

The Cappuccino Conquests

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This paper presents our new research project The Cappuccino Conquests. A Transnational History of Italian Coffee (www.cappuccinoconquests.org.uk), which traces the history of espresso-based beverages and the cultures of consumption surrounding them. Research is still in its initial stages and comments from CHARM attendees will shape its subsequent development.

The project could be conceived as a biography of espresso, but what is its academic value? A biography can open windows into historical debates by interpreting specific moments in the story of espresso within the broader context of the evolution of consumer societies. In particular this project provides a way of analysing how previous consumption practices have impacted upon present ones, not least through structural comparisons between different locales in the same period, and the same locales at different times.

The case of Italian coffee is particularly valuable for analysis of transfers between locales. Espresso is a preparation process rather than a proprietary product, so its transfer has involved multiple agents - machine makers, coffee roasters, diaspora communities, independent entrepreneurs and international chains. Its story cannot be told as a narrative of either local to global transfer (e.g. ethnic cuisine), or global to local transfer (e.g. Coca Cola). Rather there have been a set of multiple and multi-directional transfers between developed and developing consumer economies in Italy, Europe, the United States, Australasia, Asia and the Middle East. Business and cultural studies paradigms of 'glocalisation' and 'creolisation' need to be nuanced to interpret a process in which there is no single originating or dominating producer or culture.

The complex nature of these linkages has complicated the notion of coffee's imagined identity. Constructing a commodity biography that ties goods to a particular locality can enhance value to the consumer by cloaking purchases with a veneer of authenticity. This value can then be realised in higher prices that offset other services such as the 'dwell time' to consume the beverage on the premises. Comparison of the commodity biographies manufactured in different locales provides a tool for understanding the transfer process.

Espresso is a mechanically produced beverage extracted from a blend of ground coffee. In Italy, when espresso machines entered production at the beginning of

the 20th century, they were presented as a symbol of the country's industrial modernity, while roasters highlighted the exotic origins of their beans. However in light of the popularity of the beverage abroad, it has increasingly been promoted as part of the country's traditional patrimony. Independent roasters, who still have 80% of the market, stress that their blends are adjusted to local tastes by branding themselves using the colours of local football teams, and using local landmarks in their publicity.

In the 1950s a wave of coffee bars spread throughout Britain serving so-called 'frothy coffee' i.e. cappuccino. Yet these evoked multiple localities through their interiors and names such as El Cubano, Sarabia, even Las Vegas. Britons had had little experience of coffee, so that its novelty and exoticism were the keys to its appeal in a world of post-war austerity. Italianess was underplayed, not least because Italian cafes continued to serve tea to their working class clientele - it was only in the 1970s that the beverage acquired greater nationality as an element in Italian-themed dining.

In the US espresso-based beverages were largely confined to Italian-American enclaves until the Speciality Coffee movement adopted them in the 1980s as part of its strategy to address the post-war decline in coffee consumption. By the turn of the century their sales exceeded those of the high quality traditionally brewed coffees that gave the movement its name. The adjustments made to make the espresso beverages more accessible, and the use of Italianate designations for non-Italian beverages are well known, but it is notable that the chains themselves rarely incorporate Italianess into their brand identities.

In the UK independent entrepreneurs began importing the new coffee house format in the 1990s - often celebrating its US origins, as in the case of the Seattle Coffee Company later acquired by Starbucks itself. Yet the most profitable chains are those that are branded as Italian, using strategies as diverse as allowing smoking or emphasising the origins of their chief roaster. Manufacturing 'Italianess' is key to validating the quality of the beverages, given that specialty coffee has not crossed the Atlantic. This combination of real and imagined elements from both Italy and the US in cappuccino's commodity biography in the UK is indicative of the complexity and ambiguity that has characterised espresso's global transfers.