

Cafe Scientifique

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Cafe Scientifique is the first worldwide network devoted to publicly discussing science. It is expanding fast at a time when the discussion of science is starting to be almost as important as science itself. There are now well over 150 cafés in more than forty countries holding regular events. At a time when science depends not just on government funding, but also on public support, Café Scientifique is one type of public engagement with science which, as the science magazine *Nature* has commented, is bound to grow over the next decade.

A Cafe Scientifique is defined as ‘a place where, for the price of a cup of coffee or a glass of wine, people meet to discuss the latest ideas of science and technology which are changing our lives.’ Its Unique Selling Point turns out to be that changing the location of discussion changes the agenda, tone and nature of the debate. In a lecture hall you expect to be lectured to. In a café you expect to have a conversation. The aim of the cafés is to bring science into conversation and back into our culture.

For too long science has been seen as a self-defining, self-motivating, self-regulating discipline deciding its own goals and agenda with little reference to the rest of culture. This is clearly no longer the case and the more science permeates our daily lives, bringing with it both benefits and problems, the more it needs to be debated, discussed, questioned and examined publicly and the cafés provide one such forum.

How did it all start?

In 1998 I was reading the obituary of Marc Sautet, founder of the *Café Philosophique* movement in France. He was a philosopher who had failed to interest the business community in philosophy so he developed the idea of open, free and public discussion in cafés. I knew that several *Cafés Philosophiques* had been tried in England but had not taken off. I suspected that was because the Anglo Saxons considered philosophy a wacky continental subject not to be taken seriously. However I knew that the English take Science seriously and that offered the basis for some interest. I glanced up from the newspaper and right across the way was a small café-bar which was closed on Mondays. The owner agreed to open up for one night; I rang a local academic who had written a newspaper article criticising Richard Dawkins for *The Selfish Gene*, put a poster in the window of the café, told some friends and crossed my fingers.

Although I would have been happy if a dozen interested people had turned up, in fact over 30 came. But as the speaker started to talk my heart sank to my boots, because he talked in academic jargon as though addressing students. Fortunately after his 20 minute talk we had to have a break for drinks, as the coffee machine had been turned off during the talk because it was too noisy. After this break, once the audience started to ask questions the evening improved rapidly. The speaker began to realise who he was talking to and what he had to explain. The questions were simple, direct and often difficult, and the speaker began to think on his feet, always an enjoyable spectacle for the audience. So, the evening was a modest success.

I organised another one, also well attended, and what surprised me then was that people kept coming up to me and asking when the next one was and how much they were looking forward to it. It slowly dawned on me that I had accidentally discovered a real appetite for science and discussion – not science as taught in schools but science as experienced and debated. There was also a real appetite among scientists to explain their work and they too seemed to enjoy these evenings. Six months later, I looked on the internet and discovered that some cafés had started in France a year before, although with a different format. The idea was clearly a child of its time.

Things began to escalate. The Royal Society provided money to finance two series of café evenings, one on Science and Science Fiction, the other on Science and Society. The Wellcome Trust provided money to pay a part-time organiser to help spread the cafés across the UK, where there are now more than thirty, and the British Council took the idea world-wide, using the format in many different countries to seek out new audiences to discuss scientific ideas and issues. Meanwhile people were picking up the idea off the internet, and without any support (and usually without our knowledge!) cafés began springing up in places like Brazil, Japan, Costa Rica and even in such remote places as the United States, where there are now about twenty. No one really knows how many regular cafés there are – indeed I discovered a dozen while in correspondence for this talk.

Why are they so popular?

There are some obvious answers to this question. Science is moving up the public agenda as it directly affects our lives through medicine, nutrition, global warming, nuclear energy, GM foods, and the like. Science stories now make headlines regularly in the news and on television; much of it is controversial and perhaps worrying, so that arouses interest and curiosity. But I think there is another reason. Through disciplines like genetics, neurology, pharmacology, and evolutionary psychology, science is giving us a new picture of what it means to be human. This is very different from the one we have received from literature, philosophy, religion and much of the rest of our culture. Free will is at stake, sexual preference may be genetically determined, consciousness may be unzipped and God is On Trial. This fault line between the sciences and the rest of our culture directly affects us all and needs to be discussed and negotiated. This process will continue for as long as science addresses the basis of human nature and experience.

Those are theoretical reasons why the cafés are popular, but there are practical ones as well. It is enjoyable to go out to a pleasant environment which is also stimulating. Face to face interaction is rewarding, not just between scientists and the audience, but between members of the public, because the cafés are usually friendly venues where it is easy to meet people, even if all you say to them is ‘I didn’t understand a word of that – did you?’ By chatting during the break the audience gather the confidence to ask questions they know others will also be interested in.

For the organisers it is an easy and rewarding project. No money is required – speakers’ expenses are paid by literally passing a hat round in the interval. There is no shortage of subjects – just read newspapers and magazines and new subjects crop up regularly. Local enterprise is the name of the game and formats can be as varied as you like. In France there are usually four speakers, in Denmark two – a scientist and an artist or someone

from a related discipline. In Poland there are regular summer cafés in a wooded campsite by a lake, in Glasgow in a shopping mall in the city centre, and in Rome on a riverboat. The subjects are as varied as the locations. In Brazil the first and very popular meeting was on the Chemistry of Beer, in Beijing on Designer Babies, in Moscow HIV in Russia, and in Leeds the Future of Alchemy. Meanwhile in Belgrade they always make a cake to illustrate the topic under discussion. For a recent evolutionary biology evening they had an Australopithecus cake!

Sometimes organisers worry about the quality of speakers, but that is not really an issue. It is the audience that makes the evening, rarely the speaker. If the subject is interesting or controversial and the speaker is knowledgeable then the discussion will always be worthwhile. In many ways the speaker is only there to give the audience enough information to start asking intelligent questions and evening develops from there. Finally, for the organisers, it is a rewarding task. The number of people who say thank you afterwards or encourage you to continue creates a warm glow in your heart and you feel a saintly halo forming above your head.

What is the purpose of the cafés?

Oliver Sacks, the writer and neurologist said the point of the cafés was to bring science back into culture. Some people see it as increasing public understanding of science, some see it as science communication, some as science engagement or even science education. Undoubtedly it has elements of each of these, but I see it as something rather different. If, as I believe, the liveliest part of the evening is the discussion and questions, then I think the café is really a cultural examination of science. The audience is learning about one aspect of science and examining it from the outside, not the inside. This opens up a whole range of questions and issues which would not be covered by a debate within science itself.

A great advantage of the Café Scientifique is that it is not a shop window for science, and the audience quickly pick up on that. There is no secret agenda to be entertaining but always supportive of science. One session can have a speaker in favour of nanotechnology and the next meeting could have someone dismissive of it. The audience are left to make up their own minds, and this suits the period in which we live. Nineteenth century scientific societies were vehicles for self-improvement. In the twenty-first century, people want to participate and develop their own views.

The common thread of the cafés is that science impinges on every culture, worldwide. The science is pretty much the same but the cultural responses are different, hence the different formats, topics, locations etc. The over-riding need is for culture to engage with the scientific ideas and draw science back into conversation.

There are consequences. If cafés are a cultural investigation of science then they should be appropriate for any culture: high culture, popular culture, youth culture, ethnic culture, or whatever. This is what seems to be happening. A number of cafés, in New York, London and Copenhagen, to name just three, deal with the relation between science and the arts, which you might call high culture. Popular culture is probably the area most cafés deal in, where the subjects are of general interest or journalistic controversy.

Youth culture has been pioneered in France, which set up Junior Cafés in schools in 1999. The principles are that the students pick the topic and chair, and organise and advertise the event, which must not be held in a classroom, but can take place in the canteen, common room or elsewhere. Speakers are usually chosen from a local university and any teacher is there just as an observer. As one teacher put it ‘What surprised me was that the clever questions came not from the Geeks, but from the long-haired Rastas in the room.’ Finding the right subjects and speakers can be a problem. One of the schools wanted the subject of the café discussion to be ‘Dry cleaning’ – not an obvious academic discipline. However the Junior Cafés have been successful in France and are now being copied in Britain and also here in the USA. Interestingly in the USA they are taking place outside the school in a local café.

Ethnic culture is more difficult. In Britain we have recruited a Muslim woman to start a café in densely Muslim area of one city. The first meeting next month is on the subject of transplants, which is problematical for Islam – but the speaker is a Muslim transplant surgeon. We are doing the same with an Afro-Caribbean woman in another city in the north of England. We hope to find different formulae, in terms of subjects, speakers and venues that will encourage discussion in these communities.

What of the future?

The Café Scientifique is bottom up, not top down. It is a voluntary network with no hierarchy, held together only by a central website and discussion list. Its growth and change are organic, not directed, so any projection into the future is personal rather than planned. However we all have hopes, so let me spell them out.

First, I hope cafés continue to grow here in North America and also in Europe and Japan, where there are already ten. The USA has great potential for growth and the ones here already are lively, successful and innovative. In Europe, because of low cost flights, we have the unusual situation that it is cheaper to get a speaker from Holland to Leeds than to bring one up from London, and if we can encourage cross-frontier speakers that would be a great benefit.

Second, I think the Muslim world is a great challenge. If we can find ways of encouraging the discussion of science in the Middle East in places like Iran I think it would be a good thing and cafés might be one way to go about it. That is one of the reasons for our interest in ethnic groups within the UK.

Third, the underdeveloped areas of the world present a peculiar challenge. I am in email contact with someone in Bangladesh who is asking for advice about setting up a Café Scientifique in a rural area there. While I have no experience of that I know that the café organisers in San Diego are planning to set up an internet Café Scientifique TV station on the web, and if there was a way of hooking up rural Bangladesh to San Diego then we might have interesting possibilities and possibly interesting discussions.

But meanwhile I still enjoy my local sessions back home, and I look forward to our next meeting where the subject is the psychological phenomenon of *déjà vu*. This is the first time we have treated this topic – I think.

Duncan Dallas