THE PUBLICNESS AND SOCIABILITIES OF THE OTTOMAN COFFEEHOUSE

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Abstract

It has been emphasised that in the Ottoman society there was no public sphere in its "political" sense, at least until the nineteenth century. The importance of a cultural interpretation of this sphere has been ignored by sociologists, too. Sociological studies of the old urban publicness were restricted to historians' analysis, and a culturalistic view of sociology has been lacking. In this article I discuss this issue by focusing on the publicness created by the "Ottoman coffeehouses". The public sphere that emerged was of course not similar to the rational and rather elitist understanding of the concept. The coffeehouses, which were part of the Ottoman public sphere, represented the complex everyday realities of that public life, the political and cultural contest and negotiations within the Ottoman society.

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The public sphere may be historically conceptualised either in terms of political community – and as the terrain of collective decisions and citizenship as Habermas (1989) does for example – or as a sphere of fluid and polymorphous sociability, as exemplified in the works of Ariès (1962; 1989) and Sennett (1986). This article argues against the idea that there was no resonant public sphere in the Ottoman society until the nineteenth century (Mardin 1995; cf. Delanty 1999, 96-7) and suggests the presence of a strong form of publicness in a non-western context created by a "vivid sociability." To substantiate this argument it is necessary to differentiate between political and social definitions of the public sphere (Weintraub 1997, 7). "These two *may* be combinable, both in practice and in theory, but they are analytically distinct," according to Weintraub (1997, 25). This article retains this analytical distinction without rejecting the idea of a space of "discursive communication," or a space of "inclusive solidarity" or "conscious collective action," thus considering some manifestations of collective action alongside the dimension of civility. Yet this author's keen emphasis is on "a space of heterogeneous coexistence …; a space of symbolic display, of the complex blending of practical motives with interaction ritual and personal ties, of physical proximity coexisting with social distance" (Weintraub, 1997, 25). One should bear in mind that both are only representations of public space. Is it possible to combine the advantages of the polis (i.e. Romans' *civitas*) and the cosmopolis, Babylon (cosmopolis not in the Kantian sense of the ideal unity of mankind, but in the sense of Haroun al-Rashid's Baghdad or of Paris of the nineneteenth century)? Weintraub suggests "perhaps" and says, "the route to answering that question must lie through developing ways to understand both of the types of 'public space' they represent" (1997, 26-7). When we venture into the highly sociable public space, we may emphasise a public life, whose wealth lies not in "self-determination" or "deliberation," but "in the multistranded liveliness and spontaneity arising from the ongoing intercourse of heterogeneous individuals and groups that can maintain a civilised coexistence" (1997, 17).

In the following pages I will demonstrate that in Ottoman Istanbul, the *kahvehane* (coffeehouse) emerged as a principal institution of the public sphere, a channel and site of public communication, and as an arena linking the socio-cultural with the political. In an attempt to comprehend Ottoman public life through coffeehouse patronage as a social practice, the emphasis is on the spatiality rather than the temporality of this institution; thus, my main concern is not with mere periodisations, menacing glaciations, or with history's "themes of development and suspension, of crisis and cycle, themes of the ever accumulating past" (Foucault 1986, 23). Without aiming for an overall alternative theoretical framework, it is possible to conceptualise the public sphere as a realm of heterotopology, aesthetic, theatricality, playfulness and the carnivalesque, as well as an arena of reason and rationality.

When dealing with the publicness of the Ottoman coffeehouse I will draw on the Sennettian approach to the public sphere as a form of civility and sociality and on his conceptualisation of "Man as Actor" and the public realm as *teatro mundi*. For Sennett, the *teatro mundi* way of looking at the public realm, while trying to "cut free discussions of public life from questions of rationality," focuses on how people who are strangers communicate with each other, or, more precisely, how they express themselves emotionally to each other (Sennett 2003, 384).

Habermas' main concern is less with the spaces and more with the discursive practices associated with the public sphere. Kevin Hetherington (1997, 81-4) notes the lack of an acknowledgment of the affectual or expressive side of the public sphere; that is, an acknowledgment of its ambivalent characteristics and an interest in how the public sphere in Europe involved the development of a convivial sociability found in social performances, like in fashion, theater-going, or public eating and drinking. Kenneth H. Tucker (1993, 202) suggests that Habermas overlooks the development of a playful cultural creativity, because he sees socialisation in terms of the evolution of rational capacities and relies on Piaget's cognitive theories. On the other hand, Sennett acknowledges in *The Fall of Public Man* that the moral agency of individuals is established in spaces of the public realm and not simply in the prior realm of the household; he shows that the decline of sociability causes a menacing defunct public space. For Sennett a society of strangers gathered in the spaces of the public sphere and developed a style of interaction that led to mutual trust. This trust was the outgrowth of a new civility and conviviality, and this expressive side of the public space became conducive to the establishment of codes of conduct, including moral codes on how to behave towards others. The significance of trust, interaction, civility, conviviality, togetherness, or proximity lies in a vitalisation of the public world, which prevents a modern misconception of community as "intimacy writ large, which renders it both exclusivistic and ultimately unworkable" (Weintraub 1997, 24). The importance I attribute to "the complex and subtly textured world of sociability" (25) stems from such a sensitivity.

Accordingly, it would be intellectually enriching to trace the emergence and development of the coffeehouse culture in the Ottoman Istanbul as a strong form of publicness experienced a century before the Europeans encountered the drink and the institution. As late as the seventeenth century, coffee and coffeehouses were still unusual or unknown to Europeans. "There sit they," says George Sandys, "chatting most of the day; and sip of a drink called Coffa!" (1670, 51).

Coffee and Coffeehouse

Coffee brought to Europe from the Ottoman lands in the seventeenth century first arrived to Istanbul in 1543, whose first coffeehouse was established around 1550. As was the case on the Arabian peninsula, the Sufis first consumed the drink at their religious services to endure long, sleepless nights of worship. Initially there were attempts by the *ulema* (Islamic doctors of law, religious establishment) to ban coffee on religious grounds. It was interpreted as an objectionable innovation (*bida*) by the ultra-pious. And because of its stimulating effect, coffee, like hashish, was considered *haram* (forbidden by religion). The fact that both were roasted beyond carbonisation before consumption further reinforced the connection between coffee and hashish in orthodox circles. Moreover, the custom of handing around coffee in the manner of drinking wine aroused opposition (Arendonk 1997, 450-51). However, the bans proved inefficient, and coffee became a widely consumed drink. Thus, Enis Batur finds an inherent logic in the popularity of coffee in Muslim lands, "unlike the Christians who solved their problem of pleasure by imbibing the blood of Christ in the symbolic form of wine, Muslims were highly motivated to discover an alternative source of such pleasure since wine was proscribed for them" (2001, 6).

Coffee eventually moved from the religious to the secular sphere. By the time of Selim II (1566-74) and Murad III (1574-95) there were about six hundred coffeehouses in Istanbul (D'Ohsson 1791, 79); according to Dufour (1685, 38), they were situated in the most important parts of the city. The novelty of meeting in a particular outside space was obviously striking in a society with a limited availability of minor public spaces. Coffeehouses transformed urban life, changed patterns of social interaction, introduced a new process of socialisation, and rearranged urban spaces. The coffeehouse created a viable public space for patrons, who were socially restricted by the privatising effects of the home, the residential quarter (*mahalle*), and the dervish lodge (*tekke*). It turned what Sandys had designated as "inhospitall Turkie" for its lack of public spaces – such as restaurants – into a sociable one (cited in Hattox 1996, 89). Of course, there were other public spaces, like the mosque, the bazaar, or the public bath (*hammam*) for strangers to meet and socialise. However, the coffeehouse emerged as an institution, whose major and active function was sociability. Although comparable institutions, like taverns (*meyhane*) also existed, none were as encompassing as the coffeehouse in terms of its clientele and the diversity of activities. By presenting urban dwellers with an alternative to the mosque, coffeehouses were instrumental in secularising the public sphere. Indeed, according to the Ottoman historian Peçevi (1574-1650), religious functionaries complained that people preferred coffeehouses to the mosque (1992, 258). Intense literary activity was also observed in these spaces: "Coffeehouse conversation was not entirely jejune ... the coffeehouse became something of a literary forum; poets and writers would submit their latest compositions for the assessment of a critical public. In other corners of the coffeehouse, there might be heated discussions on art, the sciences or literature" (Hattox 1996, 101).

The significance of coffeehouses as public sites was their ability to embrace different segments of society. Poet Nagzi who lived in the first half of the seventeenth century, observes in his verse, *Münazara-i Kahve vü Bade* (Debate of Coffee and Wine), that among those who came to coffeehouses were villagers, townsmen, *köçek*s (male dancers), and dervishes; some were young, others old; some were cultured, others illiterate, and some were pious, while others were non-believer (Açikgöz 1999, 159). Peçevi also notes that people of different stature, from high office holders to idlers habituated the new institution (1992, 258). Dallaway makes a similar observation, "People of all ranks continually come to these places" (1799, 132). These and other similar accounts suggest that the coffeehouse society was not the product of a small elite of intellectuals and officials. Although coffeehouses catering to different professions and members of different guilds emerged in time, they were not exclusive in terms of serving their clientele.

The new relations of sociability encountered in coffeehouses – although exclusively restricted to male members of society – permitted the intermingling of people from all walks of life, "by bringing together the diverse elements of society - government officials, clergy, tradesmen and artisans, the pious and the profane- out of their own closed circles and into the common ground of the coffeehouse". The coffeehouse milieu with its face-to-face relations represented a social design for individual participation with personal knowledge and experience (Isin 2001, 11).

In short, coffee promoted the development of a novel civil experience based on a different kind of socialisation and a new civility. According to Berger and

Luckmann, "the most important experience of others takes place in the face-to-face situation" (1967, 28); this face-to-face encounter among strangers or semi-strangers, accompanied by reciprocally performed social rites of public behaviour, is termed civility. Civility, in turn, furnishes the capacity "to deal with strangers routinely" (Lofland 1973, 182, n.6). The coffeehouse was instrumental in equipping its clientele – men from almost every segment of society – with this capacity. Regulars learnt new codes of comportment and had to respect each other's opinion and cultivate self-restraint in order to enjoy their daily interactions.

The Public Nature of Coffeehouse Sociability

"In sociability talking is an end in itself," according to Simmel (1971, 136). Coffeehouses were places of public talk, sites where conversation of all kinds flourished. In a letter to his mother, dated 16 May 1784, the young Polish count, Jean Potocki (1999, 32) expresses his admiration for the diversity of topics, and the politeness and refinement in the coffeehouses of Istanbul. The customers created a dynamic and lively atmosphere with their activities, diversity, and enthusiasm and sometimes engaged in aimless conversations just for the pleasure and joy of talking. According to Charles Perry (1743, 84) coffeehouses were places frequented by people who had "nothing to do, than to talk and pick up news." Gossip as a "way of speaking" and a "form of sociable interaction" (Yerkovich 1977) also formed part of these conversations. However, coffeehouses were far more than locations of idle talk, but places for discussions of social, political, and cultural matters and intense literary activities. According to Peçevi (1992, 258) some of the habitués read books and fine writings, some played backgammon and chess, and others brought new lyric poems and talked about poetry and literature. Coffeehouses also had their orators, whose eloquence found admiring patrons. The "oriental" orator was a poet, or a historian, who would tell fables or legends and "land on every subject within the domain of imagination" (Mèry 1855, 333). Neighborhood coffeehouses served as small public libraries, where mainly religious books and popular epics could be read and listened to (Isin 2001, 32). In fact, it is telling that the coffeehouse was also called *mekteb-i irfan*, school of knowledge (Arendonk 1997, 451); or *medrese't-ül-ulema*, academy of scholars (Dawud 1992, 1).[1]

For the famous historian, Naima (1652-1715), political discussions concerning public policies, state affairs, and public administrators formed a significant part of coffeehouse conversations (1968, 1221). According to D'Ohsson's (1791, 82) observations, young idlers spent the whole day in coffeehouses talking about the latest news and state affairs. Coffeehouses had a remarkable role in facilitating public debate. Their widespread popularity meant the creation of a public domain, where news and ideas as well as people could circulate more freely than ever before. In Jean Chardin's opinion the degree to which freedom of speech was allowed in the coffeehouses of the Orient was unique in the world (cited in Dawud 1992, 1).

Coffeehouses were prime social centers for the expression of various opinions, social contempt, public disapproval, and rumor. During bread shortages, for example, the dervishes of the Kalenderi order, "went to the local coffeehouse, gathered the people, and predicted doomsday" (Barkey 1994, 127). Authorities aware of the disruptive potential of rumour, perceived coffeehouse conversation as a threat to the social order and tried to control or suppress it. During his reign, Süleyman

the Magnificent (1520-66) had ordered the writing of simple stories on social, literary, and historical topics to be read to the coffeehouse public. His aim was to divert the attention of the habitues from social and economic problems and to prevent the development and spread of political rumour (Ünver 1962, 44).

Rumour, gossip and hearsay were primary means of communication and means of spreading of news, particularly in semi-literate societies. Indeed, rumour has been described as the oldest form of mass communication (Kapferer 1990). It is composed of the "interrelated activities of individuals who constitute a public," who interact with each other and develop a common orientation toward the object of rumour (Shibutani 1966, 8). This kind of public talk is not only a means of public communication, but also of resistance. The anonymous character of rumor and gossip minimises "the risks of identification and reprisal" and becomes more dangerous for authorities (Scott 1985, 282). Rumour carries the potential to transform words from a medium of communication to a means of force. As such, Istanbul coffeehouses were the main places for circulating rumor regarding the Palace. There was always the possibility for coffeehouses to become the loci of public agitation. They did become hotbeds of defiance and meeting places for factions opposed to the regime. D'Ohsson (1791, 81) notes that the coffeehouses were the gathering places of mutinous soldiers. This was a special characteristic of the janissary coffeehouses, established in the seventeenth century, which had a radical and subversive aura. They became political sites of discussions – significantly dubbed *devlet sohbeti* (conversations concerning the state) – which had been an inseparable part of the political opposition represented by the janissary corps. Janissary conspiracies were usually "concocted at their favorite coffee-houses;" the outbreak resulting in the overthrow and murder of Osman II, for example, "was first mooted and matured in a celebrated coffee-house belonging to the 65th *oda* [legion], opposite to the janissary mosque" (White 1846, 282-3). Virtually all social anger, caused by rumors of corruption and bad administration, was first expressed in coffeehouses; occasionally the seeds of rebellion against the Palace were sown in these spaces. For example, insurgents during the Patrona Halil Rebellion (1730), used coffeehouses as meeting sites, "where they could find sympathetic audiences among fellow artisans, street vendors, and soldiers" (Salzmann 2000, 95).

Although edicts banning coffeehouses were issued during the reigns of Murat III (1574-95) and Ahmed I (1613-17) they were neither strictly enforced nor obeyed. During his heavy-handed rule, Murat IV (1623-40) imposed a very strict ban on coffeehouses in 1633. According to Naima, a large number of rascals met in coffeehouses to criticise high office holders and pass opinions on state dismissals, appointments, and administrators. Murat IV had ordered the closing of coffeehouses because he was aware of this situation (1968, 1221). The effect of his ban and the tearing down of coffeehouses were mitigated by the spread of "secret coffeehouses," when *koltuk* (armchair) coffeehouses – emerging during the ban imposed by Murat III – were located in places that could not be easily noticed from the outside (Peçevi 1992, 258). After the death of Murat IV, the prohibition ceased to impact the daily lives of people, when coffeehouses were re-established. There remained no part of a city, town, quarter, or village within the reach of the empire that did not have its coffeehouse (D'Ohsson 1791, 81). Instead of trying to prohibit such establishments, the authorities directed their energies to finding mechanisms that would place them under their control and surveillance (Isin 2001, 29). How-

ever – as will be discussed below – dissenting public sociabilities and political criticisms in coffeehouses took place not only as discursive activities but also as performative, theatrical and bodily practices.

Carnivalesque Forms of the Public in the Ottoman Coffeehouses

Coffeehouse society in Istanbul, comprising not only literary, religious, and political, but also leisure activities – such as games (chess, mancala), performances, story-telling, puppet-shows, shadow plays, music, and even drug uses – created a resonant public space. This informal cultural arena with its carnivalesque forms of expression fulfilled a mediating role between everyday life experiences and authoritative forces.

Rational discourse alone is inadequate for grasping public life. Recent historical studies considering "cultural practices" have demonstrated that various social groups in the public sphere often resort to other kinds of expressions – rites, satires, parades, ceremonies, carnivals (see Newman 1997 and Shields 1997) – to connect the social with the political and to assign a role to popular agency in shaping the terms of politics (Brooke 1998).

The significance of such expressions stems from the fact that they render the public sphere accessible to different social strata, including the non-educated, and in contrast to a rather elitist understanding of the public sphere. The arena of the public sphere is considered a space for any social group and in which it may attain recognition and a degree of political power (cf. Mah 2000).

In the Ottoman coffeehouses expressions in the public sphere often took on carnivalesque forms. For instance, the performances of the coffeehouse *asik*s, (itinerant musicians or trabadours, singers of tales), whose verses reflected a down-to-earth philosophy of life and were held in high esteem by people, represent a particular kind of sociability and expression in public. They spread their critical views on official acts and prevailing social arrangements among large audiences. They were also instrumental in connecting the rural with the urban world. Their repertoire, nurtured by an urban culture but with a marked inclination towards rural folk literature, bridged the social gap between city and countryside and served as a channel of communication (Isin 2001, 35).

The performances of *meddah*s (public mimics, storytellers) were also common in coffeehouses. According to a European observer, the *meddah*s in Istanbul coffeehouses "fulfilled almost the same function of the journalists in Europe" (Juchereau de Saint-Denys 1819, 192). In the words of another, the *meddah*s "were accustomed to perform *viva voce*, the office of our newspapers" (Mac Farlane 1829, 34). Politically sensitive *meddah*s, especially, used to convey their own ideas and messages to audiences through their metaphorical stories. During the reforms of Mahmud II, for example, "the *meddah*s played an important political role and championed the conservative party" (Martinovitch 1933, 23). MacFarlane notes that during the suppression of janissary corps, the Sultan also abolished numerous coffeehouses regarded as fortresses of the mutinous and prohibited *meddah*s, who gathered crowds in coffeehouses (1829, 34).

The *ortaoyunu* (theater in-the-round), which involved more than one player, was generally performed in large coffeehouses. It was characterised by sharp sat-

ire of the well-to-do and the ruling classes, as were the Karagöz shadow puppet plays, which were popular in coffeehouses. The hero puppet of the shadow play, Karagöz, represents ordinary people, folk morality, and common sense. Unlike Hacivad, the other principal character, he is uneducated, but with his untutored wit and naturalness he outsmarts the presumptuous and pompous Hacivad. Bakhtin would say of the latter he represents a world characterised by the prevailing truth of an established order, with hierarchies, privileges, rules and proscriptions (1984, 10).

In Mèry's opinion (1855, 359), "Karagheuz is a melange of Boccace, of Rabelais, of Petrone, of Marforio and of Arlequin." Compared with Karagöz, "Figaro is a man of order, a conservative frantic" (358). The performances of Karagöz and *meddah* were full of political and social satire, teasing and imitation of high officials, including the grand viziers. Karagöz was commonly employed as a political weapon in coffeehouses to criticise political corruption. It involved the carnivalesque qualities of inverting all hierarchies, of playfully deconstructing the established order, and presenting the opportunity to have a novel "outlook on the world, to realise the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of things" (Bakhtin 1984, 34). In the words of another observer, Louis Enault (1855, 367):

Karagöz is a character who never deceives himself or is soothed into a sense of security by shutting his eyes to the ills surrounding him. On the contrary a Karagöz show is a risqué-revue, as brave as a militant newspaper. No one is spared, except may be the Sultan, Karagöz passes judgement on the Grand Vizier and sentences him to the prisons of Yedikule.

According to Mèry, Karagöz "defies censorship, enjoying an unlimited freedom." Karagöz functioned like a free press in its criticism of social and political life and was more aggressive than the European press. Indeed, Karagöz was "a daily newspaper, without security, without stamp, without a responsible editor, a terrible newspaper because it does not write, it talks and sings before its numerous subscribers" (Mèry 1855, 358). After recounting a mock trial of the grand vizier, who was sentenced to a prison term, Mèry states that "if in another country a newspaper were to write even a single line of the numerous plays of Karagheuz," it would have been sufficient to bring about the arrest and exile of the journalist, while no such action was taken against Karagöz (359). Being the product of an anonymous tradition rather than having an author was a liberating factor, since allocating responsibility for what had been said was more difficult. An authored play restrains the freedom of the actor and the audience to influence the performance, which could be turned against the authorities through irony, satire, or improvisation.

The carnivalesque qualities of obscenity, extreme licentiousness , and invoking the body's "lower stratum" were also permanent features of the popular theater in coffeehouses, including Karagöz, according to confirmation by numerous foreign observers. Featuring the phallus was a regular part of Karagöz shows (And 1979, 86). Gérard de Nerval (1862, 192) for example, was shocked when he saw children watching the obscene performances of Karagöz: "It is incredible that this indecent figure be put without scruple at the hand of the youth".

Bakhtin coined the term carnivalesque to describe the transgression of authority by popular culture like carnivals, parades and puppet shows. The term "popular" differentiates "the rulers from the ruled, the State from its Subjects, the refined from the coarse" (Mendible 1999, 72). The carnivalesque upsets this order by

proclaiming the arbitrary nature of all hierarchies. The significance of these theatrical manifestations of popular culture with respect to the public sphere rests in their ability to cross the boundaries of class, religion, and status. Their oral form enables opinions, views, and grievances of ordinary people – who were less literate, less well-to-do and less welcome in elite circles – to be heard by the ruling strata. The political significance of these theatrical performances lies in the possibility of an actor-audience reversibility, that is, in the possibility of audiences to imitate actors and become actors on the political stage. The distrust of theater and the carnivalesque was also related to the fact that it "subverted 'metaphysical fixity,' the idea of a well-defined stable identity, keeping categories of rank, age, and gender clearly distinct. The theater, after all, suggests – even if cautiously – that social positions might be arbitrary and contingent, rather than necessary and natural" (Jervis 1999, 25-6). As such, Ottoman theatrical performances challenged the classical legitimation formula based on the principle of keeping each person in his place. They generated a language that intended to counter official or dominant explanations of how society operates. The carnivalesque held out the possibility of a political prospect of an upside down world via the potential for collective action ensuing from collective celebration, especially by the lower classes. At this juncture, political reactions directed at coffeehouses provides evidence that in a domain separate from the private, different social groups came together to form a culture of political criticism. To reiterate, it is more meaningful to conceptualise the public sphere as an arena to be entered by any social group and where it may gain recognition and reach a stage of political expression, whether through rational discourse or playful and carnivalesque forms of sociability. Moreover, by involving their spectators, the aforementioned theatrical coffeehouse performances claimed the public sphere.

The Theatre-Coffeehouses

Any subject under discussion in a coffeehouse could turn into a common agenda; one could communicate with anyone, take part in any conversation, regardless of whether one personally knew those who chatted or whether one was asked to join in or not. Whereas social status outside the coffeehouse was of paramount significance, inside a high civil servant and an idle man, a religious functionary and a fake mystic sat side by side (Peçevi 1992, 258). Any allusions to social origins were not only considered bad manners but also impeded the smooth flow of information (Saraçgil 1999).

The socialising role of the Ottoman coffeehouses served the temporary eradication of social distinctions. According to Peçevi, the coffeehouses were crammed with pleasure-seekers, men of letters and literati, idlers, judges and corner-sitters with nothing to do, to such an extent that there had "remained room neither to sit nor even to stand" (1992, 258). Thus, keeping social distance between individuals of different status was virtually impossible. Thévenot, writing in 1665, insists that all sorts of people without distinction of religion or rank came to the coffeehouses and that there was "not the slightest bit of shame in entering such a place" (1965, 96). The coffeehouse and its theatricality allowed encounter and encouraged dialogue even among strangers.

Most Ottoman coffeehouses retained a *meddah* (public mimic, storyteller), and their shows constituted one of their most popular theatrical performances. Due to this *meddah* tradition, theatrical speech in the coffeehouses was quite familiar to sixteenth and seventeenth century Ottoman Istanbullites. The coffeehouse *meddah*s were not just storytellers; they were at the same time successful actors. They impersonated rather than merely describe many different characters. To produce the appropriate visual effects, they made use of certain props, like cudgels or wrapped handkerchiefs around their neck or changed their headdress,: "representing Turk, he puts on the old fez; a Persian – the high caracul cap; a Laz – the cowl" (Martinovitch 1933, 27). They were quite successful in imitating various dialects and different sounds. The *meddah*s tried to draw the audience into the story "by identifying them with the main character" (Nutku 1999, 64).

Indeed, occasionally they performed with such a convincing realism that at one instance when they depicted a bridge with its vendors, toll gatherers, and passers-by, the audiences thought to be really on the bridge (And 1999, 37). This was also the case for Karagöz performances, where the characters were "precise and exact replicas of persons" one might have encountered in any neighbourhood of Istanbul (Siyavuşgil 1961, 17). In popular performances the acting acquired naturalness and lucidity by spontaneity, the language was plain, straight, and strong, no theatre building or playhouse was used, performances were generally held in coffeehouses at ground level, where acting was instrumental in "creating close ties between the actors and the audience" (And 1987, 101).

The coffeehouse performances thematising contemporary social issues were merged with "real life" to such an extent that the call for the theater to function as a bridge between street and coffeehouse stage was less obvious. Illusion had no implication of unreality. The audience's familiarity with the patterns of the performance led to close ties with actors and created a remarkably flexible environment of interaction. With a very high degree of realism, Karagöz shadow plays reproduced "the life of the street, the coffee-house, the public bath and so on," so much so that in Sarajevo and Bosnia where the public spoke only Serbian, audiences could "follow a Turkish play with the greatest interest" (Martinovitch 1933, 45). Playacting in the shape of conventions, ritual gestures, and manners was "the very stuff out of which public relations were formed" (Jervis 1999, 22).

In many performances the distinction between audience and performer was not clear. The *meddah* and the diverse forms of *ortaoyunu* performances were surrounded by spectators, and the distance between actor and spectator was almost non-existent. The audience was willing to interfere with the actor directly. In coffeehouse performances the presence of an information-giving process and the composition contributed to a player-spectator transaction. Through laughter, mocking, shouts, clapping, silences, and similar audible signs and gestures spectators took on the role of transmitter of signals to actors. Both parties then interpreted the show in terms of hostility, ennui, amazement, appreciation, and so on. Thus the audience's response and its signals constitute a critical input to the construction and progress of the performance, and had a significant bearing upon textual form (And 1987, 177).

It is possible to call Ottoman theatrical performances non-illusory because of its form of expression and the specific kind of its rapport developed with the audience, which did not completely regard the actor as acting. In coffeehouses, the

intermixing of actors and audiences was carried to its extreme, which greatly facili-tated the formation of codes of belief, linking performance and society. By draw-ing spectators into action, engaging them in improvised scenes, and embodying role-exchange between audience and actor, Ottoman theater-coffeehouses had an influence on shaping the individual as a Public Man in the Sennettian sense.

These spaces served to produce publicity through theatricality and to shape the public sphere through theatrical expressions. Audiences were able to detach behavior with others from individual attributes of social or physical conditions and had made a move by this theatricality towards fashioning a sociable spatiality "out in Public" (Sennett 1986, 65).

The Ottoman Coffeehouse as Heterotopia

Coffeehouses, which possessed multiple meanings for agents, were like labora-tories in which new ways of experimenting with ordering society were tried out, and from which alternative orderings were derived (Hetherington 1997, 12-13). According to St John, such spaces functioned like passages or thresholds evoking the creation of alternative public dispositions. They were heterogeneous zones with variant expectations, pleasures, and tastes held by habitues. Because of their multifaceted, contrasting, incongruous spatialities, the coffeehouses created inde-terminate and equivocal public event-spaces (St John 2001, 51-52).

The Istanbul "coffeehouse" was related to "dervish lodge (*tekke*)," "mosque", and "theatre" (minstrels, public mimics, musicians, singers, shadow players, tum-blers and jugglers, male dancers), and to "reading salon," "political club" (espe-cially for janissary coffeehouses), "tavern," "gambling house," and "oriental gar-den" (open air coffeehouses for al fresco enjoyment), to "barber-shop" and spaces for hashish consumption and, on some occasions, homosexual relations.

For such and similar contexts Foucault (1986) refers to a new knowledge, using the term heterotopia or heterotopology. In contrast to utopias, for Foucault, a het-erotopia, as "heteregoneous site," is capable of juxtaposing in a single "real place" several spaces that may be seemingly incommensurable. "In each case the distin-guishing feature of the heterotopia is its purported status as a form of spatially discontinuous ground." He coined the term heterotopia to refer to unsettling or ambiguous spaces, which set up disordering juxtapositions of incommensurate practices and personalities, which challenge, undermine, and question the alleged coherence or totality of central orthodox powers (Genocchio 1995, 37).

The coffeehouses acted morally and politically as counter public sites in oppo-sition to orthodox views ,which they were challenging. For instance, the non-exist-ence of female performers did not mean that it was not possible to satisfy the lust of the flesh; coffeehouses accomodated a variety of unorthodox sexualities.

Thus, George Sandys, writing about the role of pretty boys in Istanbul, notes,

> *"Many of the Coffeemen keep beautiful boyes, who serve as stales to procure them customers." A perhaps clearer statement is that of a 16th-century author (whose name is uncertain) of Risale fi ahkam al-kahwa; he mentions "youths earmarked for the gratification of one's lusts." Other sources, including Arabic ones, are silent on this topic, although it may be included among the "abominable practices" that often go un-itemised. It should also be noted that there was a certain vague connection between other low-life activities – some*

of which, such as gambling, are known to have been practiced in coffeehouses – and homosexual tendencies (cited in Hattox 1996, 107-108).

On that account, such coffeehouses were primary spaces of "otherness" and places of transgression. They were centers, where rejected and displaced knowledge was celebrated, and where hedonistic practices were sanctioned (St John 2001, 51). The habitues of coffeehouses subscribed to a vast range of alternative practices. In the words of Peçevi (1992, 258), for the religious establishment, for the *ulema*, the coffeehouse was "a house of evil deeds," and its fear of social disorder (*fitne, fesat*) was carried to its extreme by the declaration that "it is better to go to the wine-tavern than the coffeehouse." Among the factors that seriously tarnished the reputation of coffeehouses was a connection with drug use, "especially drug addicts, finding in coffee a great delight, which augmented their pleasure, were ready to die for a cup" (Abdülaziz Bey 1995, 326). Drug consumption was a regular activity in certain coffeehouses. According to Abdülaziz Bey, opium addicts went to the chain-coffeehouses comprised of thirty-five shops, opposite the Süleymaniye Mosque. These coffeehouses, which could accommodate up to fifteen people each, were always filled to the brim (326). The coffeehouse with musical entertainment and gambling was also common: Texts of some moral treatises written against the coffeehouse make it clear that "the presence of music contributed much to the odor of debauchery that made the places so repugnant to the pietistic" (Hattox 1996, 107).

The relation of coffeehouse and mosque was not out of the question and not merely discursive. According to Georgeon, there was a real topological connection. Many "neighbourhood coffeehouses" were established in the vicinity of mosques. They functioned as waiting rooms where the faithful gathered before prayer time. With their fountains these places were like miniature mosque courtyards. The walls were decorated with verses from the Koran, hadiths of the Prophet, and pictures illustrating Mecca and Medina. Religious music was played and poetry and epics depicting victories were read to the believers waiting for prayer time (Georgeon, 1999, 46). Dwight (1926) not only mentions the topological connection between the mosques and coffeehouses (34-5), but also between "cemeteries" and coffeehouses: "People [visiting cemeteries] sit familiarly among the stones or in the coffeehouses that do not fail to keep them company" (219).

Various coffeehouses – used as much for gambling, drug consumption, and male prostitution as for political discussions, dubbed *devlet sohbeti* (conversations concerning the state) – convey their seditious characteristics. Accompanying these seditious and seductive characteristics was the religious one with mystical tones, a fact that makes the heterotopic character of the coffeehouse much more conspicuous. This heterogenous and incongrous mix of practices (political, religious, seductive, literary, seditious, subversive, artful, theatrical, carnivalasque, and so on) defines the coffeehouse as heterotopic.[2] But heteretopias do not exist in themselves. It is the heterogenous blend of social practices, spatialities, and events that are found in the coffeehouses that allows us to call them heterotopias. Foucault's (1986) examples that outline the incongruous spatiality of heterotopias are the Turkish *hammam* (public bath), Roman baths, Scandinavian saunas, brothels, museums, churches, hotel rooms, asylums and prisons. The Ottoman coffeehouse is heterotopic *par excellence*.

Conclusion

I have tried to spatialise the public sphere, conceiving it as a space of public expression and performance which is accessible to any group (Eley 1992). Ottoman Istanbullites entered into a dramaturgical performativity and developed a critical publicness in coffeehouses long before the Europeans encountered coffee and coffeehouses. This unofficial cultural field accomplished negotiating and mediating role between everyday life routines and monologising forces. This informal power functioned as the weapon of popular agency.

All heterotopic modes in coffeehouses define popular power as "tactical, diversionary and heterologic practices, as ways of evading" the state capacity and surveillance, including forms of "practical intelligence, tactical creativity and trickery," which were employed to escape and cope with an apparently omnipotent state power (Erdogan 2000, 31). The coffeehouse society created a liminal space *vis-à-vis* the state; thus, it is not surprising that state power directed never-ending political reactions against it, like edicts banning the institution, that have been inefficient and that provide evidence that in a domain separate from the private one, different social groups gathered to form a culture, a medium, and a space of subversive publicness. Coffeehouses were spaces of suspending the conventions of a repressive and prohibitive official culture and authority. Through insult and mocking – like the mock trial of a Grand Vizier – the carnivalesque culture of the coffeehouse used performance for a showdown with official power via satire and parody.

Ottoman coffeehouses met the reaction of authorities not only because they were instrumental in creating a critical publicness and disruptive political sociabilities, but also because as points of public encounter between people of different status they challenged the conventional norms of an Ottoman stratification system.

The cultural-ideological justification of the Ottoman state tradition has been elaborated on from within an Islamicised version of a Platonic worldview, in which the power of the state is identical with the political rectitude of rulers-as-guardians (Köker 1997, 67). This was the classic legitimation of the Ottoman state, which recognised the fundamental, inevitable, and "natural" dichotomy between the ruling class (*askeri*) and the tax-paying subjects (*reaya*). It was vital to prevent the introduction of the *reaya* into the *askeri* class, because the state depended on their revenues. Hence everyone had to be kept in place. Ottoman coffeehouses as centers of political intrigues and criticism, and as sites of intolerable interminglings, violated the purported coherence of this classic legitimation formula.

The main opposition to the institution did not solely arise from the fact that coffee consumption and its related social milieu were considered *bida* (innovation) in religious terms. Political considerations were more significant. The waning strength of Ottoman military power and an economic crisis since the seventeenth century led to the dissolution of the classic worldview based on the idea of maintaining eachone's proper standing. The initial response to the disintegration of the socio-economic structure was an insistence on the preservation and restoration of the traditional order of stratification. Any challenge to this dichotomous system was met with suspicion. Thus, the attempt of the *reaya* to emulate the lifestyles of the *askeri* met the reaction of the latter, who zealously guarded their privileged

position. The blurring dividing line between the ruling elite and its subjects was a matter of serious concern for the former, who sought precautions against *reaya*'s attempts to transcend their lowly status, for instance, by adopting dress codes of the elites, or riding horses in the streets – a privilege reserved for the *askeri* (Saraçgil 1999, 37-8). The coffeehouse was perceived as a centre of such unacceptable contacts and mixing. Janissary coffeehouses, for example, had provided an opportunity for the isolated *devşirme* youth (recruited from non-Muslim boys for the janissary corps) – cut off from their former relationships and social ties and bound directly to the sultan – to interact with the daily life of Istanbul.

Especially in the seventeenth century, authorities aimed to restore traditional absolutism and stratification through new centralisation policies. As such they were worried by places with the potential of becoming centres of opposition, like coffeehouses, where men of different positions and statuses discussed and criticised public issues and affairs.

The new forms of sociability observed in the coffeehouses transformed the institution into a site, which was not at the margins of power conflicts in the capital of the state (Saraçgil 1999, 37-8). The measures against coffeehouses symbolise the struggle of the central authority to preserve Ottoman absolutism and to prevent the dissemination of an anti-regime discourse.

This was a desperate struggle. The coffeehouse society in Ottoman Istanbul played a significant role in the emergence of an Ottoman public sphere. Coffeehouses were places where the ambivalent interplay of freedom and control were expressed. As spaces most characterised by the tradition of *teatro mundi* and heterotopology, Ottoman coffeehouses were multi- rather than monofunctional, that is, disorder in public "provoked the impulse, the freedom to be disorderly in public, and provoked more vivacity in public" (Sennett 2003, 85).There was a multifaceted relation between conventional behaviour and the disorder of public space, which enhanced public life.

However, is it crucial to "cut free discussions of public life from questions of rationality" – as Sennett argues – to focus on how strangers communicate with each other, or, more precisely, how they express themselves emotionally to each other. In a similar context, Tucker suggests that the aesthetic, the emotional, the playful, and the rational are not separated rigidly. Play (*homo ludens*) can complement rationality (*homo sapiens*). According to Tucker, Habermas believes that persons find themselves in the world and must solve their problems while coordinating action as if some of their sensibilities are innate, yet "our experience is shaped and shared communally, our aesthetic sensibility is elicited by others through interaction." This process requires sensitivity and empathy as well as rationality, "through interaction, cognition becomes infused with meaning; thought invariably calls forth imagination and feeling" (Tucker 1993, 201). The expressive side of the public sphere and its spatialisation in public spaces, like coffeehouses, and especially the theatricality and heterotopology involved in such and similar sites were conducive to the formation of forms of sociability that make up the public sphere. To claim that theatrical and heterotopic forms of expression were an integral part of the public sphere becomes all the more legitimate when bearing in mind Habermas' fundamental condition for a creation of the public sphere, namely that it leads to "the association among persons of unequal social status" (1989, 34). "Play [or the contents of *teatro mundi*] satisfies a critical demand for equality that is

functionally equivalent to the claim of justice which Habermas sees as inherent in communicative action" (Tucker 1993, 206). Play (or playfulness) as an egalitarian form of sociability "requires an autonomous space, like a public sphere, where action can take place voluntarily among equals The politicisation of lifeworld traditions, which Habermas regards as a component of its colonisation that frees up potentials for communicative action, also may promote new forms of sociability and playfulness" (p. 206).

The Ottoman coffeehouses prepared the ground for the challenging forms of publicness by the social composition of their customers and their social mélange. They represented complex everyday realities of a particular public life. Different publics, instead of a singular one, emerged to engage with this reality. The emerging public, of course, was not similar to a classic understanding of the concept. It should be noted that this unitary understanding of the public sphere has been challenged in the European context, too, by recent historical analyses (see Cowan 2000).

In Ottoman society the public sphere was continually penetrated by disruptive intrusions, political intrigues, and government manipulation. Yet this was also the case in England and Germany. The well-known view that the insipient "bourgeois" public sphere was later corrupted or regressed, has been challenged; whereas Habermas has a specific kind of decay in mind, the public sphere and principled rational debate have "always" been impacted by government manipulation and political plotting (Herzog 1998, 142-6). Reinhart Koselleck (1988), in particular, notes the public sphere's pathological beginnings, i.e., its pathogenesis, and not its idealistic rise or long-term regress.

Although there was no viable bourgeoisie in the Ottoman Istanbul until the mid-nineteenth century and no modern public opinion before this period, it does not mean that there was no public force willing to counter state operations and powers. Different publics and publicnesses emerged from other social groups – janissaries, guilds, artisans, subaltern subjects, and so on. Hence, the conceptualisation of the public sphere "makes more sense as the structured setting where cultural and ideological contest or negotiation among a variety of publics take place, rather than as the spontaneous and class-specific achievement of the bourgeoisie in some sufficient sense" (Eley 1992, 306). This ideological and cultural contest and negotiation in Ottoman society took place primarily between those who wanted to question their state-determined positions and others who wanted to inhibit these demands, and between those who wanted to introduce top-down prohibitive policies and those who contested them.

In Ottoman Istanbul the coffeehouse society played a significant role in the formation of the public sphere and in shaping individuals (or popular agency) in it. Although the coffeehouses were places with a multiplicity of activities, my emphasis has been on theatrical and carnivalesque forms of expression, which – by linking the cultural with the political – were instrumental in creating a critical publicness.

Notes:

1. In a similar manner, the old coffeehouses in London were referred to as "penny universities". For a detailed discussion, see Aytoun (1956).

2. For the same reasons Hetherington (1997, 14) defines the coffeehouses of Palais Royale in the eighteenth century Paris as heterotopic.

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