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CAFE *CULTURE* AND THE CITY: THE ROLE OF PAVEMENT CAFES IN *URBAN* PUBLIC SOCIAL LIFE

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## ABSTRACT

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This article explores the relationship between pavement cafes, street life and *urban* public social life. It argues that the licensing of public entertainment and the enforcement of liquor licences and rigid opening times have helped to undermine public social life in English cities. Attitudes which first gained ascendancy in the 1890s have remained dominant and, broadly speaking, unchanged. Nevertheless, there has been a recent and fairly rapid growth in wine bars, cafes and bistros in London and some other English cities. The paper explores whether these help to stimulate public social life. Reference is made to research in Holland and Denmark, and also recent experience in London and Manchester. The paper concludes that city policy makers should, in the short term at least, act to stimulate cafe *culture*. Some anti-social and behavioural problems might well require an element of control, and not all *urban* areas are suited to cafe *culture*. Yet in a technological age, cafe *culture* represents one of the few remaining opportunities for public sociability. Where it creates a nuisance, it could and should be controlled but this is not the same thing as exercising an all-persuasive moral control which has its roots in Victorian England.

### [Preamble](#)

In Fitzrovia there is a special *urban* place. A little cafe, the Titchfield Cafe, nestles on the corner of Foley and Great Titchfield Streets, occupying a strategic point just off-centre on a small crossroads. This is the heart of London's wholesale fashion industry, the BBC is just round the corner and Oxford Street is in view. But strangely, unlike Soho which is almost a mirror image on the other side of Oxford Street, Fitzrovia is quiet, almost a backwater. It feels like a well-kept secret.

The Titchfield Cafe has glass windows on two sides, and room for about 30 people. If the weather is fair, people sit outside, virtually doubling the number of covers. The cafe is a family-run concern, and the food is cheap and hearty, if not especially good. The proprietor is a bit of a character. He plays opera over a strange music system--the speakers are old-fashioned phonograph trumpets--always Maria Callas and Jussi Bjorling, never 'The Three Tenors'. Downstairs, someone has painted the walls of the lavatories with prehistoric cave drawings and Greek figures. Outside, the cafe has personalized the pavement area. There are boxes of shrubs, a bookcase, a birdcage hanging in a tree and even an old guitar. Fairy lights are strung across the windows, so that diners on summer evenings can sit in the warm glow of candles and the fairy lights. This is a place that people like going to. They meet friends, make plans, read the newspapers, do some business, have a drink and a bite to eat. Every once in a while something special happens. One night people were there until after midnight listening to young actors reciting Shakespeare, a band played gipsy tunes and outside, on the pavement, there was a fire-eater. On another occasion, the author met Dennis Potter who was in for a light meal with his agent. We argued about religion, politics, and The Singing Detective.

So the Titchfield Cafe is a special place. Not only is it interesting in itself but it animates and gives vitality to the whole area immediately around the crossroads. Or at least it did. For the Titchfield Cafe has not been the same since 1991.

It was at this time that two sets of regulations were enforced which have not only undermined the cafe's business, but have led in addition to a loss of the buzz that once characterized this little area. First it was the planners, who insisted that the plants and the funny little bits of furniture constituted an obstruction on the highway and so had to be removed. Then, someone--possibly one of the nearby licencees--complained that wine and beer were being served to people sitting out of doors at the pavement tables, and that this was not permitted under the Titchfield Cafe's liquor licence. So they had to take the plants down and then stop serving bottles of wine outside. Trade dropped dramatically. One of the few places in London where you could sit and watch the world go by, over a glass of wine or beer, was now no more. People stopped going.

Over the following few months, the author began to realize that this was not an uncommon occurrence. In Sheffield, during the Student Olympic Games, one could drink tea or soft drinks in the new Tudor Square outside the Lyceum Theatre, but not wine (Figure 1). The theatre had to submit an application for a pavement licence to the licensing magistrates four times before it was granted. In Brighton, English's Oyster Bar set up a petition in support of their application to serve wine with meals out in the little square on which the restaurant fronts. In Manchester, it transpired that there had been a policy during the 1980s to refuse all applications and renewals of liquor licences in the city centre. Things came to a head when a new hotel, developed by a respectable national chain, was refused a bar licence. In Bath, there are white lines painted on the pavement outside a popular wine bar: if you stand within these (about 6ft x 10ft), you can consume alcohol; if you stray over the line, you are committing an offence. Council officials in Westminster unwittingly caused a furore by seeking to ban pavement cafes in Old Compton Street in 1993.

And yet, there were those who had been arguing that one of the ways to generate greater diversity and activity in town and city centres was to encourage cafe *culture* and a more active street life. What we had not fully realized is how difficult this could be.

## [Introduction](#)

In writing this article, the original intention was to argue that petty bureaucratic, over-zealous regulation of activity and land uses greatly hinders the vitality and vibrancy of *urban* centres and street-life. Even with some relaxation in liquor licensing (the all-day opening of pubs on Sundays for example), and the current moves towards '24 Hour' cities, the dominant ethos is still one of control. To explain why this attitude persists, it is necessary to briefly review the history of public entertainment, coffee houses and liquor licences in the UK. The article concludes with a summary of recent moves to promote cafe *culture* in English and Welsh cities, and argues that, in restricting cafe and pavement licences, magistrates are undermining attempts to promote more active street life and a

return to public socialising. We begin, however, with a short discussion of *urban* social life and the public realm.

### Public Sociability and the Public Realm

The concept of *urban* public social life or sociability is bound up with the equally important concept of the '*urban* public realm'. Lyn Lofland (1989), borrowing and adapting from Adam Hunter, argues that the public realm can be distinguished from both 'private' and 'parochial' realms. The private realm is:

. . .characterised by ties of intimacy among primary group members who are located within households and personal networks [while the] parochial realm [is] characterised by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbours who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within communities. (1989,p. 19)

Unlike small towns and villages, cities contain not only private realms (private households) and parochial realms (local neighbourhoods) but also public realms:

. . .made up of the public places or spaces...that tend to be inhabited... by persons who are strangers to one another and who 'know' one another only in terms of occupational or non-personal identity categories. (Lofland, 1989, p. 19)

In this way, the public realm is a defining characteristic of city life.

Following on from Jacobs (1961), it can be argued that the important distinguishing characteristic of cities is their diversity, and that this is largely derived from relative intensity of people and transactions and the division of labour. Moreover, people who live in cities become increasingly more sophisticated and adept at handling the stimuli of city life, partly because they are able to separate the private self (located within the private and parochial realms) from the 'public man' (Sennett, 1977), the complex pattern of lifestyles and identities which people can adopt in cities. Thus, as Bianchini argues, 'public social life' is "the interacting of socialising or sociability...that occurs within the public realm" (Bianchini, 1990, p. 4).

Bianchini, however, goes on to widen the definition of the 'public realm':

. . .the realm of social relations going beyond one's own circle of family, professional and social relations...the idea of the public realm is bound up with the ideas of discovery, of expanding one's mental horizons, of the unknown, of surprise, of experiment, of adventure. (Bianchini, 1990, p. 4)

For Bianchini, then, the public realm is a much wider concept than the public spaces or places in the city, but refers rather to a distinctive set of social relations. The author is not entirely comfortable with this conflation of the public realm as space with public sociability, preferring to see these as certainly closely related but distinct concepts. The subtlety of life in the cities revolves around the capacity to switch between public and

private roles within the spaces or realms within the city. Thus, when serfs fled the land to live in cities, they often used the phrase 'city air makes free'. By this they not only meant that they would enjoy freedom in a very real sense (from serfdom) but also that city life opens up the possibilities for economic achievement whilst simultaneously loosening the personal and family ties and jealousies that governed rural life. The attraction of the city is that it liberates individuals from deeply felt norms in the private self, and allows people to learn about themselves and others. But it is important to recognize that this is only possible because one can choose to be private (anonymous) in a public place, or public in a public place. This choice is made possible by the existence of the public realm. At one extreme, one might engage in public debate about the great issues of the time, celebrate democracy and be happy to be at one with the citizenry. At the other extreme, one might elect to follow some private desires to project an identity through one's public self--in seeking out sexual encounters, for example. For some writers, this polarity is seen to represent a clash of good and bad: the democratic public man versus the self-orientated private man where prime concern is personal gratification. This leads to a complete misunderstanding as to the role of the public realm in cities.

Richard Sennett's earlier work (1970,1977) is based on the hypothesis that economic development transforms community life, and encourages people to retreat into their private lives, avoiding inter-personal conflict and seeking out a purified identity (narcissism). This, in turn, encourages defensiveness, limits personal freedoms, isolates and insulates the individual and destroys concepts of sharing and the communal experience. These elements of social withdrawal create a new intensity within the family unit and "help to create the paradox whereby it is the diversity of the city that is seen as threatening the security of family life" (Punter, 1990, p. 9). Thus, for Sennett, the issue is not the *urban* public realm--the spaces in the city--but rather the changes that have been wrought on 'public social life' by the spread of narcissism. This leads Sennett to the rather depressing view that there is little possibility of changing or improving *urban* society by changing its public spaces (Sennett, 1991). People no longer seem to be able to cope with the social and cultural diversity of the modern city, but choose to maintain their personal relationships within the 'sealed communities' of physically and visibly segregated worlds, an analysis shared by Davis (1990). For Sennett, *urban* public spaces (the public realm) cannot bridge the gap between the private and the public social worlds, even though this is their primary role in the city.

Such an analysis is contradicted by several important *urban design* theorists, most persuasively by Jan Gehl's seminal work *Life Between Buildings* (1996 edition). Gehl argues that the public realm in cities has traditionally performed three roles: as places to meet other people socially, as market-places to transact in, and as channels of movement. He goes on to argue that good public spaces are characterized by the presence of people staying or lingering when they have no pressing reason (or 'necessary activity') to keep them there. Indeed, Gehl argues that the success of *urban* public space can be judged by whether or not people are engaged in 'optional' and/or 'social' activities, such as having a conversation, sitting or simply watching others (Figures 2 and 3). If Gehl's analysis is correct, then it ought to be possible to provide and *design* public spaces which allow for optional, social and stationary activities, even in an age of narcissism.

In Sennett's work, there is a strongly implied relation between the public realm and the specific character of public social life that one ought to find there: public places are sites for public meetings at which intellectual discourse takes place. This applies a norm which may or may not hold. Public spaces in the city perform many cultural, economic and social roles so that we cannot assume that there is only one 'true' mode of public social life which should occur in public space. To be sure, there will be elements in the public realm which appeal to or represent 'higher order values', for example sacred spaces or symbolic meeting places. But to confuse this with some idealized notion of public social life as 'learned and democratic' is mistaken. The point about the public realm is that it provides space for public social life to take place in all its forms. Thus, those who expect street-life and cafe *culture* to signal a return to the idealized Greek polls will be disappointed. Those who simply would like to see more diversity, street-life and activity are more likely to be satisfied. These in themselves are desirable goals.

Today, the cinema and theatre have long since turned into the home video; the launderette and laundry into Ariston and Hotpoint; the library into Penguin and Pan; the concert hall into the compact disc. Even political meetings are now redundant when it is possible to see all one wants of candidates on the television, or join a political party by credit card. (Taylor, 1988)

In the above quotation, the sociologist Laurie Taylor describes the impact of technological change and the ongoing process of economic development on public social life. He is arguing that new products, particularly media products, have undermined public forms of entertainment and interaction, increasingly replacing them by privatized and 'home' entertainment. People, it appears, would rather stay indoors than go out. During the early 1980s (1978-87), the Henley Centre for Forecasting identified a 40% increase in the volume of home-based leisure spending accompanied by zero growth in out-of-home leisure (see Bianchini, 1990, p. 5). But it is now possible to see that this growth more or less corresponded with the emergence of new products onto the market at affordable prices. Later, still in the 1980s and before the recession, there was an upsurge in cinema attendance and the rise of the wine bar. The Henley Centre (1992) is now forecasting that the most dramatic growth in leisure spending will be in eating out, going to the theatre and attending education classes.

Nevertheless, the impact of technological advances during the early 1980s was to undermine, to a greater or lesser extent, public social life. This point was taken on board by Bianchini (1990), Comedia (1991), Worpole (1992) and Worpole & Greenhalgh (1996) in their work on the public social life of towns and cities. Essentially, these writers argued that, rather than any deep-rooted cultural change, the collapse of public social life could be traced to technological change (product substitution), the suburbanization of cities, the problem of *urban* fear, the loss of diversity from city centres, the privatization of public space, the shoe-horning of life into a pattern dictated by the 'nine to five', the out-moded regulation of public entertainment, and the overall loss of street life.

These writers would argue that the dilution of public social life is not therefore a necessary consequence of some deep-rooted cultural shift, the 'fall of public man' towards

a condition of narcissism, but rather the outcome of many years of technological, social and temporal change, some of it market led, some of it public policy led (slum clearance, city zoning) and some of it simply because of neglect or a failure to understand. Moreover, the precise patterns of changing public social life have surely varied from *culture to culture*, not only in the sense employed by Sennett (Christian Judaism versus the Greek polls) but between, for example, European *cultures*. Thus, many commentators might argue that public social life is more interesting in France and Italy than it is in England, Denmark is more interesting than Sweden and so on. Within countries, some cities have more vibrant public social lives than others. Liverpool and Newcastle were always better than Manchester; Glasgow is miles better than Edinburgh; Leeds today is much more lively than Sheffield. This means that the cultural influences on public social life exist at the 'macro' level (e.g. Catholic versus Protestant, or Latin versus Norse). But they are also partly a reflection of micro-conditions, customs and traditions. It follows from this that change may be effected, and that one possible way to stimulate public social life is to encourage or enable new forms of activity to occur in the public realm. Which brings us back to pavement cafes.

### Coffee-houses, Gin Palaces, Theatres and Music Halls: The Rise of Public Entertainment

In *The Fall of Public Man* (1977), Richard Sennett discusses the role of theatre (the gathering of audiences) in a city, and the fact that city life itself can be likened to drama--the symbols and meanings of clothing, speech and the gesture. Performing was one of the keys to *urban* life, with audiences and players interacting and the signals of public social life continually being learned and relearned. Sennett argues (1970, pp. 80-82) that the '*urban* institution' which connected the stage and the 'system of speech' to the street was the coffee-house.

The coffee-houses of the early eighteenth century were the new places for strangers to gather, along with the public houses, the pleasure gardens and the first restaurants. Sennett acknowledges that the coffee-house is "a romanticised and overidealised institution: merry, civilised talk, bonhomie and close friendship over a cup of coffee" (1970, p. 81). But he goes on to point out that the coffee-houses were the "prime information centres...at this time". It was here that the newspapers were read, that tracts and leaflets were published, that insurance was invented, that all manner of business was transacted.

Coffee-houses, by their nature, were places where speech was encouraged, and where people experienced sociability in them "without revealing too much about their own feelings, personal history or station. The art of conversation was a convention...[which]...permitted strangers to interact without having to probe into personal circumstances" (1970, p. 82).

Sennett describes how the coffee-houses declined for 'purely economic reasons' as coffee was eclipsed by tea (largely because of higher duties imposed on coffee). However, the important point here is that the coffee-houses were places of social interaction and public

social life where the codes and rules of conversation were practiced, upheld and developed.

In fact, the coffee-houses were not necessarily unique in this respect. For one thing there were the summer pleasure gardens and the promenades where people would gather to observe and be observed by strangers. The building of new parks and promenades as places away from the danger of the street, where it was easy and safe to promenade, began in earnest in the 1830s. By the mid-eighteenth century walking and riding in the park in London had become a daily experience; indeed the English were renowned for their passion for the promenade. Unlike the coffee-house where one was drawn into conversation, the promenade occasioned contacts that lasted only a moment, a greeting, a wave of the hand, the tipping of hats to ladies. In this way, what we now think of as street life in part is derived from the market-place and in part from the promenade in the park.

In London's case, however, by the late nineteenth century, all the pleasure gardens had gone, having more or less been replaced by the theatres and music halls and the gin palaces. The first of these were built from around the 1830s, and they were characterized not only by the provision of indoor entertainment but also their lavish decor which contrasted majority of people lived.

The gin palaces were in fact the forerunners of the large London pubs (Weightman, 1992). Duty on spirits had been reduced in 1825, with the free trade movement, and official figures on the consumption of alcohol began to rise dramatically. This triggered a moral panic about gin-drinking, and in 1830 a Beer Act was passed, designed to encourage drinkers to switch from gin to ale, allowing anyone to set up an alehouse on the pavement for a small licence fee. Unlike the old coaching inns which were really stopping points--they had courtyards for carriages, stabling for horses, rooms for people, and they served food--the new alehouses were simply parlours for drinking in. The gin palaces adapted to this new development, so that the new pubs (from the 1860s) were built larger, redesigned with mirrors, had central rather than long bars and segregated rooms. In effect, the London pub was a new hybrid combining the gin palace with the ale house.

The growth in the number of public houses was rapid. Weightman (1992,p. 16) notes that by the end of the nineteenth century "there were 48 drinking places in a one-mile stretch (along the Whitechapel Road); along the Strand there were 46 in less than a mile". Competition between publicans was naturally fierce, and singalongs and other entertainments were put on to attract customers (Graham, 1925. As the breweries became more powerful, they began to buy out and lend to publicans, so that many pubs became tied houses.

The theatre in London, meanwhile, had been the subject of strict regulation, a circumstance that led ultimately to the rise of the music hall. The first London theatres had developed in Shakespeare's day, around Whitechapel and in North Southwark, just outside the city walls. A hundred years later many of the theatres and playhouses were pulled down by Cromwell's Puritans, the actors being branded as vagabonds. Following

the Restoration, theatres were once more permitted but subject to a strict regulatory system of Patents restricting performances to 'legitimate theatre', and banning music. New licences were granted at infrequent intervals, so that by the mid-eighteenth century:

. . .there was a tremendous suppressed demand for drama in London, but whenever an actor or speculator...tried to build a new theatre, the Patents objected and called in the Law, which was always upheld. (Weightman, 1992, p. 21)

For over a hundred years, from the late eighteenth century, there followed a procession of new theatres opening up, putting on plays, being closed by the authorities and their owners arrested and fined. To get round the Patents, all number of ingenious tricks were attempted, including 'giving' away free tickets (free performances were exempt from the Patents) with purchased items of clothing. Eventually, in 1843, the Theatre Regulation Act abolished the Patent monopoly, so that all manner of theatres could now apply for a Lord Chamberlain's licence.

After the passing of this Act, there was no longer any reason for theatres and music halls to develop separately. Theatres therefore became places where not only could one see the play but drinks and food were served and smoking was the custom. Few new theatres were founded in the period following the 1843 Act, but the music halls, or variety theatres as they were later called, arose "at an astonishing pace" (Weightman, 1992, p. 29) becoming the dominant places for popular entertainment. From the 1850s the music halls became increasingly refined and reputable, distinguishing themselves from the more bawdy proceedings in the saloon theatres and public houses. Women were allowed to watch the entertainment, often from upper galleries, provided they were prepared to give their name and address as a protection against prostitution

A typical music hall of the time (1860s) is described in F.E. Richie's *The Night Side of London*:

A well-lighted entrance attached to a public house indicates that we have reached our destination. We proceed up a few stairs along a passage lined with handsome engravings, to a bar, where we pay sixpence if we take a seat in the body of the hall, and ninepence if we ascend into the gallery. We make our way leisurely along the floor of the hall, which is well lighted, and capable of holding 1,500 people. A balcony extends round the room in the form of a horse-shoe. At the opposite end to that at which we enter is the platform, on which are placed a grand piano and a harmonium on which the performers play in the intervals when the previous singers have left the stage. The chairman sits just beneath them. It is dull work to him, but there he must sit drinking and smoking cigars from seven to twelve o'clock. The room is crowded, and almost every gentleman has a pipe or cigar in his mouth. Evidently the majority present are respectable mechanics or small tradesmen with their wives and daughters and sweethearts. Now and then you see a midshipman, or a few fast clerks and warehouse men. Everyone is smoking and everyone has a glass before him; but the class that come here are economical and chiefly confine themselves to pipes and porter. (Quoted in Weightman, 1992, pp. 33-34)

Thus by the late nineteenth century, the theatres and music halls had evolved in completely different ways. While the theatre came to provide a simple performance of a play, the music hall offered variety.

This meant that you could go in at any time, watch the pieces that amused you, and wander out again to the promenades.... (Weightman, 1992, p. 34)

It was now in the music hall rather than the theatre or indeed the coffee-house that one could combine entertainment with discourse and social interaction.

### **The Moral Backlash--Regulation, Restriction and Control**

In his compelling account of the history of public entertainment in London, Gavin Weightman describes the "battle over the Empire Theatre, Leicester Square" as combining all the ingredients of the moral struggle of the Victorian period and after: "sex, drink, prostitutes, popular taste and the profits of showbusiness" (Weightman, 1992, p. 78).

The Empire had opened as a theatre in 1884 but had become a variety hall by 1887 and had something of a reputation as a gathering place by the 1890s. Weightman quotes an 1890 description from Harper's:

You pass through wide, airy corridors and down stairs, to find yourself in a magnificent theatre, and the stall: to which you are shown is wide and luxuriously fitted. Smoking is universal, and a large proportion of the audience promenade the outer circles, or stand in groups before the long refreshment bars which are a prominent feature on every tier. Most of the men are in evening dress, and in the boxes are some ladies, also in evening costume, many of them belonging to what is called good society. The women in other parts of the house are generally pretty obvious members of a class which, so long as it behaves itself with propriety in the building, it would, whatever fanatics may say to the contrary, be neither desirable nor possible to exclude. The most noticeable characteristic of the audience is perhaps the very slight attention it pays to whatever is going on upon the stage. (Harper's New Monthly Magazine (1890), quoted in Weightman, 1992, p. 78)

Moralists were deeply concerned at the sexual connotation. Men about town were drinking in the music hall, being stimulated by the girls on stage and solicited by the prostitutes who patrolled the bars. Sex, often as not, was practiced on the premises.

In 1894, following complaints from two American gentlemen who were solicited in the promenade, a leading campaigner against vice, Mrs Ormiston Chant, led a campaign to close the Empire. She complained in particular of the lewd dancing and the use of flesh-coloured tights and bodices to 'simulate nudity'. Mrs Chant appeared before the Entertainments Committee of the London County Council to oppose the Empire's application for the renewal of its licence. The LCC was widely seen as being run by 'Progressives', but they were social reformers of the "most humourless and puritanical kind" (Weightman, 1992, p. 82) who were 'especially strict' in their administration of

music and dancing licences. This was to become a recurrent theme in the licencing of British public social life.

The Empire was a fashionable and popular place, and was supported by the public, West End society and in the Press. The upshot was that the LCC decided to renew the Empire's licence but on condition that a screen were put up between the promenade and the back row of seating, and that the sale of drink was banned from the auditorium. The Empire's manager, of course, complained that this would greatly reduce his profits and the shareholders' dividends, and that it was unfair if other establishments were not forced to do likewise. However, despite his threat to close the Empire in October 1894, it re-opened in November with the temporary screen in place. The scenes that followed are described in the Pall Mall Gazette of 5 November:

The bar at the back had been shut off from the promenade by means of a screen of woodwork covered with canvas...gradually the crowd began to attack the screen. Well-dressed men--some of them almost middle-aged--kicked at it from within, burst the canvas, but hardly affecting the woodwork. The attendants--most of whom might have played the giant in a country show--watched in helpless and amused inactivity. Finally, there was an attack on the canvas, which was tom away in strips, and passed throughout the crowd, every one endeavouring to secure a scrap of it as a souvenir. Mr. Hitchens, the manager, attempted argumentative remonstrance, but was carried away by half a dozen enthusiasts. Then the woodwork of the screen was demolished by vigorous kicks from both sides. The crowd had already cheered itself hoarse, and now began to go out into London, brandishing fragments of the screen. (Quoted in Weightman, 1992, p. 84)

One of those identified during these shameful scenes was a young Mr Winston Churchill. The Empire was closed and eventually was redeveloped as a cinema.

The moralists' second attack was on drinking in the music halls. From the mid-1890s onwards, newly opened variety theatres were unable to get licences to sell drink in the auditorium, and a great many of the smaller halls--when their licences were refused renewal--closed. The temperance movement arose in the early nineteenth century to oppose the drinking of spirits, preferring beer and wine as having healthy properties. The Yates' Wine Lodges were a case in point, as was the Beer Act of 1832. But by the late nineteenth century, the temperance societies were opposed to all alcoholic drink. A few temperance music halls were established (for example the Victoria Theatre, later the Old Vic) but these failed because "they lacked the income from alcoholic drink...and tended to have a pious and unattractive atmosphere" (Weightman, 1992, p. 97). The Working Men's Clubs and Institute Union or CIU was formed in 1862 to provide alcohol-free uplifting entertainment for the masses, although eventually alcoholic drink was permitted. Eventually, many of the working men's clubs in Soho became the private drinking clubs and strip joints of the 1950s.

By the time the cinemas began to appear in the early 1900s, it was inconceivable that the drinking of alcohol would be permitted in auditoria. Public entertainment had become more respectable and less dependent on strong drink. Not only was the notion of what a

theatre ought to be shaped during the struggles over drink, sex and prostitutes, but the spectre of moral control through licensing--of public houses, entertainment venues, opening hours and drinking-up time--had been extended to cover many aspects of public social life.

Public social life which revolves as much around private pleasures and anticipation as intellectual discourse, was--for a while at least--fatally wounded by the triumph of morality and Methodism, the same Methodism which Jane Jacobs blames for the rise of town planning and the death of the city (1961). According to Thomson (1993), Methodism originated in Bristol in 1739, and was characterized by a revival of 'the reality of hell-fire'. John Wesley's purpose was to create new moral codes amongst wider cross-sections of the population, and to set in place a strict moral censorship.

The tightening of liquor licensing, which is often attributed to wartime measures (ensuring that munitions workers were fit to work), was in fact in train from the 1860s and especially the 1890s with the control of public entertainment and the social reforming zeal of modern local government. As in other walks of life, spontaneous public social life was regulated to conform to a pattern of perceived respectability. This is why the apparently silly and archaic rules which have devastated business at the Titchfield Cafe are so serious, because they are unbending and they have a long pedigree. The contrast between Victorian moral control and what had gone before the eighteenth century is marked (Burke, 1941, Ch. 4).

The purpose of describing, however briefly, the way in which theatres, music halls, gin palaces and public houses evolved, is to point to the ever-present tension between popular entertainment and respectability, the forces of market and cultural demand versus regulation, the conflict between enterprising entertainment and prudery. For it is in the triumph of prudery over popular entertainment that we find the root of current liquor and entertainment licensing laws.

In this way, the decline in public social life which Sennett attributes to the rise of industrial capitalism, the secularization of the city and the move within the theatre towards the 'cult of the personality' was in fact triggered or at least helped along by the regulatory strictures set in place by the authorities. For fear and moral panic over the behaviour of crowds and people in public places has been a recurring theme in the attitudes of city 'fathers'. The quotations below show how persistent the exercise of moral control has become.

This man's firm runs cafes and dance-halls in various London suburbs and provincial cities, so that you may say he makes his money out of the new frivolity of our age, which we so often hear condemned by people who do not happen to like cafes and dance-halls themselves and do not see why others should. He goes round visiting these places from time to time, had just inspected their Liverpool properties and now wanted to have a look at their big cafe in Manchester. He did not like Manchester. It seems that when his firm decided to open the cafe on Sunday evenings, they asked the Manchester City Fathers if they could provide patrons with music, a little orchestra and a singer or two. The City

Fathers said: "No, we can't allow that sort of things in Manchester". So they asked if the cafe could have gramophone music. The Fathers promptly replied: "Certainly not, no gramophone in public on Sunday". Could they then install a loud speaker in the cafe, and thus entertain their patrons with the programmes that Sir John Reith himself passed for public consumption on the Sabbath? Again Manchester refused permission. So now, he informed me dryly, the cafe is open on Sunday evenings, and generally full, but nothing happens in the way of entertainment and his firm is saved the expense of providing it. The people are only too willing, on winter Sunday nights, to go in and stare at one another. It is a change from the streets or a back bed-sitting room up the Oldham Road. (Priestley, 1944 , p. 251)

Night-life...night-club...night-bird. There is something about the word Night, as about the word Paris, that sends through some Englishmen a shiver of misgiving, and through another type a current of undue delight. The latter never get over the excitement of Sitting Up Late. The others see any happening after midnight--even a game of snakes-and-ladders--as something verging on the unholy; as though Satan were never abroad in sunlight. A club they can tolerate. Call it a night-club, and they see it as the ante-room to Hell. This attitude towards entertainment after dark is held by most officials. Whenever they hear of some new development of night-life, they get a prickling of the thumbs, and give the impression that they would be happier if the universe had so contrived its system as to give the whole globe perpetual day. They always want to have their eye on us; always are ordering their subordinates to find out what baby is doing and tell him he mustn't. This impeding of the Englishman's night-life goes back to our earliest times, and has persisted ever since. In my own youth, a firm of billiards-table makers used to recommend its wares to respectable fathers, under the legend: Keep Your Boys At Home. But all through the centuries boys have refused to stay at home. So, when authority found it could not keep them there, it set about making things as difficult as possible for them, by devising budgets and laws and by-laws. (Burke, 1941, preface, p. v)

What all of this implies is that if we wish to see more active public social life and street life in our cities, the problem of moral regulation must be addressed.

### Cafe Culture and Public Policy in 1990s England

With the concern to 're-centre' cities and bring back their lost vitality, attention has in a number of UK cities been focused on the creation of cafe *culture*, often as part of a wider drive to achieve a '24 Hour City' (Montgomery with Owens, 1995; Bianchini, 1995; Lovatt & O'Connor, 1995. As Oosterman (1992) notes, many cities and towns across Western Europe have poured investment into improving and re-creating the *urban* public realm, in the redesign of plazas, streets and parks. These *designs* are intended to have a social impact by encouraging more active social life in *urban* public space (see for example Montgomery, 1995, for an account of the Temple Bar area in Dublin). As we have seen, Sennett is not convinced that such initiatives can succeed, because the 'fall of public man' has its roots in wider social processes: industrial capitalism, narcissism, the cult of personality and the confusion of public and private roles. The author's view is that the exercise of moral control over public social life has had damaging effects on public

entertainment and social life, and these are much more evident in countries like England than in France or Italy or Spain, or in places like Amsterdam.

This article has argued that it is important to distinguish between the *urban* public realm as places and spaces where public social life is possible, as opposed to the process and character of public social life itself. They are connected and each influences the other, but they are not the same thing. If this is true, then it may be possible to stimulate public social life by re-creating the *urban* public realm. But the extent to which this occurs will depend on the existence and removal of controls and other influences on how, in specific places and times, public social life occurs. The danger is, of course--as the moralists have always realized--that freeing up the possibilities for less restricted public social life in the *urban* public realm leads not to democratic gatherings and high intellectual discourse, but to the exercise of the pleasures of the body: sex, drink and prostitution. If 'city air' makes us free to sit around and talk philosophy, it also makes us free to enjoy individual pleasures. This is the inherent attraction for some, and danger for others, of cafe *culture* and the more active public social life it represents.

A similar point is made by Oosterman in his investigation of cafe *culture* in Dutch cities. Oosterman argues that, by seeing public space and the events which occur within it as contributing to "social organisation, the fulfilment of societal needs" (Oosterman, 1992, p. 159), planners and *urban* designers and *urban* sociologists ignore the perspective of the everyday user. Oosterman argues that, far from being in public space to participate in a wider, perceived by *urban* professionals as laudable, social activity of 'citizenship', individuals congregate in public places to indulge personal and private interests.

Oosterman traces the growth in the number of pavement cafes in Dutch city centres since the late 1960s: by 1991 the number of street cafes in Utrecht and the space they occupy had trebled up to the maximum allowed by the city authorities. Oosterman notes the clash of interests which this growth brought into play, with residents and street users complaining about the blocking of streets, noise and dirt. He concludes that:

...the sidewalk cafe is an excellent example of...individual pleasure derived from the public realm. The entertaining force of the street is the main attraction of the sidewalk cafe. (Oosterman, 1992, p. 161)

Apart from drinking, relaxing and enjoying the sunshine, people enjoy a number of activities which derive from the public character of the setting: watching the world go by, being 'entertained by street life', bumping into people one knows, showing off--the promenade, seeing and being seen, meeting strangers, flirting and perhaps (though not always) a sexual encounter. These observations led Oosterman to conclude that

it is not the meeting of strangers that is important, but the spectacle provided by them. Cultural and personal differences are neither left at home nor bridged [in public spaces]...On the contrary, some public spaces, like the streets where one strolls past the cafes, are used to show personality, to show differences in *culture*, style, behaviour and

taste. These differences, however, are kept at a certain distance. (Oosterman, 1992, p. 162)

The secret to public social life in cities is, therefore, not so much to be public in public but private in public. The attractions of street cafes, argues Oosterman (1992,p. 163) is that they provide:

. . .the right balance between distance and amusement [and] as a consequence are considered very safe places...On the one hand, the street is partially transformed into an open air living room, and on the other...the street turns into a sort of stage with people behaving like players and audience.

Finally, Oosterman's research revealed that the `best' cafes were those where the street life around them is heterogeneous, but that each cafe can be distinguished by special characteristics such as the age and consumption patterns and lifestyles of its clientele.

Research in Denmark (Gehl & Gemzoe, 1996) also reveals a rapid, and apparently unforeseen growth in pavement cafes in central Copenhagen since the early 1980s. Whilst there were 68 outdoor cafes with 3000 pavement seats in 1986, there were 126 cafes and nearly 5000 seats by 1996. Earlier, during the 1970s, Copenhagen had hardly any outdoor cafes at all. Gehl & Gemzoe attribute this growth not only to the increased sophistication of Danes as consumers, but to the fact that since the mid-1960s Copenhagen has pursued an active policy to reclaim, re-create and redesign *urban* public space. Cafe *culture*, it seems, is now part of the Copenhagen way of life (Figure 4).

Very few UK cities have so far experienced the explosive growth of pavement cafes which Oosterman and Gehl & Gemzoe describe. Some, Sheffield springs to mind, have barely any cafe *culture* at all; others, such as Manchester and Leeds, are deliberately setting out to promote such growth. In London, pavement cafes now appear to be proliferating although there have been attempts to resist this. In 1993, for example, officials of Westminster City Council were concerned at the apparently sudden emergence of cafe *culture* along Soho's Old Compton Street, a not particularly wide nor particularly narrow east-west street lined with small shops, restaurants, strip joints and cafes, and with two large theatres at its western end. The pavements along both sides of the street are only 6 to 8 feet wide. During the summer of 1992, one or two of the smaller cafes--possibly copying the larger Soho Brasserie which opens onto the pavement--began to put tables and chairs on the street. Like the Titchfield Cafe they were served with notices that they were obstructing the public highway and that these cases would be considered at a Council committee. The matter was raised in the Press, with the London Evening Standard carrying a leader attacking bureaucratic meddling and celebrating the emergence of street life which was described as "something wonderful". The Standard also pointed out that Old Compton Street is hardly the M4, and that a more tolerant attitude to street life should be adopted. At the Council meeting a few days later, Council members (politicians) overruled their officers' (bureaucrats) advice to serve notices on the cafes. Street life in Soho([n1](#)) appears now to be going from strength to strength and other

parts of London are doing likewise: Hampstead, Upper Street in Islington, High Street Kensington and Fitzrovia.

If London is exhibiting its old tendency to liberate with one hand and threaten regulation with the other, the pointer in many English provincial cities has, until very recently, been clear. Manchester, for example, the first 'Fordist' industrial city, has seen the collapse of traditional textile industries, and has sought to re-create itself as a financial centre and, latterly, a cultural city. During the 1980s, the emergence of cafe *culture*, lifestyle bars and clubs was gradual. The local broadcasting celebrity and entrepreneur, Tony Wilson, established the Hacienda and Dry Bar as new *culture* clubs, though not strictly speaking pavement cafes. Wilson was influenced by a trip to Barcelona where he observed the connections between style, fashion, music and the street life of the city with the emergence of up-market cafes, dance bars and designer bars. The Barcelona bar, Nick Havanna, which was designed in 1986, is believed to have inspired Manchester's Dry Bar. But at the same time--during the 1980s--Manchester's police chief had an active policy to close down licensed premises in the city centre. With his departure in the late 1980s, Manchester's licencing regime began to relax a little. Dry Bar was opened in 1989, and a new generation of cafe-bars was heralded by the opening of Mantos on Canal Street in 1991.

Around this time, Manchester City Council commissioned an 'arts and cultural' strategy for the city. The original brief, though somewhat narrowly focused on the performing and visual arts, was extended to include matters such as *urban culture*, the public realm, street life and cafe *culture*. The report contains longish sections on 'Investing in Architecture and *Urban Spaces*' and 'Improving Street Life and *Urban Culture*'. The consultants argued that much of Manchester's public life went on behind closed doors, that "there is little life on the streets, the public spaces are obviously under-used..Neither is there much sense of fun, humour or sophistication...there is a closing down rather than an opening up of city life" (*Urban Cultures*, 1992, p. 29). The consultants advised that the city should encourage cafe *culture*, its evening economy, re-create its public realm and develop a policy on city centre licensing, the presumption being "in favour of longer opening hours, more late-night licences and pavement seating" (1992,pp. 28-32).

This advice was followed up by a high-level round-table discussion by key opinion formers and leaders in the city, hosted by Manchester City Council. Overnight, almost, opponents to cafe *culture* melted away to be replaced by a shared enthusiasm for European Street Life.

### [Top of the Table](#)

Cafe Society is Urged to Back Outdoor Style

Cafe society in Manchester is being urged to try a taste of the great outdoors...all in the cause of being good Europeans of course... Councillor Spencer, Chairman of its planning Committee...is urging more cafe and bar owners to set up open-air tables. Several have

already set up street cafes...But the town hall is keen to promote the European influence in Manchester with even more permanent tables. (Manchester Evening News, June 1992)

This announcement was followed up by the Leader of the Council personally writing to all existing licence holders in the city centre, encouraging them to apply for pavement licences and late night extensions. The licensing magistrates were taken on a tour of the city at night, personally conducted by Councillor Pat Karney, Chairman of the Leisure Services Committee. From late 1992 onwards, the softening of attitudes towards licensing, which was already in train, gathered momentum. It is still doing so.

Manchester, then, became the first of the UK's emerging 24 Hour Cities. It hosted the First National Conference on the 24 Hour City in October, 1993, as part of which a one-month special license was granted (Lovatt, 1994). Other cities are now following suit, notably Leeds which has established its own '24 Hour City Executive', Sheffield which is struggling to throw off its old Methodist attitudes to liquor and entertainment licensing, Newcastle and Birmingham, but also smaller cities and towns such as Oxford, Cardiff and Bristol. In almost all of these cases, the promoters of more active evening economies and street life have seen pavement cafes as an important means of generating more activity. This is true of Canal Street in Manchester, Mill Lane in Cardiff and parts of Sheffield's cultural industries quarter. In Cardiff's case, the initiative came from a local entrepreneur, backed by a sympathetic city centre manager. At its simplest, all that was involved was a doubling of the pavement width, the downgrading of a carriageway and more investment in infrastructure, lighting and railings (designed by an artist). The strip of around eight restaurants is now, far and away, the most lively and interesting part of the city. The scheme cost several hundred thousand pounds, but its success is not in question. People in Cardiff, never previously noted for their celebration of cafe *culture*, now sit out all through the day and night, and even in the winter.

### **Conclusion: The Role of the Cafe Culture in Stimulating Street Life and Urban Culture**

Although still in its infancy in UK cities, and as yet to be the subject of more systematic and detailed research, the cafe *culture* phenomenon can be seen to bring several benefits to city life. Of necessity, our discussion of these is based largely on personal knowledge and observation of the examples referred to earlier.

First, pavement cafes are places to meet people. They are also relatively relaxed, and there is more choice over what to eat or drink, and less expectation that alcohol will be consumed. Perhaps for this reason, pavement cafes tend to be more elegant and sophisticated than pubs, and usually less rowdy. This means that cafes are an important extension of choice in city life. It is noticeable that women seem to be more comfortable on their own or meeting other women in cafe-bars as opposed to pubs.

Second, as Oosterman and Gehl have shown, pavement cafes are places where, because of greater interaction with the street and improved visibility, one can sit and watch the world go by. This is surely one of the delights of *urban* life, and one which was almost

lost to English cities. The simple fact is that cafes attract people who want to see and be seen by other people, even if all this means is strolling up and down the street. These are the all-important optional and social activities which Gehl refers to.

Third, by performing this function, pavement cafes help to increase the natural surveillance of streets, simply because more people are around and watching over the streets and public spaces. This means that streets with pavement cafes tend to feel safer and are more likely to be used by a wider cross-section of people than streets with no cafes and no natural surveillance (Figure 5).

Fourth, not only are cafes less likely to be dominated by rowdies and 'lager louts', their presence helps to overcome the dominance of English pub *culture*, so that over time a greater mix of people of much more varied age-groups are to be found throughout the day and in the evening. The hope must be that, over time, the presence of people of all ages will lead to improved behaviour by the rowdy minority.

Fifth, research has also shown that for certain economic sectors--media, advertising, fashion, the performing arts--cafes and restaurants and bars are places where a great deal of business is transacted (*Urban Cultures*, 1994). If city policy makers wish to stimulate the economic development of these creative sectors, then the people who work in them and make things happen must have places to meet. Otherwise, creative people will vote with their feet.

Sixth, it is not just media types and pop stars who meet in cafes, but people from all walks of life including key opinion formers and decision makers in most cities. Cafes and bars and restaurants have arguably become sites for the all-important networking so necessary to transactional life in the post-Fordist, flexible, core-periphery economy. Increasingly, cafes and restaurants are places where business gets done.

Finally, and perhaps most important, in the modern city where many of the old functions of *urban* public space have been removed--doing business at the Corn Exchange, finding out what the latest news is, checking the time on the town clock--cafe *culture* and its attendant people-watching is one of the few *urban* activities remaining which require streets and public spaces (Figure 6). This means that cafe *culture* is perhaps one of the few antidotes to the fully privatized public realm, the sealed-off communities and fortress mentality which so many commentators fear.

The detractors and moralists will argue that pavement cafes can also be anti-social where they impact adversely on residential amenity--noise, cars, too many comings and goings, late night disturbances. This is undoubtedly true in some cases, especially where the policy intention is to bring residents back to the city centres. Having said that, it is not a zero-sum game. Some people are drawn to live in more active *urban* areas, others are not. Some evening activities are broadly acceptable alongside residential accommodation (restaurants, wine bars), others are not (clubs and noisy pubs). It is really a question of balance, and what is considered appropriate in particular localities.

But this is not the debate we have so far been having, for the response of most magistrates and many planners has been a blank refusal of new licenses and a reluctance to allow change of use from shops to cafes. It is possible that this attitude is now relaxing as more policy makers look to improve city vitality. If so, the moral restrictions which were first introduced over 100 years ago will have been at least partially reversed. In the process cities and towns might well become more active, cultured and cosmopolitan, and we might also rediscover street life and the value of having a public realm. Not necessarily for the 'return of public man' but more simply as a terrain for all the complexity of city life to unfold.

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### Notes

*(n1.) Sadly, in 1996, new steps were being taken to control the pavement cafes of Old Compton Street.*

*Figure 1. Tudor Square in Sheffield. The city's first new piece of **urban** public realm since the 1950s. The space is framed by the Lyceum Theatre and The Crucible. This photograph was taken during the Student Olympic Games in 1992. There was street theatre and dancing, and families were happy to sit at tables looking over the square. One could drink tea or soft drinks, but alcohol was banned. In many cities, it still is.*

*Figure 2. The importance of stationary activity (standing, sitting, watching) in the **urban** public realm. Tivoli Gardens, Copenhagen.*

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Figure 3. Visibility. Glass that can be seen through allows people to look at each other and to be seen.

*Figure 4. Cafe **culture**, Danish style. Twenty years ago pavement cafes were almost unknown in Denmark. People said it would never catch on. Now there are 126 pavement cafes in Copenhagen city centre.*

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Figure 5. Allowing pavement cafes to `personalize' public space. In the process they look after the space, keep it tidy and it feels safer because there are eyes on the street.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Figure 6. Cafe **culture** can create out door rooms in the city, not only promenading routes. A place to meet your friends, an outdoor parlour.

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