

Coffee shop (Café), Public Sphere for Further Reflections on Social Movements (Case Study: Tehran, capital of Iran)



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Introduction

Public sphere as Jürgen Habermas defines; is an area, which is free of power and equally available for everyone. It is basically a place for dialogues based on logic and reason. Participations are always ready to accept possibility of error made by them. Public spheres are also democratic spaces for people to express themselves and participate in public life. As Habermas believes, public space is a part of the public sphere and it is a place for participatory democracy and public opinion that can be exchanged and discussed, free of coercion. Following Foucault, he argues that spheres such as coffee shops enable us to see the creative - as opposed to the repressive - nature of power. According to the dominant culture of the Iranian urban population, they do not go to the coffee shop just for coffee. If so, they could make coffee at home with cheaper price in comfort, listening to favorite music and drink while resting on a comfortable armchair. But people prefer to go to a coffee shop - where coffee is only a pretext to obtain others experiences. They know that there is more than coffee, eating and drinking in coffee shops: different kinds of sense, feeling, experience, culture and globalization.

Material and Methods

In the summer of 2012, I returned to Tehran with a set of research questions, some hypotheses, an interview guide and a voice recorder. I had developed my research questions and hypotheses from existing literature. Quickly, I figured out that the assumptions I had made and my interview guide, focusing on relatively personal questions and social class and indecently



experience were wrong: I was one of the people that lived in Tehran with the same experience. To fill my days while I regrouped, I began spending time in coffee shops. What I found they excited me, because I knew I had come across something important. I joined the youth in coffee shops nearly 11 in the morning for one month and for 10 days in winter of 2013. I heard what information they shared openly and daily and what information they kept out of conversation. I watched how the youth acted within the public spaces such as coffee shops. I observed how they treated others—what they said and how they behaved toward them. I had interview with personnel and manger of the coffee shops. I recorded data which was gathered through participant observation in field notes. I recorded information as soon after the observation or discussion as possible by tape-recording or jotting notes. I wrote up these notes and information in the research diary I kept every day while being there. In those days, I was introduced to the different social class system among young men and women in Tehran. I watched the daily patterns in interaction which persisted over time. The interactions I observed were not rare, insignificant actions, but were daily, reoccurring acts by youths. The actions resulted in substantial divisions between the youths who gathered in this public spot. Youths displayed these aspects of their lives, through conversation and actions, in distinct ways and acted toward others so as to reinforce these distinctions. I sought to understand how and why youths acted in these ways. To understand what was happening in the coffee shop, I placed the interactions, as Zussman¹ argues, “qualitative sociology works best when it addresses people in places”. To do this, I used a combination of ethnographic techniques, including participant observation and in-depth interviews. The interviews were analyzed using ground theory and constant comparative approaches². These diverse methodological approaches make it possible to observe behaviors and interactions, which are central to the “doing” perspective³, and to understand these interactions based on both how actors describe their actions and the larger social context with in which the actors live. This method combines naturalist and constructionist approaches⁴. I seek to understand the meaning of social class in the coffee shop from observing patterns in what the youth did and said. There is a risk, particularly in the observational data that I may be imposing my own meaning on what was occurring. But I argue that I was a participant in the social

¹ . Zussman 2004, 352

² . Glaser and Strauss 1967; Ragin 1987

³ . West and Fenstermaker 1995

⁴ . Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Harris 2003

construction process and that the meaning of the interactions for me emerged from my own experience in the public space and coffee shop. My analysis, thus, is based on experience in the social context rather than completely foreign, outside observation. Furthermore, what I report are patterned and often reoccurring actions and interactions. I use the categories of working, middle, and upper class to describe the different groups of youth.

Where is Tehran?

Until 1796, when Agha Mohammad Khan - founder of the Qadjar dynasty - chose Tehran as his capital, Tehran was an unimportant little town⁵. Tehran is situated on the southern slopes of the Alborz Mountains, almost 100 Km south of the Caspian Sea at an elevation of 1100 meters above sea level. Although it has been the capital for more than two centuries, its urban development did not begin until the 1930s. The inflow of migrants from rural areas and little towns to Tehran has been increasing dramatically since the 1960s⁶.

After the Islamic Revolution, refugees from the Iran-Iraq war, as well as from various ethnic backgrounds, have settled in the slums of southern Tehran. The city has gradually encompassed the surrounding towns and villages. For the past three decades, the population has grown from barely 4 million in 1966 to over 7 million in 2006⁷. In a similar way, according to the municipality of Tehran, the land area of Teheran has expanded from 200 square kilometers which was concentrated around the Bazar (Fig. 1). Today, this area is situated in the central part of the city.

⁵ . Pakravan 1971:9

⁶ . Bayat 1997:29

⁷ .Statistical center of Iran

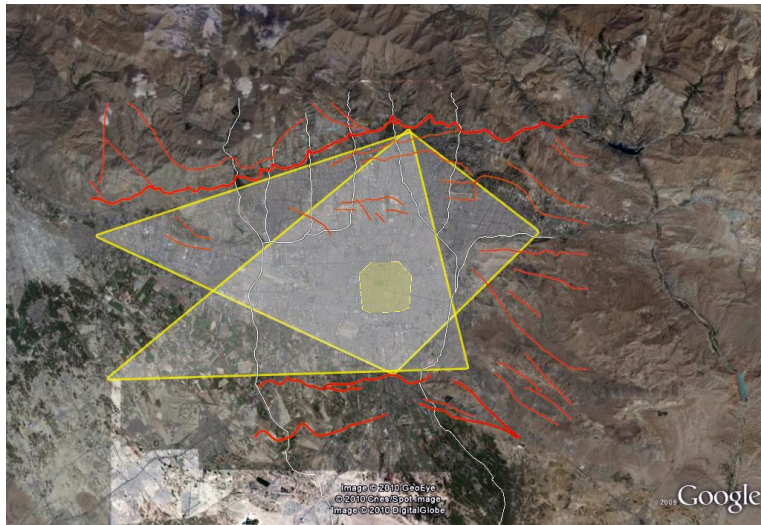


Figure 1. growth direction of Tehran

North of Teheran, with its green spaces and beautiful calm gardens at the foot of the mountains is the summer resort of the city dwellers. Until 1980, Tehran grew along a sloping north-south axis and until 1980 up to now; it grew along west-east. The resulting difference in altitude reflects the socioeconomic hierarchy, making the north-south duality a salient feature of the urban structure. The north - with its green spaces, more moderate climate, and beautiful vistas - is the home of affluent Tehranis; east and west for middle classes and the south belongs to the lower middle class and poor. Urban morphology in the north is well planned and characterized by wide, tree lined streets and large house. Iran is one of the world's youthful nations. More than half of the population of Tehran is under twenty years old. The Iranian government depicts its youth population in two ways: as a homogeneous mass “an army of twenty millions” devoted to the revolution, and as alienated, inauthentic, westernized consumers who constitute a threat to the society. Much of the focus of the Islamic regime has been utilized ways to protect Iranian young people from moral hazards and to prevent them from providing a gateway for cultural invasion from the West⁸.

What happens in public spaces gatherings in Iran?

In Iran, several researchers from different disciplines have studied public spaces and its dimensions. Architects and urban planners⁹, urban geographers¹⁰, and urban sociologists¹¹ have

⁸. Khosravi, Sh. Young and Defiant in Tehran, 2007, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 3.

⁹. Ardalan, 1980; Soltanzadeh, 1991; Habibi, 1996; Tavasoli, 2000; Pakzad, 2003; Charkhchian and Daneshpour, 2009, Tafahomi, 2007.



studied public spaces from a wide range of perspectives. Historically, such places include neighborhood centers and alleys, public gardens and cemeteries, covered passages such as bazaars, mosques and other holy spaces such as “*Imam-zadeh*” (Holy Shrines). The social dimension of public spaces depends on users’ ages and interests. For example, a public park can be used by people in their 60s as a place to relax, get fresh air and be close to nature (Fig. 2), while youth in their 20s can see it as a place to “see and be seen” and to be socialized (Fig. 3). It does not matter how many people use a public space, as long as it is for socializing and provides a sense of place even for a few individuals.



Figure 2: Public park in center of Tehran

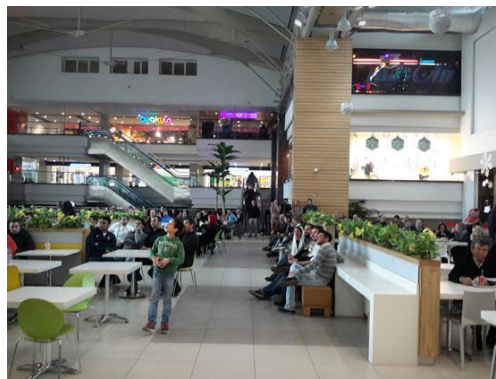


Figure 3: Paladium shopping center like a semi-public space in north-west of Tehran

Throughout history, the form and function of public spaces have been influenced by political, economic, religious, socio-cultural and ecological changes. General and public spaces gather in particular reflects of the dominant political regimes and their relationships with people¹². With more than four million university students nationwide¹³, universities possess the

¹⁰. Shakohi, 1994; Shakohi and Kazemi, 2005.

¹¹. Amir-Ebrahimi, 2006 and 2008.

¹². Tafahomi 2007: 85.

biggest potential source of political mobilization. Since the late 1990s, coffee shops have mushroomed in the wealthy northern parts of Tehran. While these coffee shops do not provide sites where the public tends to organize and form political opinions, young people nevertheless use them for “everyday forms of resistance”. They mingle with the opposite sex or exchange their knowledge and experiences about sex, life abroad “Kharej”, hot internet sites, fashions, cars, or general lifestyle matters that they can only see through the internet or satellite TV.

For many western scholars, public spaces in Islamic cities have played a positive role in routine life and have presented a well-defined sense of place¹⁴. The history of coffee shops in Tehran goes back to the 1940s, when the modernization of the urban landscape of Tehran accelerated. In contrary, coffee shops in Tehran have never played the role they once played in the emergence of the “public sphere” in Europe. Nonetheless, Iranians enjoy spaces that are in some sense “public” such as “*Qahve-khane*” (traditional coffee houses) and mosques, and have used them to discuss matters that concern them or to exchange information (Figs. 4 and 5).



Figure 4: Painting of a *Ghahve-khane* (by Hassan Ismaili zadeh) ¹⁵

¹³. <http://www.asriran.com/fa/news/325796> (view :08/08/2015).

¹⁴. Kostof, 1992; Alexander, 2002; Keddie, 2007.

¹⁵. <http://arti.ir/?p=150> (view :15.09.2012)



Figure 5: Naderi Coffe shop in the centre of Teheran like a hang out place from 50 years ago (dans le centre de Téhéran, dans la rue Jomhori Eslami)¹⁶

These Iranian “public spaces” are dominated by middle-aged Muslims. Although minority groups including women, young people, and ethnic and religious minorities, have been excluded from these public spaces by the spatial dominance of Muslims and the cultural norms that they reinforce it, they nonetheless have even their own sub-public spheres in Iran. Women, for instance, meet and discuss things at events such as a modest “fashion show” in somebody’s living room or at religious gatherings such as “*Jalaseh*”¹⁷.

Coffee Shops: places for value challenges

Coffee shops are criticized by the authorities as places for immoral behavior. Many popular ones have been closed down for not flowing Islamic values. According to an experimental study carried out by two sociologists from 30 coffee shops and 10 mosques in Tehran, coffee shops indicates as expression of modern and post-modern lifestyle and anti-traditionalism that contrasted with the traditional and religious lifestyle. They show various dimensions of the conflict and contradiction of “the coffee shop” and “the mosque” in the fields of “free time activities, consumption norms and value priorities” of the youth. They wrote that young people of coffee shops prefer the family relationships, relationships with the opposite sex, connect with friends, travel and fun, sports, entertainment, and shopping attractive more than

¹⁶. Source: <http://invar.oonvar.com> (view: 19.04.2013)

¹⁷. Torab, 1996, 2006.

mosque youth.¹⁸ In contrast to young people of coffee shops, participation in religious ceremonies, education and work are more attractive to young people of mosque. Lifestyle of coffee shop youth is very attached to being in the present time instead of future, but for youth of mosque this is very different. Kind of faith between these two lifestyles is very different. “Shariat” is oriented for youth religiosity Mosque. Islamic jurisprudence on youth lifestyle mosque regulatory is important. In contrast, attitudes of believers among young people of coffee shop are pointless.

Two views or competing discourses of "tradition-oriented" and "modern viewpoint" exist about this phenomenon in the social sphere. Traditionalist viewpoints have pathological insight to the coffee shop phenomenon and are in contrast with Islamic values as a modern phenomenon and contradict the whole social and political system of official discourse of Iran. In the modernist vision, coffee shop is like a space of leisure events and conversations. For the first view, coffee shop phenomenon is not an important matter and we should not spend our time and intellectual resources to study and talk about it or even make it as “a serious problem” which should be considered. But for the second view, this phenomenon is usually found out as a contemporary Iranian culture. In fact, first view tries to keep coffee shops hidden and make it marginal and illegitimate. The second view attempts to make this phenomenon legitimate and an important issue by acquiring knowledge about it. Traditionalist perspectives face with the coffee shops as a “social problem” and it must be controlled and monitored. In this perspective, coffee shops are the places for hangouts, drinking, resort and pleasure of affluent and upper-class youth of Iranian people. They believe that the culture and values prevailing in these public spaces challenge the “cultural hegemony” of official cultural policy of present regime of Iran. From this view modern and international values overcome religious, traditional and local values (Fig. 6).

¹⁸. Azad, Armaki & Shalchi, 2008.



Figure 6: blackboard outside of coffee shop in the north –west of Tehran: a cup of hot coffee, the best pretext for being together.

Iran's new coffee shops and new middle class

Particularly in metropolitan cities, urban lifestyle is a lifestyle that the new middle class and urban culture makes the majority of the population. This is considered as a set of social groups with some common values and beliefs. Due to this definition, the new urban middle class is common in a set of principles and values that one of them is supernal values.

“Café-goers” are those who are not traditional people. They have modern or postmodern identity. Based on their cultural and value orientations, they are future-oriented, not past-oriented. They do not have stabilized identity, but their spirit is flexible and fluid. Before they bow landing against traditional structures, they are themselves the representatives of change and transformation. The main people that choose coffee shop as a place for gathering are from middle class.

The first popular coffee shops in Tehran are on Gandhi Street¹⁹, which is famous not only for the types of the coffee shops that line in its northern end, but also for a shopping center that over the years has turned into a veritable mall of coffee shops.²⁰ There are half a dozen cafes lined up one next to one another, such as Shooka and Café de France (Fig. 7), all managed with old and young people. Eskin coffee shop, at the first floor of a high building with same name on

¹⁹. Gandhi is one of the middle class streets in Tehran which is formed in the second Pahlavi's period.

²⁰. Interview with Abdol Hossein Rieazi, geo-politician

Mirdamad Boulevard²¹, has been a youth Hang-out place for a long time.²² Raees coffee shop on different parts of Tehran attempts to re-create an atmosphere like the American Starbucks (Fig. 8). The logo of Raees on the windows and printed on the cups and wrappings resembles the Starbucks logo, and the owner claims that he offers real Starbucks coffee. Young Tehranis who like art and discussions about cultural issues, prefer Café Shooka and Café Titr. According to many of them, there are coffee shops where live guitar music or illicit foreign or “Irangelisi” pop music is played. They say that there are also some coffee shops that close their doors and let regular female clients be unveiled at the last hours of night. A coffee shop called Café Prague refused the request of installing CCTV camera inside the coffee shop by public space control unit – belonging to the regime and it has finally closed down.



(a)



(b)

Figure 7: (a) Café Shooka is managed by artists and that is place of hang out (b) Café de France

²¹. The boulevard starts from Valiasr Street in its west and continues eastward passing Mother Square up to Shariati Street. The important building like Eskin towers and Payetakht Computer Center are in this area. There are also some classy boutiques and malls in Mirdamad, most of which located at the eastern part of the street.

²². Interview with manager of Café Raise

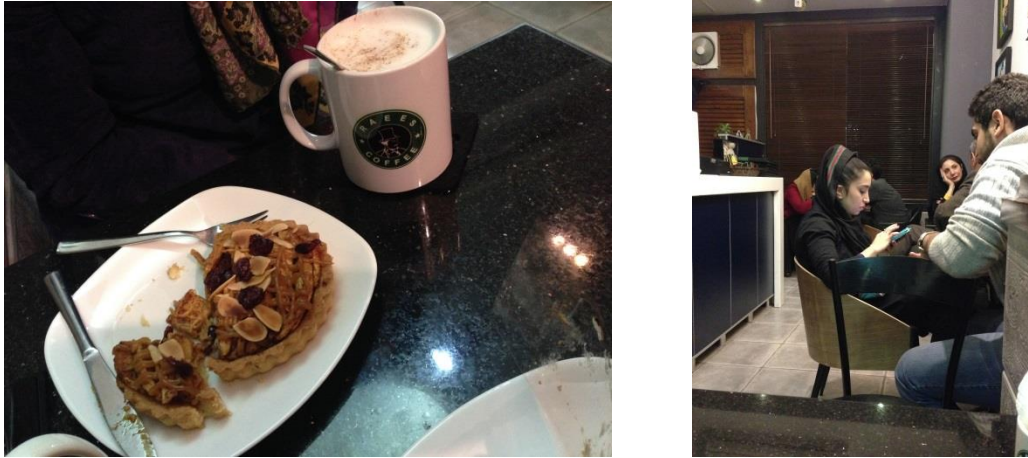


Figure 8: Café Raees, Creation, management and servicing is similar to Starbucks

Coffee shops are like third places

Oldenburg²³ suggests that for a healthy existence, citizens must live in a balance of three realms: home life, the workplace, and the inclusively sociable places. He advocates from the immense social value of third places and he brings and points out their historical role amongst others, including: the American taverns in the American Revolution, the French cafés in the French Revolution, the London coffee houses during the Enlightenment and the agoras in Greek democracy. The younger people, whose inner instinct compel them to go out on a town with a force that only time will overcome, are vulnerable to many forms of exploitation. Most third places are sexually segregated and some of them are exclusively so, while in others, separation by sex is a matter of degree. Although these public places erect barriers between the sexes and promote the ancient division of social life into men's and women's worlds, the ultimate effect is not divisive. Sexually segregated third places support the heterosexual relationships of mates in several important ways. Café Shooka, in the corner of the Gandhi shopping center on Gandhi Street, is a "cool joint" for Tehrani Café-goers and has been opened since the winter in the early 1980s. It is a hang-out place "*Patogh*"²⁴ for young writers, journalists, and artists. Coffee shops are another scene where youth perform acts of defiance (Fig. 9). They make up a relatively

²³. Ray Oldenburg is an American urban sociologist who is known for writing about the importance of informal public gathering places for a functioning civil society, democracy, and civic engagement.

²⁴. *Patogh* is a Persian word meaning "meeting place" or a place for a meeting or appointment. Amid Encyclopedia defines it in the following way: "*Paye Togh*", where a flag is installed, and people gathers around it. Thus, at the center of neighborhoods a flag (broken metal blade which was valuable and was reminder of martyrs) was installed by one of the local elders. This "*Togh*" was decorated in the best way and popular public figures and inhabitants gathered around it. Area surrounding the "*Togh*" was a place for hangout, interact and idea exchanges and. Over time, these places moved from outdoors to indoors.



biotype of “public space” for young people, who are otherwise excluded from the conventional public spaces (Fig. 10).



Figure 9: Coffee shops are another scene where youth perform acts of defiance



Figure 10: “Patogh” is a hang-out place for young writers, journalists, and artists

Coffee shops: places for cultural or political hangouts

In the coffee shops, young people according to what they claim not discuss about political aspirations “*Khasteha-ye Siasi*”, but talk tirelessly about their social aspirations “*Khasteha-ye Ejtemai*”. They make a distinction between political issues and the unpretentious

anxieties and needs of young people. Anxieties have more liberal attitudes toward relations between boys and girls, dress types, moderate policies toward youth culture and employment. In spite of their tactic for denial of political topics in order to avoid any provocation, their “social demands” are definitely very much “political demands”. Coffee shops are counter-sites, characterized with an anti-ideology. Coffee shops are anti-political places. As German philosophe, Habermas²⁵ defines, the public sphere has a concept refers to a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. For Habermas, the existence of the public sphere is based on two primary conditions: first, access is guaranteed to all citizens; and second, there must be guarantees of freedom of assembly and association and a freedom to express and publish one’s opinions. For Him, the public sphere can also be host to what is today termed as “civil society”. Habermas’s emphasis is on a sphere where public debates can deal with policies of the state, a sphere which can be a medium between society and the public state that organizes and creates political opinion. Such a public sphere, at least in its bourgeois form, is said to have developed in Europe in the late eighteenth century, a time characterized by the French revolution and citizenship ideals. Historically, the growth of the European public sphere and the rise of urban lifestyle have been interrelated. The public sphere in this idealized form would be made up of those arenas in which public discussions and the transmission of information occur, such as coffee houses, clubs, and the media.

Hang out is possible everywhere and because of this characteristic, that is not fully drawn into the social and political rules and always has something outside the law. If other situations of social life are defined, categorized, divided and encoded by political limitative rules, categorization, hang out situation has no priori assumptions or transcendent law.

All contents of hang out, including its form and characteristics are made by its contributors. The guerrilla style of hang out is an appropriate place for discussing about politics. That is why the religious police have the most control on it than any other urban area. This public place is a dangerous place for the dominant (government and laws). Hang outs that reflects themselves in Coffee shops, are conversation spaces for young people regardless to the state-controlled units such as family, school, university and government.

Public sphere is situated between private sphere and the state. The factor of vitality of the

²⁵. The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere (1962) ISBN 0-262-58108-6
Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy (1992)

public sphere is its rational and objective understanding. In the private sphere, a sense of personal affiliation prevails regardless to the rationality of the state authority and the regulation. Habermas believes that the most important aspect of the political public sphere is “democracy”. According to his idea, democracy can be obtained from freely struggle of opinions in the public sphere and authentication of private sphere and its objective and natural result. Public spheres are free spheres to express personal ideologies to achieve mental understanding among people, hoping to overcome the existent pressure. “Communicative action” can be achieved by dialogue. This is why Habermas advocates the revival of dialogue spaces as a way of reaching common general and rational understanding. One of the key areas that are interested for Habermas, is the coffee houses on the period of the bourgeoisie. Coffee houses were places that many people spent their afternoons there and they had discussion about issues and problems in their daily lives together. He says in his book “structural transformation of the public sphere” that coffee houses were one of the main forms of manifestation of bourgeois public sphere. Dialogues irrespective of the dominant are going on in coffee shops. Habermas looks for hang out areas with ideal conditions that can be set to see people free from domination establish or strengthen democracy and dialogue with each other.

Urban spaces such as coffee shops are spaces that allow people to enter and exit. This traffic has always leads to “take space”. The pedestrians that went over throwing the city consume the space. On the other hand, Henri Lefebvre²⁶ speaks about facing of urban spaces that only belongs to modern spaces: “Production of Space”. If the urban spaces are not utilized for their defined work, we are faced to “production of space”. In fact, the occurrence of distinctive functions of urban spaces by citizens leads to subjective and objective produce of space as a something new. Baudelaire - The first interpreter of the modern city theory has called this situation known as "Modern Painting in Streets".

Habermas writes: In our time, bourgeois forms are replaced by new patterns of socialization that despite national and regional differences, have one thing in common: Neither of these models has left a place for debate and political discussion. This situation is the product of getting personal in affairs and reducing of the public relations. This situation has transformed any critical discussion or debate to something organized. Since public sphere is regulated by the

²⁶. Henri Lefebvre (1901 –1991) was a French Marxist philosophe and sociologist, best known for pioneering the critique of everyday life, for introducing the concepts of the right to the city and the production of social space.



advertising institutions today, it retains feudalist components rebuilt. In terms of the dominant hegemony, the possibilities of dialogue or discussion to help revitalize the public sphere are critical element of “resistance” in the late modern period. “Resistance” means preventing the reproduction of the hegemonic domination by different agents (such as government, family, school, TV, and so on).

Conclusion

Just as Drakulić (1987) wrote about Eastern European societies under communism, politics in Iran is not an abstract concept but a powerful force influencing people’s routine lives. The trivia of these lives have been political since the Islamic Revolution. The Islamic order has striven to penetrate the bases of people’s lives: what they eat and drink, how they dress, whom they sleep with, who they look at and so on. In such an atmosphere, every aspect of daily life takes on a political meaning. An Iranian takes a political position in his/her everyday practices. Coffee shops play a significant role in the creation of political opinion by being arenas for “banal politics”. Coffee shops are potentially political and revolutionary spaces within streets full of cops, dealers, poor and desperate to keep open the windows of action. They are small rooms seemingly harmless that hide weapons behind the logic of the dialogue. It is possible to stand the government pressure by their existence.

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