

Notes on the Vienna Coffeehouses (Or how I learned to put my cell phone away)

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In 2013, 48 of Vienna's coffeehouses were placed on the UNESCO's intangible cultural heritage (ICH) list, designed to recognize important cultural spaces. Most visitors to Vienna, through intent or luck, have found themselves in one of these venerable institutions. Though the city is now dotted with a few Starbucks, a strange mutant of McDonald's called the McCafe, and a new flagship store for Nespresso, part of the corporate juggernaut Nestle, there remain well over 100 classic cafes where tuxedoed waiters balancing silver serving platters navigate their way to customers between Thonet bentwood chairs. Though architecturally different – from Art Deco to the 50's -- the coffeehouses share certain traits. For instance, they have developed their own patois to describe the various beverages, such as *mélange*, an espresso with additional water and steamed milk. Waiters will often politely nudge you to get the designations correct – a *mélange* with whipped cream is a *Franzikaner*. And then there are the newspapers, held on bamboo stretchers that look like old-fashioned carpet beaters. One local told me that the indicator of a good coffeehouse is a selection of at least 30 local and international newspapers (having newspapers on hand is a tradition dating back to 1720).

But what about the intangibles? The UNESCO designation is designed to preserve and protect culture, something that we as humans value. The Vienna coffeehouses are as Max Weber once observed, “places where humans confer meaning and significance.” In their original incarnation coffeehouses were for conversations, sometimes prosaic; sometimes political. Freud's Psychoanalytical Society met at Café Korb and a group of Austrian poets and writers founded the Vienna Group in the early 1950s and met frequently at Café Hawelka.

For anybody used to cafes where people rarely look over the top of their laptops, the Vienna coffeehouses are a striking example of places where human connectivity is measured in words per minute rather than megabytes per second. Some coffeehouses are explicit about their digital proclivities, greeting visitors with a small, handwritten sign in a gilded frame -- *Bitte kein Handy* (No Cell Phones) -- but most seem to rely on cultural norms. I would sometimes see people texting and surfing, but when I surreptitiously sought to determine who these techno-interlopers were, they usually turned out to be American students or Japanese tourists.

Most people came to talk, think, or read, sometimes for hours. It was their ‘thereness’ that shocked me...no one rushing off to meetings or the next Tinder rendezvous. People talked in complete sentences – long sentences in German – that were rarely interrupted by the need to update their Facebook page or share a photo of the Sacher Torte. Vienna is a city with good broadband access, with download speeds approaching 30 Mbit/second. What was wrong with these people? There were terabytes of potential distractions at everyone's fingertips.

I found myself, embarrassed at times, staring at the analog denizens, who had abandoned their electronic paraphernalia and were scribbling away in Moleskin notebooks. One old gent was busily loading a fountain pen from an inkbottle sitting next to his espresso cup. Some people were just sitting lost in thought with seemingly no overwhelming need for external stimulation. Maybe this is what Alex Soojung-Kim Pang, in his recent book *The Distraction Addiction*, means

when he argues for a more contemplative approach to our relationship with computers and the Internet.

On my last day in Vienna I decided to run an experiment, and went to Café Korb with a laptop, cell phone, and three work-related deadlines. I had a *mélange* and read the local paper.

The coffee houses visited, in no particular order: Central, Museum, Sperl, Griensteidl, Hawelka, Korb, Deglas, Kleines, Phil, Landtmann.

