

# Experiencias Docentes

## Manifiesto for a “Social Café”

### Manifiesto por un “Café Social”

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#### Abstract

Science should not stay out of public debate, but an open confrontation between scientists and non-scientists is not easy. All the more reason to try. *Social Cafés* are a suitable format to discuss about topics where science, technology and society mix. The resulting flavour may be attractive.

**Keywords:** Science, Society, Economy, Public Debate

#### Resumen

La ciencia no debería quedar fuera del debate público, pero desarrollar un coloquio abierto entre científicos y no científicos no es tarea fácil. Razón de más para intentarlo. La idea *Social Café* (Café Social o Ciudadanos en el Café) podría resultar un formato adecuado para discutir temas en los que la ciencia, la tecnología y la sociedad se mezclarán. El sabor obtenido seguro que resultaría estimulante.

**Palabras Clave:** Ciencia, Sociedad, Economía, Debate público

*Neutrality of science* is dead and scientism has rather been replaced by a strong mistrust towards science and scientists. This suspicion, if not aversion, is often explained as a plain consequence of scientific ignorance. Therefore, the remedy would be to strengthen the teaching of science at school, to improve the quality of scientific reports, to disseminate science news, to organize popular conferences. And scientists should be involved, specially in the popularization process. All these activities are useful and necessary, no doubt, but would it be enough? No, in my view.

Science, often mixed up with technology, is related to many aspects of our everyday life and if it is regarded as helpful and now essential it is also perceived as potentially dangerous or source of concern. Furthermore, science disputes on, e.g., GMO, cloning or global warming do not oppose “the scientific community” to “the rest of the world”. Most of times, disputes are also among scientists and since these topics are not “purely” scientific, the debate inevitably has a political side. And once the debate gets ideological every statement, every opinion seems to have the same strength of others. The answer is not to fish the topic out of the “political sea”

and say “Hey, that’s science!”, but possible alternative solutions are much more laborious. Here I’m going to discuss one.



## Incontro/dibattito

Giovedì 12 marzo 2009, ore 21  
SMS-Rifredi, Via Vittorio Emanuele 303, Firenze

### Quanti abitanti può sostenere il nostro pianeta?

con **Liano Angeli** (consulente internazionale della FAO)

**Massimo Livi Bacci** (docente di demografia, Università di Firenze)

Moderatore: **Paolo Politi** (Consiglio Nazionale delle Ricerche)



Caracas, Venezuela

Sulla terra siamo 6 miliardi e 700 milioni e gli abitanti delle città hanno appena superato gli abitanti delle campagne. Quanto ancora possiamo crescere di numero? Se non ci saranno abbastanza risorse per tutti, cosa faranno, o stanno già facendo, gli uomini per contendersele?

Pur essendo invocato il contenimento demografico, non è chiaro se misure come pianificazione familiare o sviluppo economico saranno sufficienti, così come non è chiaro se gli oltre 800 milioni di affamati siano dovuti a mancanza di cibo o dei soldi per comprarlo, e quanto la diffusione dei biocombustibili contribuirà all'aumento dei prezzi degli alimenti.

E intanto, invece, in Europa la popolazione invecchia e si fanno meno figli, e senza la temuta immigrazione si corre il rischio di un'implosione demografica.

Incontri organizzati dall'associazione culturale Caffè-Scienza  
con la collaborazione dell'Istituto dei Sistemi Complessi del CNR e dell'Assessorato alla Cultura del Comune di Firenze,  
e con il patrocinio del Comune di Firenze

Per maggiori informazioni: info@caffescienza.it, Tel. 055 5226686 (Paolo Politi)

Figure 1. Poster of a Science Café, held in Florence (2009).

I don't think there is *the* right way to discuss about science and technology, because the way should always be related to the people you are addressing and to the purpose you have in mind. My suggestion is to favour a public discussion on themes with a relevant scientific and technological aspect, in a broad sense. Such discussions may take place in various places, real or virtual ones, but I look with sympathy face-to-face discussions among people, gathered somewhere. These type of meetings are not new but they are preferentially confined to classical culture, think to Literary Cafés or reading clubs, or to genuine political topics. French Cafés Citoyens, where people meet and discuss on the most diverse subjects, are an exception. Science Cafés are another exception and they are now widespread in all continents.

I myself have organized a Science Café (Caffè Scienza, in italian) for several years, in Florence. Rather than explaining how it was organized, I prefer to give a simple and short “guide

to the future", because after this experience, I would feel the need to go a step further towards a Social Caf . Three ingredients are most important: *the organizing committee, the format, and the venue*. Let's consider them in order.

### The organizing committee

It is not required that organizers come from the academia, but it is necessary to have connections with it and to be able to get in touch with potential guests in very different disciplines. It is also useful that the committee includes people with interests or specializations in different areas, e.g., hard sciences, life sciences, economics, social and political sciences. University students would be specially suited to take part in such a committee. Non-scientists should also be welcome.

### The format

One or two guests, not more. Ten-fifteen minutes each to introduce themselves and propose some ideas to start the discussion. No slides. An active moderator should strongly avoid soliloquy whose only content is "How good I am". The guest is there for a public discussion, not to promote science (or, even worse, their activity). Finally, allow one to two hours for discussion.

### The venue

The venue may be any public place with free entrance where guests, moderator and public are on the same plane, literally. More precise recommendations would be useless, this point being strongly dependent on the region where events are organized.



Figure 2. Possible logo for a Social Caf .

Researchers may be doubtful about the format giving free speech on “scientific” topics to anyone. Well, if in a scientific conference every participant has free speech, the same should be true for a public debate, because it is how you argue which gives greater or less weight to what you say. According to my experience, a debate is more likely to be spoiled by a logorrheic, confusing or haughty guest rather than by the public.

Finally, to be concrete I would like to give some examples of topics which have important scientific or technical aspects, but also have a relevant social impact: energy sources; biomedical research; food production; waste management; finance and banking; voting systems; climate changes; cultural heritages; robotics; pharmaceutical drugs; social networks; traffic management; alternative medicines; animal testing. These topics are enough to organize several seasons of debates.

Last but not least, I would like to extend an invitation to scientists. Do something beyond research, teaching, meetings and all that paperwork which we are submerged. Many of us do a good work full time, but it is so important to go outside our Institutes!

## References

[1] <http://www.caffescienza.it/>

[2] <http://www.cafescientifique.org/>

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