

## How breakfast happens in the café

*Eric Laurier,  
Senior Research Fellow  
Institute of Geography  
University of Edinburgh,  
Edinburgh EH8 9XP  
Eric.laurier@ed.ac.uk*

**Abstract:**

In this article I examine a specific occasioned place, 'breakfast in the café', to begin a re-specification of the orderly emergent properties of timespace. Harold Garfinkel and David Sudnow's study of a chemistry lecture is drawn upon as an exemplary study of a collective event. What makes breakfast in a café, breakfast in a café rather than a lecture on chemistry is made available through comparisons with the Garfinkel and Sudnow's description. Attention is drawn to the centrality of sequentiality as part of the orderly properties of occasioned places.

## Timespace and occasioned places

When we talk of time or space in the social sciences the temptation to universalisation, the scientification of social life, is almost irresistible. With this temptation comes the inevitable capitalisation 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 colonisation and extraction of concepts of space and time from maths or physics. Concepts which are uprooted and transplanted into the distant fields of human geography, sociology or urban studies 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. Investigations in and of the ordinary un-noticed natural features of everyday life – singing a song, building a house, waiting on a bus, walking up a hill, a Powerpoint presentation, windsurfing, having breakfast – investigations that pay them surprisingly serious attention. In the unfolding of these social affairs we can begin to re-formulate perplexing abstract problems on the nature of time and space.

Already we should begin to question holding apart the terms 'time' and 'space', when they can be conjoined as space-time or timespace (Glennie and Thrift 1996; Glennie and Thrift 2002; Massey 1994; Thrift 1996)? The legacy of holding them apart has been to prioritise the theorisation of time in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which was followed by a return to the theorisation of space in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thrift and others who have put timespace to work in their studies have abandoned the dualism of time versus space in favour of considering the multiple networks that gradually extend each with specific timespaces. As they note the gradual spread of clock time through the uses of church bells begins long before the assumed advent of industrial time. Moreover in each place the clock system requires localisation so that we find the meeting of religious timings with industrial timings in the sounding of factory horns for religious festivals (May and Thrift 2001).

In using the idea of timespace the world is ordered not through the imposition of a cartesian grid, but rather through a rhizome spreading out securing patches of never inevitable and often fragile patches of order. While it does much greater justice to the organisation of the differing regions of the world, timespace still suffers somewhat from a sense of the universal. Admittedly this is a universal as an effect of human organisation, one that arises after various materials, skills, forms of repair, rules and more have been put in place. While we might be able imagine then how this approach might speak of it, how peculiar nevertheless to treat breakfast as 'timespace'? Casey (1997) in his epic history of the idea of place would rightly remind us that to stay with (time)space will leave us in the domain of Cartesian coordinates and the universal. And of course we risk also losing the sense of duration by fixing on time(space). How then to investigate places and duration without falling into an easy essentialism of the warm and human experience of daily rhythms in contrast to the cold and inhuman clock (Latour 1997). Post-phenomenological approaches maintain an interest in the lived experience of place and duration yet eschew

grounding it in transcendental consciousness or the human body. A longstanding corpus of work that has looked at specific practices first and then considered what forms of places and times they make is that of ethnomethodology (Garfinkel 1967; Garfinkel 2002; Sharrock and Button 1991).

In terms of its notion of place Rawls writes, that Garfinkel's:

has no interest in locations as physical places with concrete historical characteristics. It is not physical space that gives coherence to what we might still want to call the spacial characteristics of the places in which actors act. For Garfinkel, places are situations whose coherence is given by the practices which constitute them as situations of a particular sort. Practices have relevant histories that may be of interest. But, a place can be constituted by one practice at one time and a different practice at another. Practices define the situation and the identities that occur within it - not the location. (Rawls 2002: 166)

Equally time is dealt with by its part in producing social order and in that emerging order's accomplished timing. The often used example is that of a clapping in time to a metronome. Ethnomethodology investigates what it is to clap at the same time as the metronome, a time that has to be made by 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 involves clapping in a way that 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 making time. We do so through [following the metronome] yet the lived work of doing so involves listening at the outset hearing a first click, a second, a third, in doing so coming to hear the intervals between. Hearing them in their regularity and their rhythm and producing that same rhythm through clapping. A rhythm that need not be clapping, it could be tapping, snapping fingers or whatever. The metronome is a very simple example which puts in place the importance of sequential relations between events that occur one after another. Where 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 1994a).

Sequentiality is the time dimension in and through which persons mobilize and organize the enactment of practices and the presentation of identities that comprise the order and meaning of modern society. Time, in this regard, is the sequential time of interactional face-to-face relations. As such, time is a constitutive feature of practices, and trust and reciprocity are implicated in its use. The order in which things are said and done - their placement before or after one another - is constitutive of how they mean. (Rawls 2005: 170)

Garfinkel's work is usefully placed into the literatures on ideas of time by Rawls by outlining his arguments in contrast to Durkheim and others. To proceed through a re-arrangement of the theoretical literature on time is a way of doing ethnomethodology that Rawls (2002) herself would point out that Garfinkel and other ethnomethodologists are uneasy with. One of the dangers being that in trying to clarify conceptions of time we all too

quickly withdraw into an analytic universe overpopulated with imaginary examples and just-so stories.

By way of contrast with Rawls (2005) recent article in this journal on Garfinkel's concept of time, this article pursues its argument through real-worldly inquiries. Rather than further finesse Garfinkel's place in the literature my proposal here is to draw on and hopefully contribute to the corpus of ethnomethodology in pursuing an investigation of a particular time of day in a particular kind of place. What I will call here, as a tag of convenience, an 'occasioned place' in that specific aspects of a place, 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 in *just that* place. To consider occasioned places is not to posit a singular 'lived' alternate that opposes timespace by adding human warmth to inhuman scientific measurement (Latour 1997). It is an alternate that parallels the moves made by Thrift and others in distributing 'timespace' to its variations in multiple timespaces, to pursue a myriad of occasioned places. A similar shift to that made by Crang (2001) to 'keep a sense of the fecundity in the everyday without it becoming a recourse to ground thinking in an ultimate non-negotiable reality' p188.

In what follows I will try and describe breakfast in a café as a collective course of action thereby contributing towards an analysis of an occasioned place. In doing so I also want to touch on how an utterly familiar feature of our daily lives might be changing. So one ends up with an odd question. 'What is breakfast in this café?' A question that is answered regularly by travel writers, novelists, historians and anthropologists of exotic cultures and rarely by human geographers and sociologists. Alec McHoul puts it:

Many social scientists have argued that time and our conceptions of time are crucial to the organisation of social affairs - not the least Karl Marx. But to take for granted what counts as time in these studies is always to beg the question. Time is organised in terms of particular techniques with clocks, watches and other equipment. People don't interpret clocks; asking what they have in mind when 'reading' a clock is a pointless sociological exercise. And yet to say that the measurement of time is utterly arbitrary and without 'objective' significance is just as great a mistake - as I hope should be clear by now. Social time is 'objective' and what it is changes. So it would be a legitimate sociological investigation to ask (in a different way from the physicist, of course) what a particular kind of social time is, how it operates and how these things change. How do the familiar routine ways with bells or gongs turn into 24 hour time analogues? Most sociologists probably haven't got a clue about such matters and don't wish to have one. And yet it could well be at the very heart of their enterprise. (McHoul 1990)

A detailed description of breakfast time in a café, which is taken to be typical of a growing trend will offer us insights into 'the slow almost imperceptible, practical, ways in which quite small but always significant fragments of the *Weltbild* slowly decompose or are altered' (McHoul 1990).

## With cafes come new possibilities

Over the last decade in the UK and USA 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 Macdonald's as the icon of either globalisation or cosmopolitanism depending on which way you look at it. Where MacDonald'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 over-views point toward 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 1994b), 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; Thrift 1999). 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 (Putman 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. The placement of a café visit in the sequence of events with which we build each day is thus of consequence.

Rather than further call on our imagination of what cafés are like in numerous 'just so stories', ethnomethodologists recommend we look at actual instances of café life in motion. The suspension of the assumption that we know what a café is and how it is organised is necessary move in beginning an ethno-inquiry into and of this phenomenon (Garfinkel 1986). 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 the project on cafés and civic life<sup>1</sup> 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' and or try and 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' as a problem, I would like to spend some time making conjectures on what breakfast time in a café is and how it is organised.

Individual actions are constructed through the co-articulation of different kinds of phenomena in different media (for example, talk, the body, documents, tools, etc.), each of them capable of providing quite distinct forms of temporal and sequential organization. (Goodwin 2002: 122).

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 (Garfinkel

---

<sup>1</sup> During a 30 month ESRC funded study Chris Philo and myself carried out ethnographic fieldwork in a number of different cafés in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester and London (Laurier 2005).

2002: 219-244). 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 one of the most exact and exacting descriptions given by sociologists of a crowd *as a course of action*. It is in that light that the central section of this article finds its purpose. In writing the notes I hoped to give substance to a part of cafe life and make it available, or perhaps discoverable in its accountable details. In doing so I am wary of the study seeming overly concrete; as if I am merely reciting the world as it is in a kind of hapless empiricism. For all the ambitions of close textual records of events as Garfinkel puts it off-handedly of his lecture study with Sudnow, 'most of the observational stuff consists of descriptive blurbs and suggestive commentary' p221. On that matter there is no way out or around blurb and suggestion in recording phenomena in fieldnotes.

### Café notes 7-10 a.m.

-[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 demi-regular. It's across the street from the railway station from where I came 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 recognisable state of affairs? There is how the customer *recognises* [empty] which is deeply bound up with the typical interior architectural construction of this café and many others like it to allow 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). Where, by contrast an airport or flower market café might be full. What the customer makes of [empty] is related. 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?'). Finding the café empty is thus an accountable matter in that certain accounts can be made on finding it to be so.

---

<sup>2</sup> 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*.

### -[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. As Rawls (2005) noted of Garfinkel's conception of time, sequence of events is of central importance. The relationship between what is first, what is next and what after that in an emerging sequence allows members to confer and organise expectations, rights, rules and more (Livingston 1987). First customer is just a sequential feature of the ordering of customers through 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 37<sup>th</sup> customer was? Equally a customer is aware of when they are the first customer of the day, and unaware of their being 37<sup>th</sup>. There are the first customers that form the earliest arrivals, all of whom may have some degree of rapid recognisability 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 arrivals 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. Or rather the presence of the first customer visibly sitting in the café as a customer provides confirmation for the inquiries of the next arrivals as to whether the café is open. 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 till 8am the cafe 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, there are no customers coming in the door the second after them or exiting as they enter. 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 maintenance - newspapers are folded into holders, 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 camaraderie with the staff as a third party to these conversations about last night's television, nights out and yesterday's events at this café.

As they leave the counter they divide between the take-away and the sit-in customers, with the latter selecting tables. A visual form of [trust] is produced in the selection of tables at a *distance* from those already occupied (Garfinkel 1963; Laurier 2004). *Proximity* of table selection while the café is quiet may lead to the appearance of eavesdropping or spying on others (Goffman 1970). In contrast to lecture theatres and cinemas the café seating as a totality has an "ecology" that [indirects the attention] for the café as a whole, though each table surrounded by seats directs its attention inwards, providing for what we gloss over as 'face-to-face' conversation. However in each and every café, table selection is complicated by the orientation of the tables, their relative privacy or whether they have a good view. The mundane architecture of the café in terms of windows, sofas and so on allows that what are commonly known to be the good tables will be snapped up even when they are close to one another. In this café in winter this is true of the tables with the plush armchairs furthest away from the drafts of the door and the smoking section. Customers at proximate tables nevertheless continue to orient to the production of trust and what Goffman calls 'civil inattention', sitting artfully arranged behind newspapers, cradling their coffee cup or/and looking away from their close neighbours at the counter or 'middle distance'.

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 recognise, they are here more often than I am and they make small talk with the staff at the counter. 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. And I find myself wondering about their lives since they seem so romantic over breakfast. Surely they are not living together and then arriving here at different times to rejoin one another for breakfast. 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 romantic dinner for two - predictable, the romantic breakfast - surprising.

I know no more about them 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, they're probably in their forties. 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. 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, whilst not friendship nor loving intimacy, is more than a tolerance of others, it is an enjoyment of being amongst strangers familiar and unfamiliar that is a form of urban community. 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) finds 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). In his detailed history of cafés in Britain, Ellis (2004) documents how unruly, riotous and plain unpleasant acts were as common as the polite and intellectual conversation that fostered the rise of commerce and public inquiry into matters of the state and the court.

### **-[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 eight o’clock’ where ‘about’ serves its purposes well, being a sweep of time rather than a punctum (as in a point pierced in a punchcard). A sweep that allows for how this cafés customers work as a collective, they do not turn up on the dot, their arrivals increase in frequency gradually. What is particular to breakfast here is that it is not like lunchtime’s [busy] either where lunchtime is a bunch just after twelve and a bunch just after 1pm.

[Getting busier] is a recognisable part of the potential and projected emergence of [busy]. Recognisable in a queue forming at the counter, customers continuing to arrive, tables filling up and more. Its recognisability 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 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, officeworkers in suits, shopworkers in their varied uniforms and students with shoulderbags. There are early mornings that stay quiet – Saturdays and Sundays of course, mostly free of early morning city commuters seeking coffee. One more specificity of today’s breakfast is that it is a *weekday* breakfast, with its weekday population and fitted in with the projects of those weekdays. Officeworkers going to work for 9, students going to classes for 9 and other shopworkers going to their shops for 9.

### **-[busy]- / -[crowded]-**

At around 8.30 it *is* busy. From [empty] to [an observable collection of individual customers] the steadily accelerating arrivals have gradually become a [crowd]. There is no steady flow of customers arriving, they come in irregular pulses refilling the now constant queue. Re-organising 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,

---

<sup>3</sup> 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].

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.

In contrast to the studies of Garfinkel, Sudnow and others of the ecologies of classroom, and as noted earlier, there is not *one* directed field of vision. The ecology of this café in common with many others consists of the entrance offering a view *into* the interior, a counter with its orientation for queuing and sideways for viewing, numerous tables arranged within the space to *scatter* fields of vision and a few other features (more on the oriented properties of tables and chairs in (Laurier 2005)).

‘The place is buzzing’. The café becomes audibly busy. There’s the steady thump of the coffee ground being knocked out the handle, the jet engine whine which ends with the extended steam train chuff of the frothing of milk. People ordering their drinks and pastries in raised voices above the din of the till and the big black Gaggia. The front door swinging open and shut letting in blasts of traffic roar from the rush-hour on the street outside. As Garfinkel and Sudnow (2003) say of the lecture audience, it’s a ‘noisy assemblage’. Though once again, 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 making a lecture come to a close. 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. The scene in the film ‘Withnail and I’ where the drunk protagonists stagger into the village tearoom and the elderly well-to-do customers stop talking to stare at the two drunks. There’s the hearable way that they start talking again after their pause, that makes a social fact of their silence, it has a before and after. There is the event that it is paired up with, in what we might call a dialogue, and then there is whatever follows. In the film, the unruly characters look back at the café crowd defiantly, though they could of course have turned on their heel and fled. Such a silence is not an absence of response, a ‘lack’, its presence, as we commonly say, is ‘palpable’ (Lynch 1999).

‘There’s a table free’. With this café being busy, [free] becomes pressingly relevant to customers standing queuing and tables are inspected for their stage in an unfolding course of having coffee. Likely candidates identified as approaching the possible completion of their [breakfast]. A stage of [breakfast] recognisable 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). Newly arrived customers thanks customers who vacate their table as they arrive. A mutual awareness that [breakfast] has been completed perhaps earlier that it might for the benefit of newly arrived customers.

- [the breakfast crowd]-

“Few of these customers are here for the first time.” As I sit here as one among many other customers, by looking at the many I find myself to be a typical member of this crowd. It’s almost entirely people on their way to work, just off the train and stopping here for a coffee or tea and maybe a pastry or a muffin. Deposited by the train with many others, I use the café in that way as I break my journey here, stopping off here before walking the twenty minutes to the university. For the past couple of weeks I’ve been arriving here earlier and leaving later to see the crowd form and then dissipate. When the café is as crowded as this I see people peer in the door, and walk on, some walk in and then turn on their heels, others continue in. There are other cafés to go to.

Because I’ve been to this café many times now I recognise other regulars. Although in part I recognise regulars and they produce their recognisability by my seeing their individual faces, their usual sorts of suits or hair styles, as much of my seeing them in this café is by where and how they sit together. Akin to Garfinkel and Sudnow’s remarks on the constitution of the territories of the audience, the regulars may wander around to some extent, but this is the exception forced by how crowded the cafe is, usually they go straight to [their table]. At the far left corner when you enter around this time you will almost always see a group of half a dozen office workers and the romantic couple hidden in their nook behind the counter on the right. Regulars reproduce a geography of who sits where for breakfast on a daily basis, almost as if this were an hotel with tables corresponding to room numbers. As we noted above there are criteria used in the selection of tables, and for regulars there is [our table].

Where social theorists, notably Simmel (1950) and Canetti (1960) have analysed ‘the crowd’ in the city they have been thinking above all of the crowd in the streets. What of the many particular places at certain hours that crowds gather and thereby the occasioned places are formed? What’s more, what of the mundane reasoning (Pollner 1987) applied then and there by parties to the crowds they come upon in their daily routines? Persons arriving through the doors of this café register the café’s crowd and its crowdedness as problematic though expectedly and unremarkably so. That this crowd they come upon is a *café* crowd provides a start for the situated nature of their mundane inquiries, and that cafés themselves come finely categorised (i.e. as greasy spoons, youth cafés, supermarket cafés, internet cafés, upmarket, Starbucks, etc.). Each category comes with its expectations: regular customers of Starbucks are not disappointed by its lack of egg, bacon and chips for breakfast. Of significance for our consideration of occasioned places, customers (and staff) analyse crowds by *time of day*, and this is the *breakfast* crowd. There might be something unexpected about the breakfast crowd though.

**-[breakfast]-**

Alongside the group of six who sit at far left hand corner of the café there are other groups of people gathering who must surely work together. I see café goers greet one another who work at the same place and yet don’t sit together. And those who are here every day who

don't work together and always sit together. Then there are those who are here every morning sitting alone reading the paper. There are couples having breakfast together before going their separate ways to work. 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 around about here (as we noted there are more than half a dozen cafés within a short walk of the central railway station).

What's significant is making a change to the sequence, a change that has consequences so obvious that it goes un-noticed and overlooked. How long it takes commuters to leave the house/flat in the morning presents itself as daily trial. A commonplace method to accomplish timeliness is to have a clock time we leave our bed at and a clock time we leave our residence at. The slot lying between these two might be an hour and a half or might be ten minutes. Actually getting out of the door is the accomplishment of all that we can get done in that time. Putting our face on for the day, packing the equipment, the paperwork that we need, feeding children and or pets if we have them, setting the kids off to school, walking the dog and so on. Once the house is left then a temporal 'leg' is completed, which is not to say that all the things that could be done are done, just that what can be done in that time is done. The journey to work is, increasingly so, variable in its time length, it could vary between twenty minutes and an hour, depending on when commuters get out of the house, if we beat the rush-hour, catch the early train, there are empty roads because it's the school holidays or there are floods, roadworks etc. Arrival time at workplaces for commuters remains open to these expected though variable delays until they are within that five minute walking distance where it takes serious acts of god to throw their journey time out by more than two minutes. The working week breakfast has a definite end point though variable beginnings. There is the journey's logic of being *right beside* the workplace, rather than, say, stopping at the café closest to your house, or closest to the railway station where you catch your train to work. At that point in a journey the unpredictable part of transportation still lies ahead. Will the train arrive on time and will there be space on it? Will I get a space to park the car when I arrive? And so on.

To get to a workplace for nine in the morning will, in the daily trips in an actual week, mean arrivals at 8.20, 8.35, 8.50, 8.33, 8.31. For the 8.20 arrival one day, we have not had breakfast and we know of a café, we stop off there. At that place a new occasion starts in relation to the ongoing reproduction of the collective conventional nine o'clock start. We have the opportunity to prep for work, to have a nice coffee where we don't have to wash

---

<sup>4</sup> 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 cafés.

the dishes afterwards, to calm ourselves after the trauma (for me at least) of getting out of the house in the morning. We can coordinate with others: the half dozen office workers at the table at the back of the café arrived asynchronously from their different transportations. Just before nine they leave their table together still chatting to go on to the office. Another group who meet here are three or four car-based workers who have no office and they leave after nine when the rush-hour is over. For them this café is the staff room they will never have.

[Breakfast out] is, then, a block of variable time which we can slot into the sequences which we use to build our 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 five minutes to slug our coffee and bolt our pastry, or one 'early' morning we have twenty minutes to chat with our workmates, read the newspaper, catch up on some paperwork from last week, we can always arrive at nine. And yet we also have another time-space to our day, we have a new place we go where we can do a diversity of things, more things in fact 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 co-ordinated 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 (the inevitable power-breakfast) and transport workers (truckers, taxi drivers and various delivery people). 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 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 catching up with other colleagues, planning meetings, passing 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 cappuccino 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 contexture of the breakfast crowd some breakfasters a relationally slow, others keeping the average pace and a few dashing in and out.

As an occasion here today, breakfast, like a traffic cohort, has a self-displaying and locally available established average pace. 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. Half way through their breakfast on checking watches and realising 'is that the time!' drinking can be accelerated and from time to time cups are abandoned. There's no great consequentiality to it since there is no longer project which these breakfasts build. There is not a thirty unit breakfast course over which a conversation between two colleagues must be completed. There is perhaps a cultural translation of the Italian morning coffee to the British breakfast in that a two minute espresso at the counter would be peculiar in this café. 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 not sustenance. The British expectation of breakfast is that it will be longer than two minutes during the week and even longer at the weekends.

### **-[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. A quiet that is heard inescapably as what it is by being after the ringing of the phone. A quality which we lose if we take the quiet out of the sequence of events, 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.

## The local observability of social change

Cases need to be collected with which to enrich the phenomena of buzzing at lectures, and the variants of buzzing. We need to begin by setting up our museum of noisy assemblages. (Garfinkel 2002: 242)

Throughout this article I have returned to Garfinkel and Sudnow's study of a chemistry lecture to draw inspiration and also to look for what makes a café breakfast the kind of occasion it is rather than allowing it to be lost in generalisation. In following through the course of the event it should have become clear that the buzz of breakfast emerges and passes providing a communal ambience and possibilities for being together quite distinct from the buzz of a lecture ending. As Garfinkel hints in collecting another form of buzzing the only place to put it is on the museum shelf. Labelled 'breakfast buzz, circa 2002, captured in the Glasgow area.' Rather than halt having deposited another specimen what I would like to do is make some brief remarks that will work toward dispelling a sense that broad social change in 'timespace' is at a different level from particular occasioned places.

What the owners, staff and customers say to me during my fieldwork in and around cafés is that the breakfast crowd is a growing crowd and that it could be a change in the way people live in Britain. An adjustment in the very rhythm of our communal life in towns and cities. By what methods of analysis have they come to make such a sociological statement? A statement that researchers in the social sciences will pick away at with professional scepticism even as they wrap it up for delivery as news from their fieldwork. The answer I would like to make here touches on the resources that social science shares with other members of ordinary places that they inquire about, into and from.

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. Up until recently it was only trucker's cafés, motorway service stations, MacDonald's, the odd greasy spoon and Seamen's Missions and the like that opened before nine in the morning. Echoing their Italian, French and US counterparts the current espresso chains all 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 here, 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', and no wonder then that it has been popular in consideration of macro-social forces. Yet I think what is becoming clear from my description of one café's breakfast unfolding and by others accounts of cafés'

breakfast crowds is that, much like the traffic jam, not only is it staffed by members who ensure its existence, it is also a site of members' recognition of it as a typical instance of what it is and by their inquiries into what could be causing it. Inquiries that only exceptionally turn toward our practices as causing it and more often turn toward 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 he is pointing toward that general feature of a crowd of onlookers in cities, if they are gathering then there is some event occurring which will form a tellable at a later date. That's 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' etc.) Now the café crowd is quite 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 (i.e. are there always no seats during busy periods, does the queue make it to the pillar or only the door), how it compares today to yesterday or a day last week.

It is not only the staff, the crowd itself is composed of members who see the crowd as an accountable entity (we've noted already how we will analyse our relationship to *this* or *that* crowd). So it is that we see being part of a breakfast crowd the normality and the popularity of having breakfast out. It is not something odd to do around here (though our parents might have found it so) – it happens. We are all inquirers into features which seem to indicate something is increasing or decreasing in popularity which we check with our friends and colleagues as to whether they see such things as changing, or whether our observation 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 the good of this growing crowd (McHugh, et al. 1974).

What I would suggest is that each particular breakfast-time as it happens in a café is the gradual recomposition of the *weltbild* (McHoul 1990). It is analysably an instance in a 'bigger picture' to which it has become answerable through what ethnomethodologists call the 'documentary method of interpretation' (Wieder 1974). Comparisons of it as 'busier today than yesterday', 'as busy as it usually is', 'quieter than yesterday and so on document its part in a daily history, 'around these parts'. For the inhabitants of the city living there ongoingly breakfast in the café has a continuity and coherence if also some residue of novelty. As a substantial and substantive occasion which we come upon and might try out it is perceptible and inquiries are constantly launched into what kind of event it is, how it works, who can justifiably do it, whether to start attending the places you find it regularly.

## References

- Allegra-Strategies** 2004 *Project Café 5*, London: Commercial Research Report, available from Allegra Strategies.
- Baumgartner, M. P.** 1988 *The Moral Order of a Suburb*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Blum, A.** 2003 *The Imaginative Structure of the City*, Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press.
- Boden, D.** 1994a *The Business of Talk*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Boden, D., & Molotch, H. L.** 1994b 'The Compulsion of Proximity', in R. Friedland, & Boden, D> (ed) *NowHere: space, time and modernity*, London & Berkeley CA: University of California Press.
- Canetti, E.** 1960 *Crowds and Power*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Casey, E. S.** 1997 *The Fate of Place, A Philosophical History*, Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Coulter, J.** 2001 'Human practices and the observability of the 'macro-social'', in T. R. Schatzki, K. Knorr Cetina and E. Von Savigny (eds) *The practice turn in contemporary theory*, London: Routledge.
- Crang, M.** 2001 'Rhythms of the City', in J. May and N. Thrift (eds) *timespace, geographies of temporality*, London: Routledge.
- Ellis, M.** 2004 *The Coffee-house: A Cultural History*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Garfinkel, H.** 1963 'A conception of and experiments with trust as a condition of stable, concerted actions', in O. J. Harvey (ed) *Motivation and social interaction*, New York: Ronald Press.
- 1967 *Studies in Ethnomethodology*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- 2002 *Ethnomethodology's Program, Working Out Durkheim's Aphorism*, New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- Garfinkel, H., & Sacks, H.** 1986 'On Formal Structures of Practical Actions', in H. Garfinkel (ed) *Ethnomethodological Studies of Work*, London: Routledge and Keegan Paul.
- Glennie, P. and Thrift, N.** 1996 'Reworking E. P. Thompson's "Time, work-discipline and industrial capitalism"', *Time and Society* 5(3): 275-299.
- 2002 'The spaces of clock times', in J. Patrick (ed) *The Social in Question: New Bearings*, London: Routledge.
- Goffman, E.** 1970 *Strategic Interaction*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Goodwin, C.** 2002 'Time in Action', *Current Anthropology* 43(Supplement): s19-s35.
- Habermas, J.** 1989 *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, Oxford: Polity Press.
- Jacobs, J.** 1961 *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, New York: Random House.
- Latour, B.** 1997 'Trains of thought: Piaget, formalism and the fifth dimension', *Common Knowledge* 6(3): 170-191.

- Laurier, E.** 2001 'The region as a socio-technical accomplishment of mobile workers', in B. Brown, N. Green and R. Harper (eds) *Wireless World : Social and Interactional Aspects of the Mobile Age*, London: Springer.
- 2004 'The Spectacular Showing: Houdini and the Wonder of Ethnomethodology', *Human Studies* 27(4): 377-399.
- 2005 'What customers do, field report 3', Glasgow: University of Glasgow.
- Livingston, E.** 1987 *Making Sense of Ethnomethodology*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Lynch, M.** 1999 'Silence in Context: Ethnomethodology and Social Theory', *Human Studies* 22(2): 211-233.
- Massey, D.** 1994 *Space, place and gender*, Cambridge: Polity Press.
- May, J. and Thrift, N.** 2001 'Introduction', in J. May and N. Thrift (eds) *timespace, geographies of temporality*, London: Routledge.
- McHoul, A.** 1990 *Can We Know Rules? Wittgenstein On Certainty*, Freemantle: <http://www.mcc.murdoch.edu.au/aie/wocat1.html>.
- McHugh, P., Raffel, S., Foss, D. C. and Blum, A. F.** 1974 *On the Beginning of Social Inquiry*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Milgram, S.** 1977 *The Individual in a social world: essays and experiments*, London: Longman Education.
- Oldenberg, R.** 1997 *The Great Good Place and how they get you through the day*, San Francisco: Marlowe & Co.
- 2001 'Introduction', in R. Oldenberg (ed) *Celebrating the Third Place, Inspiring Stories about the "Great Good Places" at the heart of our communities*, New York: Marlowe & Company.
- Pollner, M.** 1987 *Mundane Reason*, Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Putman, R. D.** 2000 *Bowling alone : the collapse and revival of American community*, New York: Simon and Schuster.
- Rawls, A. W.** 2002 'Editor's Introduction', in A. W. Rawls (ed) *Ethnomethodology's Program, Working Out Durkheim's Aphorism*, Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield.
- 2005 'Garfinkel's Conception of Time', *Time and Society* 14(2/3): 163-190.
- Sacks, H.** 1972 'Notes on Police Assessment of Moral Character', in D. Sudnow (ed) *Studies in Social Interaction*, Glencoe: Free Press.
- 1992a *Lectures on conversation, Vol. 1*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- 1992b *Lectures on Conversation, Vol. 2*, Oxford: Blackwell.
- Sennett, R.** 1994 *Flesh and Stone, The Body and the City*, London: Faber.
- Sharrock, W. and Button, G.** 1991 'The social actor: social action in real time', in G. Button (ed) *Ethnomethodology and the human sciences*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Simmel, G.** 1950 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, New York: Free Press.
- Sudnow, D.** 1972 'Temporal Parameters of Interpersonal Observation', in D. Sudnow (ed) *Studies in Social Interaction*, New York: Free Press.
- Thrift, N.** 1996 *Spatial Formations*, London: Sage.
- 1999 'Performing Cultures in the New Economy', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90: 674-692.

– 2005 'But malice aforethought: cities and the natural history of hatred', *Transaction of the Institute of British Geographers* 30: 133-150.

**Wieder, D. L.** 1974 *Language and Social Reality, The Case of Telling the Convict Code*, The Hague: Mouton.

**Zerubavel, E.** 1985 *Hidden Rhythms: Schedules and Calendars in Social Life*, Berkeley: University of California Press.