

## How Breakfast Happens in the Café

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## **How Breakfast Happens in the Café**

**Eric Laurier**

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**ABSTRACT.** In this article I present an ethnographic study of 'breakfast in the café', to begin to document the orderly properties of an emergent timespace. In so doing, the aim is to provide a description of the local production of timespace and a consideration of a change to the daily rhythm of city life. Harold Garfinkel and David Sudnow's study of a chemistry lecture is drawn upon as an exemplary study of the collective creation of an event. Attention is drawn to the centrality of sequentiality as part of the orderly properties of occasioned places. As part of examining the sequences I chart the ongoing emergence of features of breakfast time in the café such as 'the first customer', 'crowded' and 'quiet'. In closing the article, I consider how changes in the rhythm of the city are made apprehensible to its residents. **KEY WORDS** • breakfast • café • ethnography • ethnomethodology • interaction

### **From Timespace to the Daily Rhythms of the City**

When we talk of time or space in the social sciences, the temptation to universalization, the scientification of social life, is almost irresistible. With this temptation comes the inevitable capitalization of time into 'Time' and space into 'Space' and the related subordination of duration and place (Casey, 1997). A less inevitable but still common manoeuvre in the examination of space and time is the colonization and extraction of concepts of space and time from maths or physics; concepts which are uprooted and transplanted into the social sciences

where their exotic charms garner considerable attention even as they slowly but surely wither far from their grammatical home. There are other ways of investigating time, space and social worlds, ways which attend to and clarify our commonsense concepts of time and space (Zerubavel, 1985; McHoul, 1990; Adam, 1995). These are investigations in, and of, the ordinary un-noticed features of everyday life – singing a song, building a high rise or waiting for a bus. Investigations that pay the duration and rhythm of these unexceptional practices surprisingly serious attention. In analysing the timings that begin, pace, measure and end these activities, we can at the same time begin to reformulate perplexing abstract problems on the nature of time and space which all too often begin with general definitions holding constant for all situations.

Thrift and others (Massey, 1994; Glennie and Thrift, 1996; Thrift, 1996) have put the idea of timespace to work in their studies, abandoning the opposition of time versus space in favour of considering extensions of specific assemblages of practices and materials, each with its own situated timespace. For example, Glennie and Thrift (2002) chart the gradual establishment of an awareness of clock time through the ringing of church bells which are heard in common in across towns, villages and nearby land. Thereby, they reveal an orientation to hours of the day that begins long before the assumed advent of industrial time. In each place they observe that the clock system requires localization, translation and inevitable transformations of both system and locality (May and Thrift, 2001). In using the idea of timespace, Thrift and others show the world is ordered not through the imposition of a Euclidean grid, but rather through a filamental growth. As timespaces settle they secure patches of never inevitable, often fragile organization requiring constant maintenance and repair (Graham and Thrift, forthcoming).

Drawing on Lefebvre and Bergson, Crang (2001: 187) also offers ‘a less stable version of the everyday, and through this a sense of practice as an activity creating time-space’; one that is attuned to urban rhythms and identifying pulses of each city. Crang brings out the varied ways in which collective events are played out in beats of minutes, hours and days. These rhythms and events are exemplified in the repetitions of the rush hour and the quiet spell that follows on from it or day-by-day collection of the bins by the rubbish vans. In this vision, the city is no longer a fixed collection of buildings and infrastructures; instead it is constantly becoming a little less like it was. Slowly evolving through its circulations, with one thing following another as night follows day and day follows night (Blum, 2003). As Crang points out, we can thereby examine common rhythms of city life other than those of its much mentioned ongoing acceleration. From Lefebvre’s (2004) perspective we can begin to think about the *colonization* of breakfast by the equivalencing of a particular mode of production and consumption relations – how through the standardizing efforts of Caffe Nero, Starbucks, Costa Coffee and others we end up having roughly the

same breakfast experience regardless of where we are. In a sense, as Raffel (2004) puts it, in extending its simulation of the Milanese café, Starbucks does not need to know the needs of its customers. In foregrounding the experience of time, as it has been theorized through phenomenology, Crang (2001: 198) places 'ontological concerns about the shaping of experience' to the fore. He does not let go of Lefebvre's rhythm-analysis; instead he marks out its harmony with the under-appreciated element of *collectivity* in the organization of time that comes with phenomenology's concept of shared practice. Although it forms part of the idea of worldly existence, the collectivity of the crowd is usually rejected by phenomenologists such as Heidegger as inauthentic. Alongside bringing out this dismissed public quality of time, Crang goes on to argue for the importance of expanding cycles and circuits of time in preference to simple 'lines' or trajectories.

With Crang's emphasis on the many possible collective experiences of time, how then to investigate places and durations without falling into the trap of opposing the warm and human experience of daily rhythms with the cold and inhuman clock (Latour, 1997)? A number of post-phenomenological approaches maintain an interest in the lived experience of place and duration yet eschew grounding it in transcendental consciousness, regimes of production or the human body (Crang, 2001; Lynch and Bogen, 1996). While not engaged in straightforward theoretical development of the concepts of the public-ness of the experience of time and its rhythm, a longstanding corpus of work that has looked at specific practices first, then considered what forms of timespaces they make, and are simultaneously made from, is that of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1967, 2002; Sharrock and Button, 1991; Rawls, 2005). Time is dealt with not as a pre-existing measure but rather by how it is experienced, accounted for, marked and put to use in whichever practice's timing. Always keen to draw on the richness of ordinary language, Garfinkel deals with timings as always connected to the uses to which they are put, such as 'fat moments', 'a day's work' and 'about plus or five minutes past the hour' (Hill and Stones Crittenden, 1968: 190).

In his writings the example that Garfinkel uses to teach, not so much 'Time' as, *timing* is that of a person clapping in time to a metronome. Ethnomethodology, writes Garfinkel, investigates what it is to clap at the same time as the metronome, a time that has to be made *by and in the clapping*. While we might want to say that it is simply that the person is triggered or responds to the metronome, it is not so. To clap in time, and not afterward, involves clapping in a way that actually masks the sound of the metronome and, if done competently, the hands strike together as the metronome clicks so the metronome cannot have been heard yet. In clapping we are keeping the rhythm. The lived work of doing so involves listening at the outset: hearing a first click, a second, and a third and in doing so coming to hear the intervals between, hearing them in their regular-

ity and their rhythm and producing that same rhythm through clapping. Other features of our lived work emerge, such as hearing the metronome becoming audible again and adjusting our clapping to become faster or slower. Keeping and making rhythms need not be clapping with a metronome of course; it could be driving a rally car, buying and selling shares, preparing food in a restaurant. The metronome, however, is a very simple example which puts in place the importance of both sequential relations between events that occur one after another and the accomplishment of those sequential arrangements. From Garfinkel's perspective, sequence provides not simply for the forward progression of time as noted by many phenomenologists (Zerubavel, 1985), it provides for prospective and retrospective orders (Boden, 1994). By way of contrast with Rawls' (2005) recent article in this journal on Garfinkel's concept of time, I will pursue my argument through further real-worldly inquiries. I will look at how the specific features of a timespace, be they typical, peculiar, rhythmic, enjoyable, excellent, average, slow, fast, coordinated, clumsy and more, are brought to life in and as part of the *course* of events.

To provide a little background on the café experience in the UK and USA, over the last decade there has been amazingly rapid growth in the number and spread of cafés serving espresso-based drinks. On the city high street Starbucks has replaced McDonald's as the icon of either globalization (or cosmopolitanism depending on which way you look at it; Blum, 2003). Where McDonald's is the icon of fast food, of people in a hurry, with no great desire to linger, Starbucks and its correlates are about something else. Statistical overviews point towards the growth in what they call linger-time or dwell-time in cafés (Allegra Strategies, 2004); simply put, customers spend ever longer over their coffees. For those with a concern with work and economies we might want to see cafés as places illustrating the 'compulsion of proximity' (Boden and Molotch, 1994), where they are familiar nodes in the network of gathering places that remain a necessity for the accidental tourists, be they business executives, chefs or mathematicians, who shuttle back and forth stitching regions together (Laurier, 2001; Brown and O'Hara, 2003). For those with a concern with urban neighbourhoods we might want see this as about a gradual emergence of a return to a form of convivial collective life that is an alternative to the more tightly knit collectives such as scouting and sports clubs (Putnam, 2000). For us here, with a concern for society and time, we could interpret it as documenting a change in the rhythms of the city, where a slow section is inserted into an otherwise rapid tune: an extension of public life in the city that is akin to but distinct from the growth or diminishment of nightlife in cities (Blum, 2003). Usually we associate nightlife with the cosmopolitanism of cities; that the beginning of the day might be cosmopolitan is a perhaps under-appreciated aspect of what constitutes the quality of city life. The placement of a café visit in the sequence of events, be it for breakfast or other occasions, with

which we build each day is thus of consequence.

What I would like to do in this article is offer some preliminary descriptions of the café-specific work of the first two hours of opening in the morning. From interviews with directors of café chains and individual cafés, their staff and customers and ethnographic fieldwork as part of an ESRC project on cafés and civic life<sup>1</sup> we came upon ‘breakfast out’ as an emerging social trend. I will not attempt here to validate or invalidate having breakfast in cafés rather than at home as a social trend, to say whether there will be a wholesale decline in ‘breakfast at home’, or try to link this shift with a potential decline of family time together, the commodification of meals or any of the other familiar worries of the social sciences and policymakers. In other words, rather than jump to treating ‘breakfast out’ for the social problems it creates, extends or indexes, I would like to spend some time making conjectures on what breakfast time in a café *is* and how it is *organized*. My rendering of the course of a collective event borrows from Garfinkel and Sudnow’s study of the performance features of lectures and their natural accountability (in Garfinkel, 2002). While Garfinkel and Sudnow themselves worry that their study is an inadequate account of chemistry, given that neither of them has an adequate grasp of the subject, their account is nevertheless an exact and exacting description of a crowd *as a course of action*. It is in that light that the central section of this article finds its purpose.

### Café notes 7–10am

#### [Empty]

I arrive just after 7am, the café is empty and I’m the first customer. Before 9am there are only a few cafés open, most of which are part of the big chains (i.e. Costa, Starbucks, Coffee Republic and Caffé Nero). At this café I am a not-quite-regular, regular. It’s situated across the street from the railway station where I arrived, having commuted from the south side of the city to the centre. Offering a small frontage, the café recedes deep into its city block. The service counter runs along the right wall from the entrance. Sitting at a table, across from the counter, one barista sits smoking a cigarette while reading the newspaper; the other gets up as I arrive through the entrance and walks behind the bar. We greet each other and I order a medium latte.

Staff can be present in the café but without customers the café is [empty].<sup>2</sup> What more is there to this easily recognizable state of affairs? There is: how the customer *recognizes* [empty] which is bound up with the typical interior architectural construction of this café, and many others like it, which allows those entering to look around as they enter and note at a glance how busy the café is. It is bound up also with the expectations of ‘this early hour’ of 7am in this cafe

known for its 'appearances as usual' on a weekday at this sort of time (Sacks, 1972) or as an 'environment of expectations' (Blum, 2003: 142). By contrast, at the same time of day, an airport or flower market café is likely to be full. What the customer makes of [empty] is related to their orientation to the 'awakening' of the day (Blum, 2003). That is, the reasons for empty-ness are temporally located – it is 'just opened'. A customer is not put off or curious about this observable empty-ness during the opening time, the way they would be were it to be observably empty at 1pm ('Why is it empty? Is the food bad? Are the staff rude? Is it expensive?')

### [First customer]

No one else arrives in the café while I'm standing at the counter. I reckon I'm the first customer and that that's a special status. The relationship between what is first, what is next and what after that, in an emerging sequence, allows members to confer and organize expectations, rights, rules and more (Livingston, 1987). 'First customer' is a sequential feature of the ordering of customers in time, a feature which cannot be collapsed on to clock time since it follows a different temporal logic. There is more that can be made of this feature. Being the first customer regularly you can easily become one of the café's *known* customers, their regulars where the thing that identifies you, as against other occupants of the category 'regular', is that 'Oh yeah, he's the first through the door in the morning'. Would the staff ever be able to say they knew who their regular 37th customer was? Equally, a customer is aware of when they are the first customer of the day, and unaware of their being 37th. There are the first customers that form the earliest arrivals, all of whom may have some degree of rapid recognizability if they are early every day but this is a little different from the first customer.

Being the first customer carries with it an ordinary inquiry that being a later arrival does not. With only staff present in the building the first customer cannot be sure the café is actually open yet. Even if its doors are unlocked it may still only be taking deliveries. It may be past the hour it advertises opening but the staff are not ready yet. In the same way that the café cannot close properly until all its customers are out of the doors, it is not open properly and unquestionably until a customer enters its door and the staff serves them. And for those next customers, the presence of the first customer visibly present in the café, as a customer, provides confirmation for the inquiries of the next arrivals as to whether the café is open. In other words, arriving at breakfast time, when the city is still starting up, you look inside a café window and you see someone sitting at a table drinking their coffee, and you enter without checking the opening hour or asking the staff as you first enter, 'Are you open yet?' It only takes one customer to remove the questionable 'empty' status of the café and it

is the work of whoever is the first customer to establish whether the empty café is open yet.

### [Quiet]

In the hour from 7 until 8am the café stays relatively quiet. I jot down notes and stretch out my coffee. There is still a sense, at this time of day, of each customer's coming and going, of looking at customers and seeing them *one-at-a-time*; Seeing them this way because there are no queues or similar collections of customers. Under the observable, accountable state of [quiet] there are expectations from staff and customers in terms of how they will handle one another. Perhaps some small talk, extra politeness and care, and a lack of hurry. The staff do prep work for the day and other cycles of maintenance: newspapers are folded into holders, shelves wiped, sandwiches stacked in the fridges and deliveries received. The staff catch up with what happened at work the day before and what they were up to last night. Sitting writing at this time, I feel a mild camaraderie with the staff as a third party to these conversations about last night. There is a particular intimacy to this quiet beginning of the day before the real business begins, even if customers like me are only party to and not party of.

'The couple take their usual table'. There are, during this period of quiet, a collection of *individual* customers. Looking around, there are only a few tables taken: a guy in a suit going over some figures, a couple talking intimately, their heads bowed together, another guy in a suit reading the newspaper and a woman sitting sipping her coffee staring out the window. The couple I recognize, they are here more often than I am. Regulars, they make small talk with the staff at the counter while they order their coffee. They almost always sit at the same table tucked away in a nook. Some days they push the table out of the way so that they can sit with their knees together. I find myself wondering about their lives since they seem so unexpectedly romantic over breakfast. A teenage couple's intimacy. Perhaps like teenagers, they are not living together. Or are they? Wouldn't that be a lovely appropriation of an occasion which, if anything, has become associated with yet another work meeting possibility. 'The power breakfast – predictable, the romantic breakfast – surprising'.

I know no more about the couple than any other regular could work out. The fact that this couple have become what Milgram (1977) called 'familiar strangers' is not incidental. They are also regulars. That I have the time to watch them, to speculate on their lives, is part and parcel of the slow pace of this quiet time and, of course, that I have an ethnographer's licence to hang around in this café. Customers, according to the timings of their dwelling in the café, have differential access to the characters of other customers. Regulars who come at the quiet times can build up a certain kind of awareness of the lives of other regulars. This awareness, while not friendship nor loving intimacy, is more than



a tolerance of others. It is an enjoyment of being among strangers familiar and unfamiliar that is part of the value of urban community (Blum, 2003). A form often dismissed as too loose, too bloodless and minimally moral (Baumgartner, 1988; Sennett, 1994) and yet it is a form that Habermas (1989) and Jacobs (1961) find essential to the rise of civility, recognition and public-mindedness in the city. With one comes the other, of course; cafés are one of the central places where we come upon communal problems, intolerance, incivility and snubs (Blum, 2003; Thrift, 2005).

### [Getting busy]

I write down, 'It's getting busier. Customers arriving in ones and twos and queuing now'. When does the café become busy?<sup>3</sup> Certainly it's not '57 minutes and 13 seconds after it opens' or some similar measure. It's 'about 8 o'clock' where 'about' serves a purpose, being a sweep of time rather than a punctum (as in a point pierced in a punch-card) – a sweep that allows for how this café's customers work as a collective. They do not turn up on the dot; their arrivals increase in frequency gradually.

[Getting busier] is a recognizable part of the potential and projected emergence of [busy]. Recognizable in a queue forming at the counter, customers continuing to arrive, tables filling up more and more. Its recognizability is not without consequence, given that on noticing it the staff retreat from their banter with customers at tables, unpacking sandwiches and so on, to stay at the counter. They are anticipating the rush that is, to all appearances, and is seen in these appearances, as emerging.

It's after 8am. Outside the café in the street there are more and more pedestrians walking by, office workers in suits, shop workers in their varied uniforms and students with shoulder bags. There are early mornings that stay quiet – Saturdays and Sundays of course, mostly free of early morning city commuters seeking coffee. One more temporal expectation of today's breakfast is that it is a *weekday* breakfast, with its weekday population and fitted in with the projects of those weekdays.

### [Busy]/[crowded]

At around 8.30 it *is* busy. From [empty] to [an observable collection of individual customers] the arrivals have gradually become a [crowd]. There is no steady flow of customers arriving; they come in irregular pulses refilling the now constant queue. Reorganizing themselves in relation to the queue's uninterrupted duration, the staff remain behind the counter. More specifically, they switch to an assembly line production to accelerate the rate of serving. One or the other is always operating either the cash till, picking up food, or making

drinks at the espresso machine. What the customers are doing at the counter changes during this busy period. From their position in the queue, customers scan the interior of the café for vacant tables. Groups split so that one or more of them can grab a table while the other(s) queue to make their order (Laurier et al., 2001).

Another note to myself: ‘The place is buzzing’. The café becomes audibly busy. There’s the steady thump of the coffee grounds being knocked out the handle, the jet engine whine which ends with the extended steam train chuff of milk frothing. People order their drinks and pastries in raised voices above the din of the till and the big black coffee machine. The front door swings open and shut, letting in blasts of traffic roar from the rush hour on the street outside. As Garfinkel and Sudnow (2002) say of the lecture audience, it’s a ‘noisy assemblage’. The buzz of the café does not have sequential properties of the lecture audience; this is not a pre-lecture shuffling and chatter that will quiet when the lecture begins. It is not a noise of pens, paper and coats that will rise as part of marking a lecture coming to an end. Like the ecology of the seating, it is undirected. This café’s breakfast buzz can be heard by those entering the door by way of contrast to walking into a quiet café. It is not entirely unreactive; there is the possibility that the buzz would die down when certain persons entered.

With only a mouthful of tepid coffee left, I am still writing notes and queries: ‘There’s a table free. At what point and how does this become a pressing concern for customers?’. With this café being busy, ‘free’ becomes pressingly relevant to customers standing queueing and so tables are inspected for their stage in an unfolding course of having coffee. Likely candidates are identified in terms of their approaching the possible completion of their breakfast. This closing stage is recognizable in the displayed details of empty cups, last sips, crumbs of croissant, checking of watches, putting on handbags and more. From the queue when actual empty tables are identified, the queuing customer looks to persons standing, and watches their progress to see if they are taking *that* table or leaving one (Sudnow, 1972). Table-seeking customers thank the departing table occupiers who up their pace in order to vacate their tables, in recognition of the generosity of that pace; the hasty draining of the coffee cup.

### [Breakfast]

Why take breakfast here? Why this café? Why not have breakfast at home? In answering these questions we can begin to tease out the extended sequential geographies of breakfast.<sup>4</sup> The breakfast stop-off in this café as in many others is inserted into commuting as a sequence of actions to be accomplished:

1. Leave the house.
2. Do nearly all of your journey leaving only the last short walking distance to workplace; then,

3. Select café round about here (as we noted there are more than half a dozen cafés within a short walk of the central railway station).

[Breakfast out] is a block of variable time which we can slot into the repetitive sequences, which we use to build each day as a whole, to absorb the contingencies before it. We can use it to turn up at the same, 'correct' time every day at work. Whether one 'late' morning we only have 5 minutes to slug our coffee and bolt our pastry, or one 'early' morning we have 20 minutes to chat with our workmates, read the newspaper, catch up on some paperwork from last week, we can always arrive at 9. From the rearrangement of the routine we have a new place we go where we can do a diversity of things, different things than we could do in the office, shop-floor or studio. This it not to say that staffrooms could not, do not and have not served the same purpose of synching up the temporal variabilities of travelling to work with the coordinated start times for workplaces. Nor that, equally, there haven't been groups of people for whom breakfast out has been their expected way of getting breakfast. Though if we think of examples of groups for whom it would have been a norm, we think of shift-workers, the crew of trawlers, travelling salespeople and transport workers. As a place for breakfast, the staffroom remains a place where one has already joined the 'staff', where breakfast is 'in' at the workplace. Cafés claim to be, and Oldenberg (1997, 2001) has famously written of them as, third spaces between home and work. What we can add here is that in their daily routines members of workplaces put them not spatially as the third of a set; they arrange them in second positions, that is where their origin is the first position and their destination is the third position. As such, breakfast in the café, while not 'in the workplace' like the staffroom, is full of prefatory acts to joining the workplace. Colleagues catch up with other colleagues, plan meetings, pass on warnings and tips and more. Equally, various activities are carried over and completed from their residences, opening the morning mail, reading the newspaper, having aspirin and last, but not least, having something for breakfast.

### [Pace]

Two women at a table never let go of their cups. They keep their coats on. Their cappuccinos go down in steady slugs and they're gone. Below a huge poster of an old man playing cards, a student sits reading a novel; from time to time he sips his coffee. His jacket is off. He's dug into his chair, one of the hard-to-grab leather armchairs. In the whirl he is a slow-moving object. During the rush, two customers, one after another, sit at his table while he reads steadily on. In the gestalt rhythm of the breakfast crowd some breakfasters are relationally slow, others keep the average pace and a few dash in and out.

As an occasion, here, today, breakfast, like a traffic cohort, has a self-

displaying and locally available established average pace (Livingston, 1987; Laurier, 2002; Galani and Chalmers, 2004); a pace which could be measured by the clock but isn't produced by using it. At the heart of it is the rhythmic drinking of hot and cold liquids (mostly lattes but also black coffees, espressos, teas, fruit drinks). The tempo of drinking can be upped or slowed. It is also where the conventions of British coffee drinking transform, and are transformed by, the introduction of both Italianate cafés and US West Coast cafés (which were already an evolving hybrid of Italian and US coffee houses; Schultz and Jones Yang, 1997). Halfway through their breakfast, on checking watches and realizing, 'Is that the time!', drinking can be accelerated and, from time to time, cups are abandoned. In fact the drift toward large lattes and away from espressos in the UK (Allegra Strategies, 2004) can be understood by the fact that the drink is an occasion as much as it is sustenance. The British expectation of the breakfast cup of coffee (or tea) is that it will be longer than 3 minutes of a Milanese espresso during the week, and yet longer still on a Sunday over the newspaper supplements.

### **[Work time approaches]**

The table of six office workers at the back corner of the café starts to leave. They do this in a gradual way, adjusting coats, checking watches, one saying aloud, 'Oh well, can't put off the inevitable any longer.' The romantic couple are long gone by now. There's not a sudden emptying out like a train reaching its destination or a lecture ending. There is a gradual leave taking. Some people have to say goodbye. The co-workers don't. The buzz is dying down. The background music seems louder. With the queue gone, the staff are roving back and forth from the counter laden with crockery and napkins after clearing up tables.

### **[Quiet]**

The beginning of the conventional working day has filleted out the office and shop workers leaving behind some students with their textbooks, text messages and newspapers, a mother and daughter probably on their way to the shops and an old guy also reading a newspaper. The manageress of the café sits down at a table to read her newspaper; she has been here since 6.15 this morning. '9.40 am. Quiet', I write in my notebook; like the quiet after the phone has been ringing in an otherwise empty room or a seaside town when the summer season ends; a quiet that is heard inescapably as what it is by being after the event. A quality which we lose if we take the quiet out of the sequence, the buzz and the quiet are joined. In their ending, the public breakfast is over. You can still come in and have a late breakfast and its lateness is found through it being after the common event.

### Local Observability and Experimentality with Rhythm

Breakfast in a café and a chemistry lecture in a university might seem an unlikely pair – except that they both involve arrangements of tables, chairs, collective hubbub and crowds, and are repeated day after day. In following through the course of a weekday breakfast time it should have become clear that the buzz of breakfast emerges, persists and then passes, providing a communal ambience and possibilities for being together. In the lecture there is the buzz that *precedes* the lecture which is the lecture hall filling and then the buzz that *follows, marks* or, every so often, may *push for*, a lecture ending. The breakfast buzz of the café is the persistent *background* to each pocket of conversation, or newspaper reading or daydreaming or whatever, as it dies down, an awareness of breakfast ending arises. Different events' buzzes have their distinct uses.

What the owners, staff and customers said to me during my fieldwork is that the breakfast crowd is a growing crowd and we discuss the possibility of a change in the way people live in Britain: an adjustment in the rhythm of the communal life in towns and cities. By what methods of analysis and with what warrants have the café staff come to make such a sociological statement? As I noted at the outset, it was the owners and staff of cafés that had alerted me to the growth in people eating breakfast out in cafés on their way to work. For this to happen at all, cafés had to start opening early enough to provide the possibility of having breakfast there rather than at home. Echoing their Italian, French and US counterparts, the current espresso chains open early to catch the breakfast crowd. You might ask, are the café chains causing this change in where and with whom breakfast is eaten? And there are answers that could be given to this question; in fact this question lends itself nicely to sceptical arguments over who is causing what and what its effects will be. However, the interest here is in how claims of social change are not dismissed as implausible or unsubstantiated. This is where we have to turn to what these daily public occasions make available.

Coulter's (2001) remarks on the 'macro-social' are useful in considering how we apprehend the public nature of time; he takes the crowd as a nice example of immediately observable macro-phenomena in everyday life. While some social institutions such as banks or hospitals are only partially instantiated in their material structures, the crowd seems satisfyingly 'there'. No wonder that the crowd be it in the street or on the beach has been popular in consideration of macro-social forces. Yet what is hopefully becoming clear from my description of one café's breakfast hours unfolding is that, much like the traffic jam, not only is it staffed by members who ensure its existence: it is also a site of its members' recognition of each crowd as a typical instance of what it is and by their local inquiries into what could be causing it. Inquiries that only exceptionally turn towards *our* practices as causing it, and more often turn towards causes elsewhere.

In analysing a conversation between two employees of a department store about an event that occurred outside their front door, Sacks (1992b) shows how the crowd that gathers as witnesses, gawpers and investigators assists the employee in seeing the event as possibly a robbery and as something reportable at a later date. In fact, Sacks is pointing towards that general feature of a crowd of onlookers in cities: if they are gathering, then there is some event occurring which will be tell-able at a later date. To have a story to tell with the authority of an eyewitness is quite a lure to join the crowd and see what they are looking at, since, even if it's not your business to do something about what it is they are looking at, it is to have something to tell later of which you were a firsthand witness (see Sacks, 1992a) on 'entitlements to experience' and 'rights to tell a story'). Unlike the onlookers after a robbery, the café crowd is differently produced. It is not a one-off thing, it is there almost every day and is utterly commonplace to the staff and to the regulars. And yet, this is not to say that the staff have not analysed the crowd several times over for what it is like, who composes it, whether it is growing or declining and what its normal appearances are, how it compares today to yesterday or a day last week. As inhabitants of this city, we are all inquirers into its appearing or disappearing daily rhythms, which we check with our friends and colleagues as to whether they see such things as changing, or whether our encounter with a crowd was a one-off blip. Given that there are crowds of people out for breakfast, we are willing to speculate and perhaps become theorists of, and on, whether cappuccinos and lattes for breakfast in some way destroys our sense of being Bostonians, Milanese, Glaswegian or Londoners. We can sip our cappuccino, without great remark from others and feel cosmopolitan, part of here and now, 'to welcome the influence of the world or not' (Blum, 2003: 128).

What this shift in the morning routine also raises is a question of experimentation with daily urban rhythms, as do the various struggles over night-time in the city (Blum, 2003); an experimentation that is not only about how we organize transporting ourselves from home to workplace as I raised earlier in the fieldwork notes. In that sense we might heed Lefebvre's warning about the colonization of the everyday as breakfast time becomes a scheduling device for the better transportation of the workers, a province of paying for costly Costa coffee while also being better stimulated for economic productivity. The experimenting is about more than colonization, since having our breakfast out offers an *ambiguous* connection between *enjoying* life in the city with a freshly baked *pain au chocolat* in a buzzing crowd of others, and those still uncertain rhythms of productivity arriving with the rapid extension of the espresso café industry.

## Notes

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1. During a 30-month ESRC-funded study (R000239797) Chris Philo and I carried out ethnographic fieldwork in a number of different cafés in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and London (Laurier and Philo, 2005).
2. Square brackets are used to ‘bracket out’ the assumption that we already know what we are talking about in mentioning a phenomenon. Their use was originally in phenomenology to suspend the assumption that we know what a thing is *a priori*.
3. In their study the question that Garfinkel and Sudnow return to several times is ‘has the lecture begun yet?’ and later [the lecture room is starting to fill up].
4. Alongside the time spent ‘sampling’ café breakfasts in numerous cafés, café staff and owners were interviewed about their cafés and the place of them in people’s daily routines as well as the particular crowds that came to their café

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