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How Coffee Became a Modern Necessity

For much of its 500-year history, the drink was viewed with confusion, suspicion and disgust

A man cupping coffee beans in Ethiopia.
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Coffee is so ubiquitous that it's easy to forget how unusual it is.

Its defining, namesake ingredient, caffeine, is not only the world's most popular mind-altering drug—used regularly by perhaps 90% of the planet—but also, as Michael Pollan has noted, the only one we routinely serve to children. This nearly universal acceptance is all the more striking considering that, for much of its 500-year history, coffee drinking was viewed with confusion, suspicion and disgust.

What changed? Once used to fuel extraordinary acts of worship and creativity, coffee has become a necessity we rely on to meet the everyday demands of modern capitalism.

Coffee is native to Ethiopia, but Sufi monks in Yemen seem to have been the first to consume the brewed form, probably in the 15th century. According to many etymologies, "coffee" is derived from the Arabic word *qahwah*, which carried several meanings, including "to make unappealing," "dark" and "wine."

This raised some early questions. In 1511, officials in Mecca, suspicious of the drink's intoxicating effects, decreed a coffee ban. Police torched the city's supplies, but that hardly settled the matter.

A century later, around the time that European travelers recorded their first encounters with coffee, the beverage was so widespread in the Ottoman Empire that, according to the

scholar Markman Ellis, it appeared “the perfect symbol of Islam.” Marked with foreignness, coffee entered Europe through a scrim of prejudice. In 1610, the British poet George Sandys judged it “blacke as soote, and tasting not much unlike it.”

Like alcohol, coffee changed people who drank it, but there was no consensus on how. Some women in London claimed that it made men impotent and lazy, but the city’s employers disagreed. Morning draughts of ale rendered apprentices and clerks “unfit for business,” but coffee helped them “play the good-fellows,” wrote court historian James Howell in 1657.

Europeans didn’t understand why. The medical thinking of the age emphasized balancing the body’s four humors—blood, phlegm, black bile and yellow bile—by using foods as drugs. Foods were classified within one of four prescriptive categories: hot, cold, wet and dry. Yet coffee, along with tea and chocolate, didn’t fit neatly into any one quadrant. It was hot and stimulating but also cooling and diuretic, confounding ideas of the human body that had been fixed for 1,500 years.

The picture wasn’t clarified by the chemical isolation of caffeine in a German laboratory in 1819. “Coffee acts on the diaphragm and the solar plexus, where it spreads to the brain via immeasurable emanations that escape all analysis,” Honoré de Balzac wrote 20 years later. “However, we can presume it is the fluids of the nervous system that conduct the electricity which this substance releases, and which it either finds or stimulates in our bodies.” Balzac himself drank coffee in prodigious quantities as he wrote his nearly 100 novels. By some accounts, he downed 50 cups a day, exacerbating his heart disease.

Balzac died in 1850, but if he had lived just a few more years, he might have seen a breakthrough. A new concept of the body was then emerging in the West to take the place of the humoral system, one based not on the balance of fluids but on cycles of input and output. The analogy was no longer a scale but an engine.

The crux of this shift was the discovery, in part through analysis of steam engines, of energy: the overarching force unifying what had been thought of as discrete phenomena, including motion, heat and light. The first law of thermodynamics, stating that energy is neither created nor destroyed but rather converted from one form to another, posed a fundamental question: Were human beings exceptional creatures, or did they operate on the same principles as machines? Hermann von Helmholtz, commonly credited as the author of the first law, suspected the latter.

By 1900, the new science of nutrition had applied thermodynamics to human physiology via the calorie, a unit of measure that expressed the needs and abilities of the body in common terms—inputs and outputs, food and work. On its own, the calorie didn't resolve

questions about coffee, which contains very few calories per cup. But the calorie did provide a stable framework for understanding coffee's physiological effects since it made work look like the basic function and natural condition of a living body, much like an engine. This ascendant biology of drudgery informed a new consensus on coffee: It was lubricant for the "human machine."

That idea was translated into advertising in the 1920s. Brazilian coffee growers and American coffee roasters cosponsored research to contest the claims of John Harvey Kellogg and C.W. Post, who, peddling trademark breakfast staples of their own, blamed coffee for an American epidemic of enervation and frailty. Samuel Prescott, an MIT biology professor, ran the study from 1919 to 1923, drawing heavily on earlier research funded by the Coca-Cola Com pany which concluded that caffeine increased the body's capacity for muscle or cognitive work within 15 minutes of consumption.

Prescott's lasting contribution was to rebrand coffee's apparent contradiction—generating work without calories, output without input—as a kind of miracle. Coffee was better than food, he concluded: a form of instant energy, a work drug not subject to the limits of appetite and the delays of digestion. The implication was that the human body on coffee was liberated from the laws of energy consumption and expenditure that governed the rest of the universe. Based on these findings, the coffee planters and roasters began to push a novel proposal: a pause in the workday for coffee, especially late in the afternoon.

After five centuries, we still have questions about coffee, but we agree on what we need it to do. Most of us drink coffee not because we have a finely calibrated understanding of its role in blocking the adenosine that makes us feel tired and increasing the dopamine that makes us feel good. Instead, we drink coffee because we have adopted (in part from the coffee business itself) a way of understanding ourselves and the world that makes it look like a godsend when we have no choice but to keep working—or even the fulfillment, for a moment, of our bottomless desire for more ideas, more talk, more energy, more time, more life.

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