



H.C. & CULTURE

George Steiner: Europe is made up of coffee houses, of Cafés

History

BY [HISTORIC CAFES ROUTE](#) // JUNE 27, 2022 0 COMMENTS

Francis George Steiner, (April 23, 1929 – February 3, 2020) was a Franco-American literary critic, essayist, philosopher, novelist, and educator. He wrote extensively about the relationship between language, literature and society, and the impact of the Holocaust. An article in *The Guardian* described Steiner as a “polyglot and polymath”.

Among his admirers, Steiner is ranked “among the great minds in today’s literary world”. English novelist A. S. Byatt described him as a “late, late, late Renaissance man ... a European metaphysician with an instinct for the driving ideas of our time”. Harriet Harvey-Wood, a former literature director of the British Council, described him as a “magnificent lecturer – prophetic and doom-laden [who would] turn up with half a page of scribbled notes, and never refer to them”.

Steiner was Professor of English and Comparative Literature in the University of Geneva (1974–94), Professor of Comparative Literature and Fellow in the University of Oxford (1994–95), Professor of Poetry in Harvard University (2001–02) and an Extraordinary Fellow of Churchill College, Cambridge.

Here are some ideas of George Steiner referring to the European coffee houses and the Irish and English Pubs:

The Idea of Europe by George Steiner (22 June 2016)

Lightning-rods have to be grounded. Even the most abstract, speculative of ideas must be anchored in reality, in the substance of things. What, then, of ‘the idea of Europe’?

- Europe is made up of coffee houses, of cafés. These extend from Pessoa’s favourite coffee house in Lisbon to the Odessa cafés haunted by Isaac Babel’s gangsters. They stretch from the Copenhagen cafés which Kierkegaard passed on his concentrated walks, to the counters of Palermo. No early or defining cafés in Moscow, which is already a suburb of Asia. Very few in England after a brief fashion in the eighteenth century. None in North America outside the gallican outpost of New Orleans. Draw the coffee-house map and you have one of the essential markers of the ‘idea of Europe’.
- The café is a place for assignation and conspiracy, for intellectual debate and gossip, for the flâneur and the poet or metaphysician at his notebook. It is open to all, yet it is also a club, a freemasonry of political or artistic-literary recognition and programmatic presence. A cup of coffee, a glass of wine, a tea with rum secures a locale in which to work, to dream, to play chess or simply keep warm the whole day. It is the club of the spirit and the poste-restante of the homeless. In the Milan of Stendhal, in the Venice of Casanova, in the Paris of Baudelaire, the café housed what there was of political opposition, of clandestine liberalism. Three principal cafés in imperial and inter-war Vienna provided the agora, the locus of eloquence and rivalry, for competing schools of aesthetics and political economy, of psychoanalysis and philosophy. Those wishing to meet Freud or Karl Kraus, Musil or Carnap, knew precisely in which café to look, at which Stammtisch to take their place. Danton and Robespierre meet one last time at the Procope. When the lights go out in Europe, in August 1914, Jaurès is assassinated in a café. In a Geneva café, Lenin writes his treatise on empirio-criticism and plays chess with Trotsky.
- Note the ontological differences. An English pub, an Irish bar have their own aura and mythologies. What would Irish literature be without the bars of Dublin? Where, if there had not been the Museum Tavern, would Dr. Watson have run into Sherlock Holmes?

But these are not cafés. They have no chess-tables, no newspapers freely available to clients on their hangers. It is only very recently that coffee itself has become a public habit in Britain, and it retains its Italian halo. The American bar plays a vital role in American literature, in the iconic charisma of Scott Fitzgerald and Humphrey Bogart. The history of jazz is inseparable from it. But the American bar is a sanctuary of dim lightning, often of darkness. It throbs with music, often deafening. Its sociology, its psychological fabric are permeated by sexuality, by the presence, hoped for, dreamt of or actually of women. No one writes phenomenological tomes at the table of an American bar (cf. Sartre). Drinks have to be renewed if the client is to remain welcome. There are 'bouncers' to expel the unwanted. Each of these features defines an ethos radically different from that of the Café Central or the Deux Magots or Florian. "There will be mythology so long as there are beggars", said Walter Benjamin, a passionate connoisseur of and pilgrim among cafés. So long as there are coffee houses, the 'idea of Europe' will have content.

- Europe has been, is walked. This is capital. The cartography of Europe arises from the capacities, the perceived horizons of human feet. European men and women have walked their maps, from hamlet to hamlet, from village to village, from city to city. More often than not, distances are on a human scale, they can be mastered by the traveller on foot, by the pilgrim to Compostela, by the promeneur, be he solitaire or gregarious. There are stretches of arid, forbidding terrain; there are marshes; alps tower. But none of these constitute a terminal obstacle. Europe has no Death Valley, no Amazonia, no 'outback' intractable to the traveller.
- This fact determines a seminal relationship between European humanity and its landscape. Metaphorically, but materially also, that landscape has been moulded, humanised by feet and hands. As in no other part of the globe the shores, fields, forests and hills of Europe, from La Coruña to St Petersburg, have been shaped not so much by geological as by human-historical time. At the glacier's edge sits Manfred. Chateaubriand declaims on the rocky headlands. Our acres, be they under snow or in the yellow noon of summer, are those experienced by Bruegel or Monet or Van Gogh. The darkest woods have nymphs or fairies, literate ogres or picturesque hermits in them. The voyager seems never to be altogether out of reach of the church-bell in the next village. From time immemorial, rivers have had fords, fords also for oxen, 'Oxfords', and bridges to dance on as at Avignon. The beauties of Europe are wholly inseparable from the patina of humanised time.