

# A cafe as it happens ; having breakfast out

- Eric Laurier, University of Glasgow, 2003.

## ...as it happens

In her later work Deirdre Boden (1994a; 1994b) was constantly reminding us of ‘the compulsion of proximity’, the peculiar parallel development of technologies that allow remote cooperation and collaboration with a boom in travel to distant and nearby gathering places. For all that we were acquiring the means to have the world delivered to us at our home address, we remained bound to seeking out places where we could be close to others. Hers was no easy paradox to be resolved by proxemic compulsion as a social rule, economic law or manifestations of evolutionary psychology. Dede Boden’s studies exhibited the ways in which business, education, law and politics were bound to un-noticed situated practices, particularly those of face-to-face conversation. Her work, steeped in ethnomethodology, described what happened when business people sat around meeting tables, when witnesses faced the prosecution on court-rooms and when presidents and their staff discussed matters of state in the White House. She picked out not only *what* the activities were but how these affairs were and are *organised* through members’ methods such as beginnings, turn-taking, adjacency pairs and closings.

Over the last decade in the UK and USA there has been amazingly rapid growth in the number and spread of cafes serving espresso-based drinks. Starbucks has replaced Macdonald’s as the icon of global culture on the city high street. We might want to see cafe as places illustrating the ‘compulsion of proximity’, where they are a network of monotonous gathering places that remain a necessity for increasingly mobile fast subjects that shuttle back and forth holding networks together (Thrift 2000). Yet that would be going against the logic of Boden’s inquiries, they suggest that for all the temptation to think that we know what cafes are, we should look at actual instances of café life in motion. The suspension of the assumption that we know what a café is and how it is organised is how she might have started such an inquiry in this phenomenon.

Over the past six months Chris Philo and myself have begun an ethnographic study of a number of different cafes in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and London. What I would like to do here is make some early conjectures on the café-specific work of its first two hours of opening in the morning. In doing so I aim also to elucidate the where-ness of breakfast and contribute towards an analysis of the social production of a time of day. As Alec McHoul puts it:

Many social scientists have argued that time and our conceptions of time are crucial to the organisation of social affairs - not the least Karl Marx. But to take for granted what counts as

time in these studies is always to beg the question. Time is organised in terms of particular techniques with clocks, watches and other equipment. People don't interpret clocks; asking what they have in mind when 'reading' a clock is a pointless sociological exercise. And yet to say that the measurement of time is utterly arbitrary and without 'objective' significance is just as great a mistake - as I hope should be clear by now. Social time is 'objective' and what it is changes. So it would be a legitimate sociological investigation to ask (in a different way from the physicist, of course) what a particular kind of social time is, how it operates and how these things change. How do the familiar routine ways with bells or gongs turn into 24 hour time analogues? Most sociologists probably haven't got a clue about such matters and don't wish to have one. And yet it could well be at the very heart of their enterprise. (McHoul 1990)

As geographers Chris Philo and myself are sensitive from the outset to the complex ways in which time is bound to space, and in sympathy with McHoul's pursuit of combining elements of Foucault's histories with ethnomethodology's studies and Wittgenstein's philosophy (Laurier and Philo forthcoming), we are interested in 'the slow almost imperceptible, practical, ways in which quite small but always significant fragments of the Weltbild slowly decompose or are altered' (McHoul 1990).

Just as Garfinkel (1967) from the outset highlighted the production of social order as nothing other than each local staff's accomplishment; so it is that Latour (1988 (orig. 1984); 1997) has urged us to see the construction of new socio-materialities by scientists in laboratories and engineers building quasi-objects. While the great retrospective overviews of social theory explain what happened (past tense, the labour, uncertainty, local struggles and alternatives ready remedied), Garfinkel, Latour and their congregations, of which Boden's studies were an exemplary member (1994b), have pushed us toward dwelling in the world as it happens, reflecting on phenomena in the midst of things with no metaphysics, with no view from above. A world of possibilities being constructed constantly with no time out, worlds being produced in a here and now with what is at hand, that requires work to make it recognisable, stable, enduring and predictable. In our case we are treating the owners and staffs of cafés as involved in the steady production and alteration of particular public spaces (the café), and, public times (breakfast).

From interviews with the owners of cafe chains and individual café we learnt that 'breakfast out' is a current social trend. Now we are not attempting here to measure this trend, validate or invalidate it as a social trend, to say whether there will be a wholesale decline in 'breakfast at home' and link this in with the decline of the family, the commodification of meals or any of the other familiar worries of the social sciences and policymakers. Rather than jump to treating 'breakfast out' as a problem, we would like to spend some time making conjectures on what breakfast time in a café is and how it is organised. At a later stage in our project when we are happy that we have carefully described our phenomenon we will reflect on what implications and respecifications it might offer our concept of community and civic life.

## Café notes 7-9a.m.

The notes that follow are excerpts from a collection that we (Chris Philo and Eric Laurier) are still assembling, expanding on, reflecting upon and analysing. Our rendering borrows from Garfinkel and Sudnow's study of the performance features of lectures and their natural accountability (see Garfinkel 2002 chapter 7). Our results are best evaluated in terms of practice – we wish to both give substance to a part of cafe life and make it available, or perhaps discoverable in its accountable details. We are wary of our study seeming overly concrete, as Garfinkel puts it off-handedly of the lecture study with Sudnow, 'most of the observational stuff consists of descriptive blurbs and suggestive commentary' p221.

### -[Empty]-

I arrive just after 7am and I'm the first customer. Before 9am there are only a few cafés open most of which are part of the big chains (i.e. Costa, Starbucks, Coffee Republic and Caffé Nero) and at this café I am a demi-regular. It's across the street from the railway station where I arrive having commuted from the south side of the city to the centre. Offering a small frontage it recedes deep into its city block. The service counter runs along the right wall from the entrance. Sitting at a table across from the counter one barista sits smoking a cigarette while reading the newspaper, the other gets up as I come in the door and walks behind the bar. We greet each other and I order a medium latte.

Staff can be present in the café but without customers the café is [empty]. The reasons for empty-ness are temporally categorised – it is 'just opened' – a customer is not put off or curious about this observable empty-ness during the opening time, the way they would be were it to be observably empty at 1pm ('why is it empty? Is the food bad? Are the staff rude? Is it expensive?'). A café's empty-ness is an accountable matter. From time to time I see early-arrivers check the opening hours - another reason for its emptiness may be that it is closed.

Being the [first customer] regularly makes one a recognisable customer – you can become one of the café's known customers. Would the staff ever be able to say they knew who their regular 37<sup>th</sup> customer was? Equally a customer is aware of when they are the first customer of the day, and unaware of their being 37<sup>th</sup>. The [first customer] carries rights with it that later arrivals do not. Is part of the relation here the switch from the café only having the staff in it, to having staff and customers? Just as the cafe cannot close properly until all its customers are out of the doors, it is not open properly until a customer enters its door?

There is still a sense at this time of day of customers coming and going.

### -[Quiet]-

In the hour from 7 till 8am it stays relatively quiet. Under the observable accountable state of quiet there are expectations from staff and customers. Perhaps some small talk, extra politeness and care, and a lack of hurry. The staff do prep work for the day and maintenance - newspapers are folded into holders, sandwiches stacked in the fridges and deliveries received. The staff catch up with what happened at work the day before and what they were up to last night.

Customers arrive in ones and twos and queue. As the queuing finishes they divide between the take-away and the sit-in customers, with the latter selecting tables. Where the queue is relatively closely arranged, tables are taken so as to set a *distance* between their occupants. *Proximity* of table selection while the cafe is quiet may lead to the appearance of eavesdropping or spying on others (Goffman 1970). However in each and every cafe table selection is complicated by the orientation of tables, their relative privacy or whether they have a good view. According to the geography of the cafe, tables tend to be snapped up even when they are close to one another. In this cafe in winter this is true of the tables at the far end of the cafe, furthest away from the drafts of the door, the smoking section and with plush armchairs. Proximate tables during quiet period sit artfully arranged so as not to be facing one another (see extended notes and (Laurier 2002))

#### **-[getting busy]-**

A queue forms at the counter, there are still plenty of spare tables. It's after 8am. Outside the cafe in the street there are more and more pedestrians walking by. The queue is the observable thing that identifies this getting busy, situated in its regular occurrence sometime after 8 in the morning. There are mornings that stay quiet - Saturdays and Sundays of course, free of early morning city commuters. The staff shift their positions - staying closer to the counter, readying themselves for the oncoming rush.

#### **-[busy]- / -[crowded]-**

At around 8.30 it is busy. From [empty] to [an observable collection of individual customers] the steadily accelerating arrivals have gradually grown what is here, to become a [crowd]. There is not an exactly steady flow of customers arriving, they come in irregular pulses, but there are almost constantly customers standing at the counter. The staff now remain behind the counter. More accurately - one or the other is always operating either the cash till, picking up food, or making drinks at the espresso machine. There are very few available tables. From their position in the queue customers scan for vacant tables. Groups split so that one or more of them can grab a table while the other(s) queue to make their order.

In contrast to the studies of Garfinkel, Sudnow and others of the ecologies of classroom, there is not *one* directed field of vision. The ecology of the cafe consists of the entrance offering a view *into* the interior, a counter with its orientation for queuing and sideways for

viewing, numerous tables arranged within the space to *scatter* fields of vision and a few other features (more on the oriented properties of tables and chairs in (Laurier 2002)).

‘The place was buzzing’. The café becomes audibly busy. There’s the steady thump of the coffee ground being knocked out the handle, the whine then the extended chuff of the frothing of milk, people speaking their orders loudly above the sound of the till and the machines. As Garfinkel and Sudnow say of the lecture audience, it’s a ‘noisy assemblage’. Though once again, the buzz of the café does not have ordering properties of the lecture audience, this is not a pre-lecture shuffling and chatter that will quiet when the lecture begins. It is not a noise of pens, paper and coats that will rise as part of making a lecture come to a close. Its buzz can be heard by those entering the door though by way of contrast to walking into a quiet café. Moreover there is the possibility of a café where the buzz would die down when certain person entered (like the scene in the film ‘Withnail and I’ where the drunk protagonists stagger into the village tearoom and the elderly well-to-do customers stop talking to stare at the two drunks. There’s the hearable way that they start talking again after their pause. The buzz of the café crowd can react to events).

‘There’s a table free’. As the café becomes visibly busy, [free] becomes visually available and pressingly relevant to a customer. In the crowd, empty spaces are identifiable, the queuing customer looks for persons standing, and watches their progress to see if they are taking a table or leaving one (Sudnow 1972).

Under these conditions - busy/crowded - *table-sharing* becomes an option (Laurier, Whyte, and Buckner 2001). Habermas (1989) in his historical study of the rise of the public sphere makes much of the possibility of interaction between subjects of different social rank and those previously unacquainted. What we have noted from our studies is that the possibility for not just ‘proximity’ but the rather more intimate table-sharing, provides a ticket to opening lines and a situation where a relatively extended conversation can occur between those previously unacquainted.

### **-[the cafe crowd]-**

While social theorists, notably Simmel (ref) and Cennetti (ref) have analysed ‘the crowd’ in the city, from their armchairs (so to speak), persons arriving through the doors of a café analyse the café’s crowd and its crowdedness then and there. That this is a *café* crowd provides a start for the situated nature of their analysis, and that cafés themselves come finely categorised (i.e. as greasy spoons, youth cafés, supermarket cafés, internet cafés, upmarket, Starbucks, etc.). Each category comes with its expectations, regular customers of Starbucks are not disappointed by its lack of egg, bacon and chips for breakfast. In analysing the crowd they find in particular cafés, members also analyse their relationship to it. Is this a crowd of which I form a central part, is this a crowd for which I form a suspicious category, a crowd toward which I am hostile (Parr 1999)? And if members of the cafe crowd stare at me, then whether their stares are taken to be approving, disapproving will be assessed in part by my categorical relation to them (e.g. the young drunks in ‘Withnail and I’).

Moreover customers analyse crowds by *time of day*, and this is the *breakfast* crowd. What the owners and staff say is that the breakfast crowd is a growing crowd and that it could be a change in the way people live in Britain. By what methods of analysis have they come to make such a sociological statement?

As I sit here as another customer, I find myself to be a core member of this crowd. It's almost entirely people on their way to work, just off the train and stopping here for a coffee or tea and maybe a pastry or a muffin. As I sit here as a demi-regular, I recognise other regulars. Do I recognise regulars and they produce their observability by my seeing their individual faces? Akin to Garfinkel and Sudnow's remarks on the constitution of the territories of the audience, the regulars may wander around to some extent, but this is the exception perhaps forced by how crowded the cafe is, most go straight to [their table]. Regulars reproduce a geography of who sits where for breakfast on a daily basis, almost as if this were an hotel with tables corresponding to room numbers. A given division is that the smoking section is up at the front beside the doorway (they get the blasts of fresh air). As we noted above there are criteria used in the selection of tables, and for regulars there is [our table]. The crowded cafe causes problems for always sitting at the same table (see also Laurier, Whyte, and Buckner 2001).

When the café is crowded during the breakfast rush I see people peer in the door, and walk on, some walk in and then turn on their heels, others continue in. We should note that few customers of any café are going there for the first time. This has implications for the earlier remarks about categories of cafe crowd and also for what happens in dealing with a favored café being busy. There are other cafés to go to.

### -[breakfast]-

There are groups of people gathering who work at the same office. I see people greet one another who work at the same place and yet don't sit together. And those who are here every day and always sit together. Then there are those who are here every morning and sit alone and read the paper. There are couples having breakfast together before going their separate ways to work (where people come from and go next is something we want to follow up in detail later in our project).

Why take breakfast here? Why this café? Why not have breakfast at home? The geographies of breakfast.

The breakfast stop off follows a logic of: leave house, do nearly all of journey leaving only last short walking distance to workplace, select café here. Why is this such a good way of doing things?

It's blindingly obvious – yet still needs to be spelt out to remind ourselves. How long it takes us to leave the house/flat in the morning is temporally variable and leaving is the accomplishment of all that we can get done in that time. Putting our face on for the day,

packing the equipment, paperwork that we need, feeding children and or pets, setting the kids off to school etc. Once the house is left then a temporal 'leg' is completed (which is not to say that all the things that could be done are done just that what can be done in that time is done). The journey to work is, increasingly so, variable in its time length, so that it could, say, vary between twenty minutes and an hour, depending on when we get out the house, if we beat the rush-hour, catch the early train etc. or there are floods, roadworks etc. Anyways our arrival time at our workplace remains open to more contingencies until we are within that five minute walking distance where it takes serious acts of god to throw our journey time out by more than two minutes. The working week breakfast has a definite end point though variable beginnings - the co-workers at the table beside me arrived out of sequence from their different transportations.

So anyway let us note that given the way many of us live now there is likely to be a gap between the nine in the morning that an abundance of employees are expected to arrive at their workplaces and their actual arrival times everyday. To get there for nine in the morning will on average week mean arrivals at 8.20, 8.35, 8.50, 8.33 etc. For the 8.20 arrival one day, we have not had breakfast and we know of a café, we stop off there. Now there a new institution starts in relation to the ongoing reproduction of the nine o'clock start. We have the opportunity to prep for work, to have a nice coffee where we don't have to wash the dishes afterwards, to calm ourselves after the trauma (for me certainly) of getting out the house in the morning.

[Breakfast out] is then a block of variable time that we can slot into the day which will absorb the contingencies before it and we can use to turn up at the same, 'correct' time every day at work. Whether one 'late' morning we only have five minutes to slug our coffee and bolt our pastry, or one 'early' morning we have twenty minutes to read the newspaper, catch up on some paperwork from last week. We can always arrive at nine. And yet we also have another bit to our day, we have a new place we go where we can do a diversity of things, more things in fact than we could do in the office, since we could read a love letter there in a way that many of us could not if we are at our workplace twenty minutes early.

This it not to say that staffrooms could not, do not and have not served the same purpose of synching up the temporal variabilities of travelling to work with the co-ordinated start times for workplaces. We can also note the journey's logic of the early morning café stop right beside the workplace, rather than, say, stopping at the café closest to your house, or closest to the railway station where you catch your train to work. At that point in a journey the unpredictable part of transportation still lies ahead. Will the train arrive on time and will there be space on it? Will I get a space to park the car when I arrive? And so on.

This is a start on how [breakfast out] fits into our journeys across the city. Not just as breakfast time, we select cafes by their relevance to our movements and locations - think about arranging to meet a colleague in the city at a café. Selection procedure is by proximity to their workplace or your workplace, or where you're at that day. And being aware of a café in that particular place.

### **-[work time approaches]-**

The table of six, who seem to be co-workers, to my immediate left starts to leave. They do this in a gradual way, adjusting coats, checking watches, one saying aloud, 'oh well can't put off the inevitable any longer.'

There is a gradual leave-taking... some people have to say goodbye. The co-workers don't. The buzz dies down. The background music seems louder.

### **-[quiet]-**

Like the quiet after the phone has been ringing. Nine o'clock has filtered out the office and shop workers leaving behind some students with their textbooks, text messages and newspapers, a mother and daughter probably on their way to the shops and an old guy also reading a newspaper.

## **The local observability of social change**

As we noted at the outset it was the owners and staff of cafes that had alerted us to the growth in people eating breakfast out in cafes on their way to work. For this to happen at all cafes had to start opening early enough to provide the possibility of having breakfast there rather than at home. Up until recently it was only trucker's cafes, motorway service stations, MacDonald's, the odd greasy spoon and Seamen's Missions and the like that opened before nine in the morning. Echoing their Italian, French and US counterparts the current espresso chains all open early to catch the breakfast crowd. You might ask, are the cafe chains causing this change in where and with whom breakfast is eaten? And there are answers that could be given to this question, in fact this question lends itself nicely to arguments over who is causing what and what its effects will be. However my interest is instead in how claims of social change are not dismissed as implausible or unsubstantiated.

This is where we have to turn to what the crowd makes available. Coulter's (2001) remarks on the 'macro-social' are useful here, he takes the crowd as a nice example of immediately observable macro-phenomena in everyday life. While some social institutions such as banks or hospitals are only partially instantiated in their material structures, the crowd seems satisfyingly 'there', and no wonder then that it has been popular in consideration of macro-social forces. Yet I think what is becoming clear from considering the cafe crowd is that, much like the traffic jam, not only is it staffed by members who ensure its existence, it is also a site of members' inquiries into what it means.

In analysing a conversation between two employees of a department store about an event that occurred outside their front door, Sacks (1992b) shows how the crowd that gathers as witnesses, gawpers and investigators assists, the employee in seeing the event as possibly a robbery and as something reportable at a later date. In fact he is pointing toward that

general feature of a crowd of onlookers in cities, if they are gathering then there is some event occurring which will form a tellable at a later date. That's quite a lure to join the crowd and see what they are looking at, since even if it's not your business to do something about what it they are looking at, it is to have something to tell later of which you were a firsthand witness (see Sacks (1992a) on 'entitlements to experience' and 'rights to tell a story' etc.) Now the café crowd is quite differently produced, it is not one-off thing. It is there almost everyday and is utterly commonplace to the staff and to the regulars. And yet this is not to say that the staff have not analysed the crowd for what it is like, who composes it, whether it is growing or declining and what its normal appearances are (i.e. are there always no seats during busy periods, does the queue make it to the pillar or only the door).

It is not only the staff, the crowd itself is composed of members who see the crowd as an accountable entity (we've noted already how we will analyse our relationship to *this* or *that* crowd). So it is that we see being part of a breakfast crowd the normality and the popularity of having breakfast out. It is not something odd to do around here (though our parents might have found it so) - it happens. We are all inquirers into features which seem to indicate something is increasing or decreasing in popularity which we check with our friends and colleagues as to whether they see such things as changing, or whether our observation was a one off blip? Given that there are crowds of people out for breakfast we are willing to speculate and perhaps become theorists on whether there are reasons for this growing crowd (McHugh, Raffel, Foss, and Blum 1974).

What I am at hinting at here is that the regularity of this café crowd is producing the gradual recomposition of the weltbild (McHoul 1990). It is perceptible and inquiries are constantly launched into what kind of crowd it is, what it is doing here, whether to start attending the places you find it regularly. It is easy to find and on hearing of our project journalists have attempted to ironise our study by redoing the 'discovery' of café crowds. We were never saying they were hard to find, it is precisely their ubiquity and observability that offers them as how a mass of people do things around here. The breakfast crowd is teaching us that the café now functions in the routine humdrum production of nine in the morning. It is almost something that is not worth mentioning, at which point it is ripe for rediscovery by social and cultural studies of the world as it happens.

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