

# The Rise of Yuppie Coffees and the Reimagination of Class in the United States

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Let us begin at Zabar's, a gourmet food emporium on Manhattan's Upper West Side. We enter, make our way through the crowd waiting to place orders in the cheese section, move quickly past the prepared foods, linger over the smoked fish, then arrive at the coffees. There, in full-sized barrels arranged in a semicircle, we find a display of roasted coffee beans for sale – Kona style, Colombian Supremo, Gourmet Decaf, Blue Mountain style, Mocha style, "French Italian," Vienna, Decaf Espresso, Water Process Decaf, Kenya AA – and a helpful clerk waiting to fill our order, grind the beans to our specification, and suggest one of a small selection of flavored syrups.

Given Zabar's reputation for quality and excess, this is a rather modest selection as coffee now goes. The evidence of plenty and waste can be found in the size of the barrels and the quantity of roast beans available for sale and spoilage. But the real spot to spend money is upstairs, where the brewers, grinders, and espresso coffee-makers are sold – from simple Melitta drip cones and carafes to the more serious Krups Semiprofessional Programmatic (\$349) or the Olympia Caffarex (\$1,000). Zabar's collection of coffee is not especially distinguished. They eschew the trend toward flavors (raspberry, almond, chocolate, amaretto, vanilla, and the like, in various combinations), offering instead a few prepackaged coffees in flavors and small bottles of flavored syrups for those customers who prefer them. But only two of their coffees are sold as specific varietals, Colombian Supremo and Kenyan AA. The rest are "styles" that suggest a geographic place without having anything to do with it. Kona style can include beans from El Salvador, Blue Mountain style, beans from Puerto Rico, and so on.

If I visit the deli across the street from my apartment, I can choose from a much wider variety of coffees, 43 in all, including Jamaican Blue Mountain, Venezuela Maracaibo, German Chocolate, Swedish Delight, Double Vanilla Swedish Delight,

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Swiss Mocha Almond, and Decaf Swiss Mocha Almond, to name just a few. These are displayed in burlap bags that take up much more space than coffee sections used to occupy when my only choices were Maxwell House, Folgers, Chock Full o' Nuts, El Pico, and Medaglia d'Oro. And they require the assistance of a clerk to weigh, bag, and grind the coffee.

As I walk down the street, virtually every deli offers a similar variety, generally in minibarrels, though sometimes the barrels are distributed in apparently casual abundance throughout the store so that I can also select breads, spreads, teas, chocolates, and cheeses as I decide which among the many roasts, varietals, styles, or flavors I will choose this week. I no longer need the gourmet shop – though such shops, which proliferated in the 1980s, continue to thrive, concentrated in cities but also present in suburban towns and shopping malls – to buy what coffee traders call “specialty” coffees; nor do I need to be a gourmet to buy and enjoy them (or better said, I need not be a gourmet to look, act, and feel like one). I can go to the corner deli or the major supermarket, where even Maxwell House and A&P have joined the “specialty” trend.

Surely these developments are “good.” Specialty coffees taste better than mass-market coffees. They offer pleasure in many ways: the aroma, ambience, and experience of the coffee shop or even the deli itself (indeed, part of the experience of a place like Zabar's is the succession of smells); the casual conversation with the shop owner or dinner guest about varietals, roasts, preparation methods; the identification with particular places through consumption – Copenhagen or Vienna, Jamaica or the Celebes; or the inclusion of coffee purchasing, preparation, and consumption in a widening spectrum of foods – including wines, beers, waters, breads, cheeses, sauces, and the like – through which one can cultivate and display “taste” and “discrimination.” Moreover, the expansion of specialty coffees marks a distinct break with a past characterized by mass production and consumption. The move toward these coffees was not initiated by the giants that dominate the coffee trade but by small regional roasters who developed new sources of supply, new modes and networks of distribution that allowed, among other things, for consumers to buy coffee directly (well, not *directly*) from a peasant cooperative in Chiapas or Guatemala. **New coffees, more choices, more diversity, less concentration, new capitalism: the beverage of postmodernism.**

Proper understanding of the proliferation of specialty coffees requires consideration of the experiences and choices of the consumer in the coffee shop and at the dinner table, but it also requires consideration of the methods, networks, and relations of coffee production, processing, distribution, and sale in the 1980s, as well as a placement of those methods, networks, and relations within a wider history.

This essay concentrates on that second range of questions, on what might be termed the *shaping of taste*. I begin with two historical issues – first, the complex relation between the recent rise of specialty coffees and an earlier period characterized by standardization and mass-marketing, and second, the specific history of specialty coffees themselves. In considering both, I deal with coffee in particular, but what was happening with coffee marketing and consumption was not at all unrelated to what was happening with many other food commodities. I then turn to a range of questions that might be termed sociological: How has the turn toward

specialty coffees been organized? What has been the position and role of the giant corporations that dominated the coffee trade during the period of standardization? Who have been the innovators and "agents" of change in the move toward specialty coffees? How have they organized themselves? How have they reimagined and reorganized the market? What kinds of class and generational maps of United States society have they used in their reimagination of the market? How have they imagined themselves, and the class and generational segments they target as their market niche, in relation to a wider world of coffee producers?

These more historical and sociological questions raise issues for anthropological interpretation. Can the study of changing marketing and consumption patterns of a single commodity at a particular moment (even a mundane commodity produced for everyday and routine consumption) shed some light on a wider range of social and cultural shifts? We have a good example of such an analysis in Sidney Mintz's *Sweetness and Power* (1985), an exploration of the growing and changing presence of sugar in the English diet from the 17th through 19th centuries, linked – explicitly and necessarily – to industrialization and the growth of a working class, changing modes of life, consumption, and sociality in growing cities in England, and to the establishment of colonial power, plantation economies, and slave labor in the Caribbean. The range of issues considered here is more modest, but it shares Mintz's conviction that "the social history of the use of new foods in a western nation can contribute to an anthropology of modern life" (1985:xxviii).

A distinctive feature of the essay is that the data come largely from two trade journals, *World Coffee and Tea (WC&T)* and *Coffee and Cocoa International (C&CI)*. These journals raise several questions, the first of which is methodological – the use of trade journals in relation to other possible methods and sources, including ethnographic ones. The journals give us access to the preoccupations, diagnoses, and strategies of a range of actors in the coffee trade – growers, traders, roasters, distributors, and retailers large and small, in producing as well as consuming countries. In one sense, they share a common interest: to increase coffee consumption and maximize profits. In many other senses, their interests and their stakes in the coffee trade differ.

If we are trying to understand these actors – their interpretations and intentions, their images of the social world in which they act, their disagreements and disputes, and their actions – trade journals constitute a central, readily available, and under-used source. But their use raises a second related and interesting issue of the trade journal as text. The articles in the journals speak to a particular kind of public – in this case, to an assumed community of "coffeemen." The anthropologist who would use these articles for other purposes has the strong sense that he (in this case) is eavesdropping, or – to return to the text – peering over the shoulder of the intended reader.

### Connections and Contrasts

We understand and value the new specialty coffees in relation to "the past," though in fact more than one past is being imagined. On the one hand, specialty coffees are placed in positive relation to the past of, say, two decades ago, when most coffee in

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the United States was sold in cans in supermarkets, the roasts were light and bland, the decaffeinated coffees undrinkable, the choices limited to brand and perhaps grind, and the trade dominated by General Foods and Procter and Gamble. On the other hand, the new coffees seem to connect with a more genuine past before the concentration and massification of the trade. The identification of particular blends and varietals recalls the glory days of the trade; the sale of whole beans in barrels or burlap bags recalls that past (for a present in which the "containerization" in international shipping has rendered such bags obsolete) at the same time that it gives the late-20th-century gourmet shop the ambience of the late-19th-century general store. This identification is further effected with the tasteful display of old coffee mills, roasters, and brewing apparatus on the store shelves. Coffee traders themselves share these identifications. Alan Rossman, of Hena "Estate Grown" Coffee, explained to *World Coffee and Tea* in 1981:

I am a second generation coffeeman and, through direct experience, remember when there was a certain pride in the coffee business. We used to wonder why, in earlier days, there were so many second generation coffeemen around. And it was because there was an art to coffee then. . . . Today, the ballgame has changed and suddenly the password in coffee has become "cheaper, cheaper!"

All of a sudden . . . comes along somebody who's interested in quality. He doesn't care that he may have to sell it at twice the price of canned coffee, he's only interested in quality. All we're doing today is copying what our fathers and grandfathers did years and years ago. . . . Specialty coffee has revived the pride that was lost somewhere along the line and it is the main reason why I, who was born and raised in the coffee business, really enjoy now being part of that business. [WC&T 1981b:12]

In the same issue of *World Coffee and Tea*, the journal enthused:

And so it seems that the coffee trade in the US has come full circle, returning to its roots and the uncomplicated marketing of coffee in bins, barrels and the more modern method of lucite containers. As they did in the early days of coffee consumption, American consumers, in ever-growing numbers, are blending their own coffee, grinding it at home and brewing it fresh each day. [WC&T 1981b:12]

Similarly, the journal notes that specialty coffees appeal to consumers who prefer "natural," "whole," and "fresh" foods. Imagining yet another past, the same journal nervously tracks the latest government reports on the effects of caffeine or methylene chloride. But to what extent is the new also a return? Upon what pasts have the specialty coffees actually built?

In an important essay, Michael Jimenez (1995) describes the processes through which coffee was transformed from an elite and expensive beverage, with annual per capita consumption in the United States at three pounds in 1830, to a relatively inexpensive drink consumed in working-class homes and at factory "coffee breaks" across the country by 1930. Much of his analysis concerns the first three decades of the 20th century, by which time coffee was widely distributed and consumed.

Of special relevance is Jimenez's analysis of the emergence of a more concentrated and consolidated coffee trade in the first three decades of [the 20th] century, one that had developed a central directing (though not controlling) authority and imposed

standardized notions of quality and taste in the creation of a national market. Jimenez shows that we cannot understand transformations in the coffee trade without understanding a broad range of economic and social transformations in the history of American capitalism—the industrial revolution of the late 19th century and the creation of a more homogeneous proletariat, the development of national markets and modes of distribution; the revolution in food production, processing, and distribution that resulted in the creation of the supermarket, among other things (indeed, the histories of the supermarket and of standardization in the coffee trade are contingent); the revolution in advertising; the concentration and consolidation of American industry; and so on. In all this, the particular history of the standardization of coffee for mass markets is not unrelated to the history of standardization, indeed “industrialization,” of foods in general in the 19th and 20th centuries (see Goody 1982:154–74).

The process of standardization and concentration begun before the depression was consolidated over the succeeding decades, especially after World War II, during which we can locate two new developments. The first involved the creation of international control instruments and agreements, beginning in World War II and culminating in the creation of the International Coffee Organization and an International Coffee Agreement signed by producing and consuming countries, through which export quotas were imposed upon producing countries. Though room was allowed for new producers (especially from Africa) to enter the market, entry and participation were controlled. With such instruments, and with the widening production and consumption of solubles, the trend toward coffee of the lowest common denominator continued.

The second postwar development involved the long-term decline in consumption beginning in the 1960s. Through the 1950s, consumption was essentially flat, with minor fluctuations. From 1962, one can chart a consistent decline. In that year, 74.7 percent of the adult population was calculated to be coffee drinkers; by 1988 only 50 percent drank coffee (see Table 8.1). Even those who drank coffee were drinking less. In 1962, average coffee consumption was 3.12 cups per day; by 1980 it had dipped to 2.02 cups and by 1991 had dropped to 1.75, which represented a slight increase over the 1988 low of 1.67 (WC&T 1991:14). Worse, in the view of “coffeemen,” consumption was increasingly skewed toward an older set. At the beginning of the 1980s, they worried that they had not been able to attract the 20- to 29-year-old generation, who seemed to identify coffee drinking with the settled ways of their parents and grandparents. According to their calculations, 20- to 29-year-olds drank only 1.47 cups per day in 1980, while 30- to 59-year-olds drank 3.06 cups, and those over 60 drank 2.40 (WC&T 1980:22).

### Differentiation and the Identification of Market Niches

The long-term trend toward decline was exacerbated by the effects of the July 1975 frost in Brazil, after which wholesale and retail prices rose precipitously. In response, various consumer groups began to call for boycotts, and coffee purchases declined sharply. Congressional hearings were called to investigate the coffee trade, and the General Accounting Office conducted an official inquiry and published a report.

Table 8.  
Redrawn

Year

1962
1974
1975
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**Table 8.1** Percentage of US population drinking coffee, 1962–88.  
Redrawn and simplified after *WC&T* 1989a.

Year	Percentage drinking
1962	74.7
1974	61.6
1975	61.6
1976	59.1
1977	57.9
1978	56.7
1979	57.2
1980	56.6
1981	56.4
1982	56.3
1983	55.2
1984	57.3
1985	54.9
1986	52.4
1987	52.0
1988	50.0

At the beginning of the 1980s, then, many “coffeemen” had reason to worry. Kenneth Roman Jr., president of Ogilvie and Mather, a major advertising and public relations firm which carried the Maxwell House account, offered them some advice. In an interview with the editors of *World Coffee and Tea*, he commented,

Coffee is a wonderful product. I believe, however, that we have got to stop selling the product on price. We must sell coffee on quality, value and image. I believe coffee has a potential for this marketing approach and I know we can do it. But we must get started now. . . .

Once you start selling a product on price, you end up with a lot of money being put into price promotions . . . and you forget the basic things like the fact that coffee tastes good, that it smells and looks nice, that it’s unique. . . .

We are entering the “me” generation. The crucial questions “me” oriented consumers will ask, of all types of products, are: What’s in it for me? Is the product “me”? Is it consistent with my lifestyle? Does it fill a need? Do I like how it tastes? What will it cost me? Is it necessary? Can I afford it? Is it convenient to prepare? How will it affect my health? [*WC&T* 1981a:35]

In a speech to the Green Coffee Association of New York, Roman suggested fictitious couples and individuals who could serve as markers of distinct market niches and suggested that “coffeemen” should develop different coffees to appeal to specific niches. The first couple was “the Grays,” a dual-income couple in their mid-thirties, for whom coffee is a “way of life” and who prefer to buy their coffee in a gourmet shop. Others included “the Pritchetts,” in their late fifties and watching their pennies, for whom price is the most important question; “Karen Sperling,” a single

working woman in her thirties who does not want to spend much time in the kitchen and for whom a better instant coffee should be developed; "the Taylors," in their sixties and worried about caffeine, for whom better decaffeinated coffees should be developed; and "Joel," a college student who does not drink coffee. "We don't know yet what to do about Joel. . . . Finding the right answer to that question will be the toughest, and probably the most important task coffee marketers will face in the 80s" (WC&T 1981a:76-7).

Kenneth Roman was inviting "coffeemen" to envision a segmented rather than a mass market, and to imagine market segments in class and generational terms. In his scheme were two groups that were to be the targets of specialty coffee promotions — the yuppie "Grays" and the mysterious "Joel," who prefers soft drinks. These two segments mark what were to become two strains of an emerging specialty business — the marketing of quality varietals, on one hand, and the promotion of flavored coffees, the equivalent of soft drinks, on another.

Roman was describing the virtues of product diversification to a trade that had grown on the basis of standardization. Yet the standardization itself was a bizarre development, having been imposed upon a product that "naturally" lends itself to diversity. Even during the period of concentration among roasters and packagers, the export-import trade was organized around a complex grading hierarchy, first according to type (arabica or robusta), then according to place, processing methods, and shape, size, and texture of the bean. Coffees are graded first according to a hierarchy from Colombian arabica, other milds, Brazilian, to robustas. They are traded and may be sold by the place of their origin or export (varietals such as Guatemalan Antigua, Kona, Blue Mountain, Maracaibo); once traded, they may be blended with coffees from other locales or of other grades. Both varietals and blends can then be subjected to different roasts, imparting different, more or less complex aromas and tastes to the coffee. From the point of production through traders, export firms, importers, warehousemen, roasters, and distributors, the grading hierarchy with significant price differentials prevails. In their attempt to capture and service a mass market in the 20th century, the giant roasters had bought their coffee through these grading differentials, then proceeded to obliterate them in the production of coffee of the lowest common denominator.

The giants had never controlled the whole trade, however. In addition to the major roasters and their distribution network through grocery stores, smaller "institutional" roasters were scattered throughout the country, servicing restaurants, cafes, offices, vendors, and the like. At the beginning of the 1980s, fewer than 200 roasting and processing companies operated in the United States, with four of them controlling 75 percent of the trade (C&CI 1982:17). In addition, a small network of specialty, "gourmet" shops could be found, primarily in coastal cities like New York and San Francisco. In the retrospective view of "coffeemen," these shops began to attract new customers and expand business in the wake of the 1975 freeze, when coffee prices expanded across the board and consumers faced with paying \$3 a pound for tasteless coffee began searching for something "better" and found that "quality" coffee that used to cost three times supermarket prices was now only about a dollar more.

This, in turn, provided stimulus for others to enter the gourmet trade, perhaps including specialty coffees as one of a range of foods in a gourmet shop. For this

expanding number of lots of a product entering a trade through critical middlemen, importers willing to build a network of specialty trade especially in Seattle take advantage of specialty lines of roasters, and of expanding gourmet regular customer a more detailed would educate them with retailers who retailer to drain roasts at the same

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Although the United States A scant seven named market: on "the brownie the coffee trade to 50 percent. The 14 million pour Coffee and Cocoa (1985), after which the number of lots \$500 million in trade, and so on

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expanding number of retailers, supply was a problem. They were dealing in small lots of a product that was imported, warehoused, and sold in bulk, and were entering a trade that was highly concentrated. As the specialty trade expanded, the critical middlemen were the roasters, who could develop special relationships with importers willing to deal in smaller lots. The roasters, in turn, would supply a network of specialty stores. Location mattered, as a relatively dense concentration of specialty traders, roasters, retailers, and customers developed on the West Coast, especially in Seattle and the San Francisco Bay Area. The roasters best situated to take advantage of the situation were institutional roasters who began to develop specialty lines as subsidiaries of their restaurant supply business. These regional roasters, and others new to the trade, quickly became the control points of an expanding gourmet trade, developing new supplies, roasts, and blends; taking on regular customers among shop owners; running "educational" seminars to cultivate a more detailed knowledge of coffee among retailers, expecting that they in turn would educate their customers; and so on. An early gourmet-market idea popular with retailers was the "gourmet coffee of the day," sold by the cup, allowing the retailer to drain excess inventory and acquaint customers with different blends and roasts at the same time.

One of the most important difficulties for the roaster was the establishment of a regular supply of green coffee. Here the problem was less one of quality than of quantity: major importers and warehousemen were reluctant to break lots into shipments below 25 to 50 bags (of 60 kilograms each), but a small to medium-sized roaster dealing with several varieties needed to buy in lots of about 10 bags each. While a collection of green coffee traders in the Bay Area (B. C. Ireland, E. A. Kahl, Harold L. King, Royal Coffee) specialized in the gourmet trade and traded in smaller lots, New York traders were slow to move into the new markets (Schoenholt 1984a:62). As late as 1988, Robert Fulmer of Royal Coffee complained, "Demand for quality has happened faster than producers can react. The New York 'C' market is becoming irrelevant, because it's not representative of what people want" (*C&CI* 1988a: 18-22).

Although the trend still represented a very small percentage of total coffee sales in the United States by the early 1980s, traders and roasters had begun to take notice. A scant seven months after Kenneth Roman discussed the need to identify a segmented market and diversify coffee products, *World Coffee and Tea* issued a report on "the browning of America," pointing to an exponential growth in the segment of the coffee trade devoted to specialty lines, with annual growth rates approaching 30 to 50 percent. The journal estimated total US sales of specialty coffees for 1980 to be 14 million pounds (*WC&T* 1981b:12). Over the 1980s growth was phenomenal: *Coffee and Cocoa International* reported sales of 40 million pounds in 1983 (*C&CI* 1985), after which further reports were presented in value of the trade rather than the number of bags - \$330 million in 1985 (*C&CI* 1986), \$420 million in 1986, \$500 million in 1987, by which time specialty coffee constituted 8 percent of total trade, and so on (*C&CI* 1988b).

The expansion of specialty coffees was coincident with a number of technological and commercial developments that require brief mention. First, the "containerization" revolution in international shipping has drastically cut the amount of time coffee is in transit from producing countries to consuming countries (from 17 to 10



days for a typical Santos-to-New York run), and has transformed warehousing practices in the United States, cutting warehouse storage times from an average of six months to an average of 10 to 14 days. Speed in transfer and the development of direct and immediate relationships with roasters have become critical, and the widespread use of containers has allowed distributors to relocate from the coasts to interior cities, enhancing flexibility in supply and distribution (Coe 1983).

Changing relationships between roasters, traders, and bankers were also involved in the gourmet boom. The combination of high inflation and interest rates of the late 1970s and early 1980s affected the way in which "coffeemen" could think about financing their trade. By the early 1980s, banks were less willing to finance purchases of large lots that would be warehoused for several months and encouraged their clients to buy smaller lots and maintain lower inventories. "It's a different world now," Mickey Galitzine of the Bank of New York commented to *World Coffee and Tea* (1983a:21), "and I'm not sure we can go back. People have adjusted to this new situation and are now buying in a different pattern. They're simply used to buying less."

They were buying less, but still buying in lots that were large and risky enough to concern the specialty roaster. Institutional roasters could roast, grind, and package large lots and not worry about freshness. Specialty roasts, to be sold in whole beans, required freshness and had to be distributed and sold quickly. The roaster therefore had to develop an extensive network of retailers but was limited to particular regions because of the difficulties in shipping whole roast beans and maintaining freshness. Here the development of valve packaging made it possible for roasters to keep roasted beans fresh longer, extending the time available for shipping, storage, and selling. The beans could be packed in 250-gram bags for direct retail sale or in 15- or 25-pound bags for retail storage. Indeed, the deli across the street from me buys its 43 varieties from a single roaster in 15-pound valve bags, transferring the coffee to burlap bags for presentation and sale.

### New Actors, New Institutions

Throughout the 1980s, the "quality" segment of the coffee market, highest in prices and profit margins, was booming while total coffee consumption declined. This constitutes such a perfect response to market decline, and such an obvious response to the suggestions of Kenneth Roman, that we might expect a central directing power – "Capital," or at least "The Coffee Interest." But the initiative toward specialty coffees occurred outside of and despite the controlling interests of the giants like General Foods, Procter and Gamble, and Nestle, who ignored the growth of specialty coffees and seemed to regard them as a fad until they captured a significant percentage of the market. Their reticence might be explained by the fact that the giants were part of large food conglomerates likely to be less threatened by a long-term decline in coffee consumption than the smaller institutional roasters, who were forced to develop new markets in order to survive.

This is not to say that the emergence of specialty coffees was completely free from direction and organization. I have pointed to *some* of the larger commercial, financial,

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and technological changes with which the move to specialty coffees was associated. In addition, the coffee trade viewed the new developments with interest and excitement. We have seen the notice taken by trade journals from the early 1980s. *World Coffee and Tea* began tracking developments quite closely, with frequent reports on the trade and profiles of particular roasters or retailers. In 1984, the journal also began an irregular column, "The Gourmet Zone," by Donald Schoenholt, followed in the early 1990s by a regular column with various contributors, "The Specialty Line." *Coffee and Cocoa International* viewed developments from a greater distance but enjoyed profiling particular gourmet retailers for their readers. Most importantly, a group of roasters and retailers formed the Specialty Coffee Association of America (SCAA) in 1982. As with the earlier formation of the National Coffee Association (and later the International Coffee Organization), the importance of such trade associations needs to be emphasized. They provide an important directing organization that can lobby the government, speak for the trade, identify economic and political trends, engage in promotional campaigns, provide information and training for entrepreneurs entering the trade, and so on.

In association with the National Coffee Service Association, the SCAA appealed to the Promotion Fund of the International Coffee Organization and received a \$1.6 million grant to promote specialty coffees, especially among the young (*WC&T* 1983b). The money was funneled through the Coffee Development Group (CDG), which promoted specialty coffees throughout the 1980s. One of their early activities involved joint sponsorship of coffeehouses on college campuses (Columbia University being one of the first), at which coffee brewed from specialty roasts and blends would be sold. The CDG would specify the amount of coffee that had to be included in each pot brewed (*WC&T* 1988). Some, such as the shop at the University of Southern California, even experimented with iced cappuccino, sold in cold drink "bubblers" (*WC&T* 1989b).

In addition to promotional efforts, the SCAA has pursued other goals as well, including the dissemination of information on green market conditions and the development of networks among roasters, retailers, and traders. By 1989, the group held its first convention, and each annual convention demonstrates the phenomenal growth of the association. Its conventions now attract over 3,000 people, and it claims to be the largest coffee association in the world.

Many of the association's members are new to the coffee trade, and they bring with them a formation quite unlike that which characterized second- and third-generation "coffeemen." For one thing, many begin with a lack of knowledge about the basics of coffee production, processing, and marketing. This is reflected in a new tone in *World Coffee and Tea*, which increasingly offers articles giving basic and introductory information of various aspects of the coffee trade, recently advising new entrepreneurs that "historic and geographic background is an essential element to a comprehensive knowledge of coffee. If you're selling Colombian coffee, you should have some idea about where Colombia is located and what kinds of coffee it produces" (McCormack 1994:22). It is also reflected in the kinds of workshops and training sessions offered at annual conventions of the SCAA, popularly known as Espresso 101 or Roasting 101 or Brewing 101.

The presence of new entrepreneurs is also reflected in new sets of social, political, and ethical concerns that would have been anathema to earlier generations of

"coffeemen." Among them is a growing interest in social and environmental issues and the creation by coffee roasters of such organizations as Equal Exchange and Coffee Kids, and companies like Aztec Harvests ("owned by Mexican co-op farmers"). As the founder of Coffee Kids, Bill Fishbein, expresses the problem:

This disparity that exists between the coffee-growing world and the coffee-consuming world is rooted in the centuries and remains the true inheritance of 500 years of colonialism. Although no one in today's coffee industry created the existing situation, everyone, including importers, brokers, roasters, retailers, and consumers are left with this legacy either to perpetuate or address. [Fishbein and Cycon 1992:14]

William McAlpin, a plantation owner in Costa Rica, gives voice to an older generation that dismisses these concerns along the paternalistic lines one expects from a plantation owner proud of the livelihood he has provided for "our residents," but also observes:

I am always amused to see that many of these same people, who are involved in the final stages of selling specialty coffee, while proclaiming that they support this or that charity or political action squad, are careful to avoid mentioning that the usual mark-up by the specialty coffee trade is from 400% to 600% of the price paid for delivered green coffee. . . .

From the producer's point of view, it seems truly ironic that a product that takes a year to grow, and that requires thousands of worker hours of difficult, delicate, and often dangerous work, should be so remarkably inflated by someone who simply cooks and displays the coffee. [McAlpin 1994:7]

In any case, both dimensions of the formation of the new coffee men and women find expression and are given direction by the SCAA. In addition to the workshops and training seminars, one can see this in their annual choice of a plenary speaker. At its second convention, held in San Francisco, the SCAA arranged a group tour of wineries and invited a wine merchant to give the plenary address, in which he offered advice based on the success of a beverage that the trade journals have most frequently taken as the model to be emulated. For the 1993 convention, the association invited Ben Cohen of Ben and Jerry's Ice Cream. Of his address, *World Coffee and Tea* reported:

Ben Cohen urged the members of the coffee industry to integrate the 1960s values of peace and love with running their businesses. . . .

Cohen pointed out that coffee is a very political commodity and called on the members of the special coffee industry to:

purchase coffee from the Aztec Cooperative because a high percentage of the money goes back to the farmers; "buy it, tell your customers about it, and let them choose whether or not they want to pay the higher price," Cohen said.

buy organic coffees; and

participate in Coffee Kids by using a coin drop or donating a percentage of sales.

"Use these steps to build your image as a socially conscious business," Cohen explained, "and make it your point of difference in a highly competitive business." [WC&T 1993:7]

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### Flexibility and Concentration

As the smaller roasters captured the new market niche, they expressed both surprise and concern about the activities of the giants, sometimes assuming that the market was theirs only as long as the giants stayed out (e.g., *WC&T* 1984:12). Some of the roasters' and retailers' fears were realized in September 1986 when both General Foods and A&P introduced specialty lines for sale in supermarkets – General Foods with Maxwell House Private Collection and A&P with Eight O'Clock Royale Gourmet Bean in 14 varieties, “all designed to appeal to the former soft drink generation.” At the time, Karin Brown of General Foods commented, “Gourmet is the fastest-growing segment of the market – large enough to make sense for General Foods' entry now” (*C&CI* 1986:9).

By the time the giants began to enter the market, the groundwork for a certain kind of standardization and concentration among the newcomers had already been laid. In coastal cities, the isolated gourmet food shop was already competing with chains of gourmet shops operating in minimalls, which could, if they chose, develop their own roasting capacities. In addition, some roasters (the best known and most aggressive of which has been Starbucks of Seattle) had begun to move beyond regional distribution chains and develop national markets. While structural changes, from the technologies of shipping, warehousing, and packaging to the credit policies of banks, were significant, we need to also consider some of the characteristics of the gourmet beans themselves.

As the gourmet trade expanded, participants viewed two new developments with excitement or alarm, depending on their respective commitment to traditional notions of “quality.” As noted above, the quality of coffee “naturally” varies according to several criteria – type of coffee tree and location of cultivation (varietals), method of processing, size and texture of bean, and degree of roasting. With the expansion of the specialty trade, two new modes of discrimination were introduced – “styles” and “flavors.” Because the availability of particular varietals is uncertain (a hurricane hits Jamaica, wiping out Blue Mountain coffee, or a trader cannot provide Kenya AA in lots small enough for a particular roaster because larger roasters can outcompete, and so on), and the price of varietals fluctuates accordingly, roasters attempt to develop blends that allow them flexibility in using a number of varietals interchangeably. “Peter's Blend” or “House Blend” says nothing about where the coffee comes from, allowing the roaster or retailer near perfect flexibility, but so again does the sale of “Mocha style” or “Blue Mountain style.” At the beginning of this trend, J. Gill Brockenbrough Jr. of First Colony Coffee and Tea complained, “It is more and more difficult all the time to find the green coffee we need. . . . But there really is no such thing as a ‘style’ of coffee, either it *is* or it *isn't* from a particular origin” (*WC&T* 1981b:15). Donald Schoenholt of Gillies 1840 elaborated in his column, “The Gourmet Zone,” in *World Coffee and Tea*:

In the past I have pointed out the practice of labeling “varietals” with the code word “style,” a habit which has come to replace good judgment too often these days. But now it appears we have a new phenomenon added to the good-humored diversity of

specialty coffee labeling: the gentle art of selling the same coffee by whatever varietal label the customer orders.

One well-known trade executive states his customers understand that substitutions are made from time-to-time when varietals are unavailable. A well-known roaster/retailer avoids buying varietal selections, following instead the accepted tradition of buying for cup qualities alone. He offers his patrons distinctive tastes in varietal labeled blends – Colombian Blend, Kenya Blend, Jamaica Blue Mountain style, etc.

Where the wholesale or retail clientele understand a merchant's practices and honorable intent, both the above-mentioned methods of labeling have been accepted. The problem arises where a merchant's intent is to mislead, through unbridled use of a stencil machine, creating labels just for the sake of inventing variety where none exists. Where no effort or skill is used, the public is presented with cut-rate mislabeled coffees.

A recent inspection of a grocer in the New York area sadly proved a point: Virtually every American roast coffee on display was the same item under different label, purchased from a discount roaster offering all American roast beans, regardless of origin, in the same \$2.60 per lb. price range. [Schoenholt 1984b:39]

A second, related development was the emergence of coffee flavors that can be sprayed on recently roasted beans. C. Melchers and Company of Bremen began operating in the United States in 1982, offering an ever-expanding variety of liquid flavors for coffee and tea. Each flavor is composed of 20 to 60 "natural" and "artificial" (chemical) ingredients, and Melchers is adept at developing different combinations to produce "unique" flavors for particular roasters (WC&T 1983c:16, 18). Viewing this trend, Larry Kramer of Van Cortland Coffee observed, "Specialty coffee is becoming the Baskin Robbins of the specialty food trade." Actually, as we have seen, it turned out that Ben and Jerry's would have been more to the point. Some roasters and retailers refused to deal in such coffees. Complained Paul Katzeff of Thanksgiving Coffee, "People who drink good coffee drink it because they enjoy the flavor of real coffee. . . . I doubt that flavored coffees bring in drinkers who never drank coffee before" (WC&T 1982:20). Despite such expressions of dismay, the move toward flavored coffees has continued apace; roasters and retailers alike recognize that flavors are popular, that they are attracting new coffee drinkers, especially among the "former soft drink generation" that had seemed lost to coffee consumption at the beginning of the 1980s – Kenneth Roman's "Joel," about whom "we don't know yet what to do." Increasingly popular in both retail shops and espresso bars are flavored syrups that, in addition to imparting an apparent "Italian" elegance, grant the small retailer more flexibility. A smaller number of blends, varietals, and roasts can be kept in stock, along with a few bottles of syrup, and customers can add or mix their own flavors.

Style and flavor can, in turn, be combined in various ways, so that one can buy Blue Mountain style vanilla or almond, Mocha style chocolate cream or amaretto, and so on. If we further combine with different roasts, throw in the possibility of caffeinated or water process decaffeinated, the possibilities for variety are almost endless. Critically important, however, is that the variety is controllable. To the extent that roasters and retailers are able to create criteria of variability and quality that are removed from the "natural" characteristics and qualities of the coffee beans themselves, they generate for themselves extraordinary flexibility. In extreme cases, they "invent variety where none exists," as Schoenholt complains. Here we find a

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consumer who acts and feels like a gourmet but is buying coffee that is not far removed from Maxwell House Private Collection. More generally, they create, define, and control their own forms of variety. Specialty "coffeemen" constantly emulate and consult wine merchants and hope that consumers will select coffee with the same discrimination and willingness to spend money they demonstrate when buying wine, but the Baskin Robbins (or Ben and Jerry's) model may not be too much of an exaggeration.

Ironically, controllable variety also makes the specialty trade subject to concentration, whether from the outside as giants create their own "Private Collection" and "Royale Gourmet Bean" lines or from internal differentiation, expansion, and concentration among smaller roasters. Variety, too, can be standardized, especially if the varieties have little to do with "natural" characteristics.

### The Beverage of Postmodernism?

In his study of the transformation of coffee production and consumption in the early 20th century, Michael Jimenez suggests that coffee is the beverage of US capitalism. Indeed, as we consider the place of coffee as a beverage of choice in working- and middle-class homes and in factory canteens, the role of coffee traders in the emergence of a practical internationalism, and the processes of standardization and concentration that restructured the coffee market, we see that the coffee trade was subject to and participant in the same processes that made a capitalist world.

This is not to suggest, of course, that coffee exists in some sort of unique relationship with capitalism, but that it provides a window through which we can view a range of relationships and social transformations. The processes of standardization and industrialization were common to many foods in the 20th-century United States, and coffee would therefore be one of many foods through which one could examine the transformation industrialization wrought in such broad areas as the structure of cities, the remaking of work and domestic life and organization, or more specific concerns, such as the rise of advertising or the supermarket. Here, Jimenez's work on coffee in the United States complements Mintz's work on sugar in England (1985). Yet coffee and sugar belong to a small subset of commodities that can illuminate capitalist transformations in other ways in that they link consumption zones (and the rise of working and middle classes that consumed the particular products in ever increasing numbers) and production zones in Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia (and the peasants, slaves, and other rural toilers who grew, cut, or picked the products). For these commodities once inadequately termed "dessert foods" and now increasingly called "drug foods," Sidney Mintz offers a more arresting phrase - coffee, sugar, tea, and chocolate were "proletarian hunger killers" (1979).

Might we, in turn, now consider coffee to be the beverage of postmodernism? That is, can an examination of shifts in the marketing and consumption of one commodity provide an angle of vision on a wider set of social and cultural formations and the brave new world of which they are a part? That I can walk across the street and choose among a seemingly endless variety of cheeses, beers, waters, teas, and coffees places me in a new relationship to the world: I can consume a bit of

Jimenez  
Mintz  
coffee  
capitalism

Sumatra, Darjeeling, France, and Mexico in my home, perhaps at the same meal. Such variety stands in stark contrast to the stolid, boring array of goods available two decades ago. We live now in an emerging era of variety and choice, and the revolution in consumption seems to indicate, and in some ways initiate, a revolution in production. As with coffee, so with other food products: the moves toward product diversification often came not from the established and dominant corporations but from independents whose initiatives have undercut and undermined the established practices and market share of those corporations. We might see this as the extension of the Apple Computer model of entrepreneurialism to other realms.

David Harvey elaborates:

The market place has always been an "emporium of styles" . . . but the food market, just to take one example, now looks very different from what it was twenty years ago. Kenyan haricot beans, Californian celery and avocados, North African potatoes, Canadian apples, and Chilean grapes all sit side by side in a British supermarket. This variety also makes for a proliferation of culinary styles, even among the relatively poor. . . .

The whole world's cuisine is now assembled in one place in almost exactly the same way that the world's geographical complexity is nightly reduced to a series of images on a static television screen. This same phenomenon is exploited in entertainment palaces like Epcot and Disneyworld; it becomes possible, as the US commercials put it, "to experience the Old World for a day without actually having to go there." The general implication is that through the experience of everything from food, to culinary habits, music, television, entertainment, and cinema, it is now possible to experience the world's geography vicariously, as a simulacrum. The interweaving of simulacra in daily life brings together different worlds (of commodities) in the same space and time. But it does so in such a way as to conceal almost perfectly any trace of origin, of the labour processes that produced them, or of the social relations implicated in their production. [1989:299, 300]

A more complete understanding of coffee marketing and consumption in the 1980s and 1990s requires that we make some attempt to examine the world of production concealed by the emporium of styles. We might begin by maintaining an understanding of coffee as "the beverage of United States capitalism" but placing the history of that beverage within two periods of capitalist accumulation.

In David Harvey's view, much of 20th-century capitalism was dominated by a "Fordist" regime of accumulation; since the mid-1970s a new regime has emerged, which he labels "flexible accumulation." The Fordist regime can be seen to begin in 1914, with the imposition of assembly line production, and it has dominated the post-World War II period. The Fordist regime was founded on mass production and industrial modes of organization, based in a few key industries (steel, oil, petrochemicals, automobiles), characterized by the presence of both organized management and organized labor with negotiated, relatively stable pacts between them. These industries, in turn, were subject to state regulation and protection of markets and resources, and they produced standardized commodities for mass markets. With the financial crises of the 1970s, the stabilities of the Fordist regime came to be seen as rigidities. Harvey sees the regime of flexible accumulation emerging in partial response. His description of the innovations characteristic of flexible accumulation concentrates on many features that we have already encountered in our discussion of

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specialty coffees – the identification of specialized market niches and the production of goods for those niches as opposed to the emphasis on mass-market standardized products; the downsizing of plants and production processes; the shrinking of inventories so that producers purchase smaller quantities and practice just-in-time production; the revolution in shipping and warehousing technologies to cut shipping times; the reconfiguration of financial markets; and so on.

In this regard, it is interesting to place the period considered by Jimenez and the period examined in this essay next to each other. Both concern decades that saw, if we follow Harvey's analysis, experimentation with new regimes of accumulation. But if we return to a history more specific to coffee, both also began with a perceived problem – stagnation in consumption in the first, long-term decline in the second. Both began with evident consumer dissatisfaction and governmental investigation (in the form of congressional hearings). In both, the coffee trade, in the individual actions of its fragmented members and in the programs of its directing centers, devised strategies to respond to perceived crises that, as it happens, neatly correspond with the forms, methods, and relations of emerging regimes of accumulation.

As I visit the gourmet shop, it might be a bit disconcerting to know that I have been so clearly targeted as a member of a class and generation, that the burlap bags or minibarrels, the styles and flavors of coffee, the offer of a "gourmet coffee of the day," have been designed to appeal to me and others in my market niche. But such are the circumstances surrounding my freedom of choice. In an influential essay on the global cultural economy, Arjun Appadurai has suggested the emergence of a new "fetishism of the consumer" and claims that commodity flows and marketing strategies "mask... the real seat of agency, which is not the consumer but the producer and the many forces that constitute production.... The consumer is consistently helped to believe that he or she is an actor, where in fact he or she is at best a chooser" (1990:307). While I think Appadurai's larger claims regarding the radical disjuncture between the present global cultural economy and earlier moments and forms require careful and skeptical analysis (Roseberry 1992), the recent history of coffee marketing and consumption seems to support his understanding of consumer fetishism.

That is to say, my newfound freedom to choose, and the taste and discrimination I cultivate, have been shaped by traders and marketers responding to a long-term decline in sales with a move toward market segmentation along class and generational lines. While I was thinking of myself as me, Kenneth Roman saw me as one of "the Grays." How many readers of this essay have been acting like "Joels"? This is not, of course, to say that we enter the market as mere automatons; clearly, we have and exercise choices, and we (apparently) have more things to choose from than we once did. But we exercise those choices in a world of structured relationships, and part of what those relationships structure (or shape) is both the arena and the process of choice itself.

Another, inescapable part of that world of structured relationships is a set of connections with the world of production and of producers. My vicarious experience of the world's geography is not just a simulacrum; it depends upon a quite real, if mediated and unacknowledged, relationship with the rural toilers without whom my choice could not be exercised. How has the brave new world of choice and flexibility affected them?



For both Fordist and flexible accumulation regimes, the mode of mobilizing labor is critical – the importance of a stable core of organized labor and labor relations under Fordism and its virtual opposite under flexible accumulation, which seems to remove labor as much as possible from core to peripheral (temporary, seasonal, occasional, or contracted) labor supplies that can be engaged and disengaged as needed. Some of the innovations that I have discussed in relation to the coffee market have involved such shifts in labor relations (e.g., the move toward containerization in international shipping, which revolutionized distribution in the United States and allowed importers to bypass the docks and warehouses of coastal cities, cutting the need for labor and the power of the unions of longshoremen and warehousemen).

As we turn from the United States to the manifold points of production, we find that the changes can be quite dramatic, though their shape and consequences remain uncertain and can only be suggested here. Throughout the post-World War II period, the coffee trade was regulated by a series of international coffee agreements, the first of which was the Pan American agreement during the war, and the longest lasting of which was the International Coffee Agreement (ICA) administered by the International Coffee Organization (ICO), formed in 1963. Through the agreements, producing and consuming countries submitted to a series of quotas that could be adjusted and even suspended from year to year – as particular countries suffered hurricanes, droughts, or frosts or other countries entered the market and signed the agreement – but that nonetheless imposed a series of (let us call them Fordist) rigidities on international trade. They also provided a series of protections for individual producing countries and regions, regulating both prices (which fluctuated but with highs and lows that were less dramatic) and market share.

The agreements were never especially popular among “coffeemen,” who profess a free trade philosophy, and they encountered increasing opposition in the 1980s. Specialty traders wanted to develop new sources of supply, emphasizing arabicas and deemphasizing robustas, which had an important place in mass-market blends and soluble (instant) coffees but found little acceptance in specialty markets. Unfortunately for the specialty traders, the percentages of arabicas and robustas offered on the world market were fixed by the ICA; fortunately for robusta producers, their livelihoods were relatively protected by that same agreement.

The ICA was due for renewal and extension in 1989, but the various members of the ICO encountered difficulties in resolving their differences. Two countries were especially insistent on their needs – Brazil, which wanted to maintain its 30 percent share, and the United States, which pressed two concerns: (1) the troublesome practice among producing countries of discounting prices to nonmember consuming countries (essentially those within the then-existing socialist bloc), and (2) the inflexibility of the quotas that, they argued, prevented traders and consumers from acquiring more of the quality arabicas. Because the differences could not be resolved, the ICA was suspended in mid-1989, ushering in a free market in coffee for the first time in decades.

The immediate effects were dramatic for producing countries. Prices plummeted and quickly reached, in constant dollar terms, historic lows. Exporting countries that could do so expanded exports in an attempt to maintain income levels in the face of declining unit prices, and importers took advantage of the low prices and

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expanded stocks. In addition to the general price decline, robusta producers were especially disadvantaged, as prices for robusta dipped below \$.50 per pound and farmers faced a world market that no longer wanted their product. Robusta is grown primarily in Africa, and African producers and economies were devastated.

By 1993, under the leadership of Brazil and Colombia, along with Central American arabica producers, a coffee retention plan was signed that called for the removal of up to 20 percent of production by participants in the plan. The plan was the first step toward a new Association of Coffee Producing Countries in which both Latin American and African countries participated, and it has succeeded in spurring a price recovery. It remains a fragile coalition, however, and by the time it had been formed the market had been completely restructured. Most importantly, because market prices had fallen below the level of production costs, only the strong – those who could weather a prolonged depression – survived. The weak disappeared from the coffee scene.

The free market vastly increased the flexibility of coffee traders and “peripheralized” the labor of coffee growers in a direct and immediate way. My freedom to choose in the deli across the street or the gourmet shop a few blocks away is implicated with the coffee trader’s freedom to cut off the supply (and therefore the product of the laborer) from, say, Uganda or the Ivory Coast. To the extent that “coffeemen” have been successful in creating styles, so that I think I am drinking coffee from a particular place but the coffee need not have any actual association with that place, I will not even be aware of the processes of connection and disconnection in which I am participating. “The beverage of US capitalism,” indeed! ✓

### Conclusion

Resolution of the issues raised by this analysis would take us beyond our sources. My aim is to draw out certain implications and perspectives resulting from the angle of vision pursued herein, but also to point toward questions and perspectives that could be pursued in supplementary and complementary analyses – other chapters, so to speak.

This essay’s perspective on the shaping of market trends and taste may raise the specter of manipulation by unseen, but powerful, forces. In an important discussion of the Frankfurt School’s approach to culture industries in general and to consumption patterns in particular, Stephen Menell observes:

The problem with the use of words like “manipulation” by the Frankfurt School and other critics is that it suggests that those in powerful positions in industry – the culture industry or the food and catering industries – *consciously* and with malevolent intent set out to persuade people that they need and like products of inferior or harmful quality. It fails to draw attention to the unplanned, unintended, vicious spiral through which supply and demand are usually linked. [1996:321]

There is, of course, plenty of evidence from the trade journals that conscious action on the part of a range of actors in the coffee trade to persuade people that they need and like certain products – leaving aside the question of intent and the quality

of the products – is precisely what they do. But it is also clear from the sources that they do not act in concert, that there is no single controlling interest (despite obvious power relations), that there has been ample room for new interests and actors, that these actors, big and small, often do not know what they are doing, and that in their bumbling experimentation they have stumbled on some strategies that work. They work not because there is a manipulable mass out there waiting to be told what to drink but because there is a complex, if specific, intersection between the shaping actions of various actors in the coffee trade and the needs, tastes, and desires of particular groups of consumers and potential consumers.

We gain access to that intersection by means of a discussion of class. We have seen that Kenneth Roman preached market segmentation along class and generational lines. His own suggestion of segments was relatively simple, even crude – divided by very broad distinctions of class and generation, with some sense of gender differentiation, but each of the segments was implicitly white. Theorists of niche marketing have since gone much further in dividing national populations into class, racial, ethnic, and generational groups than Roman would have imagined in the early 1980s, as books like *The Clustering of America* (Weiss 1988) make clear. That these distinctions, however crude, are being made, and that they *work* for the purposes for which they are intended, is worth some reflection.

The point, of course, is that when market strategists imagine a class and generational map that includes people like “the Grays” and “Joel,” they are not trying to create categories out of thin air. They are doing – for different purposes – what sociologists and anthropologists used to do: trying to describe a social and cultural reality. The imagined map works only if there are indeed such groups “out there,” so to speak, and that the map needs to work is the whole point.

That there is a complex relationship between class and food consumption is often remarked, first in the obvious sense that particular groups occupy differential market situations in terms of their ability to purchase certain foods, and second in the uses various groups make of foods and food preferences in marking themselves as distinctive from or in some sense like other groups. In the case of specialty coffee, one of its interesting features is that it is not, or is not meant to be, a “proletarian hunger killer.” Looking further afield, it is worth comment that the other proletarian hunger killers of the 19th and 20th centuries – with the exception of sugar, which does not lend itself to such multiple distinctions except in combination with other substances – are also caught up in the move toward variety and at least the illusion of quality. In one sense this signals the return to “dessert food” status, but there are other senses that need to be considered.

The original market segment toward which specialty coffee, tea, and chocolate were directed was that of “the Grays” – urban, urbane, professional men and women who distinguished themselves through consumption and who consumed or hoped to consume variety and quality, as well as quantity. If they fashioned themselves through consumption, an interesting feature of the movement is that among the commodities in which they demanded variety and quality were the old proletarian hunger killers. In doing so, they almost certainly did not imagine themselves in connection either with proletarians or with the rural toilers who grew, cut, or picked what the yuppies chose to consume.

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The identifications they were making were rather more complex and may connect with the commodities "prehistory," as it were, representing a kind of preindustrial nostalgia. Each of the proletarian hunger killers entered European social history as expensive goods from exotic locales, affordable and consumable only by a privileged few, not in homes but in the courts, or, increasingly in the 17th and 18th centuries, in coffee houses (Schivelbusch 1992; Ukers 1935). They became proletarian hunger killers as their costs of production, processing, and shipping dropped, as available quantities increased dramatically, and as they became items of domestic and routine consumption. The class and cultural identification of this yuppie segment, then, is not so much bourgeois as courtly, genteel, cosmopolitan. It could be seen to represent an attempt to re-create, through consumption, a time before mass society and mass consumption. It could be seen, then, as a symbolic inversion of the very economic and political forces through which this particular class segment came into existence. Here, close attention to class-conditioned patterns of consumption can provide another window onto the cultural history of US capitalism.

But the story does not end here. Over the past decade, the consumption of yuppie coffees has broken free from its original market segment, as the coffees are more widely available in supermarkets and shopping malls and are more widely consumed. We have seen that the processes of production and distribution have been subject to concentration and centralization from above and below as Maxwell House and Eight O'Clock Coffee have introduced gourmet coffees and as new chains as different from each other as Starbucks and Gloria Jean's move into central positions at the coffee shop end. This movement, in which a class-conditioned process of marketing, promotion, and consumption escapes class locations, and apparent variety and quality are standardized and mass-marketed, has obvious limits. Gourmet coffees can be standardized, and their processes of production and marketing concentrated, but it is unlikely that these coffees will ever become truly mass-market coffees. Their continued success will depend upon the processes of social and cultural differentiation they mark, even as the social locations of groups of consumers are blurred. It will also depend upon the continued existence, at home and abroad, of a world of exploitative relationships, evidenced in the social relations through which coffee is produced, the engagement of coffee-producing regions under free-market conditions, and the processes of standardization and concentration to which gourmet coffee production and marketing have been subjected. Coffee remains, as Ben Cohen expressed it, a "very political commodity."

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