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‘Run by the poor for the poor’?
Social Elites in the Early Modern Public House
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Many historians associate the early modern period with processes of social polarization and cultural differentiation within local communities.¹ As a result of mounting socio-economic pressures and religious fragmentation during the Age of the Reformation, relatively ‘comprehensive’ patterns of medieval sociability are seen to dissolve into more ‘selective’ forms of social exchange. Examining the theatre of public houses, in particular, scholars have identified a contraction of customer profiles. By the early seventeenth century, social elites are said to have disappeared from the world of the tavern. Alehouses, to use a poignant assessment of the general trend, were now ‘run by the poor for the poor’.²

There is plentiful evidence for fundamental change and intense social tension in this period, but can we really observe such a streamlining of patrons in one of the key social centres of premodern Europe? Public houses, after all, were often the only major secular buildings in towns and villages and their multifunctionality allowed them manifold roles in the political, economic and cultural affairs of the local population.³ This brief contribution, which draws on a larger study of inns, taverns and alehouses in two Central European case studies (the Catholic principality of Bavaria and the Protestant city republic of Bern), reassesses the relationship between public houses and social elites from a variety of perspectives.

A broad range of sources illuminates attendance patterns at public houses. Official records such as statutes, tax returns and victuallers’ registers provide basic normative information. In addition, publicans generated materials like inventories, lists of debtors and petitions in the course of their business activities. Further clues come from literary voices like travel reports, dramatic texts and moral pamphlets, while woodcuts and other contemporary illustrations visualize key aspects of

¹ K. Wrightson, *English Society 1580-1680* (London, 1982), p. 226.

² P. Clark, ‘The Alehouse and Alternative Society’, in: D. Pennington and K. Thomas (eds), *Puritans and Revolutionaries* (Oxford, 1978), p. 53. Similar verdicts in R. Muchembled, *Popular Culture and Elite Culture in France, 1400–1750* (Baton Rouge, 1985), p. 119, and R. van Dülmen, *Entstehung des frühneuzeitlichen Europa 1550–1648* (Frankfurt, 1982), p. 208.

³ See the contributions in B. Kümin and B. A. Tlusty (eds), *The World of the Tavern: Public Houses in Early Modern Europe* (Aldershot, 2002). The medieval origins of the hospitality trade are summarized in H. C. Peyer, *Von der Gastfreundschaft zum Gasthaus: Studien zur Gastlichkeit im Mittelalter* (Hannover, 1987).

the topic. All of these categories, of course, present specific methodological challenges, but through combination and juxtaposition we get a remarkably detailed view of everyday life in public houses.⁴

Even a quick glance at this evidence produces impressions not easily squared with the overall thesis outlined above. A rare record of a tavern visitation (for the German principality of Lippe around 1800), for instance, reveals that no group in local society was significantly over- or under-represented among the patrons.⁵ Just looking at some of the buildings themselves also casts doubt on the notion that they merely targeted the lowest social groups. Inns like the *Alte Wirt* at Obermenzing near Munich (rebuilt in 1589-90 at the behest of its ultimate owner, the duke of Bavaria) were state-of-the-art constructions, involving prominent architects, above-average financial resources and attractive interior decorations. They were easily the most striking secular buildings in their communities and it must have seemed perfectly respectable to use their facilities.

In many of the superior establishments, social elites were in fact permanently present. 'In honor of friendship and as a symbol of confederate solidarity and political independence, the old cantons of Switzerland gave each other stained-glass paintings containing their coats of arms for their newly constructed [public buildings]. As a sign of sovereignty, the canton arms personified the state. Since the late Middle Ages, carved wooden escutcheons had been mounted on [...] bailiffs' or governors' offices, churches, towers, and gates as well as out-of-the-way inns to document legal sovereignty in the Holy Roman Empire as well as in the Swiss Confederation. In this way, arriving strangers could immediately see whose territory they were treading on.'⁶ While ornamental glass *symbolized* power and authority, many innkeepers *personified* the same qualities through serving as local officers. In the Bavarian market of Dachau in 1646, five of six members of the inner council were victuallers, while over fifty per cent of sixteenth-century

⁴ For more detailed discussion of sources and historiography cf. B. Kümin, 'Public houses and their patrons in early modern Europe', in: idem and Tlusty (eds), *World of the Tavern*, pp. 44-62.

⁵ R. Linde, 'Ländliche Krüge. Wirtshauskultur in der Grafschaft Lippe im 18. Jahrhundert', in: S. Baumeier and J. Carstensen (eds), *Beiträge zur Volkskunde und Hausforschung* (Detmold, 1995), pp. 7-50.

⁶ Barbara Giesicke and Mylène Ruoss, 'In honor of friendship. Function, meaning, and iconography in civic stained-glass donations in Switzerland and Southern Germany', in: Barbara Butts und Lee Hendrix (eds), *Painting on Light. Drawings and Stained Glass in the Age of Dürer and Holbein* (Los Angeles, 2000), pp. 45-6.

mayors in the Swiss town of Zofingen earned their living at least partly as publicans.⁷ It is inconceivable that they never played host to their social peers for official or convivial purposes.

Rather than a process of linear contraction over time, the sources suggest a more complex pattern in terms of customer profiles. Three main variables affected the range of patrons in public houses. 1) The type of establishment; 2) its location and specialization; and 3) the particular situation. In what follows, I shall argue that these factors combined to effect a rather heterogeneous overall picture.

The huge number and variety of individual catering establishments crystallizes into two basic types: 'inns' with a full range of rights, including the sale of alcohol, the provision of hot meals and the accommodation of travellers, on the one hand; and outlets allowed to offer alcoholic drinks without further services – a group which can be subdivided into 'taverns' (focused on the retail sale of wine) and 'ale-' or 'beerhouses' (mainly providing the respective drinks), on the other hand. It is clear that the 'type' of establishment directly influenced customer profiles. Inns naturally catered for travelling strangers and thus *also* elite social groups like merchants on their way to fairs; diplomats on state errands; and young nobles on their Grand Tour of Europe. Contemporary testimonies (from sixteenth-century woodcuts right through to eighteenth-century travel reports) duly reflect this heterogeneity in terms of status, wealth, gender as well as geographical origin. An isolated rural alehouse, in contrast, was more likely to cater for its immediate local clientele.

The second main variable, topographical location and/or gradual specialization, equally affected the range of customers. The *Little Horse* at Wangen on the river Aare in Bern, for instance, was a natural watering hole for rafters; foresters made up a disproportionate share of patrons at the tavern of Hartröhren in a woodland area of Lippe; and carriers, wagoners and coachmen dominated at the beer house of Ramersdorf on a transit route into Munich. Yet other places became associated with intellectual or political elites. Cambridge's *White Horse* tavern features in all textbooks of the English Reformation as a haunt of prominent Protestant theologians, while early political parties depended on public houses for their own meetings and campaigns: in the 1680s, Northampton's *Swan* accommodated the Whigs and the *Goat Inn* the local Tories.⁸

The third factor, the impact of particular situations, deserves some more detailed attention. For a start, social elites owned the vast majority

⁷ Stadtarchiv Dachau, Ratsprotokoll 1646, f. 1; Felix Müller, 'Wirte und Wirtschaften in Zofingen 1450-1600' (Lizentiatsarbeit [M.A. thesis], University of Zurich, 1990), p. 86.

⁸ References in Kümin, 'Public houses', pp. 53-4.

of major public houses. Quite in contrast to petty alehouses, often run by poor women in a desperate attempt to augment family income, substantial inns required capital resources restricted to much more prosperous groups. Nobles are not usually associated with petty commercial activities, but a recent case study of the Bernese district of Lenzburg reveals that patrician families had a direct (possessory or jurisdictional) interest in over a quarter of all public houses. Inns and taverns provided a welcome marketing outlet for the agricultural products of noble estates and they contributed substantially to family wealth. Quantitative analysis of accounts suggests that up to half of a noble's annual income could derive from wine sales at public houses!⁹ It is hard to believe that no members of the social elites ever set foot in establishments so clearly associated with the ruling classes.

In fact, there is plenty of evidence to substantiate that they did. In contemporary depictions of kermis festivals or rites of passages, artists usually include members of various social groups – including clergymen and manorial lords – among the crowds assembled in and around public houses.¹⁰ Normative records point in the same direction. A seventeenth-century ordinance regulating the quality and quantity of food and drink served in Bavarian public houses made it clear that normal guidelines 'do not apply to princes, counts and noble travellers, who can instruct publicans according to their liking'.¹¹ Countless inns in rural areas of Bern, furthermore, doubled up as courthouses, with owners contractually required to heat the 'judges' room' during winter (village of Worb) or communities erecting purpose-built local centres serving political, socio-cultural and catering purposes all under the same roof (Saanen in the Bernese Oberland). Brief scrutiny of 'elite' sources such as Pepys's diary, to adduce yet another category of records, will confirm how often urban dignitaries frequented public houses, both in a private and 'public' capacity.¹² Some historians, in fact, credit the information networks and sociability patterns of early modern public houses with an important role

⁹ F. Müller, 'Ownership of public houses by the Swiss nobility. A regional case-study', in: Kumin & Tlusty (eds), *The World of the Tavern*, pp. 177-90.

¹⁰ A. Stewart, 'Inns in German art at the time of the Reformation', *ibid.*, p. 106. Cf. also Pieter Bruegel's 'Peasant Wedding' (c. 1568), where a high-ranking guest is shown at one end of the table.

¹¹ Extract from the original printed mandate of 1631 in Munich, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Mandatensammlung.

¹² Official registers of Bernese inns often refer to 'public' functions: Staatsarchiv Bern, B V 142-148 (1628-1789), *passim*. Online evidence for Pepys's tavern patronage: 'Samuel Pepys's Diary' at <http://www.pepys.info/index.html> (consulted 20 December 2002), e.g. 14 September 1665.

in the genesis of the political public sphere.¹³ The most extensive evidence for elite presence in public houses, however, comes from the proliferation of travel reports. This is particularly true for visitors of Alpine areas, one of the cradles of modern leisure tourism. On the *table d'hôte* of a late eighteenth-century Genevan inn, diners enjoyed the cosmopolitan company of Swiss, German, French, Italian and English travellers and parties including academics and clergymen as well as noble ladies.¹⁴

There is thus more than just poetic licence to the frequent tavern encounters between commoners and elites in Renaissance literature. Shakespeare, Marlowe and Jonson, among many other authors, use the stage of the public house for the illustration of numerous aspects of social exchange.¹⁵ From the evidence surveyed here, it looks as if different groups did indeed mix in drinking establishments. However, the most prominent characteristic of early modern public houses is their versatility and heterogeneity. No one guest profile matches all the different contexts. Sophisticated dinner conversations are documented alongside violent conflict, and nobles attended as well as the poor. Social barriers could be overcome, at least temporarily and in particular contexts. Alleged chronological trends, particularly a decreasing proportion of social elites, are not always borne out by the sources.

A number of variables affected the composition of patrons. Official norms, established gender roles, regional customs and moral attitudes set a general framework, but three factors – type of establishment, location and situation – influenced the specific profile of visitors. Market-days and major highways, for instance, yielded a mixed clientele, while isolated village taverns or VIP-houses had more homogeneous patrons. Tavern attendance, it seems, was as varied as early modern experience as a whole.

¹³ J. Chartres, 'The eighteenth-century English inn: a short-lived "Golden Age"?', in: Kümin & Tlustý (eds), *The World of the Tavern*, pp. 222-3; D. Freist, *Governed by Opinion: Politics, Religion and the Dynamics of Communication in Stuart London, 1637-1645* (London, 1997).

¹⁴ C. Meiners, *Briefe über die Schweiz* (4 pts, 2nd edn, Berlin, 1788–90), pt 2, pp. 335–6.

¹⁵ T. B. Leinwand, 'Spongy plebs, mighty lords, and the dynamics of the alehouse', *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* 19 (1989), 159-84.