

Tahir Abbas (<https://www.criticalmuslim.io/author/tahir-abbas/>)

Coffee

Few pleasures in life surpass a cup of freshly ground, roasted coffee, whether in the form of a Turkish coffee found in the bazaars of Istanbul or an Americano served at one of the more established international coffee chains in the capital cities of Western Europe. It almost doesn't surprise me that coffee is the second most traded commodity in the world after oil. What makes it such a popular, mildly hallucinogenic, psychoactive drug that directly affects the central nervous system, encouraging hundreds of millions to prepare their morning fix without hesitation? My impression is that without coffee many individuals sitting at their office desks would freeze into a state of paralysis due to the absence of this hypnotic, elusive, high. With research indicating that coffee is addictive, leading to recognisable withdrawal systems when individuals abstain, surely therein lies the explanation for its tremendous popularity beyond the idea of a stimulating concoction that dramatically impacts the body. Is there a coffee culture that focuses on coffee drinking as a collective exercise to the extent that it is pivotal to national consciousness? How has coffee become such an essential element of any meeting involving two or more people engaged in banter that necessarily utilises the frontal cortex of the brain, enhancing short-term concentration, memory and thinking?

Having evolved from the rather bland and inferior instant range, like so many of us growing up in Britain in the 1980s and 1990s, coffee houses were a rarity among eateries in the high streets of towns and cities across the country. With the establishment of global brands such as Starbucks, Caffè Nero and Costa, drinking coffee became more than just a lubricant for exchange or a stimulant for office workers. It was now widely accessible to all, permitting an individual, or more, to enjoy the effects of

partaking in a brew, not only as a social glue but to enhance ties and friendships. Coffee was more than a device to encourage individuals to start their day on an artisanal, hand-roasted, smooth, skinny high. It was now returning to its historical roots of bringing people together and engaging in thought-provoking, provocative and broad-ranging conversation, pushing forward the boundaries of thinking, intellectual development and social argument. Coffee was suddenly cool and convenient. Coffee drinkers sprung into action as social agents engaged in the process of sharing and enhancing a collective, forming an entirely new language and culture that has become firmly rooted in our day-to-day reality. It was against this backdrop in the 1990s that I too began to appreciate the nuances of the Ethiopian versus the Colombian versus the Kenyan. Each coffee brand reflected certain colour composition, bitterness or otherwise, and a preference for a fast kick-butt versus a slow high. This journey led me to eventually live in Istanbul where I learnt how to make Turkish coffee at home using the simplest of utensils, but without the refined technique, cultivated by homemakers and coffee lovers over the generations. Getting the process right was not as easy as it seemed.

Mastering this process is a prized skill, particularly as the role of Ottoman Turkey in harnessing then spreading coffee and its consumer culture is significant in the history of coffee. However, the fact remains that coffee itself came from elsewhere. Its origins lie in Ethiopia. From there, it travelled to Yemen and then to Mecca, the centre of the Muslim world, at which point the Ottomans incorporated coffee consumption culture into the fabric of Ottoman society. In my search for the perfect cup of coffee and the most enticing of coffee aromas, two countries in the world have a particular story of note. Jamaican Blue Mountain and the Ethiopian brands are undoubtedly my favourite coffee beans. I travelled to both of these countries, tasting the beans as close to source as is physically possible. It was part of a journey to explore my personal history of coffee, intertwined with a wider historical cultural and sociological analysis of the consumption of this most popular beverage that starts life as a mere inconsequential green bean.

The historical birth of coffee is well documented and it comes as no surprise that the origins of human civilisation and coffee emerge in the same place. Little else is known of this origins story other than it supposedly occurred in the city of Mocha in a region called Kaffa, in what was the ancient land of Abyssinia at some point in the ninth century. According to legend, a herder named Kaldi noticed that his donkeys were behaving erratically after they had chewed on a wild red berry. Their frenzied activity caused a stir, prompting Kaldi to experiment with the berries himself, only to discover a similar feeling of excitement, euphoria and enthusiasm. His wife encouraged him to introduce the berry to the head of the village, who dismissed the fruit as the 'work of the devil'. He threw the berries into a fire, and the smoke began to affect the perception of those gathered around,

upon which point hot water was placed over the beans, leading to a mixture, which they drank. It revealed an intoxicating but calming effect. This new-found revelation was related to others and from there the story moves to Yemen where Sufi Muslims carrying out the *dhikr* found the *qahwa*, a stimulant that allowed them to devote themselves to the chanting with greater vigour. These Muslims integrated coffee consumption into Islamic practice, which then found itself in Mecca by the 1350s. The coffee was soon transported to the cities of Damascus and Cairo by the mid-1500s, and it was in Istanbul where Venetian traders sampled the mysterious concoction and were immediately enraptured by its fine qualities. From there they took it to northern Italy, before its renown spread through Europe. From Mecca, a taste for coffee proliferated throughout the Ottoman territories, and to Spain and India.

It was during the time of the Ottomans that coffee consumption became a form of social interaction, with groups congregating to share the intoxicating drink but to also engage in discussion. Vast swathes of the different classes, cultures and religions of late sixteenth century Istanbul would come together; and, not surprisingly, such gatherings and associated activities were considered excessive by the sultans who feared political resistance or plotting. At one level, the *kavehanes* (coffee houses) were seen as a hotbed of sin because of their association with late-night drinking and opium taking. At another level, this tête-à-tête among artists, writers, *ulema* and ordinary members of the public necessarily introduced a form of 'democratised socialisation', initiating notions of leisure for the middle classes, creating a standardisation that has survived to this day. Coffee allows people to assemble, share ideas and inspire action through the intellectual and emotional responses the drink can induce. The Ottoman Sultan Murad III attempted to ban coffee houses in Constantinople, ordering their immediate shutdown, but to no avail. Even Kair Bey, governor of Mecca in 1511, tried to stop the use of coffee, but was thwarted. The Ottoman Turks could not get enough of the substance it seems. During the Ottoman era, Turks perfected the art of preparing and serving it, cultivating it as an essential component of the social fabric of daily life. Those who came to the Ottoman Centre never failed to be enamoured by its richness and splendour, and this association with coffee drinking and the Ottomans therefore remains a significant symbolic, cultural and tourist concept for the nation of Turkey today. So deeply embedded is the culture of drinking Turkish coffee, distinctively ground finely to a powder, that it is the staple drink for Turks after breakfast or lunch.

As coffee spread into Europe, it did so at a time of rapid transformation among intellectual, cultural and religious thinkers. Coffee houses became a site for the convergence of fervent intellectual ideas, sowing the seeds of rebellion and social change that would inevitably follow. These changes led to the enlightenment, renaissance and in some cases revolution. Over the years, the notion of a coffee

culture has emerged, where coffee touches every aspect of our lives, from the home, to the office and to the spaces where we eat and are at leisure. The consumption of coffee is now on a global scale. It is ubiquitous in North America, where it is sometimes called ‘a cup of Joe’, which suggests its common appeal and expands on the idea of a national drink in response to the efforts of the Europeans who brought with them tea as their favourite tippie. However, the mass production of coffee during the 1950s by Nestlé and brands such as Maxwell House reduced the popularity of the product because of its declining standards. During the 1970s onwards, however, chains such as Starbucks embarked on a mission to provide an authentic coffee taste in a comfortable seated environment. This revolutionised coffee consumption and introduced new and decidedly more sophisticated forms of the beverage, which had otherwise been the preserve of refined Italian coffee drinkers. Choice entered into the coffee consumption world, and with rising standards of living and upward social mobility, large sections of societies were able to enjoy even more of their favourite warming drink. This reversal of fortunes for the coffee production and consumption sectors led to specialisation and the emergence of independent artisan coffee houses providing specialist beans and blends at premium prices.

It occurs to me that everywhere I have lived for extended periods has turned out to be an important site in the history of coffee. In September 2015, I had an opportunity to spend a semester at New York University. My flat was located on Fifth Avenue. Around Washington Square Park, between the numerous buildings owned by the University, independent coffee houses were on every corner on every street of Greenwich Village. Café Reggio served the first cappuccino in 1927. This coffee shop still sits on MacDougal Street. The coffee houses today not only provide directly imported, roasted and prepared filter coffee, but offer it in a variety of forms including the vacuum drip method or the Chemex filter. Some outlets provided something called ‘bullet coffee’, which was coffee blended with fresh butter. Apparently, the caffeine kick is supposed to be easier on the heart, but I did not notice anything too distinct. Most of the time, various blends of South American and East African beans were served to the hipsters of lower Manhattan who were spoiled for choice but without any real understanding of where these beans originated.

Turkish coffee is renowned across the world, as is the sublime preparation and service associated with it. It also carries an air of magic when grandmothers, aunts and eager sisters take their turn to read the remains of a finished cup, promising all sorts of fruitful encounters with strangers or endless bounty at the hands of divine intervention. *Kurukahveci Mehmet Efendi* is located at the back of the Spice Bazar in Kadikoy in Istanbul. When I lived in the city for six years, it is where I went to pick up my freshly roasted, ground, Turkish coffee. Locals lined up in quickly moving queues picking up their bags of still warm coffee. The effervescent aroma filled my satchel as I journeyed my way home to

prepare a fresh cup. Barely through the door, I would whip out my copper plated *cezve*, and the bubbly boiling smell filled the kitchen. For a few days, the coffee smell remains intensely fresh. The process of making Turkish coffee in a *cezve* took a while to master. The understanding of how one needs to boil the coffee at a particular temperature, while removing the froth at different stages, never allowing the coffee to boil all the way, was something that had to be shown to me in the end. Convinced I had become something of an expert, I brought my *cezve* back with me when I returned to the UK. Luckily, upon my arrival I was easily able to source my coffee of choice: *Kurukahveci Mehmet Efendi* is one of Turkey's most recognisable brands and a significant export, popular in the diasporas of north London and Berlin.

The Middle East, too, is renowned for its coffee but it is made in a slightly different way compared to the method championed by the Turks. In the bustling cities of Beirut and Damascus, coffee shops are everywhere. Arabs smoke the *shisha* and drink coffee incessantly throughout the day. The coffee there has some cardamom ground into the process. This gives it a mild yet distinct aftertaste, refreshing the breath and the tongue. When I asked the traders from where they sourced their coffee, the general answer was that it was a combination of South American and African, in particular, Brazilian and Ethiopian. When I purchased the blend containing cardamom from a local seller in the West Bank, the smell of the coffee engulfed the entire residence I was staying in, again for days on end. People do not really drink coffee in South Asia or Southeast Asia due to the role that tea plays there, but I had heard so much about the coffee in Indonesia that I could not wait to try the infamous *kopi luwak*, said to be the most expensive coffee in the world. Established by the Dutch settlers in the seventeenth century, the islands of Indonesia are notorious for their coffee beans today: Sumatra and Java being the two most prominent. The idea is that when the civet eats the beans, the digestive process alters its chemical composition, specifically removing the bitterness of the flavour. However, it is incredibly strong for the unassuming, and can cause an unpleasant reaction. For the dedicated connoisseur, *kopi luwak* is one for the rarer occasions.

One of the other more expensive coffees available is Jamaican Blue Mountain. Jamaica is known for its sun, sand and vibrancy. While many associate Jamaica with certain other kinds of naturally grown stimulants, coffee is not always the first thing that comes to mind. However, coffee enthusiasts are aware that there is a certain bean notorious for its pleasant flavour and limited bitterness, grown high up on the Blue Mountains on the eastern side of the island. One day, I took a bus journey from Kingston all the way to Port Antonio. In the morning before setting off, I had two cups of Blue Mountain coffee and some slices of mango. The memory still lingers of the rush of a perfectly brewed cup of caffeine tempered by the smooth silky sweet taste of a ripe mango. The eventual calming

effects of these two ingredients ensured that I had a large smile on my face throughout the day. Blue Mountain coffee is exceptionally expensive because of the lofty export tariffs laid on importers due to the limited growing space high up in the mountains, ensuring that demand remains high and supply low.

Last year, I had the opportunity to travel to Ethiopia, which is the birthplace of human existence, as we know it, and the fount of coffee. Could there be a correlation between the advancement of human civilisation and coffee? Although the chances are that the bean was not roasted and consumed in a watery substance, the plant was certainly used for medicinal purposes as well as for flavouring foods. Ethiopia is undoubtedly an interesting place for all sorts of reasons, although many people associate it with famine or lack of development. Take a little time to look beyond the headlines and this country located in the Horn of Africa bestows many riches. Tomoca is the first coffee roasting company in Ethiopia, established in 1953 in Addis Ababa. Upon visiting the original stall that sold the licensed freshly roasted beans, I was taken aback by how unassuming the place looked. As I queued up to take my freshly prepared espresso, the line was littered with visitors from Europe and Asia. The balmy evening, the sun setting and the air thick with dust as I walked around central Addis Ababa, the city elevated to over 2,000 metres above sea level, I felt charged to the max, buzzing, light on my feet and with my mind racing at every observation. Boarding a local bus packed to the rafters, I could see eyes wide open, blinking in the darkened spaces of the heaving vehicle.

In my numerous travels to Europe, one place above all else stands out as the country most identified with drinking coffee – Italy. Sitting outside various coffee shops in a whole host of towns and cities over the years, the experience of sipping an espresso accompanied with a small wrapped biscuit, watching the world go by, is a sight to behold, especially in an age of frenetic activity where no one has a spare second let alone a moment to pause and take in their surroundings. Italy drips coffee culture from every pore, from Trento, Milan, Venice, Rome, Prato, Florence to Palermo and Agrigento. Against such backdrops my espressos were consumed in an enchanted state.

Enchantment is not the entire story and it must be acknowledged that coffee is a global commodity and consumer product available in every restaurant, hotel, bar or cafe worth their salt. In partaking of this international pastime, one is unmistakably connecting with a global infrastructure that begins with farmers located all over the global South, and ends with consumers in the predominantly prosperous North drinking their cups of coffee by the billions of gallons a year. What manifests is gaping inequalities embedded in this process. Farmers who supply this wonderful substance receive

little by way of the gains of its voracious consumption taking place largely in the West. Countries producing coffee are some of the poorest across the globe. What's more the production of coffee has significant consequences for the environment and for the pockets of the needy.

Grande or *Venti*, single or double, with or without milk or sugar, coffee remains the number one drink of choice for so many in the global North, while in the Middle East and North Africa, it is part of the cultural fabric. I go so far as to import the green beans from an independent company emulating the Blue Mountain climate but grown in Kenya. Roasted on a cast iron pan, the beans are left to sit for twenty-four hours before the grinding and preparation commences. These beans are consumed within two weeks before roasting the next batch. My two morning cups set me up for the whole day, with no further coffee consumption unless I invite friends over for a Turkish coffee or an espresso or an Americano from my Moka pot, helping loosen the tongue and the mind for endless discussion. The roasted coffee bean needs to be ground finely when preparing a Turkish coffee or an Italian style dispersal, always using a Moka pot.

Coffee provides the stimulation, the rush of ideas and the inevitable melee of thoughts, taken alone or shared in company. It is a global commodity popular everywhere in the world. The coffee bean, from its humble origins as a wild berry, now interconnects our planet, ensuring that the process of farming, exporting, roasting, packaging, distribution and consumption remains in a natural state of flow. However, the main sources of the beans, namely farmers, benefit the least despite this thriving product being devoured in almost every community of almost every country. As with so many products consumed in the north and in the west, their origins lie in the east or in the south. It entrenches the inequalities of the world while keeping most people oblivious to the source of their elusive yet beloved favourite foods.

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We arrived late for Friday prayers from a meeting in the city centre. Carried on a warm May breeze, the sermon droned over the little loudspeakers of the dome-less, minaret-less mosque to an audience of motorcycles, chained handcarts, and an avalanche of footwear.

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There is a deep affinity between travelling and telling a story. Put in the simplest of terms, both activities require a starting-point, move through a sequence, and, as conclusion of the activity, aim at an ending, a destination. Travel is a lived experience; telling a story is an expression of lived experience.

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