down at their local Café Nero for some blue-sky thinking. In a seaside town, with their heavy Saturday shopping sitting under the table, a couple enjoy the autumn sun and fresh coffee on the terrace of a newly opened café. In the suburbs, a group of eight women with newborn babies settle down at three café tables pushed together for a blessed hour away from the house, enjoying being in public. In a high street trendy café, sat at his regular table, an elderly gent with neurological damage keeps a diary of his day and takes pleasure in speculating about the stories of the other customers. Near a university, their cappuccinos half drunk, two academics sit hunched around a final report to their funding body, making additions and deletions.

The public sphere of the UK is changing, transforming itself, as the once declining coffee-house re-appears across its cities, towns and villages as latte-serving cafés. Social scientists and journalist are quick to coin phrases such as ‘cappuccino culture’ or, in our case, ‘cappuccino community’. They are equally as quick to fit this contemporary transformation of our public gathering places into arguments about social trends and grand shifts in our society. What this project has been about is taking the time to examine, patiently and attentively, what is actually happening in these cafés. Much of what it uncovers are aspects of everyday life that are in plain sight, that have become so obvious, so well known, that we no longer take notice of them.

Over its three years, the project has used a number of methodologies to investigate the relationship between cafés and everyday life in the city. Eric Laurier carried out a brief workplace study, training as a barista and serving behind the counter in three distinctly different cafés: one in Covent Garden, one in an international bank and one in a suburb of London. A longer-term ethnographic study was made of sixteen cafés selected for their diversity, from a transport café off the M6 to a city centre café that hosted scientific debates. Five of these cafés were then selected for a video-analytic study that involved filming a typical day in each from opening until closing. Finally, literary and archival work unearthed historical precedents for and disjunctions from cafés as they are dwelt in and organised today.

The results of the project are at once familiar and yet also surprising. Historically, the picture we have received is one of the coffee-house as a polite place of intellectual debate, a key site for both the rise of the Enlightenment’s valuing of ‘reason’ and open criticism of the operations of the state in the form of public opinion. While this was indeed the case, coffee-houses were also places of commerce, gossip, idle banter, violent arguments and licentious behaviour. We have also tried to unearth how the café became a place where a collective entity that was the public could be found by journalists, politicians and other interested parties, and where the public’s opinion could be formed, recorded and engaged with.
The exotically titled maker of lattés, the ‘barista’, has continuities with the passing professions of bar staff, waiters and other servers of refreshments to the public. In the project, we documented the workplace skills required to make good espresso consistently, quickly and in quantity, skills that were allayed with the expectation that a barista could be a public character in everyday life. They are one of the persons in the city whose business is not just to provide us with what they supply (e.g. coffee) but is also to recognise us if they regularly serve us. In the potentially anonymous city, they provide a vital if mundane background of recognition to urban dwellers such that, while a café is rarely a ‘place where everybody remembers your name’, it might be a place where the barista remembers your drink.

As our introductory paragraph hinted, the café is able to host a remarkable variety of activities, from child-rearing to insurance-selling, activities that are harder to imagine being welcomed and nurtured in the traditional British pub. For the many forms of mobile workers, the café is a place of rest and refreshment, a temporary address and meeting place. For home workers, the café can be a place to escape ‘cabin fever’ and to enjoy the company of others. For office workers, academics, studio-based artists and designers, it can simply be a change of scene that re-energises their projects during the day. These diverse groups gather together in cafés, producing particular crowds, so that some cafés are recognisably arty, child-friendly, studenty or touristy, or even cosmopolitan. The project showed how a certain homogeneity of crowd was essential to an immediate sense of community, even as it risked being socially exclusive. On each and every occasion, the test for such a crowd was how it welcomed and accommodated its particular outsiders, or did not. The project also highlighted the importance of ‘scenes’ in the city, and the café’s place in hosting these ephemeral and yet essential parts of civic life.

From the detailed access that video records provided of staff and customer conduct, we found that, instead of elaborate theories imported from psychology to explain customer behaviour, a contrasting minimalist analysis was adopted that described customer and staff activities in terms of the methods used on the ground by these diverse members of these everyday scenes. What came into view were the obvious, yet so often overlooked, categories of staff, customer, regular, lone-customer, group, parent and child that are routinely used to organise activities, mutual expectations and what can be done next at any particular moment in time. These categorisations of setting-relevant identities were used in combination with sequential categories such as: arriving, ordering, selecting a seat, mid-coffee, and leaving. These perfectly ordinary grammars of dwelling in the café provided the possibilities for making the café a convivial place in the city. Recovering these banal yet crucial dimensions of making conviviality happen, as located in the café, allows us to offer fresh reflections on the changing character of public life in the contemporary city.