BODILY INSCRIPTIONS AND THE MARKET OF PUBLIC OPINION IN 18TH CENTURY ENGLAND

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Abstract

My paper aims at the analysis of bodily de-scription, re-in-scription and re-presentation seen as mechanisms of power relations and contamination. I am also interested in techniques of a civilizing process as well as in manifestations of ethical, moral, aesthetic, political, socio-cultural and economic crises of values in the 18th Century and the contemporary English society(s). To what extent can we speak of 18th Century periodicals, clubs and coffeehouses as instruments and even institutions of public opinion formation and power relations at collective and individual levels? I am going to deal with bodies seen as systems of signs submitted to de-coding and interpretative processes.

Can we speak of public opinion formation in public or private institutions like coffee-houses, taverns, journals or tea-tables as an outcome of extreme situations of corporeal and power relation "games" or crisis including excess in the late 17th and the early 18th century England? Extreme situations make people aware of their bodily existence as much as they are aware of their national and social existence. The body becomes either vulnerable and transparent as a result of intense public display and disclosure or resistant and opaque to external stimuli as a reaction of a self-defense system of intellectual, emotional and bodily features annihilation. Power elements or signifiers such as public or private places, publications, external material or intellectual, emotional or spiritual "objects" / "texts" and body stimuli are actively or passively engaged in signifying processes of power relations leading to internal or external bodily writing and reading - encoding, decoding and interpreting, in-scription and de-scription, enclosure and disclosure. These Power Elements become institutions of social, cultural, ethical and aesthetic instruction and reformation comprising assistance or repression of bodies as "cultural constructs".

A coffeehouse culture of public debate opposes the Restoration Court culture of Charles II – a libertine fashionable court society in the last decades of the 17th century. The shift from a set of bodily internal and external vices and follies exposed to public display and criticized by the genteel society of public *censor morum* in coffeehouses or periodicals, into a set of decent bodily appearance and manifestation is mainly the reason and the outcome of public opinion formation. The glittering beau monde of fans and fancy dress, of card games, masquerades, duels and sexual intrigue were external bodily manifestations of internal vices – ostentation, vanity, snobbery, self-interest, insincerity, moral laxity, slavish devotion to fashion - showing thus, the interdependence between the two distinct elements or parts of a person: the body and the individual – mind, emotions and believes. In *A Tale of a Tub*, Jonathan Swift outlines the manners and morals of the fashionable Restoration man-about-town: *They Writ, and Raillyed, and Rhymed, and Sung, and Said, and said Nothing: They Drank, and Fought, and Whor'd, and Slept, and Swore, and took Snuff; They went to New Plays on the first Night, haunted the Chocolate –Houses,*

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beat the Watch, lay on Bulks, and got Claps: They bilkt Hackney-Coachmen, ran in Debt with Shop-keepers, and lay with their Wives: They kill'd Bayliffs, kick'd Fidlers down Stairs, eat at Locket's, loitered at Will's.[1]

It is hard to imagine and even confusing for the present reader, either interpreter or decoder of the following three quotations from *The London Spy*, *The Character of a Coffee-House* and Steele's *The Spectator,* refer to one and the same place: the coffeehouse. Different and sometimes contrastive coffeehouse descriptions or representations reflect the eclectic mass of coffeehouse goers from rakes, fops, beaus or coquets to honorable merchants or members of the aristocracy. This melting pot contributes to the foundation and development of civil society with its public sphere, being a response or a counterbalance of extreme situations of sovereign's abuses, excess and constraints by moderation, equilibrium and a plurality of voices involved in public affairs – a meeting point of high and low culture. Anyone can claim access to this sphere of public debate which should be based on Equality as Bickerstaff asserts in *The Tatler* No. 225: "*Equality is the Life of Conversation.*" [2] Coffeehouses together with periodicals like *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* – interested in manners and morals more than news – constitutes a public social space where traditional status of wealth hierarchies are rendered irrelevant by human rationality. A rationalization of politics allows the formation of a bourgeois public sphere. Paradoxically, members of the gentry and aristocrats may sit down with "less refined or educated" tradesmen and financiers and pursue rational conversation. They learn how to make the distinction between "having" a body and "being" a body - the mark of the division "mind / body" within the individual.[3] For Kant's "enlightened" man in his famous 1784 essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?*, the mind of a private individual should not be "in secret free" like with Hobbes' but he should make public use of his reason submitting, however, his body to the public and political authority of his time. In my opinion, a key moment of public opinion formation and awareness is precisely Kant's definition of the Enlightenment (Aufklärung) as "a way out", "a liberation" (Ausgang) from the state of "immaturity" meaning the acceptance of the "guidance of another" instead of using one's own understanding and reason. The individual as part of a social system with official duties to fulfill should obey or let himself be externally or "bodily" disciplined while individually using his reason. *"He must simply obey. But he cannot reasonably be banned from making observations as a man of learning on the errors in the military service, […] the fiscal system or religion, and from submitting these to his public for judgment."* [4] The individual should be capable of coming up with solutions without being assisted by the "Other", the absolute sovereign who kindly takes upon himself the role of supervisor or guardian. Thus, "Domesticated animals" or "docile creatures" are "carefully prevented from daring to take a single step without the leading–strings to which they are tied." [4] In other words, the whole process deals with the change of the previous relation between public authority and, individual's will and the public use of his reason. In an article bearing the same title, *What is Enlightenment?* Foucault analysis the two essential conditions established by Kant for people to get rid of "*immaturity*" namely: "*spiritual and institutional, ethical and political* "while clearly distinguishing between the realm of obedience and the realm of the use of reason. [5]

In the struggle of the individuals to make public use of their reason in the 18th century English society, John Wilkes (a Whig MP) acquires popular fame. He did not like the new government of George III and his external affairs and saw in his decision of making peace with France in 1763 without telling his ally Frederick of Prussia, an act of political crisis and

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injustice. Wilkes printed a strong attack on the government in his own newspaper, The *North Briton* as he strongly believed that politics should be open to free discussion by everyone. As the king and his ministers were unwilling to accept free speech of this kind Wilkes was arrested and imprisoned in the Tower of London and all his private papers were taken from his home. Due to the judge's famous judgment that "public policy is not an argument in a court of law", Wilkes won the case.[6] His victory shows in an incipient form that the freedom of the individual should be more important than the interests of the state and that no one could be arrested without a proper reason. The Government should also observe the law like any other institution or citizen. Encouraged by the court's just decision, ordinary people, and not only, began to organize political activities in order to win their basic rights.

Politically, writes David Kerr Cameron, the coffeehouse was a place of intrigue whose patrons were subject to discreet surveillance by government spies. In 1675, Charles II found a need to close them briefly as "*places where the disaffected met, and spread scandalous reports concerning the conduct of His Majesty and his Ministers."* The Smyrna in Pall Mall, was one such enclave, a Whig hangout and Jacobite stronghold where the porters and chairmen, it was said, picked up an education just by eavesdropping on the conversations of members like Swift and Steele.[7]

The heterogeneous mass of people in coffeehouses marks the transition and the displacement from taverns and alehouses to coffeehouses and clubs; from a place of release, raucous and alcohol-charged, nonproductive leisure to public space of considerable restraint, rational debate and productive leisure. Mackie writes that *"in the alehouse one resorted to a realm of pleasure removed from the demands of work; in the coffeehouse pleasure never abandoned business."*[9]

In the first text, Ward's Spy adopts the character of an outsider and a reformer in anticipation of Steele's and Addison's Bickerstaff and Mr. Spectator or Montesquieu's Usbek and Rica: *"Come", says my friend, "let us step into this coffee-house here". As you are a stranger to the Town it will afford you some diversion." Accordingly, in we went, where a parcel of muddling muckworms were as busy as so many rats in an old cheese-loft; some going, some coming, some scribbling, some talking, some drinking, others jangling, and the whole room stinking of tobacco like a Dutch scoot, or a boatswain's cabin. The walls were hung with gilt frames, as a farrier's shop with horseshoes, which contained abundance of rarities, viz., Nectar and Ambrosia, May Dew, Golden Elixirs, Popular Pills, Liquid Snuff, Beautifying Waters, Dentifrices, Drops, Lozenges, all as infallible as the Pope. "Where everyone" (as the famous Saffold has it)"above the rest, Deservedly has gained the name of best." Good in all cases, curing all distemper; and every medicine, being so catholic, pretends to nothing less than universality. Indeed, had not my friend told me" twas a coffee-house I should have took it for Quacks' Hall, or the parlour of some eminent mountebank. […] Being half-choked with the stream that arose from their soot-coloured ninny-broth, their stinking breaths and the suffocating fumes of their nasty puffing- engines, my friend and I paid for our Muhammadan gruel and away we came."*[10]

Like Edward Ward's description in *The London Spy*, the second text in *The Character of a Coffee-House*, a satiric pamphlet whose author is unknown, emphasizes the social promiscuity that makes coffee-house society a smoky, dirty place full of knaves and fools mixed up with merchants, lawyers, physicians, artisans and even noble men, a place for gossip, for scientific conversation, for legal, political, religious and literary criticism:

"The Coffee-house […] like Noahs Ark receives Animals of every sort, from the precise diminutive Band, to the Hectoring Cravat and Cuffs in Folio; a Nursery for training up the smaller Fry of Virtuosi in

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confident Tattling, or a Cabal of Kittling Criticks that have only learn't to Spit and Mew […] The Room stinks of Tobacco worse than Hell of Brimstone, and is as full of smoak as their Heads that frequent it, whose humours are as various as those of Bedlam (Bethlehem Hospital for the insane) and their discourse oft-times as Heathenish and dull as their Liquor; that Liquor, which by its looks and taste, you may reasonably guess to be Pluto's Diet-drink [Coffee, Pluto is the Roman god of the underworld]; that Withes tipple out of dead mens Skulls, when they ratifie to Belzebub their Sacramental Vows. […] So that oft you may see a silly Fop, and a worshipful Justice, a griping Rook [a con artist or extortionist] and a grave Citizen, a worthy Lawyer, and an errant Pickpocket, a Reverend Nonconformist, and a Canting Mountebank; all blended together; to compose an Oglio [mishmash] of Impertinence.[11]

In the third text, the above descriptions differ from Steele's satiric accounts of the coffeehouse life as well as from the general historical and social meaning of the coffeehouse seen by historical social theorists like Habermas as a place of rational and genteel discourse:

"It is very natural for a Man who is not turned for Mirthful Meetings of Men, or Assemblies of the fair Sex, to delight in that sort of Conversation which we find in Coffee-houses. Here a Man, of my Temper, is in his Element; for, if he cannot talk, he can still be more agreeable to his Company, as well as pleased in himself, in being only an Hearer. […] When the Day grows too busie for these Gentlemen to enjoy any longer the Pleasures of their Deshabile, with any manner of Confidence, they give place to Men who have Business or good Sense in their Faces, and come to the Coffe-house either to transact Affairs or enjoy Conversation. […] Their Entertainments are derived rather from Reason than Imagination: Which is the Cause that there is no Impatience or Instability in their Speech or Action. […] The Coffe-house is the Place of Rendezvous to all that live near it, who are thus turned to relish calm and ordinary Life. "Eubulus" presides over the middle Hours of the Day, when this Assembly of Men meet together. He enjoys a great Fortune handsomely, without launching into Expence, and exerts many noble and useful Qualities, without appearing in any publick Employment." [12]

Two engravings of London's early coffeehouses are somehow illustrative of Steele's written description of a peaceful atmosphere **(Fig.1 and Fig.2)** although the second picture (**Fig.2)** shows people in a heterogeneous gathering interested in gossip and political plotting besides news reading and interpreting. Steele's newsmonger in *The Tatler* No.178 is "surrounded by an Audience of that Sort" in a "Cloud of Tobacco, with the *Post-Man* in his Hand and all the other Papers safe under his Left Elbow."[13]



FIG. 2.15. A coffeehouse at the close of the seventeenth century. Note the papers on the table in the foreground and the tables in the rear devoted to conversations on different subjects. (By permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Douce Prints W.1.2[203].)



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On the other hand, Hogarth's *Midnight* **(Fig.3)** is said to be set in St. John's Coffee-House. Some coffee-houses served alcohol and this is one of these, as this engraving shows different stages of drunkenness. While Hogarth denied that any of these were portraits of particular people, there are several that people seemed to recognize such as the tobacconist, John Harris, the man raising his glass in the back and placing another wig upon the head of the parson.



Mackie writes in his introduction to *The Commerce of Everyday Life, Seections from The Tatler and The Spectator*, about a "vigorous coffeehouse culture" as well as about the "intimate affiliation between the commercial periodical press and coffeehouse society establishing a closed circuit of production and consumption." According to the same Mackie, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator*, two of the most famous periodicals of the time, are written and even generated in the discussions at particular coffeehouses, clubs or drawing rooms of female conversation like in the *The Female Tatler,* "each section being in turn circulated and read in such locations, […] refueling the conversation.".[14] Besides the negative connotations attributed to the coffeehouse, the author of *The Character of a Coffee-House* acknowledges the liberty allowed to any man in it to be a statesman, politician or critic. The coffeehouse is "a High-Court of Justice, where every little fellow […] takes upon him to transpose Affairs both in Church and State, to shew reasons against Acts of Parliament, and condemn the Decrees of general Councils." [15]

Apart from their economic, aesthetic and literary value, *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* acquire cultural, crosscultural and finally acultural value as they try to generalize observations of contextual bodily manifestations – manners and morals, and understand them as universally human and eternal. Thus, the historical, transitory and cultural bodily manifestations become ahistorical and acultural.

Mandeville's statement: *Private Vices, Public Benefits,* valid in today's consumer society more than ever, reflects the compromise traders and politicians are ready to make for the sake of progress. The way of excess and the cultivation of the Senses by external stimuli make the

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body vulnerable to social and cultural power relations generating new meanings and values while altering and distorting the old ones.

Thus every Part was full of Vice, / Yet the whole Mass a Paradice; / Flatter'd in Peace, and Fear'd in Wars / They were th'Esteem of Foreigners, And lavish of their Wealth and Lives, / The Ballance of all other Hives. [16]

For the socio-political body and especially for the economical one, vanity and pride are raised at the level of virtue as long as they bring public benefits by the cultivation of their natural inclinations - appetites and sensual pleasure.

The Root of evil Avarice, / That damn'd ill-natur'd baneful Vice, / Was Slave to Prodigality, / That Noble Sin; whilst Luxury / Employ'd a Million of the Poor, / And odious Pride a Million more. / Envy it self, and Vanity / Were Ministers of Industry; / Their darling Folly, Fickleness / In Diet, Furniture and Dress, / That strange ridic'lous Vice, was made / The very Wheel, that turn'd the Trade. / Their Laws and Cloaths were equally Objects of Mutability; / For, what was well done for a Time, / In half a Year became a Crime. [17]

Although Mandeville in his satirical poem *The Grumbling Hive* strives to recuperate the traditional significance of Vanity opposing, like Addison, the Natural, the Equilibrium and the Stability to the Artificial, the Excess and Mobility / Inconsistency, reaches the conclusion that compromise is inevitable for the sake of progress.

'[…] Fools only strive / To make a Great an honest Hive. / T'enjoy the World's Conveniencies, / Be famed in War, yet live in Ease / Without great Vices, is a vain / Eutopia seated in the Brain. / Fraud, Luxury, and Pride must live / Whilst we the Benefits receive. […] Bare Vertue can't make Nations live / In Splendour; they, that would revive / A Golden Age, must be as free, / For Acorns, as for Honesty." [18]

When explaining the mechanisms of commodification, Maxine Berg uses Sombart's classic account in *Luxury and Capitalism* (1913) who declared that the principal cause of the expansion of trade, industry and finance capital over the whole period between 1300 and 1800 was the demand for luxury and goods, especially by the nouveaux riches, the courts and the aristocracy. An intensification of the demand for luxuries, bodily and political in origin, made fashion a driving force of social elites. The analysis of luxury can be extended from the elite to the middling-classes.[19]

New consumer luxuries – china and glassware, cotton fabric and small metal goods useful and convenient as well as trifles and fancies could be found alongside the tea and coffee in coffeehouses or clubs, like chocolate and dried fruits and other colonial groceries in the shops of London or provincial England. The same attitude regards fashion and matters of dress. There is, as I have already mentioned, an economically positive and progressive approach to Fashion as well as a socially and culturally negative, satirical connotation attributed to fashionable items pointing to a ridiculously obsessive, limitless appetite of middle class members for social status and worldly goods' possession. Besides its communicative role, costume translates into fabric, colour and cut a cultural, emotional, technological or economical evolution. The same Mandeville writes in *The Fable of the Bees* - an inquiry into the economic, sociological and psychological context of the time: *"What Estates have been got by Tea and Coffee! What a vast Traffick is drove, what a variety of Labour is performed in the World to the Maintenance of Thousands of Families that altogether depend on two silly if not odious Customs: the taking of Snuff and*

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smoking of Tobacco; both which it is certain do infinitely more hurt than good to those that are addicted to them!" [20]

Steele shares the same point of view in Spectator: *"I fancy'd it must be very surprising to any one who enters into a Detail of Fashions, to consider how far the Vanity of Mankind has laid it self out in Dress, what a prodigious Number of People it maintains, and what a circulation of Money it occasions."* On the other hand, *"the Variableness of fashion turns the Stream of Business, which flows from it now into one Channel and anon into another; so that different sets of people sink or flourish in their Turns by it."* [21]



In *Beer Street,* (Fig.4) Hogarth engraved a more or less satirical illustration of urban contentment and prosperity in 1751. On the one hand, it celebrates British prosperous community of commerce and urban labour. Although they look happy, those people may be seen as ridiculous, greedy, vulgar, plebeian, unsophisticated and governed by the gross dictates of physical appetite: *"Beer was promoted as a patriotic elixir that fuelled the nation's workforce and stimulated a harmonious sense of community and freedom among ordinary Britons."* [22] (Hallett, 211)

Both *The Tatler* and *The Spectator* deal with various consumer and social choices in relation with the financial and commercial markets of their time being themselves fashionable commodities on the periodicals' market as they depend upon commodification and commercialization. They are private enterprises based on sales and advertisements and not on Governmental financial support. The two periodicals play the role of guides for the readers in point of rational or useful individual or social consumption out of financial and social reasons. In a consumer culture the practical, the useful diversity and variety, tends to be more important than the aesthetic.

The socially and politically diversified mass of coffeehouse goers, the manners, morals and external texts / objects or bodily stimuli on display in such institutions leading to economic development while sometimes altering their moral, cultural or emotional value or non-value, the overuse or the denial of such goods, as well as the diversity and specificity of topics debated in different coffeehouses such as: the White's Chocolate-house for gallantry, pleasure and entertainment, Will's Coffee-house for poetry, The Graecian for learning and St. James's Coffee-house for foreign and domestic news, lead to public opinion formation in public or

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private institutions like coffee-houses, taverns, journals or tea-tables perceived as an outcome of extreme situations of corporeal and power relation "games" or crisis including excess in the late 17th and the early 18th century England

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