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Reflections Tea bag futures

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Recently I ran out of my favourite green tea. I went to the shop only to find that they had none of the tea bags I usually used. I was a little dismayed, but I rallied and found that they had the whole leaf. So I bought that and went home and brewed myself a pot of tea.

The experience of brewing felt totally different to me and every time I brew a ‘cuppa’ I feel a slight tingle of pleasure simply from the ritual of taking the pot, rinsing it out, sluicing it with hot water, spooning in a teaspoonful of leaves, pouring on the boiling water, setting aside the pot to stand and finally and triumphantly pouring myself the cup.

I confess to not owning any Royal Dalton china, but that doesn’t seem to matter too much. What I find interesting in the experience is not that the tea tastes better, though I suspect it does, rather it is that I feel somehow enriched by the action, the ritual. It took some weeks for me to recognise how attached I had come to brewing the tea.

I then reflected that my days of tea bag dangling were over and that I had accidentally reclaimed a social activity that many have lost. The time to brew is important—it is a meditative act—but just as importantly the tea bag culture of speedy and utilitarian ends had lost a minor battle. The teapot had won out.

Tea is murky water. As a metaphor it is also ambiguous. On the one hand it is a symbol of colonial power. Many millions over the centuries have laboured, warred and died because of tea. The humble cup of tea is not so innocent. Yet tea is also a symbol of refinement and stability. It represents both tradition and continuity, propelling us into a future that is safe and reliably familiar. The tea bag makes this future more accessible and manageable.

Though arguably illusory, this safety is premised on a secure lineage that is both aesthetically coercive and intimate. It is as if we had a tea bag gene that seeks to carry forward what we value while making it as unintrusive and convenient as possible.

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The irony is that the tea bag as metaphor is deeply fractured. It levels the heights of great culture, a truly proletarian deed, bringing it within the grasp of all while being itself the antidote to cultural sensitivity of any kind. Within its powdery heart lies the beauty and elegance of the Japanese tea ceremony—lineage—and the British attachment to tea as a symbol of home and hearth—intimacy.

As modernity crashed upon the twentieth century time became more and more precious and the quick, the instant became both fashionable and necessary. The age of the tea bag began in the offices and work places of people forever under pressure. It also quickly made the transition into the home when family members needed to grab a cuppa on their way to work or in the space provided by advertisements on the television.

It was not only quick—it was clean and efficient. No more tea leaves under the rose bush or clogging up the sink. In so many ways the instant has simplified our lives, relieving us of the burden of mundane reality. Eating out means no more dishes. Dishwashing machines mean no more messy benches and sinks filled with yesterday's dishes. And thank god for disposable nappies! What a relief. A small price to pay for some ironic tension in our lives.

My grandmother died emptying the teapot under the rose bush at the rear of her home. She was an expansively British matron who had maintained her sense of self through decades of tea drinking, usually with other women, in the uncompromising Australian wilderness. To her generation tea was the blood of social life, an affirmation of the culture she had left behind and sought to establish in a new land.

Tea got the Brits through the war with Hitler. If Hitler had had the imagination to stop tea imports in the crucial years of Britain's single-handed resistance to Nazism (1939–40) we might be living in a different world today. Tea rations were increased during 1940 as it helped the average Briton be stoic in the face of what appeared to be enormous odds.

Yet tea, though deeply associated with things British, has a very exotic and pluralist nature. As a beverage it is associated around the world with friendship and conviviality. Russians stew it in samovars, Tibetans boil it with yak butter, Indians and Pakistanis flavour it with cardamom and other pungent spices. The Turks drink more tea than coffee despite being associated with the latter. Tea and China go hand in hand, not just because that country is the birthplace of tea but because peasant communities today still produce awesome amounts of tea through traditional methods.

During the Cultural Revolution, Mao Zedong attempted to end the Chinese habit of drinking tea in public because it was perceived as an inefficient use of time. Tea, despite being seen as un-American, is still drunk in vast amounts in that country. And the Japanese managed to raise the art of tea drinking to a mystic experience of Zen mind in the famous tea ceremony.

Tea production worldwide is still increasing. People can't get enough. It was the problem of not getting enough that led the British to engineer the Opium War with China and also create their own plantations in their colonies around the world, forever changing the shape—physically, culturally and economically—of the countries that proved best suited to its growth and production. Having to pay extortionate taxes

on tea, a favourite drink in the American colonies, precipitated the famous Boston tea party. There is no doubt that tea has changed the face of history.

What is most interesting about tea though is the way it has been adopted by such a diverse array of cultures. As Kakuzo Okakura, author of the famous 1907 *The Book of Tea* wryly observed, humanity seems to meet in a cup of tea. There are as many different ways of drinking tea as there are peoples who drink it. Tea has adopted the cultural intricacies of the peoples it has come in contact with. Unlike other commodities of the global market which owe their success to their uniformity, tea is unique in that it is a heterodox phenomenon, blending in to each culture and being identified with it as an essential part of social discourse.

The tea bag is simply the industrialised answer to the compressing of social discourse and cultural dynamics. Sixteen percent of tea worldwide is consumed via the tea bag. And all of that in western industrialised countries. It is only in these countries that time has been constrained to such an extent that the tea bag—always an inferior tea—has been able to take hold. Industrial time makes of the tea bag a clean and efficient marvel of engineering.

The unity found in tea belies its colonial past. Tea, like bureaucracy, economic impoverishment, environmental degradation and tribal division, is a legacy of colonial power. The unity is in fact to be found in a shared post-colonial trauma experienced by the vast majority of humanity, all of which is happily overlooked through the sweet haze of a steaming cup of tea. Tea's ready admission into the cultural hearts of people worldwide is a tribute to the cosmopolitan spirit, a spirit which embraced all-comers, and allowed the fingers of colonialism to strike at the very hearts of cultures worldwide.

The futurist Rick Slaughter is fond of pointing out: everything has a cost. The friendships shared over tea worldwide have been bought at the cost of colonial intrusions into many quarters. Similarly the tea bag is efficient, clean and speedy—in an economically rational world, a world driven by restless energies, predatory yet dynamic—the tea bag can even be said to have a certain elegance: streamlined purpose and clean exit.

It has stripped back our culture just as it draws in the forms of other cultures. My green tea is not an Anglo-Saxon brew even though I am. Globalism in the form of the tea bag from Hell has entered our kitchen and we can be as cosmopolitan as we like sipping tea from Formosa, or Sri Lanka, India, Australia, Tanzania, South Africa. Thus the tea bag has the potential to provide a multicultural gloss to life without the substance.

Our inability to grasp deeper cultural forms is due to our tea-bag mind set which is often restricted to the realm of litany where consciousness is simply well packaged and disposable. There is no doubt that tea-bag consciousness is lazy. Not because it is quick, but because it lacks the mindfulness to engage with culture in a meaningful way. Any time-saving device has the potential to unleash energy for more mindful higher-order tasks but what happens when the time is made, yet no higher order is perceived? If the tea bag allowed us the time to develop relationships, reflect more deeply, engage more effectively in nurturing sustaining actions, then it would be a boon. Yet it has corroded our sense of time and self. Its very accessibility has been

an affirmation that the here and now—the absolute present—is the moment of ultimate power. Instant gratification becomes an end in itself.

The implications for the future are great. Tomorrow will take care of itself and can be trusted to behave just as the tea bag itself behaves with regular, clean, effective good sense. Relativism and economy of time and scale transcend all else while giving us the misguided sense that we are part of a global village. In the tea bag, our cultural amnesia is complete.

The tea bag also highlights western culture's inability to find higher-order meaning. We have traded things of universal value—time, tradition, relationship, reflective space—for an artefact that is ephemeral and disposable. The aesthetic science involved in brewing a pot of tea, if lost, needs to be replaced with another action that is rich in cultural overtones even though it depends in part on the triumph of the tea bag over the pot. The problem for many of us today is that we have not enough time to reflect and process. Our inner worlds are being sacrificed to outer demands. Cultural activity is by its very nature laden with reflective space. It has a mythic dimension, a story to be told, a lineage to be counted and a link to the future that is anchored in the human desire to partake of richness and meaning. The tea bag has been part of the reduction of this cultural space at a time when ironically it has freed up humans to place their energies at the service of higher-order objectives. It has simply eclipsed a way of life that was rich in reflective space and meaning.

Misgivings aside, I have no doubt that the tea bag has a firm hold on the future. I know that at times I will still have to use them, and when I do I will not lament the 'good old days of the tea pot'. What I will do is try to be mindful of what it allows me to do now. I want to jiggle my tea bag to a different tune.

Tea-bag users in general are at the crossroads. If we embrace the aspirations and practices of global capitalism we may have to throw out the bag itself, as coffee is trendier and more stimulating. Already the heady scents of Nestles' and other corporations are encircling the globe. And let's face it, things could be a lot worse than a cup of coffee. But my money is on the tea bag fighting back. The tea bag gene is one that is strong within us all. The desire for tradition, conformity and ease. There is still a little ritual involved in jiggling the bag before discarding it. If instant coffee takes over there will be hardly anything left to celebrate—just stirring in the sugar and milk.

On the other hand, tea bags may reveal to us something of the deeper nature of human beings. The wealth of cross-cultural strands available with a palette of tea bags is truly dazzling. But this future is one that will resist the pressures of global capitalism to make one of the many. It is in danger of simply skimming the artefacts from the realm of culture and putting them on the supermarket shelf.

For tea-bag aficionados to really have something to celebrate they need to rediscover what it was that tea first represented in our culture. They need to own the colonial horror of it and move on to looking for those higher-order activities that the tea bag, in the hands of modernism, have silenced: intimacy, relationship, open-ended time and reflective and aesthetic space.

To do this perhaps we need to get out our teapots once in a while and sit by the fire to remember our selves. There is a different future to be shaped from the tea leaves.