

OUT THERE/ A SLICE OF CHICAGO

For perky chat, try cafe salons

By Laurie Kaiser

Special to the Tribune

It wasn't easy to communicate my thoughts over the whirr of the espresso machine. But when I did, the table full of people leaned in to listen.

I had a few things to say about workplace changes, and how some new workers expect more perks than those of us who started working a decade or so ago. A half-beat later, another person slid his thoughts into the mix.

But this wasn't dinner chat with old pals, or college chums gabbing at the local bar. Rather, I had jumped into the newest twist on an ancient form—public discourse—at Lakeview's *Intelligentsia Coffee*.

Called *Cafe Society*, this is a Weekly "discussion salon," organized by the Public Square (formerly the Center for Public Intellectuals), with an assigned topic to tackle in an hour. Since the *Cafe Society* began in early November, three coffeehouses in Chicago, one in Oak Park and one in Hyde Park tackle the same subject, led by trained facilitators. It is open to anyone who wants to participate.

The goal is to capture what society grapples with, to give it texture and meaning over a cup of coffee: part college symposium, part free-for-all.

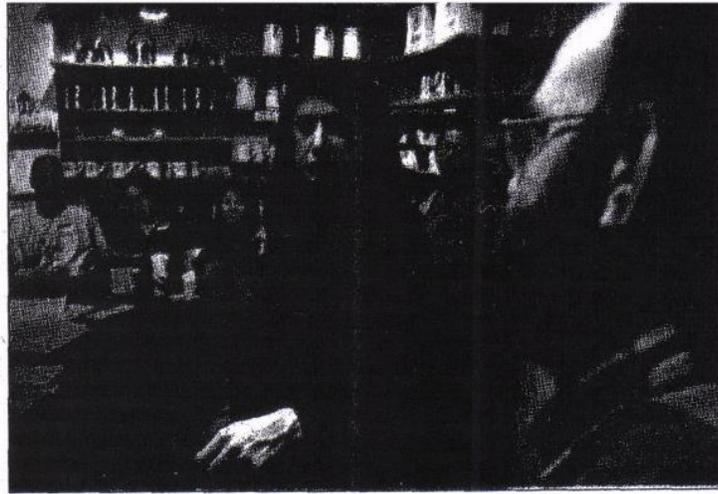
"We want to encourage people to get together and help build a participatory democracy," explains Katrin Voelkner, coordinator of the *Cafe Society* for the Public Square. For now, the topics come from Gretchen Helfrich's "Odyssey" program on WBEZ-FM91.5.

"We thought 'Odyssey' brought up relevant social issues and allowed interest in a broader audience," Voelkner said. "One objective of *Cafe Society* is to promote media literacy and encourage people to think critically."

On this Tuesday night, a dozen of us virtual strangers squeeze around a table to discuss the global economy and the meaning of work.

"Globalization is a necessary part of the world," noted Irene Walters, a semiretired German immigrant who has lived in the

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Tribune photo by Charles Cherney

Marie tettiere Roberts (center) leads a salordiscussion at *Intelligentsia Coffee House*.

Cafe Society meets at these locations:
Buzz Cafe, 905 S. Lombard, Oak Park, 7-8 p.m. Wednesdays. 708-524-2849
Cafe Siena, 1617 E. 55th St, noon-1 p.m. - Thursdays. 773-363-7742
Cafe Society, 1801 W. Indiana Ave., j 1:30-2:30 p.m. Wednesdays. 312-842-4210
Filter, 1585 N. Milwaukee Ave., 7-8 p.m. Thursdays. 773-227-4850
Intelligentsia Coffee, 3123 N. Broadway, 7-8 p.m. Tuesdays. 773-348-8058
 Price: Free
 For more information and to view upcoming topics, visit tnepublicsquare.org

Chris Miller, a thoughtful 33-year-old in a turtleneck, mulled this, then offered his globalization concern: "It's not the trend overall but a question of who makes the decisions, who loses the jobs, who has the power."

Another participant chimed in that globalization helps people see models for vacation and health care in other countries.

The salon discussion rambled and meandered like any conversation among a group of friends or co-workers. And yet it seemed to work. The discourse stayed compelling until the end, and at one point, a young man watching from another table asked if he could join in.

Unlike a political rally, proposed referendum or even a church gathering, no one issue draws these people together. The only thread running through all the discussions is the theme of citizenship.

Like most debates, some par-

As Walters put it, "None of the speakers become huffy, even if they don't agree." This is her fourth visit to the *Cafe Society* at *Intelligentsia*. Originally, she came because she lives nearby and was intrigued by the idea. She kept coming because she liked the topics and the format.

Her only complaint was the society's popularity. The first night so many people came, she said, they couldn't all fit around the table and some had to stand.

Twelve people is a tight fit tonight, but doable. Most of the discussions at the various coffeehouses have drawn between 10 add 15 participants.

"We've never had less than 12, sometimes it's been as many as 20," said Barret Harvey, a co-owner of *Filter*, which became host to the Thursday night *Cafe Society* soon after the coffeeshop opened. "It brings in a mix of people and looks pretty stimulating without being heated."

The challenge is getting your thoughts out before the conversation quickly veers in another direction (especially if you are soft-spoken like I am).

And the noise of a place that makes its business whipping up lattes and cranking out music tailored to a twentysomething crowd may not be the most conducive for formulating and expressing thoughts in a hurry.

Or maybe it is. Maybe a loud beanery is the best place, barking to the days of beat poets