French Café Culture: A Microcosm of Society?

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## Contents

**Introduction** 3

**Blog**

- Overview 5
- Manifesto 6
- The beginning… 8
- Not yet a ‘Student of Café Culture’ 10
- Je suis arrivé 12
- A wander to the périphérique 14
- Fête de la Musique 16
- Around deceased cafés 18
- The Latin Quarter 21
- Picnics on the bridge 23
- A few conclusions and some ways forward 26
- Starting to feel a part of it 29
- Food for thought 31
- Judgement Day: Café Philo 33
- In search of the intellectuals 37
- The culture of the Paris Café 40
- Onwards 43
- Aix en Provence and the difference of the café 44
- The towns and villages of Provence 49
- Cheers 51

**Analysis and conclusions** 52

**Appendix** 57

**Acknowledgements** 58
French culture, and especially French intellectual culture, has always been linked to the café. From the political groups meeting and conspiring in the French Revolution, to the high culture of the 19th century, the cultural revival in the 1920s and 30s and the French Resistance in World War II. As well as acting as a centre of intellectual debate, the café has been the hub of French society as a place to meet, to drink, to discuss and to relax. But how has this long tradition translated to the 21st century; to 2009?

My investigation was split into two distinct sections: the search for young intellectual culture, reminiscent of that of the 1920s, and a survey of the fate of the café as a French institution. In both instances I had a head start through articles and books that I had read before I left. Firstly intellectual culture. In the 1990s there was a new phenomenon in Paris; the ‘Café Philosophe’; groups of professional and amateur philosophers who met weekly to discuss and debate all aspects of life and living. It originated in the Café des Phares in the young and exciting Bastille area of the city, and met with such success that similar groups were set up in other cafés across the city, across France and across the world. There also emerged variations on the idea such as psychology cafés and political cafes. I had read articles about the Café Philo, and one about a political café, but it had been some time since there had been any new articles. I had also been told by a friend about a youth political organisation which was literally underground; they met for lectures and discussion on the Metro every week. Despite continual searching, I did not meet anyone who had heard of this group in Paris itself. Things like that come and go, I was told. I had also done some reading on the culture of the French café in general, and had mostly come across articles about the closure of cafés throughout the country. In the international press there seems to be a feeling of impending doom about the future of the cafés in the face of a global and commercial world. The first Starbucks opened in Paris in 2003 and there are now 36 of them in the capital, another 12 in the surrounding area and 2 in Lyon. Clearly the dominance that this type of chain has in other countries is not
present, but the fact that it has met with success is significant and, for many, a terrifying prospect. This is because French society is in the café, both physically and metaphorically, and the death of the French café, or the invasion by international and American chain imitations, would deal a devastating blow to French culture, traditions, and the idea of a unique ‘Frenchness’ which is a great source of pride for large numbers of the French people. So I had a plan, some information and an apartment in Paris for a month, followed by one in Aix en Provence for a couple of weeks. I hoped by dividing my time like this I would be able to show a contrast between the capital and the southern small city, and also get a more complete picture of French café culture.

The written investigation will take the form of an internet blog which I wrote at the time, followed by a more deeply considered, analytical piece linking together all of the strands that I touched on in the blog and drawing some conclusions from what I have seen.
I decided to undertake to write a blog during my travels in France, in order that I could keep a lasting record of my trip and so that my friends, family and members of the Peter Kirk Fund could keep up with my progress as I went along. It also served as an aide-memoire for my thoughts, observations and feelings as I went between cafés, met different people and learned more about the French café culture. Through keeping a short daily blog, I thought, I would then be able to refer back easily when I eventually came to writing my final report. In reality, the blog grew and grew until it itself became a writing of great length and detail, albeit of a much more informal, personal and somewhat rambling nature. It is for this reason that the blog entries recorded at the time are presented in the following pages in their original form, unaltered and without any attempt to make them more discursive or formal. They show a very immediate and organic picture of how I was experiencing French café culture and my feelings associated with this. This is particularly useful due to the nature of the project itself. French café culture is not an objective entity to examine; it is a cultural element which exists only in the experience of it, and this is why my immediate thoughts at the time are as useful and hopefully enlightening as the more formal and analytical conclusions that will follow in the report. It is easy enough to research the number of cafés that have closed down, the number of them that remain, the existence of formal intellectual café groups and so forth, but what I intend that my method of research and presentation of my findings will supply is a more intuitive, subjective but hopefully accurate view of the life and nature of French café culture, both everyday and intellectual.

Because my blog was published on the internet, the record of my trip will now also remain indefinitely in its online home of www.benscafeblog.com.
I am going to France with an aim. I want to know if the French café still represents the flavour of society; the zeitgeist, a microcosm of political, cultural and social feeling. I certainly have lots of preconceptions about French cafés, and lots of ideas about what I am going to look for and how.

When I think about cafés in France, I think of them as being the hub of a community, a place where young and old meet together over a coffee or a glass of wine to discuss politics, art, music and everyday concerns: Honoré de Balzac's "parliament of the people." I think of a forum for ideas as well as a place to relax and enjoy good drink and good company.

In the past this was probably true; to some extent anyway. This idyllic and somewhat clichéd idea of the role of the French café is born from a long and illustrious history where people of great influence in every field; from Picasso to Marx to Hemingway sat together (though I would suggest not this particular trio) in the cafés of Montparnass and Montmartre in Paris with their sketch books, manifestos and novels, and changed the world. Equally, the French Revolution saw its conception in similar cafés and meeting houses, and the French Resistance of the Second World War operated often through cafés across the land.

But does this role continue in 2009? Is the vision that I have put forward outdated, outmoded, clichéd, stereotypical? Although the above represents my currently uninformed view of the French café, this is certainly not what I expect to find. The idea of a café culture exported from France has become a worldwide commercial phenomenon in the form of Starbucks et al, but has this French success turned out to be the downfall of real French cafés? Has there even been a downfall? I fear
so. Or at least a downturn. New licensing laws, smoking bans and financial difficulties have made the existence and success of French cafés all the more difficult. Could it be that the cultural and political forum that has existed in the most unique way in French cafés has now moved elsewhere? Has my generation embraced the values and lifestyle associated with this great institution?

The last point concerning my generation is one in which I am particularly interested. I read everywhere about the decline of the traditional café, but is this purely those that have refused to move with the times? Historically the French café has served a purpose for the particular time and generation that frequents them. Today, do there exist cafés which have adapted and modernised, not into globalised chains of coffee shops, but to a medium that suits the new generation of twenty-first century, culturally engaged, politically shrewd citoyens. For France remains a hugely politically astute country, with an 83.8% turnout for the first round of the 2007 Presidential elections. Has the café managed to retain its place in that political forum, withholding at least some of the traditions which characterise it in the popular imagination? What is the relationship that young people have with café culture?

I am going to sit and observe. And ponder. And talk to those that are in the cafés, as well as those who are not. What sort of cafés are the most popular, or the most lively? What drinks are they serving? What food, if any? What are the clientele like; their age, gender, job, political views? Are they locals? How long have they been sitting in the café for? Why? What are they doing: conversing, writing, reading newspapers? What newspapers? What do they think about the role of the café?

There are many questions to be asked, many cafés to be frequented, many opinions to be heard and many espressos to be drunk before I find what I hope to be something close to an understanding of French café culture in the 21st Century.

I hope that you can follow this blog and make that journey with me.
The beginning...
Tuesday 5 May 2009

So yesterday’s entry to the blog wasn’t so much of an entry than, as the title suggests, a Manifesto. I wanted to start by setting the scene for what I am doing in France and why. It was a very serious affair I know, so this entry is to atone for that. Over the coming weeks and months I will be keeping this diary as much as possible, hopefully most days while I am actually away, and it will be a mixture of real observations that I make that will go towards my project and informal chats about what I have been doing and seeing (with accompanying photographs). Incidentally, the photos attached to these bloglets (I fear they cannot yet be called a real blog, this is after all only the second entry), are ones that I have taken on previous trips to Paris and France. Once there, I intend to have the best picture of the day in their place. Hopefully from the hours milling around cafés and the areas which house them I will see and hear things that will prove entertaining anecdotes to relay to you.

To start with; an update on where I have got to with sorting out my investigation. I have accommodation in Paris booked for a month (although not yet paid for... Parisian estate agents are quite a difficult bunch) in the Bastille area. According to a friend, this is the most lively and young arty area of Paris; what Montmartre used to be and Montparnasse before it. I have dates set and flights booked. I know, I shouldn’t be flying. I would have loved to have got the Eurostar, it is so much nicer and better environmentally, but being a needy student I just couldn’t justify the extra cost. It is more to do with the shamelessly low flight costs than outrageous train fares. I have read articles and am reading books about the past, present and future of the French café and I am putting together ideas (as seen in the Manifesto) about what I think, what I expect and how I am going to go about it.
From Paris I intend to jump on the TGV and head down to Aix en Provence to compare the role of cafés in a smaller, hotter and more southern town. Then to a village to complete my survey of different types of places and their cafés.

A few words about the website. As I said I will be updating it as much as possible with new posts and pictures. It has all the mod cons you would expect: you can subscribe to my RSS feed, Podcasts (if I do them...) and leave comments on any of the blog (or bloglet) entries and photos that you feel are noteworthy for their astuteness of observation or elegance of phrase or composition, or their complete lack of these qualities.

I can’t wait.
The reality is that I am not yet a ‘Student of Café Culture’ as the blog boastfully proclaims. I am in fact just a normal student at the moment. And a normal student with exams at that.

The life of a student is certainly an enviable one for the most part, but one time when this is certainly not the case is during exams. The normally upbeat and friendly atmosphere around campus turns to one of solemn fatality and in extreme cases, blind fear. It is for this reason that there has not been a blog for a while.

To add to this stress, I still have yet to pay for my accommodation in Paris. I have tried, oh I have tried, but I find myself in the bizarre position where I want to pay more than they want my money. The estate agents have seemed less than enthusiastic to deal with me at all; respond to my emails or make any arrangements since I handed over the agency fee a couple of weeks ago... Anyway, I suppose I should be happy to spend some more time in the company of a relatively healthy bank balance before it all disappears as quickly as it arrived.

I have also been starting to read articles and books regarding my subject matter: the French café. There have been some really good ones, especially with regard to the fate of the café in the era of chain multinational café corporations, the smoking ban and the ‘credit crunch’. I also read a fascinating article about a type of café that has emerged called a ‘café politique’, a political café where young people meet and discuss major issues such as, in the example in the article, the role of Europe and the EU in modern politics. There apparently also exist ‘café philo’ (philosophy) and similar ones for psychology. I contacted the journalist who wrote the article, John Lichfield, and he has been really helpful in pointing me in the right direction.
So I have started now, officially. I have done some reading. I have a contact. All I need now is the cafés. And to do my exams. Now I must return again to the reality of my current student status: ‘Not in a café’.
Yesterday I arrived in Paris. My apartment in the Bastille area, on the cusp of the 11th and 12th arrondissements, is beautiful; just the right size, clean, bright and airy. I almost have a rooftop view from the lofty heights of the fourth floor, up a beautiful winding staircase in the 19th century building. The door to the building is one of those that I have always wanted to live behind; just a door with decorative iron bars behind which are the post boxes, a small courtyard and the staircase. Perfect.

This morning was a bit grey, but it soon brightened up and I spent some time perusing the nearby Marché d’Aligre; a really lively fruit and vegetable market which I was told was the cheapest in the city, and this proved completely right. Tomatoes at €1 per kg, peaches and nectarines at €1.50/kg, lettuce at €0.75, and all of it fresh and delicious. After coming home with arms of food, I discovered that there is another area of the market, covered, which has a wider range of produce including meat, fish and cheese. I will be there tomorrow to check it out. I have also read that there is a popular wine bar just by the market which gets really busy, especially at weekends, and also serves charcuterie, cheese and oysters. I am not usually one for wine mid-morning but ‘when in Rome’ and all that...

I then went to explore the city. With very ambitious plans to go everywhere in one day, I inevitably failed, but nevertheless managed to see everything from the Place des Vosges to Notre Dame, Les Halles, Centre Georges Pompidou, Louvre, Place de la Concorde, Arc de Triomphe, Eiffel Tower, Les Invalides and Montparnasse. Phew! In hindsight I didn’t do too badly. I ate my home-made camembert and saussisson demi-baguette in a pretty little square in which the impressive and newly renovated St-Jaques Tower sits, and from where the above picture is taken. Of course, I kept my eyes out for any café action as well. The area I am in seems to be reasonably un-touristy, especially in the daytime, so I think that the many cafés around might be of use to me. At a cursory glance
they seem to have the requisite number of gnarled old men drinking coffee, smoking, chatting and reading the paper to qualify as authentic! As I walked further towards the centre, the cafés became certainly more expensive and more tourist orientated. The reason I went to Montparnasse is that it is famed for it’s cafés. It was here more than anywhere else that the likes of Picasso and Hemingway met to drink and socialise. I am currently reading The Sun Also Rises by Hemingway and it was pleasing to see that I recognised many of the names on the café fronts as those from the book. From the outside they seemed shadows of what I imagine and understand their former selves to be. I think I may dedicate a day to going to a few of these cafés and having a look, perhaps going back at different times of day, otherwise staying myself throughout the day.

Tomorrow is Saturday, and I am interested to see how the composition of people in the city changes at the weekend, especially in my area which I see as more local, especially within the cafés. I also hope to finish my tour of Paris by foot, by returning to Montparnasse where I left off, heading through the Jardin de Luxembourg, the Latin Quarter and up up up across the river, beyond Opéra to Montmartre. This used to be the chic and arty neighbourhood of Paris, but I am told that nowadays this is far from the case. Tourists galore but hopefully a good view of the city from the Sacré Coeur.

I will be putting up any pictures that I take during each day in the Photos section of the website, so make sure to keep looking back. From now on, this blog will also be attempting to be updated daily. We shall see.

A demain.
With best made plans of what I was going to do, I did very little of it today. Realising that there was little point in going to the Latin Quarter (thus named because it is the traditional university area - the place where Latin is taught) on a Saturday when there would be no students there, I instead decided to start the morning with a walk East of Bastille along the Promenade Plantée. This pathway flanked by trees, bushes, flowers and other bursts of colour runs from the Bastille Opera House in an easterly direction, initially along the top of a viaduct, underneath which is a long row of arty shops, though I did not manage to see them from my lofty heights on the Promenade. It was dominated by runners in either direction, but people walked and sat on either side of me as I made my way to what I thought would be the Père Lachaise Cemetery. It was while walking that I encountered my first youthful arty types; three young women, student age, sitting at different levels on a bench reading poetry aloud to one another. Unfortunately there was no nearby bench to sit on inconspicuously and have a nosey, but it demonstrated that they do exist. So that is a start. It has recently become clear to me that my first objective for the investigation should be to try and find out about youth artistic and political movements if I am to understand how cafés, formally so integral to these sort of avant guard groups, are or are not a part of them today.

To cut a long story and a long walk short, I had got confused with my piecing together of maps in the guide book (this area of Paris is not covered in my handily laminated tourist map), and the road that I thought would take me to the famous cemetery, long-term residence of Oscar Wilde, Chopin, Jim Morrison and Edith Piaf among many many others, in fact took me only to the périphérique in the far eastern extremity of Paris. Surrounded by only high rise buildings, the roar of traffic and a complete absence of bus or Metro stops, I decided that this was not the most congenial place to hang out alone on a grey morning, so retraced my steps to a previous Metro and made my way to Montmartre.
Montmartre was as I expected. Rain spat from the sky as if trying to cleanse this formally chic and arty area of its sin in selling out to the gift-shop-tourism that it has, or at least cleanse the streets of the huge amount of dog litter that covered it, more than any other area of Paris that I have yet experienced. I have been to the Sacré Coeur before and it rained then too. Maybe it is a continual cleansing process. The shops that line the pretty roads sell quintessentially French tat at rip-off prices, but that is what is to be expected I suppose. Montmartre is a small area so this small amount of ruining is enough to be fatal. I wandered away from the tourist trail but the place seemed dead; soulless. There were very few cafés, and those which did exist seemed to be more of the same rip off tourist affair, just not as well placed as the rest. This is seemingly the only way to try and make money where there is a lack of much living life. I hope this is unfair and untrue. At the top of the Butte Montmartre, by the basilica, I looked down on Paris. It is a nice scene but not spectacular. Perhaps what makes the city so beautiful from ground level is that it is so low rise and beautiful in its details rather than in the grand scale of it all. The Centre Georges Pompidou was clearly visible, and on closer inspection Notre Dame, Opéra, Louvre and Musée d’Orsay were also. The looming figure of the Tour Eiffel was hidden by the trees. Tourists took pictures, surrounded by the rubbish dropped by tourists before them. I decided to leave.

I walked down the hill, stopping at Opéra and to buy some chocolate that I had been recommended, and made my way to St Germain de Prés, where I had decided I would finish my day by seeing Les Deux Magots; one of the most famous cafés of the 1920s/30s era. The café is set in a pretty square, unfortunately under construction on the road, with a church, and one of the most fashionable streets of the bygone times; the Boulevard St Germain. The café itself visibly retains much of its former grandeur with a large awning, tables lining the street and waiters wearing bow ties. I looked at the menu. An espresso or other coffee was €4.50. I decided to give it a miss. The tables outside were filled with people reading maps and guidebooks, and a cursory glance inside showed that no one was drinking at the zinc (bar) and no one was talking to the staff. I do not think that this is the place it used to be, or the sort of place where I need to be looking for signs of café culture. Of course this is what I had been expecting; in the Paris of mass tourism, the past masters have not retained their greatness. So it must have moved elsewhere, and I intend to find it. Tomorrow is the annual Fête de la Musique, with free music concerts, mainly in outdoor venues, across the city. I intend to take full advantage.
The 21st June is la Fête de la Musique - World Music Day, and the French, as the first country to take up this initiative in 1982, celebrate it more than anyone. According to the press, 15 000 free concerts were arranged around the country, with many of these in Paris itself. From the middle of the afternoon, the city was pulsating to one rhythm or another, which got faster and crazier as the night progressed.

My day started with a walk through the Marché Bastille towards Place de la République, Oberkampf and the Canal St Martin. I didn’t have any money to spend in the market, banks are terrible at transferring money, but it was alive with the bright colours and appetising scent of fruit and vegetables, fresh seafood, rotisserie chickens, pigs, rabbits, anything that can be rotisseried, and packed with people both local and not so local. I had known about the Canal St Martin, my ultimate destination for the morning’s trip, only from the film Amelie, in which Audrey Tautou (Amelie) goes to the canal to skim stones for relaxation. The area was very pretty, with tree lined boulevards leading to the lock on which Amelie stands, and the canal beyond. My guidebook told me that this area had a great sense of community, and this was evident in the comings and goings of people along the canal and in the surrounding area. It felt calm, yet still retained the Parisian flavour in its buildings and authentic,arty feel. I liked it. There were a few cafés around, most notably the Hotel du Nord, which was so named as it offered a refuelling stop for the barge operators coming from the north. The main buzz however was around the park and the setting up of speakers and equipment for the evening of music ahead.

I walked down the Jardin du Luxembourg to bask in the sunshine and try and see some of the music, though with little success. The park was full of people picnicking, reading and just sitting and chatting. There is only one strip of grass in the park which you are allowed to go on, and this was given over mainly to groups of young Parisians; the rest of the park was full of seats which
people had pulled into tanning vantage points. As the evening drew in, I left the gardens to meet my one Parisienne friend and her friends for the evening. By this time the city was really starting to buzz. Throughout St Germain, jazz musicians performed on the streets, rock bands played from the entrances of cafés and bongo groups tapped away rhythmically in corners. People flitted around from place to place, stuck in the excitement that was overcoming the town. Our target was the Pyramide du Louvre, the space under the great glass edifice which constitutes the entrance to the museum. Finding an alternative entrance to bypass the enormous queues, we sat cross-legged on the marble floor with 2000 other people and witnessed the most compelling recital of Stravnski’s L’Oiseau de Feu by the Orchestre de Paris under the direction of the legendary composer and conductor Pierre Boulez. It could not have been more perfect. The concert started at ten, and the sun reflecting on the bright stone of the Louvre above us melted away throughout the concert, leaving a beautiful twilight through the towering glass. The music was sweet and powerful, and it seemed that the orchestra were revelling in their own sounds filling this most amazing of spaces. One of my new found Parisian friends described with fervour how the concert represented everything that Boulez stands for; the old meeting the new, classical music meeting with his revolutionary style of composition, reflected in the antiquity of the Louvre palace and the modernity of the pyramid. ‘Boulez is over modernity though’, she added. The recital ended and the audience erupted to their feet and leapt with applause until an encore was played, presently erupting again for amounts of time that should be measured in fractions of hours. This may not have been café culture, but it was the most amazing reflection of the passion of Parisian arts.

In the most drastic change of scene we made our way to Montmartre, which the day before I had heralded as lacking in the very soul which had made the earlier evening so special. But this was a completely different Montmartre to that which I had see just hours before. The dead cafés which I had seen previously now spewed with excitement and energy, as rock bands and mainly electro DJs played loudly to huge crowds of young, electric Parisians. This was exciting young musical art, and the café was at the centre. Talking to a Parisian mec (guy), I asked what Montmartre was like normally at night, telling him about what I had seen in the daytime. He agreed with what I had seen, and said that on a normal evening there would be a few people drinking, but nothing like this. This was far from a normal evening in the French capital. On this token, I think I will go back to Montmartre one evening and see what it is normally like. It had been a great evening, and I had met a lot of great people; and they are Parisian people who seemed to know a good deal about the sort of youth culture I am interested in tracking down. They told me about the existence of a café philo (philosophical) in my area and am going to try and go there in the coming week. I am meeting John Lichfield, journalist for the Independent tomorrow as well which I am really excited about. The time in Paris is going well, and the project is really starting to get off the ground.
Yesterday I got in contact with John Lichfield, ‘Man in Paris’ for the Independent again. We arranged to meet this morning at his local and favourite café near the Champs Elysée, and he sent me an article in dense and challenging French, written 20 years ago about the existence of literary cafés here and there around the St Germain area of the city. The article described how some writers had been working in the cafés in the way that had been the case in the illustrious past, though not so much in literary circles and discussions, rather just working there. It was a start. The article talked about the reasons for decline in literary cafés; citing the movement of discussion from cafés to private houses, and then to the publishing houses of books and then magazines. But it also named a few cafés which had been active at the time of the late 80s.

I met John Lichfield at the café, the metro had been late because of people on the track further up the line, but apparently this is normal on a Paris morning. We had a coffee and talked about what I was doing and what his feelings were about it, before talking to Mme Cathy, the owner of the café. This was not a ‘culture’ café in the sense of being political, literary or philosophical, but a normal, traditional place which had not seen re-decoration since probably the 60s. The seats, the bar and the terrace were exactly as you would expect; slightly shabby yet full of character. Some people sat outside in the sunshine, others at the bar reading the papers, others chatting convivially to the staff. It wasn’t so busy; Cathy said that it was because of the time of day. The early mornings would be dominated by business people of the surrounding offices, then a little later mothers would come in after having dropped their kids off at the local school, then a lull until lunchtime when the café would again be full of people, this time eating. I asked her if many young people came to the café, she said they didn’t. It wasn’t really the area for that many young people, but she said they tended to prefer the Starbucks across the street. There they could buy a coffee to take away. I think this is a reflection of a changing of lifestyle within the culture, moving away from a laid back way of life in which there is time to sit in a café and to have a couple of hours off for lunch, towards a more fast-
paced, less French, more global and more American city lifestyle. Contrary to what I had thought, John said that in his time in Paris he could not remember a time when everything shut for a couple of hours at lunchtime; something I had thought to be very French, and he told me that there is an ongoing debate about whether there should be more openings on a Sunday. Life is certainly speeding up. I later met John Lichfield’s son who had been to school in Paris. He said that this sort of American culture is cool among French youths. The global consumer culture that Starbucks represents is fashionable, and so young people more and more turn away from their café heritage to the rich and soulless multinational chains. I find this very sad. He said that at his school there was no Starbucks nearby, so they did used to go to the café or the boulangerie after school, but if there had been one, he supposed that it would have been the cool thing to do to go there. And perhaps by now there is one there. Starbucks in Paris is growing and growing. More stores are opening as smaller, more traditional cafés are closing. Cathy also told us how the ban on smoking had affected her business. I had read all over the press about how a huge percentage of café business had been lost due to the ban, but Cathy said that this was only a temporary problem. Initially, she said, the people who had been having three coffees in the morning with their cigarettes had been having a coffee, going outside for a smoke and leaving. Now people are used to the ban, these regulars will have a coffee, go for a smoke, return for another coffee, smoke and so on until sufficient caffeine and nicotine levels have been reached that they go off to work. Cathy was really friendly and as we left I thought I would probably be back to ask some more questions later in the stay.

John then took me off to seek out a café that he had been a guest speaker in five years ago, when they would run regular Café Politique nights of discussion. It was about this that I had initially contacted him, wondering if he could remember the name of the place. He couldn’t, but he could remember where it was, so it was there that we went. But it was no longer. The café had closed down and been replaced by Paradis du Fruits, a smoothie bar which now has nineteen locations across the city. Instead we went to the Café Beaubourg by the Centre Georges Pompidou. Apparently the centre itself is known to locals as Beaubourg, due to its location in the area of the same name. The café is apparently quite famous, and keeps its prices high, John suggested, in order to keep out the riff raff and tourists that it could so easily attract. The café was not that busy, but many of those who were there were business people, working alone or in groups with piles of papers and laptops. This is apparently quite unusual, and I think perhaps inherited from the same culture that exists with Starbucks. It is also, I feel, symptomatic of the speeding up of the French culture; even when in a café, a place of relaxation and slowing down, they are working and networking. The café itself was wonderfully stylised in a 1980s art deco way and the waiters wore pristine black suits, white shirts and black bow ties.

We made our way down to St Germain to find the cafés mentioned in the article I had read the day before. I hoped that my continual questioning of French life, views, politics and café-related culture was not becoming tiresome, but I was loving the opportunity to ask a nearly-genuine and certainly very knowledgeable Parisian these sort of questions. I also wanted to get a better idea about what life in Paris is like in general, as culture in cafés can only exist within a culture in general. We found Le Twickenham, perhaps a reference to the Rue des Anglais on which it is situated and took a seat while waiting for John’s son to arrive. There was a woman outside writing in a large notebook, which could have been anything, but apart from that there was no sign of any literary goings on. Sitting down to eat we asked the waitress if she knew anything of this sort of culture attached to their café, but she was Polish and had only been working there a few months and the owner who could have known, was out. There was certainly no sign of it as we ate, though a whole mix of interesting looking people, from cherished regulars to suited businessmen to a full-on Priest in all
the gear did arrive as we sat there. John’s son will be working at an Irish Pub over the summer, and I arranged to make a visit some time. The Irish Pub is apparently quite a phenomenon in Paris, and not just with ex-pats. The French youths like the foreignness and the dark and alcoholic atmosphere. Within the sphere of drinking establishments, there surely cannot be anything further from the traditional French café. Perhaps this is an act of rebellion. He also knows some people who might know about philosophical cafés, and told me he would investigate. The French, he said, like to think of themselves as being intellectual, so even in a normal situation, in a café or otherwise, deep and conceptual discussions are far more commonplace than in Britain. I wondered why this was the case; Britain has a fear of seeming intellectual. Of course there are ‘intellectuals’ in Britain, but they are not grouped as such. They are theatre directors, composers, writers, never ‘intellectuals’, John pointed out. Perhaps this is why café culture existed in the first place in France, these people could group themselves together and be grouped as such by others. The naming of them is in itself a collectivity, an identity and thus a reason to coexist. As France becomes more global and less ‘French’, perhaps this is being lost; these categories disintegrate. More likely I think is the idea that the café is too local a stage for discussion. In the modern age of publicity and international fame, discussion in a small café, or a small area of cafés is not enough. It has to happen with spotlights attached, with global coverage, with a book deal, a film deal or a deal with OK Magazine. A blog like this one is a perfect example. It is not good enough these days to keep a diary, it has to be public, it has to be read, commented on, Facebooked to your friends and broadcast on Twitter. Perhaps this is an over-exaggeration; after all, the perfectly reclusive and alternative artist or thinker of any kind still exists, but perhaps less and less. If the French Revolution were to happen today (I am not suggesting that this blog might be incendiary enough to cause that), would it be organised through networks of cafés? No. It would be most probably be done through the aforementioned internet channels. We can see that with the happenings in Iran at the moment. Perhaps the technological, global age has meant that many artists and thinkers have no desire to sit and discuss and more, no desire to share their ideas, and no desire to keep their work among themselves.

John Lichfield and his son left me, they had been so kind, accommodating and helpful, and I went to scout out the remaining café on the list from the French article. It was a hotel in the St Germain des Pres area, and emblazoned on the outside was ‘Hôtel Littéraire’. I was obviously hopeful, until I got inside. It was very posh, and the bar was very empty. The receptionists, curious to my presence wandering around looking confused and saddened, explained that the place used to be frequented by literary types, but then it was renovated and now they essentially just dine out on their famous and popular past, with pictures of long gone masters on every wall of the entrance hall. It had been a hugely productive and interesting day, but mostly because of finding that nothing remained of the intellectual culture, at least in the cafés that we had visited. John Lichfield affirmed what I had previously been told about Bastille, my area, being the place for youth and the avant-guard, so maybe somewhere more close to home should be my next port of call.
I started the day by reading a really interesting article from Le Monde in 2006. It was mainly a potted history of the popularity of the Parisian café, detailing the movements of the likes of Picasso, Trotsky and Hemingway. The first real Parisian café opened in 1672, and by 1781, it was estimated that there were 700 cafés in Paris, testament to the quick and widespread popularity of both the drink and the social space. The revolutionary likes of Robespierre, Danton and Marat frequented cafés in the St Germain area of the city; a political birth which surely developed the cultural development to follow. The era of the artists started in the middle of the 18th century when Manet, Monet, Degas, Renoir, Van Gogh, Toulouse-Lautrec and Cézanne among others including writer Emile Zola, would meet initially every Thursday around two tables in an underground salon on Boulevard de Clichy, and later in Pigalle in Montmartre, to discuss and appraise. The area of popularity then moved to the left bank, and to Montparnasse, with the Dome, La Rotonde, La Closerie des Lilas, La Coupole and the Select. Many of these were frequented by foreigners; Russians, Slavs, Spaniards, Germans and later Americans. It was partly for this reason that they were such centres of café culture; the Dome would get the newspapers of St Petersburg directly delivered for the delectation of the likes of Lenin and Trotsky. This was the era in French café culture of political exiles, impressionist and cubist art and the continuing popularity of literature, with the aforementioned Russian figures as well as Picasso, Cocteau and Hemingway. Culture then moved back to its origins in St Germain des Pres, with Les Deux Magots and Café de Flore, the French Resistance and the likes of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. The point of this long, but hopefully concise and interesting history is that café culture moved around. The article says that those involved are not faithful, even to their cafés, but it is probably fair to say that the sort of artistic types that create café culture are fickle. This is no bad thing, it keeps it fresh, but it also means that today, in a time where there is no obvious area of café brilliance, it is difficult to find where the sparks of brilliance and creativity could be residing. It is of course not only a matter of location, because it may not exist in the traditional café context at all, but it is clear that
geographical positioning is something that is important with changing fashions, especially in the arts. Location is also important at a time when (before the economy shenanigans at least) the bourgeois elements of society have been buying up formally ‘cool’ and fashionable areas, thus rendering them anything but. In Paris at least, there is also a stratum of society known as Bo-Bo - Bourgeois Bohemians - who are rich, yet also feel cool and bohemian. The article ended on a thoughtful point, which I will quote as accurately as my French will allow. In order to find the café culture in Paris today “you have to go off the beaten track, lose yourself, find the new places that no guide recommends, where you least expect it, perhaps on the street corner. There will surely be some there.” This is perfect. And I very much hope it is true.

I went down to the Latin Quarter in search of my street corner, although I was not expecting much. I had been told that these days it was not even a particularly studenty area, despite its name and the presence of most of the universities and Grands Ecoles of the city, as it had been bought out and brought up-market. But I was pleasantly surprised. It is a gorgeous looking area, with some slight hills, typically Parisian buildings and lively and pretty squares. There were also lots of cafés, and many of them were busy, even at a time of day which I was annoyed at myself for visiting at as I thought they would be empty. There were lots of students and young professionals, some sitting in groups around a table with, drinks, papers an Apple Mac computer and a copy of Libération, the most popular left-wing daily newspaper (this may seem to cliché modern student, but this exact scenario was played out in front of me). Other people sat alone reading, others were there for a chat, and there were few tourists around at all. In other words; perfect. There were a huge number of small libraries and bookshops, and one that was both a bookshop and a café. These places were invariably old buildings with every inch of wall space covered with well-organised-I’m-sure books, and boxes of cheap copies on the street outside that just could not be fitted into the tiny space. The university year has finished, so these were less busy, but I can imagine that in term time they get a lot of trade and I hope a lot of café trade as well. On the wall of a building was a huge painting of a tree, accompanied by a poem which seemed to be about the importance of having trees in the streets, but I am sure had some sort of deeper meaning which I will contemplate and perhaps mention again. If I say nothing more about it, it is because I am nowhere near arty and literary enough to understand its hidden depths.

I stumbled upon the Pantheon and took advantage of the Paris-wide museum and monument policy of allowing free entry for students under 26, to go and see a huge recreation of Foucaults famous experiment with a pendulum displaying the turning of the Earth, and the tomb of the most revered French citizens of the past 250 years. Among them lie great figures from Paris’ café past; the revolutionary Marat, the writer Zola, and thinkers Voltaire and Rousseau. The last two were both exhumed from their initial graves and placed opposite each other in the Pantheon crypt at the time of the French Revolution; something that Rousseau would have abhorred as much as he did Voltaire. When I came out it started to thunder so I made my way home. The Latin Quarter had had a great feel about it, and the food and drink was noticeably cheaper even than in my own Bastille area, so I shall definitely be back for a more detailed study. It seems to me that the places that I will give greater concentration to now are all in the east of the centre of the city, from the Latin Quarter on the left bank, Bastille across the river and Oberkampf and the Canal St Martin just north. If anywhere, this is where I will find my café.
While walking to the Musée d’Orsay along my local Rue Faubourg de St Antoine, I heard the
chants of a strike or demonstration coming towards me on the other side of the road. There were
about thirty girls of about 20 years old and wearing identical light blue shirts, marching with
placards, blowing whistles and chanting down the street. The placards sported phrases such as
‘Light and Liberated Women’ and ‘Light yes! Shrew-like no!’ Some of them were difficult to
translate, for me at least, as they seemed to rhyme at the expense of making sense. So some sort of
women’s liberation then? No. They were advertising Orangina Light. Taking a closer look, their
shirts were emblazoned with the Orangina logo as well as the back of their protest placards. In a
country famed for its love of strike action, this was a most French way to go about advertising a soft
drink. A short movie (!) of the march is on the photos page of the blog, along, as usual, with some
of the best snaps from the day.

I continued in the hot sunshine to the Musée d’Orsay, housed in the building of the old Gare
d’Orsay which was taken out of use after the Second World War. It had been built in 1900 for the
World Fair, but by World War II the platforms had become too short for the new trains, so it fell into
moderate ruin. In the early 1980s it was set to be knocked down and replaced by a new hotel, but
waves of public protest kept the stunning building alive, and it was converted for its current use. I
got to the impressionist section, where there is a fantastic collection of Degas, Manet, Rodin and
Monet. The exhibition is arranged chronologically, and I stopped at this point, just before the Van
Goughs and Toulouse Lautrecs, as I can return any time I want due to the student under-26s free
policy that I have mentioned before. I’m sure this is completely snobby of me, but I was also
getting annoyed with many of the people there and their habit of taking photographs of every
painting in the museum. I resented having to move out of the way for someone moving up to a
painting, taking a snap of it and moving on, without a second glance. One man was literally going
along the line of paintings taking a picture of the plaque introducing the painting, and then one of
the painting itself, all through the lens of his camera. He did not see a single one of the paintings with his own eyes. Anyhow, the exhibition, so far, was superb. Most of the painters, if not all of them, had been active in the café communities in the late 19th century, and some of the paintings were even of the very meetings that had taken place, or paintings that they had done of each other at work. There was a real feeling that these artists had been an intellectual community. A prominent theme, especially among the Degas paintings, was the cabarets and dance shows of Paris at the time. This will obviously also be a theme of the Toulouse Lautrecs later in the exhibition when I return. One of my fellow Peter Kirk recipients, Rachel Clerke, is doing a project on the subject of European Cabarets, and it will be interesting to see if her research takes her back to the same group of people and artists that are also such a big part of my research.

Predictably, after the museum I went to a café, this time in the local St Germain des Pres area. I had been there before in the early hours of the morning with some of my new Parisian friends, and it was busy even at closing time then. Now, in the late afternoon to early evening it was completely full. The café, which doesn’t display a name on the chipboard plaque above its open front, is a real student hang out, serving cocktails in surroundings reminiscent of more exotic places in a ‘Happy Hour’ that extends from 2 in the afternoon to half 9 at night. So they were rightfully busy. The service was brusquely Parisian and the people sitting there were almost all young, trendy and Parisian. There was no one working at this time on a Friday afternoon; they were all meeting socially for a drink and a chat. As I sat there I pondered the difference between this sort of social drinking, and that which goes on in England. The English pub is a fine institution, born for the traditions of an industrial, working nation. It is completely different to the French café. Pubs are places of drinking. They are dark and enclosing, smell of the alcohol they serve and facilitate ‘pub talk’. A quick search on the internet throws up lots of pages about pub talk; one website of this title being dedicated to ‘light-hearted discussion of pubs, jokes, football, anything’, another, from the Social Issues Research Centre, having a detailed description of the form of conversations is pubs. It talks about the pub argument or discussion as being most importantly something that is not taken seriously: “no strong views or deeply held convictions are necessary to engage in a lively dispute.” This is completely different to café talk, especially in France. Even in this cool café in the early evening, I overheard a deep conversation about the problem in Gaza and saw one girl take out a small notebook, presumably on her thoughts on the subject, to help her argument. A similar conversation in an English pub, though perhaps engaged in, would seem completely incongruous to the setting. This is not to say the pub is bad, it is just completely different. It is no coincidence that the recent rise in binge drinking among French youths has been simultaneous to the rise of the English and Irish pub. These are drinking institutions, cafés are places of relaxation, sociability and discussion. The whole of the French culture of embracing conceptual ideas and aspiring to at least sound intellectual that I discussed with John Lichfield a few days ago is intrinsically linked to the café tradition. If not that this discussion takes place in cafés, the café is symbolic of this state of mind and lifestyle. And the cafés are still popular. They are popular with the young Parisians so the café culture is still alive. I think that even if during this investigation I don’t find that there is any cultural base in French cafés these days, it does not mean that French café culture is dead. It is all part of a tradition of thinking and living that still very much exists. Many cafés in the capital are busy from breakfast to midnight and beyond. They transform during the day and night to suit the occasion, but they maintain the same ethos, and in the long evenings are still a home of exciting thought and creativity, even if not on a formal level. I later went into a Starbucks and asked what time they closed. On a Friday and Saturday they close at 11 at night. Even they are quite aware that they have to adapt to fit in with, even hijack the living culture and tradition that exists; that people want to sit in cafés and talk and relax and discuss, well into the evening.
I was meeting some friends from university for dinner in the cheap Latin Quarter. We had arranged to meet at the Louvre, and I crossed the Pont des Arts, a wide, wooden, pedestrian bridge, to get there. The bridge was crowded with people sitting in groups with a bottle of wine and a picnic, sitting and reading alone or soaking up the evening sunshine, practising dancing and playing guitars alone and in small groups. Every social and age group was represented from teenagers to old couples to families. It was incredible. There was so much energy and spirit and calmness which I had never seen so spontaneously and so unusually placed before. This was the sort of culture that I had been looking for. It may not have been high creative culture, though it may have been, but this was popular involvement cultural and social pastimes in the most perfectly Parisian setting. Looking at the picnics that people had prepared I thought I knew why. Drinks and food have become so expensive in cafés and bistro in Paris, and the difference in price, especially for wine, has become so great that, on such a sunny evening, people have found it cheaper and now just as sociable to meet here on this bridge. Sarkozy has negotiated a cut in VAT on eating out in France, though it will not come into effect until next year. I hope that this will go some way to bringing people back to the cafés, but for the moment I was enjoying the spontaneous gathering on the Pont des Arts, where I will certainly be going back soon with my own picnic (or pique-nique as it is so wonderfully called in French) in order to have a closer look.
The last couple of days have been full of little bits of progress amid some stagnation in my project. I got to the point where I was sitting in lots of different cafés of different types, looking at the different people and drawing different conclusions. It was all very interesting, but I was starting to feel that what the research was lacking was cohesion, and the emergence of any sort of great conclusions. Firstly, some of the things that I noted about people in the various cafés. Since John Lichfield told me that it used to be quite unusual to see people working in cafés; having meetings, looking over papers and so forth, I have noticed its occurrence more and more. In small local places, larger, more commercial places, more intellectual and more trendy bars and cafés.

I have also been to a few cafés in the evenings, and almost without exception they are heaving. Last night I had a wander through the Marais area of the city, and every café was full of people enjoying the evening with friends, notably smaller groups of friends than perhaps would be out in England, maybe in order that they can sit down together and have a proper conversation. There were also a lot of gay bars in the area, as Paris and especially the Marais has a thriving gay scene. These tended more to be bars than cafés however. As I noted in my previous post, the ability for the café to adapt throughout the day and night to suit the time and necessary atmosphere means that it becomes almost like a more relaxed bar in the evenings, so remains extremely popular. I have read many articles about the demise of traditional cafés across France, but it is those which are perhaps thought of as less traditional, or at least willing to adapt to their surroundings that seem to be thriving. This is nothing much to lament, the majority of these establishments continue the great traditions from which they are born, from coffee in the morning to lunch and beyond. It has always been this way; a glance at history shows that the popular places of the 20s and 30s were popular mainly because of their evening existence. So although it may be tempting to view these sort of cafés as less traditional, it is far from correct. For the café to have had a renaissance in the earlier decades of last century, it needed to become more contemporary, more cool and more adaptable to the needs of the
time. This is why cafés continue to be so popular, despite what you read. Yes, many cafés are closing and often as a result of uncontrollable factors such as the smoking ban, the change in licensing, the recession and the introduction of new, foreign institutions, and this is very sad. However, the tradition of the French café, from what I am seeing here in Paris at least, is not on the decline. Cafés of all types continue to thrive, and people continue to use them for similar purposes that they always have, yet there has been collateral damage which is very sad. But it does not mean that everything that is left is either a Starbucks, an Irish pub or a garish bar or club. Many are as they always were. I saw this with John Lichfield at his local café, and I have seen it over the last couple of days as well.

Yesterday morning I made my first steps towards the Café Philo on the Bastille. This is a place which I feel could be the key to making some real conclusions about more intellectual café culture. I went for breakfast and spent a good couple of hours sitting in the sun and watching the people. The sun is important. This café is on the western side of the Place de la Bastille, so gets the most of the morning and lunchtime sun. This certainly affects the popularity of a café at different times of day. When I arrived there were plenty of businessmen reading papers and sipping espressos, but they soon headed off, presumably to the office. The café however remained reasonably busy with a whole collection of different people, from holidaying families, to mothers chatting, to individuals reading papers and books. There were some people at the zinc, chatting to the staff, but most sat outside at the small tables in the sunshine. After nine o clock when the businessmen had left, there arrived a few people in their twenties, all separately, but all who looked the café philo type, if that is possible. Appearances are not as deceptive as often said. One was joined by a woman who could have been some sort of university lecturer or similar, and they looked over what appeared to be the girl’s dissertation together. I asked the waiter when the philosophical discussions are held. Sunday from eleven until 3. Very specific. I suppose in reality it is not this exact. He said that everyone is welcome and someone speaks to the group and then a discussion is stimulated from there; he implored me to come along. The waiter was nice; he turned round to talk to me properly, leaning on the side of the bar as if he was in no hurry to get off, as is very much the case with many waiters in this city, and answered my questions in sentences rather than monosyllabic grunts. I wished afterwards that I had pushed for some more information about whether people tend to meet there independently of the specific times, but I intend to return and perhaps have a coffee at the bar and pose some more questions. I will definitely be there on Sunday. Something else I intend to look into and consider is the fact that these sort of meetings now have to be staged especially by the café, rather than being spontaneous. However, as I have previously mentioned, the artists of the 30s used to meet specifically on a Thursday evening on a certain set of tables, so I do not think that this will necessarily pose too much of a problem in the identification of a true intellectual culture.

This morning I went to a more local, perhaps slightly tatty café on the street where my local market is for a coffee and a croissant, which I had to buy myself from the café next door. It was a wonderfully French and very local, non-touristy affair, and the waiter ignored my presence a few times before I caught his eye. Perhaps it was because he had seen me as a typical tourist, but as soon as I talked a bit of French to him he became hugely friendly and joked around a bit with me as well. I feel if I go back this might be a great place to have a chat about the French café in general, and he might be the right sort of person to tell me what I want to know.

A final few things that I have been doing, not particularly of café relevance, but relevant to French culture in general. I rushed out of my apartment yesterday at the sound of chanting coming through the window. It was a huge marching protest against the election decision in Iran which had
presumably come from Place de la Bastille and was presumably heading to Place de la Nation. There were hundreds of people wearing green ribbons, holding banners and chanting phrases like “Liberté en Iran” (Liberty in Iran), “Solidarité Internationale” (International Solidarity). It was very well organised, very passionate and very loud. The French have a reputation of loving to protest, but this was a great illustration of their readiness to demonstrate their love of the liberté that is so important to the history of the French nation. I also spent an enjoyable afternoon at the Paris Jazz Festival at the Parc Floral. It was blues weekend, the festival is every weekend for a couple of months, and the music was good to listen to lying on the grass of the impeccably kept park in the sunshine. The festival is organised by the mayor’s office which seems hugely active throughout the city. Another observation that I have made about parks here is the number of different people using them, especially for eating lunch that they have bought in nearby shops. With the price of eating in cafés so high and the weather so good, why not. This picnic culture is great, and I intend to study it more closely this afternoon in the Jardin du Luxembourg with food from the fabulous Grande Epicerie. Wish me luck.
Today I finally felt like I felt a part of this little part of France; like I was no longer a tourist and that I could have the confidence to talk to people properly on an ad hoc basis. This I think is partly to do with the language, and partly to do with people that I have talked to today who were friendly, open and understood what I was saying.

The day started with a quick, one euro espresso in a nearby small café. I stood at the zinc to keep the price down but also to try and feel like I was doing what a local would do. An old man came into the café before I had the chance to try and start any sort of meaningful conversation, but his mumbling which was difficult to understand gave me the impression that it was not often that young people came into the café. The bar man greeted him by his first name and gave him a hearty handshake, before pouring him a small glass of red wine without prompting. In other words; a regular. It is this sort of close and familiar relationship that differentiates what it is like going into a proper French café and a tourist one or a Starbucks, or somewhere that is just being run for the money. I have been to a place such as the latter and mentioned it in this blog, but I do not think in this context. It had apparently been very popular, and continues to be, though the new owners are not very friendly and not very accommodating to the young crowd that frequents it. Waiters hover over you impatiently until you order and payment is demanded immediately, rare for a French café. In this morning’s café there was no such rush, except for the fact that I was on my way to do a little bit of tourist-ing...

I have been to Paris a few times before, so have not needed to rush round too many tourist attractions so far. However, one thing that I had not done was see the catacombs. They were incredible. Only 20 meters under ground, they are below the metro, sewers and water supply of the city, and the tunnels are beautiful and spooky. Due to a restriction on the maximum number of people allowed down at a time, it was not too busy once inside, but I became as annoyed with photo
taking as I had done in the Musée d’Orsay a few days ago. I again add the proviso that I may just be being a snob, but it just felt that we were in this place of incredible atmosphere, morbid beauty and respect, and all people could think about was getting a picture of things they had not even looked at with their own eyes. I just wonder what they are going to do with all the photos when they get home. I managed to hang back and avoid the more annoying of the crowds, trying to translate some of the strange and macabre inscriptions along the passageway such as “For the dead there is only hope” and “Sometimes death is better than life”.

On returning to ground level it was hot. It has been for the last three days or so. Blue skies, little wind and hot, humid sun. I took the metro towards Montmartre, in the area of Boulevard Haussmann and Grands Boulevards, as I had realised that this was one area of the city that I had not yet walked around, and I was eager to escape the crowds of the centre. Not wanting to look at my map, I wandered, first up towards the seedy Pigalle area, home of the Moulin Rouge among others, and then south east down the Boulevard de Bonne Nouvelle. I was pleasantly surprised; the wide tree-lined boulevards reminded me of St Germain de Pres, though much more scruffy, alternative and multi-cultural. Many of the cafés served North African food, dispensed sheesha pipes and one was even hosting chess matches on outside tables. Something that I remember being mentioned to me, or I read, I forget which or where, was that there has been an emergence of nationality-specific cafés across the city. This was very evident in the whole of this northern area with names like Café Libya and similar. This is an interesting fusion between strong national culture influences, and the French café culture into which they are born, and one that I think could be important in the continuation of French cafés in the future. With more multiculturalism across most world capitals, especially Paris, the adoption of the French café culture into their own by these groups could take the café from strength to strength.

I finished the day with a drink in a café up the road from my apartment; the staircase to my door had been varnished and I was told to come back in an hour, so really I had no choice. I had seen someone on the internet singing the praises of this particular one, so I gave it a try and liked it very much. It still had much of the traditional signage, internal decor and zinc bar, and the waiter was friendly and laid back. An older couple, or not a couple, sat on the table next to me going through what looked like a dissertation or academic essay, scribbling furiously all over it. On the other side, a chic French-Chinese girl with an iPod and a silver case full of long cigarettes. Really an eclectic mix. That is the beauty of these sort of places. Tonight I am going to a Jazz Café in Montmartre; intending to incorporate music into the café culture in my repertoire so far.
The jazz club was excellent. It was a small café in the lower Montmartre or upper Pigalle area of Paris, just up the road from the Moulin Rouge, and downstairs there was what they called the Jazz Cellar. This was the old wine cellar; an exposed whitewashed brick tunnel, or rather a pair of tunnels, with a jazz band playing at the far end of one of them, and a bar in the other. I arrived about half an hour after it had started, which I thought was early, but already the cellar was packed with people sitting quietly and watching the jam. Performers swapped on and off throughout the night which meant we were witness to a whole range of music and instruments, even including a jazz violin. The fact that this was a jam rather than a performance meant that the whole experience was much more lively, interactive and friendly. People beckoned each other to join them on stage, and most of the performers obviously knew each other. The players were good, but not professional; rather they were good local amateurs, and the small club is obviously a great community centre, for jazz anyway.

The following morning I headed to the Louvre. I saw the pieces that it was necessary to see and had a wander through some of the rest of the gallery, but this type of art does not appeal to me as much as that of the Musée d’Orsay so I did not dwell for too long. The building itself is magnificent, with each room completely different but every one equally ornate. The high ceilings were covered with delicate paintings, angelic statues and royal symbols, the walls in contrast now an art gallery concrete colour. On the way to the museum I had popped into the Café des Phares; the Café Philo, for a bite of lunch. I had not been out for a lunch yet and it was amazing to see how busy and animated the place was on a weekday lunchtime. There was a great mixture of locals and tourists and the waiters buzzed around busily attending with unusual care to the needs of the customers. That evening I would again treat myself to a meal away from my flat, this time near the Eiffel Tower on the Rue St Dominique; a road which is home to a number of excellent restaurants. This café; the local-style bistro of acclaimed chef Christian Constant, served excellent food at a
reasonable price in a café which was self-consciously styled to be traditional. Within a minute’s walk from the café are two of Constants’ other restaurants which are both elegantly decorated and styled, yet this café goes out of its way to be slightly shabby, quirky and wonderfully homely. Strange pictures are crammed at odd intervals on the walls, the tables are pushed against the windows where people are meant to sit, the shelf above the old-fashioned bar displays the glass bottles of soft drinks on offer and at the top of the staircase was an old poster advertising Absinthe with a blurred and multiplied picture of Van Gough’s self portrait. And it was packed. By the time I left, people had been turned away and I heard the head waiter tell someone that there was a 40 person wait. But people did wait. They sat and stood at the bar nursing drinks, chatted to other regulars and locals and studied the menu written out on blackboards with chalk. With choices such as ‘devilled eggs from your childhood’ and rice pudding, it was undoubtedly hearty and thoroughly delicious fare.

It was dusky and I headed up the Eiffel Tower; it had to be done at some point. While on the second floor, the light was starting to dim and spotlights were beginning to illuminate the monuments of Paris; by the time I got to the top it was dark night and the city glistened below me. I spent longer than I had thought at the top working out where everything that I knew of the city was. The Bastille where I live, down to Notre Dame, the Louvre and its gardens, Opéra, the Arc de Triomphe and in the other direction the Pantheon and the Tour Montparnasse. I traced the roads with my eyes, walking them in my imagination and planning out routes that I have walked and those which I have yet to. A stunning sight. By the time I got off it was midnight. The metro shuts at 1am so I rushed to the nearest stop to get the RER back home with one change. After 40 minutes the first train arrived. It was ridiculous. I got to my stop to change and I had missed the last train by 20 minutes. Luckily I was not far from home, just the other side of the river, so I walked in the warm night air back to Bastille. The walk goes past the Jardin Tino Rossi directly on the left bank of the river, and it was overflowing with people. Some stood around playing music from their cars, while the majority in the park simply sat and chatted and strummed on guitars. Almost all were young, but the atmosphere was relaxed and controlled. It reminded me of a more exclusively youthful version of the Pont des Arts that I had seen a few days previously. Again I thought that with the economy as it is and cafés as expensive as they are, this is somewhere where people can have similar, yet even less formal meetings for chat, drink and discussion.

On 1st July, the rate of VAT (or TVA as it is called here), in France was slashed from 19.6% to 5.5%; a massive reduction. This is meant to stimulate spending and create jobs through this and other measures that have been introduced with the cuts. For me, this means that cafés should be cheaper and thus busier. It could not be better timing. However, businesses do not have to pass on the savings to their customers. I have so far seen a mixture of cheaper prices in quieter places, and no reduction in cost at places that were already doing well, and I imagine this will be the pattern everywhere. This should create an interesting spreading out of café business, and hopefully save many places from failure.

Incidentally, I also now have a plan. I will study three cafés in detail; the Café des Phares (Café Philo) as a bigger, more commercial café, a small café in the market that I frequent as a representative of a local establishment, and another café which I have yet to decide on. Over the next couple of days I will interview a few café candidates and choose a suitable place to represent the middle category. This should give me, over the next couple of weeks, a good overview of the different café strata. This starts with a Sunday visit to the philosophical discussion at the Café des Phares, and this will prove to provide great progress in my ongoing search for café enlightenment.
It felt a bit like judgement day. My last week has been filled with interesting findings and observations, at least I think so, but it has still felt like it had been leading up to Sunday morning and the Café des Phares, the Café Philo. Whenever I was planning how I should go about my research, in my mind it always came back to the philosophical debates that have been happening in the salon of this Bastille café since 1992. Whenever I started losing confidence that I was finding interesting, relevant and original material, I told myself that even if I was not, this would all change at the Café Philo. With regard to finding intellectual practice in cafés, every other avenue had become a cul-de-sac, and I was relying on the Café Philo to give me something, and give me somewhere else to go. All roads lead to Rome, and for me Rome had become the Café Philo.

So it was with excitement and trepidation that I made the short walk to the café just before 11 on Sunday morning. What was I expecting? I did not know, but I was hoping for a group of young,arty, deeply philosophical individuals crowded around tables in the salon. I was expecting to feel an outsider to an intellectual circle; almost hoping to be. With this in mind I had neglected to shave for a couple of days, pathetic I know, but I had been told the week before that I looked ‘inescapably English’ and that cool French guys have scruffy stubby beards. I was doing my part, putting the effort in, and in a naïve and rather sad way I hoped that this gesture would make them more open to including me in their group. I may look English, but at least I could try and look like an English version of one of them. Waiting to cross the road to the café I stood next to a girl who looked to fit the bill in my mind perfectly, and when the traffic stopped she hurried towards the café, but then straight past it. I entered and saw immediately that what I had hoped for was not going to become reality.

The salon was almost completely full, mostly full of men and women in their 60s and 70s with note paper in front of them and a coffee on the table, having lively chats between themselves. There
were a few younger people, in their 30s perhaps, and a couple of students my age. I managed to get a table by the terrace window, not quite completely in the action but there or there about, and took out my note paper as well and ordered a coffee; if the beard was not going to get me included, this was the least I could do. A man in his mid 60s went towards the bar and took up one of two microphones, welcomed everyone and read out some notices. There were other philosophical discussions going on around the city, and a Café Philo special film night. With the audience with their pens at the ready, hanging on every word that the man with the microphone said, I was almost expecting it to be announced that there would also be a Café Philo bingo night later in the week. This is of course very unfair. The microphones were passed round the room to people who wanted to suggest topics for the days discussion, and it was decided that it would be “J’ai peur de rien” - I am afraid of nothing. For the next two hours they solidly discussed the statement, focussing heavily on the grammatical facets of what it meant; whether ‘nothing’ was a negative (ne...rien is the French grammatical construction for ‘nothing’, but it was argued also that it is presented in the phrase as being a ‘thing’), and what sort of ‘nothing’ way being implied. Needless to say it was in-at-the-deep-end French practice for me, but I managed to get the gist of most arguments, which ranged from the interesting, to the insightful, to the pedantic, to those who obviously just wanted to hear their own voices, and everyone else in the room knew it. The man in his 60s, who I later found out was Austrian and took the role because it was decided that he could do it best, chaired the discussion; leading the debate around the room and clarifying points that had been made, and another man, perhaps in his 70s and clutching a book, walked around amiably yet with an air of authority. There was a woman in her 20s who spoke very well a couple of times, and was introduced as Alexandra, who was part of another café philo in St Cloud, one of the nearest suburbs outside Paris. I wanted to ask her more, but the discussion went on and on with no respite, and when I looked back she had slipped away. It was clear that most of the people in the room knew each other well. People were introduced by their first names without conferring, they laughed at each others’ points and chatted behind shielding hands. It was a social occasion.

The discussion finally came to a close at 1pm; the whole thing was quite regimented; I had been expecting more of an informal and rambling discussion, but it had been interesting. Events were wrapped up by a poet named Gerard who read a poem that he had written about the discussion as it had been doing on. This was obviously a regular ending and it summarised proceedings beautifully. I quickly cornered a man in his early 20s who had been sitting near me and who I had judged as being a regular, taking lots of notes and nodding along. It was in fact his first time. However, he told me he had found out about the café on the internet, but unfortunately did not know of anywhere else similar, or in other intellectual fields. He as surprised as I was about the age demographic and thought I should probably look towards the universities and Grand Ecoles if I wanted to find more youthful groups for discussion. This was probably true, but they had finished for the year before I arrived in Paris, and anyhow, you can find discussion groups in any university in the world; it is café discussion that I am interested in. Perhaps the two conflate here in Paris. It might be difficult to find out.

Then I went for it. The man with the book who had been flitting around the room during the discussion was wandering back into the café alone as I was about to leave, and I introduced myself and what I was doing. Immediately he invited me to sit down with him and ordered us both a coffee, which he insisted on paying for (“Do you have more money than me?! It is my wife’s money anyway”). “Je m’appelle Ben” I said, which literally translates as ‘I call myself Ben’. ‘I don’t call myself anything’ he replied, ‘it is other people who call me things’. Eventually, when later he gave me his phone number for if I or any of my friends were in Paris again, it was revealed
that his name was Egilfred Franchi, an Italian from Venice with a Norwegian first name who had been living in Paris for the past 52 years. He had a lot to talk about, and mainly about philosophy and life. He had been there at the first ever Café Philo at Café des Phares seventeen years ago, and had been good friends with the philosopher who started up the weekly meetings, Marc Sautet. I have seen some pictures from the early years of the Café Philo, led by the late Sautet, and it looks much more like I had envisaged the café would be like now; much younger, much artier, much more avant-garde looking, if that is possible. It occurred to me that perhaps the people from 1992 are the same people who were here today. They are not old people, they are just older versions of the people who where here 17 years ago, and this is surely only natural. Nothing has changed at the café since it started, Egilfred told me, and I believed him. Nothing had changed, and with that everything has changed. Time has moved on and taken the bright minds of the Café Philo with it, but their minds are still bright, though their bodies may have lost a little of their former sheen.

I had some questions that I had written myself to answer during the morning so I started on those. Yes, there was a regular group of people; about two thirds of the group, but the remaining third varied. Yes, there were always some younger people, he said, but they tended to be philosophy students who had been told to go by their teachers. Yes, the vast majority of the people there were interested amateurs, but from time to time, he said, real philosophers did make appearances and to help out. The questions I had were answered quickly, but did not lead to much discussion as I had hoped; instead Egilfred talked about philosophy. Philosophy, he told me, is for everyone. It is understanding that one opinion is not any more correct or valid than another, learning the difficult lesson that you are not always right and entering a forum where discussion is equal and open to everyone. I thought the last point was the most important to my investigation. These values that philosophy is based upon are also the values of the café. He agreed. The reason discussion happens in the cafés rather than in libraries or scholarly institutions is that everyone can come to a café, it is open, it is free. Discussion like this is for everyone, it cannot be locked away behind heavy old doors, the dim light of the morning in the salon is where this academia of the people lives. Socrates, he said, held his discussions everywhere in Athens, not in the universities, and not for a price. The philosophy at the Café Philo, as founder Marc Sautet had said it should be, is based on these same Socratic principles of inclusion, and that is why the café is the centre. I asked him whether he thought this sort of discussion went on without the rigidity of weekly meetings at certain times, but he said that this was necessary, and anyway, philosophy is in all parts of life so any discussion is philosophical. What I really wanted was to find out about somewhere or something where discussion was a little more fluid, a little more causal and a little more cutting edge. He said that he had a list of all the café philos in Paris, but not with him. I thought this sort of place, if it exists, would probably be off the radar of this older generation, however brilliant and proactive they undoubtedly are.

Towards the end of our discussion, which lasted about an hour, I was becoming tired with the effort of listening to and understanding so much French, and having to respond, and he was speaking a bit more quickly and less clearly. He started reminiscing about his youth; he had been an outstanding intellect by all accounts. Passing his early education in double time, his teachers progressed him two academic years per calendar year, he had been a victim of his own success as there was no local university that he could go to, so his formal education ended there. By the time he would have finished school at the normal rate, he could have gone to university, but, he said, “c’est la vie”. He had always been happy, but never rich, and had been helped out by others, including his brother who, as far as I could understand, was in the business of clothes making or mending. He was incredibly interesting and incredibly kind and friendly, and he took my questions and my project
seriously. By a long way, my conversation with Egilfred had the most important part of my investigation since I met John Lichfield ten days previously. He joked about the English and it transpired that the book that he had been holding was a history of the British isles. He had brought it with him, he said, without even knowing that I would be there; ‘fate’.

I thanked him hugely and bid farewell; I was exhausted and had a lot to think about.
The Café Philo changed everything. It was the moment when I realised that my search for the type of intellectual café that I had been hoping to find, was on its last legs. Doubtless the Café Philo was intellectual, but what I had wanted was the young, the avant guard and the more casual. Either this did not exist, or at least I was finding it terribly hard to come across. But there is a third option for the reason for my failure in this area, and this is the fact that I am conducting my research during my university summer holiday. Thus, the students here are in the same position. If the café culture that I dream of goes on amongst students, then it is not surprising that it has alluded me throughout my stay in France so far. It was through thinking about this conundrum that I started to wonder what sort of people I thought would be in the café intellectual culture. The candidates, as far as I can see, break down into three categories: amateurs, students and professionals.

Amateurs are intellectuals as a hobby, taking part in café discussion and dialogue as well as doing another job. There are presumably lots of people who fit into this category, and it is the existence of organised events, such as the Café Philo, and through the existence of intellectual circles that these people can be seen to form a group. However, I have yet to discover or hear of any informal circle of association, and my experience of the Café Philo showed me that although lots of discussion went on, and it was in a café, it was not made up of the sort of people that would herald in a new wave of café popularity; not the avant guard. Without any circles of association, the only way to discover such amateurs would be either through chance, or through the existence of geographical areas of particular association; those of the Montparnasse, Montmartre and St Germain des Prés of the past. No doubt throughout my investigation I have identified places of more interest than others in this sense, but nothing particularly concrete or outstanding.

Students are the next group. Students, cafés and discussion are things that naturally go together throughout the world, so finding these three things occurring together should not be anything too
remarkable. This is where it gets difficult; the definition of an intellectual café culture, and its
difference from normal student discussion. Of course, student discussion in cafés is important to my
investigation as a whole - café culture exists - but in this sense I am wondering about the existence
of specifically an intellectual culture. Anyhow, the investigation has so far not been forced into such
difficult quandaries for the aforementioned reason: it is the university holidays. I was in a café a
few days ago, discussing such a matter with a student from the Sorbonne. He said that the area
around the university itself was normally buzzing with students talking, discussing and working.
But they are on their holidays.

The final, and surely most hopeful category is professionals. The writers and thinkers of the past
were professionals sharing their ideas, work and feelings in cafés, so why not nowadays? I am
taking as a premise that the professional will be writing books, and so will gain their income either
solely through this or by subsidising it with other ventures; university professorship, lecturing etc.
Those who have the amount of success to allow for writing to be their only income will, more often
than not, be necessarily caught up in promotions, book tours, PR and so on and so forth, and those
who take on university jobs will be working in a role that requires more time in the office and less
time in cafés. Either way, it becomes more difficult than it was in the past to make time for café
inhabitation and discussion. The global world makes it necessary to secure relationships and have
discussions on a more international basis than in the salon of a small café, and the nature of the now
cut-throat industry means that writers and artists are more inclined to keep their ideas to themselves
and enter into discussion only with their publishers. Intellectualism has modernised with the world,
and they are no longer the young, free and successful artistic vagabonds that we imagine those of
the past were. My hope was to find a third category of people; those who are successful enough to
make some money, but do not desire the fame and fortune that comes with commercial success:
truly artistic artists. They would be my café perfection. But I have yet to find them.

In any case, I got my first taste of literary café meeting a few days ago in the legendary Café Select
in Montparnasse. I had resolved to spend much of a day in the area observing the old cafés that
Lenin, Hemingway and so on made their homes. There are the big three cafés; Le Select, La
Rotonde and Le Dôme, plus the restaurant La Coupole. Le Dôme is these days a Michelin starred
fish restaurant, with prices that match its food and its historical past, but as a café it seemed to me
hardly a player any more. La Rotonde was more buzzing, but still dominated by people eating and
considerably busier at these times of day. Of the three, Le Select seemed the most café-like and the
most authentic, so it was there that I made my base. It was busy throughout the day with a hugely
diverse crowd of people; businessmen, lone newspaper readers, tourists and couples. I pitched up
next to a particularly interesting group of men who were gathered around a pile of identical books,
and flicking through them with great discussion. My heart leapt. Pretending to read my newspaper, I
noted the title of their book and saw them flicking through, making notes and discussing in a way
which I eventually decided was of a relationship between a writer and a publisher. When I returned
home I looked up the title of the book and found a picture of the author, who was undoubtedly
present at the meeting. The book was also of cutting academic nature, but was old and ripe for a
new edition. Exciting, to be in the presence of such a meeting, and exciting too that it was
conducted in a café. This though, is what I had thought; meetings of literary intellectuals, and it was
over the publishing, or so I have assumed, of a book; nothing more conceptual or meaningful than
that. Business as usual.

Being in the surroundings of the marvellous Montparnasse made me think more about the
composition of people in the cafés, and prospective intellectuals, now in comparison to that of the
past when the café culture did exist. It came down to immigration and globalisation. A couple of weeks ago I talked at great lengths about the historical content of an article that I had read on café culture in Paris; the way that different immigrant groups inhabited different places, such as the Russians preferring the Dôme and the Americans the Select and Coupole, which still bear the subtitles of ‘Bar Americain’. Hemmingway, Picasso, Lenin... the striking thing about all of these famous Paris café names is that they are not French. Of course there are many French intellectuals that can be named alongside them; Jean-Paul Sartre and Edouard Manet to name but a couple, but the melange of intellectuals of different nationalities is what gave Paris its flavour, its excitement and its success. People came from far and wide because people came from far and wide. It was global before globalisation. And it was a very select group of people from across the globe. Today, with international globalisation, this idea has lost its uniqueness, and it becomes less international as a result, and less prolific. When I was there people were using the café; locals, Parisians, business people from elsewhere, and perhaps what they were doing was intellectual by nature, but it lacks the international stimulus to be really special and ignite the sort of intellectual culture that existed in the past.

Having said that, I was impressed and slightly surprised about how busy, and not with tourists, the Select was. It was the first time I had ventured into a café of the past masters, and it was great to think that they had sat in these chairs on this terrace or salon. But not today. It was busy, but I still did not find what I have been looking for. The Select had hosted an art exhibition opening a few days earlier, and the paintings still hung on the walls, a reminder of a cultural past that is even now slipping away. With that I decided to call off my active search for Parisian intellectual culture. The world of the intellectual has changed, and so the nature of the café. The title of my investigation is ‘French Café Culture: A microcosm of society?’ and so in this respect I think I can say yes.

These blogs are becoming longer and more irregular, and for good reason. I have been spending time picking around and piecing together ideas from different cafés, focussing on my three target cafés of different strata. This blog focuses on what I have discerned about the intellectual side of things, next is the turn of the way that cafés are used; the café culture of Paris.
I decided after my visit to the Café Philo that I would focus my investigation into the culture of the café in France in general by choosing three cafés in particular to study in greater detail. As I mentioned in an earlier post, I chose the Café des Phares on the Place de la Bastille (Café Philo) as a larger example, the Café Bouquet Haussman on the Boulevard Haussman and an unnamed café on the Place d’Algerie, next to my local market as a small, very local place. Taking this tact, I set out to observe each one at different times of the day; observe their clientele, their patterns of patronage, their reasons for being there, how they went about their stays, what they read, what they drank and so on and so forth. The plan fell at the first hurdle. I had already been to the café in the market for breakfast; it had been busy, very busy, with people sitting in the morning sun that their small outside seating area caught, people having animated conversations at the bar, the owner flitting about in a social whirl, serving, chatting and being generally convivial. It was evident that many were from the busy market which the café borders, and it was in this that the café proved difficult for my planned investigation. I returned to the café one afternoon, when people would be leaving work, intending to talk to the owner and the regulars who I assumed would be spending the end of their day there. However, the place was empty. Only the owner and a man who could have been his son were in the café, sitting at a table and looking together at a laptop. I walked straight past in puzzlement. Then a possible reason occurred to me; this café is associated in everyone’s mind with the market, which goes on every morning except Monday. At this time in the afternoon people have another café in mind for their afternoon coffee or something stronger. Different cafés serve different purposes to different people, and for different times of the day.

Instead I wandered to a small café on the Rue du Faubourg de St Antoine; the Brasserie la Camila, where I had been for a morning espresso some time previously. In the morning it had been busy with people doing just the same, and eating croissants from wicker baskets set out on the counter, now the mood was quite different. I arrived about half an hour before people would be leaving
work, and the salon and zinc of the café was very quiet; a man sat at a table sipping a coffee and a woman at another read a paper but left soon after I arrived. There were also the two barmen, an older man who worked the tabac at the entrance to the café, and a younger man who looked to be of North African origin who manned the bar. They were both tired, they kept saying to each other and the man at the table who spoke little between sips of coffee but did interject regularly with his opinion grunted almost under his breath. I ordered a coffee and stood at the zinc, hoping to be engaged in conversation which never came. It was not that they were rude, or shunned me for being much younger or much more foreign than any of them, it was just, I think, assumed that as I did not initiate conversation myself, that I did not want to talk. In the café you can act how you want; if you want to chat you can, if not, it is no problem. It is comfortable that way. People came in and out; a man ordered an Ice Tea and borrowed a paper from behind the bar to read, others came in for a coffee, a beer or a lemonade mint infusion. Many drank up straight away and quickly left; a demi beer in no longer than 5 minutes; others took their time and chatted to the barmen. Many of those who stayed for a drink were greeted by name by the barmen, some shook hands and for some the barman poured himself a small beer and leaned against the bar opposite for a one-on-one chat. They talked about anything; immigration, women and life in general. The friendship between the barmen and the clients was evident, and it made me think about how this relationship, and employment in cafés in general affects the café culture. There are hundreds and thousands of cafés around Paris, and around France, and they provide a great source of employment. The employees, and more often than not the owners, are not part time or fill in workers; students and school kids trying to make some extra money, they are big personalities within the community, they are well known and well respected, and they bring people into the café. The fact that people of the community work there, and the fact that this in itself is a reason for someone to go into a café means that the café culture upholds itself to some extent. There exists a delicate balance between employment, the people brought in by it and the maintaining of a successful café business. But this is not something I know much about, or should really dwell on.

A great amount of the business in the café came in through the tabac. During my time sitting and standing in this café, huge numbers of people came in, bought, and left. A pack of cigarettes cost on average €5.30, and many took non-French brands which I was surprised about. And it was not just cigarettes that they were selling. Along with the scratch cards, Lotto and Rapido (a lottery which is drawn every 5 minutes on a small plasma screen above the tabac) which I had expected, it sold a great variety of chewing gum, mobile phone top-up cards among many other things. I thought that this may have been the most profitable part of the café. I decided to talk to the barman; the older man who had moved from behind the tabac in order to chat to some regulars. He was not overly chatty, but I had thought to ask him about whether there are any younger people who came into the café. He told me no; I was an oddity. I suggested that the Starbucks down the road might have something to do with it but he disagreed, it was another café that the young people wanted to go to, one that opened until 2 in the morning. They closed at 8 in the evening, and this just was not attractive to a young audience. I could see this, but wondered whether the atmosphere in the café had something to do with it as well. Perhaps when people get to a certain age they start coming to this sort of place, as opposed to the 2am opening one, Starbucks or even the Café des Phares. Perhaps it is something of a rights of passage, once they start working. I remembered a conversation I had had with a friend at home who had graduated from university and found it very strange and difficult suddenly being in the ‘real world’ without the social networks that they had been useful throughout their life before. Maybe this is where the local café comes in, providing a sociable environment that starts at this time of life. None of my time spent in this café cost me much at €1 for an espresso at the bar, and €2.20 for a demi bière.
The next on my list was the Café Bouquet Haussman. I had already visited in the morning for my coffee with John Lichfield a few weeks previously, and then made notes in this blog. However, I went back at some different times of the day in order to note the change in feeling and clientele that Cathy, the owner, had told me about. I went for lunch, eating an outrageously French ‘assiette de cochon’, and saw the huge increase in business and a few tourist visitors around the lunchtime period, which then quickly ebbed away as they returned to work or the sights of the city. The evening drew in, and the workers returned for a coffee, but soon the café closed. It was busy at most of the key times of day, and in this predominantly business area it was clearly the right strategy not to open late into the evening. I went to the Latin Quarter and had a long conversation with a girl behind the bar in a café there, who told me that they had not been affected at all by the long talked-about failings of the French Cafés. Theirs is a highly residential area and a studenty one, so they open until the early hours in order to suit their regular clients. This is evidently the thing to do; suit your audience. This is the key to the success of cafés like the ones in the Latin Quarter and the Café Bouquet Haussman.

I headed back to the Café des Phares; my favourite and most frequented café. I have been, and documented, many times on a morning and a lunchtime, but I wanted to investigate an evening in this café at the heart of Bastille; itself a cool and well used hub of evening activity. It was busy, exciting and full of a vast range of different people. Young groups met around clusters of tables for a drink and a chat, people read the evening papers, couples met over a glass of wine and people sat alone relaxing in the evening. This café was busy at every time of day. Remarkable. During my whole time in Paris, I have yet to talk to anyone who is worried about the French café, or particularly their own café business. Perhaps when I go on to the rest of France, it will be a different story. Having made some concrete conclusions about the intellectual scene of Paris cafés, I feel that not enough have been made on the general café front. Many are obvious from the continuing blog, but I will delay making any sweeping conclusions until the investigation is over. I feel hugely optimistic about the French café, but this is Paris, and Paris is a world apart.

Make sure to check the photos section of the site for a couple from the amazing Bastille Day celebrations in Paris.
The last blog entry was very late, but this is because I have been on the road, and thus without internet access to update. I took the TGV (1st class! It was cheaper) down to Montpellier for a couple of nights to take in the cafés of a true Mediterranean town. It is a beautiful place, with fantastic winding streets, small squares and classic South of France architecture. The first night after I arrived after the long train journey, I walked into the old town centre and sat in a café at the top of the hill and relaxed in the setting sun. Most of the people were tourists and I did not learn much, but I was sure that the next day would prove fruitful. However, I was wrong. It was incredibly good luck and incredibly bad luck that the main day that I was in the town was also the day of the local festival. For this reason there were many people wandering around the town, many stalls had appeared selling all variety of foods, drinks and artisanal craft, but it also meant that the cafés were dead. It was a shame but a lovely day all the same.

I then took the train to Aix en Provence where I have now moved into my new apartment in a beautiful 17th century thick walled and big windowed French building. I have spent the arrival days getting to know the town and getting myself known in some cafés. There is a completely different feeling and arrangement of eating and drinking cafés, bistrots and restaurants to that in Paris, and I hope to be making some interesting observations over the next few days. For now, I sit back with my very Provencial Pastis and watch life go by from the cafés of Aix.
This has been a long time coming. My last blog was posted shamefully long ago, but for this I have good reason. When I left you, I had just arrived in the historic and beautiful city of Aix (pronounced ‘X’) en Provence and was settling in to life in the South of France, or the ‘Midi’ as it is known. Immediately there were differences to Paris, as you would expect. Firstly the climate. Situated about 350 miles closer to the equator than Paris, Aix was significantly hotter than my first stop on my investigation. Temperatures stayed consistently around and above 35°C (95°F) and with small, enclosed streets in the old town, this meant that it was often quite stuffy. The sun beat down every day that I was there, but the temperatures were not so high and it was not so humid that it was unbearable. Solace was to be found in the shade, and much of this happened to be in cafés. One of my favourite places to have a sit and a drink was a small bar tabac in the northern end of the old town whose outside area was shaded by a beautiful large tree, but most other cafés offered the artificial shade of canopies or umbrellas.

The second major difference to Paris was with regard to the way and pace of life as people went through their days. Whereas in Paris they are pushing for a Sunday opening for shops and many already practice this, Aix still operates on a much more old fashioned timescale. Sunday is off, as is Monday for most of the shops, and nearly all close for a good couple of hours over lunch every day they are open. As in Paris, there are plenty of people up early, but unlike Paris, they did not seem to be on their way to work. I hardly saw anyone in a suit throughout my stay, far fewer people on mobile phones, with computers, doing work, or giving away anything that suggested that they might be working or planning to do any work any time soon. It sounds like a cliché that the Mediterranean offers a slower, lazier pace of life, but there seemed to be a whole section of people who made being in cafés their whole day, every day. By the end of the fortnight I recognised people from their daily routines and could guess who I would see in different cafés at different times. I wondered if unemployment in the city was high, but it isn’t, or at least wasn’t before the recession (there are no
figures since last year). These people could afford to be there though, could afford to buy drinks and in no way looked like they were struggling. I wondered what work they could possibly do. I asked a man of this persuasion after I got into a long conversation with him, and he replied that he was unemployed. And so were his other friends that were with him. It did not seem to add up. Anyhow, this all meant that there was not a discernible pattern to the day as there had been in Paris. The Cafés were all busy at most times of the day.

Thirdly was the issue of tourists. Paris had had tourists throughout my stay, but by the end there were more and more as July slipped through our fingers. They were easily identifiable: lost, looking up and around them, walking slowly, looking at guide books, looking confused, and generally found in certain specific areas. And they were normally Americans. It was lucky that they were easily noticeable as it was important for my study that I knew who was what in a café, so to identify what was genuine and what was normal. This all changed in Aix. Undoubtedly there were tourists, but Aix is a popular tourist destination among the French, and not so much among those from overseas. This created two major differences. Firstly, a problem: it was not so easy to spot the tourists. They were speaking French for one, and on top of this, Aix is a much smaller and less intimidating place than Paris so tourists were on the whole not wearing the tourist look of bemusement that I had become used to. Equally, there are fewer ‘sights’ in Aix; the attraction of it is the beauty and history of the place, so there were less guidebooks and less confinement to certain areas for the majority of tourists. The second major difference meant that for the most part, none of this mattered. The French tourists brought with them their own conception of French café culture, their own experience of it and their own genuineness. The reason that I avoided tourists in Paris was that at best they were irrelevant to the study and at worst skewed the results, as they were in cafés for a break from sightseeing or to experience the café culture as a bystander. The French Aix tourists were in the cafés for a break, but due to the lack of sightseeing, it was more genuine, and linked with their own experiences of café culture in their own cities, towns and villages. In short; they were still French, and it is French café culture that I am interested in. They may not have been locals, but they were not to be and could not be avoided like in Paris.

The final difference was in the makeup of the town itself with regard to cafés, bars and restaurants. There were a lot of cafés in Paris. A lot. And they came in a number of different types: small, local café tabacs, larger local cafés and bistros, often serving food, and larger, often older, more touristy cafés and bistros. The majority of the places in Paris were of the middle category. Even many local cafés served food, and there were huge numbers of bistros which were bigger and more food-oriented still. This all meant that, although there are obviously huge numbers of restaurants in Paris, there are fewer ‘restaurants’ than perhaps there would be it not for the existence of these types of cafés and bistros. Things are very different in Aix. Proportionally, there were lots of café tabacs and small, drink-only cafés and also lots of restaurants catering for the tourist crowds above all. Any open spaces in the old town such as squares were filled at the first opportunity with tables, chairs, umbrellas, menus, waiters and crowds of diners. The outstanding category of café in Paris did not really exist in Aix in any meaningful way. The Cours Mirabeau is the main boulevard of the town, and is home to many large cafés which could fit the bill. They are, however, more the equivalent of the famous cafés of Montparnasse in their history and scale; Les Deux Garçons (or 2G as the locals call it) being a prime example. The local but bigger and food-serving café was not present. So quite a difference. The tourists tended to stay in the Cours Mirabeau cafés, along with the only people I saw who looked like they might be working that day and some of the more upper class Aix residents, while the locals inhabited the bar tabacs. While talking to one man, he commented that they did not get many people from abroad visiting Aix; not the case, but probably
true of the places which he went to in the town. Tabacs can be intimidating at times, especially if you do not speak any French. So I could not do a cross-section study of cafés like that which I did in Paris, and I could not do different areas like I did in Paris, as Aix is too small. This meant that my research took a very different form and cannot necessarily be compared directly to my findings in Paris. Rather, this is a cumulative study, and Aix adds a dimension from a smaller town.

So why is this blog so late? It is for all of the above reasons. The three factors; the climate, the way of life and the setup of cafés come together and dictate the café culture, as you would expect. It is hot, so people want to sit in the shade, they do not want to be too active and they want a nice cold drink to cool them down. People tend to eat in a different way too, with a fresh produce market every morning in the centre of the town, so this perhaps explains the lack of bistros as people tend not to want to eat out or a big meal. The size of the town means that you can never be far from home, so there is little point in buying food at a bistro, restaurant or café when you probably have all you need for a light lunch within a few minutes walk. As well as appetites, the heat also dictates work. It is for this reason that businesses and shops close at lunchtime, and that the majority of shops, and I assume offices, are air conditioned. Heat is not conducive to work. So when people go to cafés, they want to relax, not get out their laptops and send another email. Rather then business meetings in cafés, I saw people writing postcards, socialising or just sitting and staring into space and watching the world go by. With a necessary lack of structure in my research, I instead began to live this café life exclusively, and came to be a part of this pace of life. I too felt these factors that so dictate how cafés are used, and I too was a victim of them. I sat and scribbled down notes, but when it came to trying to comprehend what was going on, work out a higher reason for what I was seeing or putting my thoughts down in a more formal way, I crumbled. I was de-motivated. I was tired. I was hot. I was unable to think on any sort of serious level. Obviously this is not a symptom of everyone living in the South of France, but as an Englishman with an English constitution, notes were all I could manage. I thought for at least half of my trip that I was seeing nothing; that people were just going to the cafés for a drink, a sit and a chat, and that this meant nothing and therefore my study meant nothing. Back in chillier climes across the Channel, I hope I have now been able to make sense of it all, and hopefully it is a lot more fruitful that I thought early on. Therefore, as a partaker in it, I can say that café culture in Aix en Provence, and perhaps elsewhere in the South of France if my findings are representative, is all about relaxing, taking some time to yourself and to the people around you, and a step back from the stresses of life.

So café culture exists in Aix as well. Resoundingly. As well as some overall deciphering, I also noted some more specific themes among the cafés of the town. The make up of clientele in the cafés was interesting in that on the whole it consisted of single-sex groups or individuals. There were some couples, but on the whole it was groups of men or groups of women meeting for a chat and a catch up. There were some very old people in some of the cafés, along with the middle aged and those slightly younger. There was however a conspicuous lack of people in the late teens early 20s range, but I came to have an idea why this was. Aix is a famous university town and university had finished for the summer, but this did not explain everything as there were surely people in this age range living in Aix full time. Then I noticed the army of white and blue t-shirt wearing youngsters who made up the workforce for the Cezanne and Picasso season in the town, and it became clear that the tourist office had employed nearly every young person in the town to be a driver, tour guide, reception worker or otherwise in this summer long project. Pable Picasso is buried in the garden of one of his last homes; an imposing mansion in a village close to Aix, and his house has been closed to the public since his death. However, this summer the house has been opened for tours, and will be closed again at the end of September. The town usually has a Cezanne fever as the
artist’s studio is just outside the town and many of his famous works depict the area, especially the Mount St Victoire. Everywhere there are houses, restaurant set menus and even nursing homes named in Cezanne’s honour, but for this summer, this fever has been joined by that for Picasso. There is an exhibition of works of both artists (though very Picasso-heavy) and for all of these ventures there is a team of young workers shepherding people around, selling tickets (very early in the morning) and giving tours. So that is why they were not in the cafés. Those who were often chose to read the paper while taking their coffee, infusion or beer. In Paris they would have been reading Liberation (my personal choice), Le Figaro, Le Monde or another national paper, but here they overwhelmingly read the regional newspaper: Le Provencal. This perhaps suggests that they feel that they are separate from the goings on of Paris or the rest of France, that they have their own character, history, way of life, which is not reflected in the national news. Certainly France is historically composed of many different cultural and ethnic heritages from Celtic to Latin, even before the cosmopolitan modern society existed. France was only recently united by historical standards, and you could argue that it is still not spiritually united today, with the people of Provence and those of Brittany (as historically they always have been staunchly separatist) as examples. The drink of the Southern France café, and Aix was no exception, is Pastis. Served in a straight glass about 3 inches high, it is an anise and liquorice flavoured liqueur which is usually either diluted or served straight with a small carafe of water with which to dilute it yourself. I saw people drinking Pastis from first thing in the morning to last thing at night. It is also one of the cheapest drinks you can buy in a Provencal café, with wine, beer and infusions of mint, strawberry etc also cheap, with soft drinks such Coke or Orangina more expensive. Coffee is of course still resoundingly popular and cheap with the espresso remaining the drink of choice.

While talking to people in Aix, I came across a continual problem (apart from the strong and difficult Provencal accent that some had). When I told people about my project, about my investigation into café culture, about my interest in the future of the café and about the way that the café is integral to French life, no one was interested. That is not to say that they were rude, we continued on with other conversations, but whereas in Paris people were fascinated, proud and eager to talk about this great French institution, people here were not. It was just part of their lives. I do not know whether they thought I was an ignorant Englishman, an over-thinking student or a boring scholar, they just were not at all interested. I had been used to telling people what I was doing and getting a full response, a personal opinion and often an interjection from across the bar, but now it was met with a disinterested grunt, ‘uh-huh’ or ‘oh right’ accompanied by a change of subject. Even the café owners gave the same reply. Strange. Perhaps it is just so much a part of their lives that they have not really thought about it. Perhaps there is no crisis of cafés in the area. Perhaps it is because they are just seen as places of relaxation rather than cultural strongholds. Perhaps it is symptomatic of the separation from Paris and the rest of France, as the café as we, or certainly I, think of it is the café of Paris, of Hemmingway and therefore ultimately of another part of the country. I do not have an answer for this, but it is an interesting difference and demonstrates the difference in the café culture, despite their equal success.

I must of course give a mention to intellectual culture. After failing to find any in Paris, I did not hold up much hope, but Aix is a very arty town and I wondered whether this aspect might feature. Again, there was nothing concrete, and nothing at all within the cafés. There was one interesting gathering however. I was passing through the only small park in the old town one evening and there was a group of people seated facing some performers who took it in turns to read poetry, short stories or play music; in the case a man doing incredibly beautiful and creative things with a cello and a loop pedal. It was over before I could find out more, but it suggested a creative life in Aix that
could be even greater when the university is in term. None of this seemed to exist in the cafés though, which were used, as I have suggested, almost exclusively for relaxation, reflection and socialising. This does not mean that my search for café culture has been futile. Far from it. Café culture lives on. And strongly. It is so deeply linked and ingrained into French society and life that I do not see how it can ever diminish or die. The worry over its future for me only illustrates how precious the café is to the French; that any sign of change, any sign of crisis, any sign of modernisation in some cases, and there is upset, outcry and worry. French Café Culture lives on, and it will continue to live on. Just wait and see.
After I left Aix I headed into the countryside for a bit of a rest. Staying in the remote reaches of the Provencal countryside to the north west of Avignon, the population mainly lived on farms, cottages or in small villages and towns scattered among the trees. My nearest town was the historic and formally great town of Uzes which used to be home to the most important duke in France after those of royal blood. I also had easy access to a small village named Lussan which had a café and a restaurant/hotel, both very small, and the existence of both belying the tiny size and even tinier population of the village.

I went first to Uzes. The town is very popular with tourists throughout the summer, and there are therefore a great variety of cafés catering for every taste. Wanting to sit in the beautiful main square, I took a seat in an upmarket café restaurant. It was a moulded plastic seat with a cushion, so I thought that it would be a clear tourist hotspot. This was the case, but there were also various younger people who I took to be locals sitting and working on their laptops. The café offered free wi-fi (pronounced ‘wiffée’) to its customers and it was clear that this was being successfully used to attract the local youth to their tables. It dawned on me that this might have been a good indicator of modernisation to have looked out for throughout my trip, but it was an insight that came too late in the day. Wandering around the rest of the town, I came across some café tabacs that seemed to be catering for the more traditional locals. They were very similar to the tabacs in Aix and to a certain extent Paris, suggesting a universality of market across France. The café tabac, steeped in tradition and history is something that remains relatively unchanged and unspoiled throughout time and throughout the country. The tabac style café which is present all across France was first made popular a long time ago, but today these cafés remain uniformly similar to each other in function and appearance. It is inconceivable that they have continually changed and modernised at the same rate, so the only conclusion to draw is that they have in fact changed very little and have remained relatively unspoiled throughout the ages.
Lussan (the village shown from afar in the picture accompanying this post) was a very quiet place. I spent an evening in the café of the town run by an incredibly friendly and thick-accented man. The place served a bit of food but mainly catered for drinks on a stone terrace under some trees. There was a big party of people who looked as if they were going for a meal at the hotel restaurant afterwards, a couple talking over a drink and not much else going on. People around the village told me that the locals like to use the café to support a village business, but there are few tourists or non-village-dwellers who frequent it. It was a very small village, hence it was not packed. It was however very pleasant, and probably a good representation of a local village café. The owner was chatting to the groups of people sitting at the tables as well as a couple of guys sitting inside by the bar, it was relaxed and it was unpretentious. There seemed no reason why the place should go out of business; it seemed well supported and it was not cheap, but you do not mind paying more to support a local café.

My insight into Provencal small town and village cafés was slight but yet seemed to complete my overview of French café society. I had now seen every strata of café in the country, from the large historic cafés of Parisian Montparnasse, to old greats in Aix en Provence, to tiny tabacs in Provencal villages. Now I need to put everything I have learned into place. I think I need a coffee.
I want to draw up a couple of loose ends of a more pragmatic nature. Before I started my trip, even before I was awarded the bursary, I came across a website called ‘Sauvons les cafés français’ - ‘Let’s save the French cafés’. They had set up a petition to keep the culture and traditions of the French café and bistro alive, especially in the face of 21st century globalisation. I had been delighted and intrigued by their message, and at the end of my investigation, when I had been able to construct my own views through what I had seen, I contacted them by email asking for a comment and a discussion of how the cafés are faring now. I have yet to hear back. There has also been no activity on their website for over a year, so hopefully I take this to mean that the French café has been saved, or is no longer in need of saving. So that’s good news.

I also want to briefly mention a particular regret that I have about my time conducting the investigation. This is the lack of quantitative data that I collected on the cafés, in Paris in particular. Looking back I wish that I had conducted some sort of survey of cafés across the city, perhaps splitting it into a few distinct areas and examining some countable elements about these places, as well as getting answers to a few solid questions from the owners and workers of the cafés. This would probably have taken the form of a small questionnaire that I would try to answer for as many cafés as possible, posing questions such as whether it has wi-fi access, whether it has a tabac, whether it serves food, as well as whether the owner felt under threat of competition from other cafés, what their opinion was on Starbucks, the reduction of VAT on cafés and the closure of other cafés across the city. I think that through this sort of study I could have supplied a better and more scientific representation of the state of cafés in Paris.
Analysis and conclusions

As I got underway with my project, it became clear that my research would encompass two strands with two different questions that I would focus on answering. They concerned firstly whether the intellectual café culture of the 1920s and 30s still exists today and secondly whether the culture of the French café; that is, the role of the café as a central meeting point of people and of minds, still operates with the same zest and with as much importance as the recent past. My original plan to investigate whether the café is ‘a microcosm of society’ seemed to be unfocused in what it was aiming to achieve. The key questions that I have endeavoured to answer are both a derivative of this broader investigatory remit, and a result of my first hand experience in researching the topic.

During my time, particularly in Paris, I became somewhat obsessed by finding surviving remnants or growing seeds of an intellectual culture, and it became obvious to me that this was the main aspect that I had been thinking of when I had thought about the French café and the culture surrounding it. The use of ‘intellectual’ in this case signifies any sort of formal art or discourse form; writing, painting, music, politics and so on. This is in order to separate it from the lay discussion and discourse that became the focus of the other half of my study. The role that the café plays in French life is ancient and well documented, yet recently there has been much talk in the popular press about the decline and possible extinction of their most venerable institution. I made it my business to get a feeling, through the means of a highly unscientific straw poll whether this is in fact the case, and whether we should be worried about the death of the French café as we know it, perhaps at the hands of multi national café corporations, perhaps at the hands of the fast paced and somewhat faceless society that has allowed these corporate chains to become so dominant elsewhere. I will conclude the report on my findings by providing an analysis of what I found during my time in France through the consideration of the two key questions of my research. As the details of what I saw and learned can be found in the preceding blog entries, the analysis will be just that: discussion of the strands of meaning encountered along the way, assuming prior knowledge of events as they unfolded.
Firstly; on the existence of an intellectual culture. Throughout my time in Paris I searched continuously for formal intellectual debate and discourse. I found it in the Café Philosophe in the Bastille but nowhere else. The Café Philo, though a highly intellectual and credible debate, was not the sort of group that I had been hoping to find. Perhaps it was an error in my expectations, perhaps I was being too idealistic, but I had been looking for discussion that was pioneering, encompassing all age groups, especially the younger generation, and in some way counter culture. In consideration of French society today, and in particular the fate of the cafés I was imagining anti-capitalists, anti-globalists, students, artists, activists and so on. This, I had thought, would be the microcosm of society that I had wanted to find. The French have a reputation for strong ideals, opinions and actions. This is reflected in their contemporary politics which has hugely high participation, their regular strike and protest action and their voicing of dissatisfaction for much of the official politics of the state. The Café Philo, however, did not deliver this sort of challenging and energetic discourse. It was a highly organised philosophical group discussion, but overwhelmingly involving people of a much older generation. I was told that younger people and students did come to the meetings during term time, but only really because their lecturers told them to, and they rarely came back. I had read and been told a lot about the rise of the concept of the Café Philosophe, Café Politique and other types of discussion café groups in the 1990s, but there was no evidence that this culture had continued on any meaningful level. There are still philosophical groups modelled on the one in Bastille meeting across the city, but other than that, the re-emergence of café culture through these projects seems to have died out. I had also been told about an underground organisation, quite literally, which met on the Metro to hold discussions. However despite asking around continuously during my stay, they did not seem to be operational still. Lots of people told me that these sort of groups are often fleeting in their existence. It has to be hoped that my lack of findings in this area is not an indication that these fleeting existences are becoming less regular. One of the most limiting factors in my investigation was the timing. Necessarily I was there in the university holidays, but this meant that the student culture which could have been a great source of intellectual culture was lacking in the city.

So it is necessary, from my findings, to understand that intellectual culture of the pioneering, energetic and challenging nature that I was looking for does not any more, or at least for the moment, exist in Paris. However, it is necessary now to ascertain whether or not this is a result of cafés no longer being a ‘microcosm of society’ on the intellectual plane, or whether they continue to fulfil this role, and rather it is for that reason that they no longer have an intellectual culture along the lines of those of the past. Has French society changed and moved away from allowing space for this sort of intellectual discussion in a café environment?

Answering this question brings into discussion the other question in my investigation: whether the culture of the French café in wider society is still as important as it has been over the last few centuries. In November 2008 the New York Times ran an article on the decline in popularity and economic success of the French café. They cited the international banking crisis, the smoking ban and a change in the attitude of French society towards food and drink as reasons for the decline in sales and the closure of many cafés, but from what I experienced during my time in France, there have been changes in the past year that counteract many of these problems. While I was in Paris, the French government changed the rate of TVA (VAT) from 19.6 to 5.5 percent which meant that, in theory, cafés could reduce their prices in order to attract more customers. In reality, the majority of cafés either kept their prices the same or reduced the price of just a few items (excluding alcohol) on the menu, meaning that the café would, evidently, gain more profit. It is too early to say yet
whether these cuts have been effective in helping cafés to survive in the ‘credit crunch’, but initial indications suggest that business has increased in many places. The smoking ban was a subject that I broached in many of the cafés that I visited, and there seemed to be a uniform response. Initially when the ban was put in place in early 2007, many of the owners of cafés noticed a change in sales as people came for a coffee in the morning, went outside for a cigarette and did not come back. Now however, people are used to the restrictions and business seems to have normalised. In the south, the difference in climate also means that it is possible to sit outside for a much greater part of the year, so customers can still sit, drink and smoke in cafés at the same time for the most part. I also saw evidence of the new law not being followed in various places, but this is not the norm. So it is clear that on two of the three problems facing French cafés a year ago when it was widely reported that there was a huge threat to their existence, have been in some way addressed and potentially resolved. A change in French society away from the café culture is a more complex issue and one that is key to answering both of the key questions for my investigation.

It is necessary to examine the geography of inhabitancy and work, the changing values of the culture and the extent of globalisation with regard to cafés. Firstly, an important issue is where people live relative to where they work. This is less important in Paris where there are cafés on every street, whether it is residential or directed towards commerce, but it was evident in Aix en Provence in particular that there was a clear separation between areas of residency and of work. There is a semiconductor industry nearby and industries in the surrounding area such as wine and olive oil production that are clearly based on natural resources out of the town. However, the local economy is based firmly in tourism; Aix being one of the most popular holiday destinations for French tourists in particular. Tourism in the town operates almost exclusively in the Old Town where the restaurants, shops and hotels are situated, as well as the cafés. There is some, but not lots of residential space in the old town, and this means that housing has been developed in the surrounding area. These are suburbs that are purely built to house people, with the focus of the town clearly on the old central area, and as a result there are few cafés or other meeting areas. As tourism in these sort of historic towns becomes more and more an integral source of income (flour milling, hat making and iron mongering are previously important trades that have all but died out in Aix today) this arrangement of suburban housing is almost inevitable. If there are few cafés around where people live, and the cafés where they work tend to be dominated by the tourists that it is your job to accommodate, it is little surprise if people are less inclined to sit for a coffee. At weekends, residents may not even venture into the town, making it difficult to facilitate hubs of intellectual discussion. The café has always been at its most popular for breakfast; a coffee and a croissant perhaps. But people are living away from the cafés; they eat at home and then go to work. The prevalence of the supermarket in France does little to help this situation.

The French attitude to work has also changed vastly in recent years. In the 1970s the average lunch break for a worker in France was 90 minutes, today it is a mere half hour. People are always on the move, always working, and as a result can find little time to sit and relax in the day. The nature of family life has also changed which alters the practice of sitting in cafés after work. With regard to intellectual café culture there is also the issue of personal economics. The intellectuals of old often tended to be to some extent wealthy; consider the American immigrants like Hemmingway who made Montparnasse their home in the 1920s. However, today the class of landed intelligentsia is much less prevalent. The groups that could have the time to conceivably engage in café intellectual discussion are students, the retired, the very rich, the unemployed and those with jobs that do not require a regular geographically specific commitment such as journalists. This greatly cuts down the statistical odds of developing a significant café intellectual tradition. Intellectual tourists and
those seeking some sort of high society visiting and living in Paris in particular are very rare, but were much more common in the 1920s and 30s when café culture was at its peak. It is also easy to speculate that the role of intelligence and intelligent discussion in society has changed internationally in a way that discourages café debate. A culture where the best and brightest are more and more becoming business people rather than thinkers, writers or politicians could also be cited as a contributing factor to a change in perception of intellectuality.

It is interesting to consider if the French attitude towards food and drink has changed. The recent success of Starbucks in Paris and the closing of traditional cafés suggests a change in perception of the café, as well as an increased sense of globalisation and acceptance of particularly US consumerism. There are various reasons why the US influence has been to a lesser extent in France than many other European countries, not least the political differences of the two countries and the pride of the French in their own culture. Although McDonald’s (or McDo as it is known) has been part of the high street landscape since its opening 30 years ago, there has not been the proliferation of coffee shops, retail chains and media that has been exported to the UK for example. With regard to the media, this is calculated. Under French broadcasting law all radio stations must play at least 40 percent of non-classical songs in the French language, and there are similar rules regarding television and film broadcast. This does not mean that US exports are not popular, and this is evident in the success of Starbucks as a symbol of values, culture and commercialism from across the Atlantic. It is not just the USA that is being allowed to gain more influence. French coffee has traditionally been ground from beans grown in French colonies or ex-colonies, and it is said by many that this is the reason that French coffee has a bad reputation: none of these countries are famed for their excellent coffee beans. Recently however, Italian coffees such as Lavazza and Illy have become more and more widely drunk in French cafés where their logos are displayed on signs on the exterior. In the world of fashion, according to Le Figaro, the ‘snob’ (the newly preferred word to chic) dog to own this year is an English Bulldog and the most fashionable sunglasses are Italian designed and made famous by an appearance in a British James Bond film and you should drink Lebanese coffee and green tea. This is quite a nationally and culturally diverse mixture, and shows a France which is truly global and cosmopolitan. Of course immigration has always been fluid in the country, but it has traditionally been from ex-colonial nations such as those of North Africa. French culture is willing to diversify, and perhaps this means that French cultural institutions such as the café will have to make room. However, my research showed that the popularity of the traditional French café lives on, though perhaps not with the same intellectual verve that it possessed in the past. Rather than making way for global and modern drinking salons, it is perhaps only that the French café should itself move with the times, at least to some extent. It is this that has allowed the cafés in the country today to survive. It is doubtless that there has been a period in the last few years when there have been many closures of long standing cafés and bistros, but, as far as I could glean from those that I talked to, this is now stabilising. This is because those that remain have got through the hard times by clinging on to a regular clientele. The mantra I heard from almost every café owner was that they were alright because they would always have their regulars. One café was completely void of young people, I enquired about it and was told that they all went to another café down the street that opened into the small hours of the morning, but they did not need them as they were busy with after work customers and tabac consumers. Every café has had to find its niche, and this is surely not a negative thing.

Although it is easy to mourn the recent death of many traditional cafés, the ones that remain do so because they are there for a reason: they are good and they are popular so there is no reason that they will fail now. The café continues to be incredibly popular in everyday French life and it can
only be seen as overly negative to believe that this great bastion of French culture will die any time soon. Cafés may be starting to offer wi-fi, they may be frequented by people with laptops and mobile phones but this is purely a reflection of the society in which they are placed. Intellectual debate is not as common in bars, cafés and bistros because it is not as common in society at large. The café is a microcosm of society: it has always had to adapt to its surroundings in order to stay at the cutting edge of fashion and the avant-garde, to stay popular and to stay in business. It continues to do so, emphatically.
Appendix

Blocker, J. S. *Alcohol and temperance in modern history* (2003, ABC-CLIO, Santa Barbara)


Jones, A. ‘How café culture influenced writers and artists’, *The Independent* (5th October 2006, London)


Lichfield, J. Various articles from this author - http://www.independent.co.uk/opinion/commentators/john-lichfield/


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