
From the Middle Ages to the long eighteenth century, contemporaries regarded public houses as a confusing world with blurred boundaries. The products on offer varied from establishment to establishment. Many people considered them to be synonymous with unsatisfactory service, diluted wine, and bad beer. The variety of regional names for public houses gives an idea of the difficulties that anyone working on this topic today faces when trying to define his or her subject: ale/beer house, cabaret, drinking house, inn (with accommodation), public house, tavern. ‘Most areas [throughout Europe] distinguished between establishments restricted to the sale of alcoholic beverages (drinking houses) on the one hand, and those offering a full hospitality service inclusive of accommodation, hot dishes and banquets (inns) on the other’ (p. 17). Swiss-born historian Beat Kümin, who teaches at the University of Warwick, has investigated this institutional chameleon which, along with the church, town hall, and market place, was one of the most important public places in the urban and especially the rural area. It offered food, beverages, and temporary accommodation as its basic service. However, for modern historians, the public house matters primarily as a social centre, as a place of governmental control, a battle ground for competing concepts of masculinity and gender, and as a laboratory for researching communications between individuals and groups.

In his study Kümin analyses two central European regions in greater detail: the city-republic of Berne in the Swiss Confederation, the largest city-state north of the Alps; and the principality of Bavaria in the Holy Roman Empire. The source situation for a study of public houses is not entirely satisfactory as tavern archives have rarely been preserved intact. In most cases, therefore, historians, including Kümin, have to rely on government files, travellers’ reports, literary texts (such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*), sermons, and didactic texts (for example, Hippolyt Guarinoni’s *Die Greuel der Verweistung Menschlichen Geschlechts* of 1610). Kümin’s book is divided into three sections. Part I, ‘The Context of Public Drinking’, describes the setting of pre-modern public houses, that is, the various types of drinking
establishments, their topography, and the built environment in which they were located. The agents of pre-modern hospitality, the publicans and patrons who usually had a tense relationship with the authorities, are also dealt with. Part II, ‘Functions of the Early Modern Public House’, looks at aspects of the accommodation and service offered, and at communication (infrastructure, exchange of media, and stabilizing and subversive functions). Part III, ‘Public Houses in Early Modern Society’, examines the public house from the outside. How contemporaries interpreted the public house, how scholars today analyse them, and public houses as social centres are at the centre of interest.

Hospitality in early modern Europe was characterized by great institutional diversity. A range of external factors influenced the way in which public houses were organized. The Little Ice Age of the late sixteenth century, for example, changed Bavaria from a wine-drinking to a largely beer-drinking region, which had an immediate impact on the public houses. In addition to full public house licences, the authorities also issued licences only for beverages, which made it possible for citizens to serve home-made wine or home-brewed beer. Moreover, family rooms, guild premises, and drinking rooms could temporarily be run as public houses. And then there were hospitals, pilgrimage hostels, monastic guesthouses, and lodgings for journeymen which doubled as public houses. Thus a considerable variety of institutions ran public houses: guilds, monasteries, brotherhoods, municipalities, landlords, and private individuals. The services offered with regard to beverages, food, and accommodation also displayed a considerable range. Apart from regions on the periphery (such as Scandinavia and southern Italy), Europe maintained a large number of public houses, which increased during the eighteenth century. According to tax lists, there was one public house for every 471 inhabitants in Bavaria in 1580 (in 1806 the ratio was 1:289); in Berne there was one public house for every 421 inhabitants in 1628 (1:394 in 1789). In 1577 alcohol-loving England and Wales alone had an estimated 24,000 public houses in 1577, rising to 60,000 in about 1700. This makes on average 84 inhabitants per public house in 1700. Since it is extremely difficult to identify the number of unlicensed premises (in German, Winkelwirtschaften, that is, establishments hidden away on dark street corners), these figures might change considerably in the future.
The spatial distribution of early modern hospitality depended primarily on location. In the eighteenth century, the building of spacious new roads created advantageous new locations, while other establishments could be ruined by a change of route. The layout of public houses also varied: ‘The spectrum ranged from single lounges and small cellars to combinations of several buildings and extensive grounds’ (p. 37). In terms of architecture, two basic designs (as in the case of early modern hospitals) can be distinguished: (1) one-roomed places; and (2) buildings grouped around one or several courtyards (either in parallel or connected lengthways). Inns could run their own bakeries, breweries, stables, barns, and so on. Depending on the size and function of the establishment and regional customs, the furnishings of guestrooms also varied.

The central problem was the division into public and private space, which sometimes resulted in conflicts with guests and the authorities. Before the introduction of house numbers, signs depicting names taken from the religious sphere, hunting, heraldry, mythology, or remarkable events in the past (such as an elephant passing through central Europe in the sixteenth century), advertised premodern hospitality. Publicans, frequently of bad reputation, often had no proper training and worked in this profession as an ancillary trade, while also running a butcher’s shop or a bakery, for example. Often the publican was only a tenant, not the owner of the premises. According to a Bavarian list, in 1806, 36 per cent of public houses were owned by the nobility, 34 per cent by territorial authorities, 27 per cent by the Church, and only 3 per cent by local municipalities (p. 55). Publicans of larger establishments, however, sometimes acquired considerable wealth and also served on representative bodies, such as town councils. Gradually, as the trade of inn keeping became more professionalized, it also became more organized with the growth of guilds. But it was still a long way from the standardized hospitality which we take for granted today. For a long time historians considered public houses as primarily for men (‘masculinization’) and the lower classes. Yet going to a public house was often a luxury for the guests: ‘Buying a measure of wine could easily absorb between a third and two-thirds of a labourer’s daily wage’ (p. 65). On the whole, the clientele of early modern public houses was much more mixed in terms of social class and gender than previously thought. Finally, public houses attracted the interest of the authorities because they
were taxed and needed tight policing. Measures to control trade and foreigners, and to discipline the population socially (drinking bans, closing public houses during mass, and so on) were de rigueur in early modern Europe.

Of course, supplying food, drink, and accommodation was the core business of the pre-modern hospitality trade, the subject of the second part of the book. The selling of alcohol provided the publican’s main income, but public houses also offered a number of other functions. Historians have recently analysed the wider economic dimension of public houses: the nobility benefited from the wine trade; urban breweries were one of the most important factors in the local economy; and agricultural products were sold at the public house market in a regional context. It was—and still is—not easy to collect taxes from public houses, but the tax on alcohol in particular was a crucial source of income for early modern states, one which should not be underestimated. In other respects, too, early modern public houses had an important role. Their long tables provided the setting for drinking rituals, loan negotiations, and labour markets. Despite complaints by Reformers, alcohol was the financial backbone of the public houses. But meals—in most cases, breakfast, lunch, and dinner were served—also generated important income streams, while ‘takeaway facilities and event catering’ have also been mentioned for the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Denominational differences had a direct impact on the menu which was influenced, for example, by fast days, sumptuary laws relating to weddings, funeral services and so on. For the moment we know little about the quality of accommodation, although we may safely assume rather spartan conditions. For an extra payment, however, comfort improved dramatically; sometimes an extra charge was levied for chamber pots. ‘Prices in public houses varied depending on type, standard and location, but they were hardly cheap’ (p. 113).

Public houses were also essential to early modern communication. Often the imperial post and the regular postal connections of individual territories maintained small stations at public houses. In many cases the owner, who was usually well informed and may have acted as a spy for or against the authorities, was also the postmaster—and thus the region’s central communications contact. The central ‘news room’ of the pre-modern age was headed by a publican acting as a kind of ‘broker’. Horses, post chaises, and coaches could
be rented at many inns. To some extent, then, the inn as the main political forum of the pre-modern age served to stabilize society. Janus-faced, however, the public house also included a subversive communicative component. A critical public increasingly started to emerge in these establishments during the eighteenth century. The public house of the pre-modern age was also a stage for ‘social plays’ and conflicts such as insults, quarrels, and so on. Court files all over Europe contain ample evidence of swearing, blasphemy, excessive drinking, gambling, violent offences, and criminal sex taking place at or around the public house. ‘Between a fifth and a third of all offences dealt with by secular and ecclesiastical courts had an explicit link to drinking establishments’ (p. 135). The ‘deceitful’, ‘smart’, ‘sly’ publican as a receiver of stolen goods who offered accommodation to shady characters was a popular topos of European literature and, rightly or wrongly, earned the distrust of the authorities.

The standing of public houses within pre-modern society and the position of public houses in the emergent modern age forms the subject of the third part of Kümin’s monograph. Three main strands can be distinguished in the contemporary perception of public houses in the early modern age: first, the ‘instrumentalizers, utilizing public houses for (ulterior) pragmatic or artistic purposes’; secondly, ‘Lobbyists and critics, taking sides for or against the drinks trade out of convivial, moral or metaphysical impulses’; and, thirdly, ‘evaluators, assessing the phenomenon as a whole’ (p. 147). The book’s numerous illustrations (19 coloured and 31 black-and-white images) give a good impression of these three divergent approaches. The analysis of European public houses according to space and time also reveals a great typological range. The growth of the network of public houses over a long period during the Middle Ages is demonstrated, as the public house became a fixed part of the European environment. Only during the nineteenth century, with the appearance of mass media, did a constant erosion in the political role of the public houses begin. For a long time it had also served as a contre-Eglise, a setting for lower-class popular culture and a secular festive culture. That is why the Council of Trent tried to dissociate the Church from the public house. For ordained Catholic priests, visiting the public house was made as difficult as possible—with doubtful results. Pilgrimages involving extended visits to public houses also enraged secular and spiritual reformers of the eighteenth century.
Public houses, however, also encroached on other spheres of public life. Examples of the brewery/public house combining with the town hall illustrate the close connection that existed between these two worldly decision-makers. Here Kümin’s results fit well with Peter Blickle’s communalism thesis. ‘State control over drinking houses and social discipline within them, therefore, remained targets rather than achievements. Central authorities staked their claims, but rivaling powers and (not least) conflicting interests among the ruling elites themselves undermined the effect of individual measures’ (p. 184).

Another topic that has occupied historians more recently is the understanding of space within the public house—the debated division between private and public in the early modern age. In this respect the eighteenth century marked a turning point in the history of the public house: the habits of consumers and the demands of the market were changing. Nevertheless the sober coffee house cannot be said to have made a momentous change in the sense of creating a reasoning, bourgeois public, as some historians claim. For far too long, subjects of the state, drinking beer and complaining about their landlords, were not taken seriously enough by researchers—wrongly, as Kümin shows. The Zedlersches Universal-Lexikon’s comprehensive coverage of the public house reveals the great contemporary interest in the topic.

All in all, Kümin’s book yields much that will encourage further research. In and around one and the same public house, for example, the denominational differences in Europe played a surprisingly minor role. The view of the public house as male-dominated space, long a frequent topos of literature, is revised. The public house also emerges as an economic factor which must be taken seriously. Thus the history of the public house is increasingly moving from the sphere of cultural history to that of economic history. The overall change, which became apparent during the eighteenth century and gradually resulted in a standardization of public houses, was due to many factors which, at the time, were only partly recognizable. Extremely flexible in its structures, the public houses reacted to changed contexts, changed demand, and new communicative media. The provision of food, drink, and communications was the essential function of public houses; annual sales of between 4,000 and 10,000 litres of beer or wine per establishment were not exceptional. 'The
social construction of public houses involved a complex interplay of human, functional, contextual, spatial and chronological variables. Analysis of prominent factors such as political constitution, confession and regional setting accounts for specific differences, but on the whole similarities across all contexts are even more striking' (p. 195).

Beat Kümin has written a highly readable social history of the public house that combines analysis of specific cases (Berne, Bavaria) with a general overview. Although, on the whole, the state of research on public houses is still unsatisfactory, the outlines of this essential European institution of hospitality are gradually emerging. The emphasis of this book is on the numerous functions of the public house as a communications centre, which varied according to region. Kümin introduces the publican as a news broker located between subjects and authorities. However, he resists the temptation to provide simple answers to his complex questions, and this is one of the strengths of his book. Furthermore, his findings can easily be connected with other mainstream concepts of research on the early modern age, such as, for example, the development of the state, the communications revolution (Taxis Galaxy), gender research, the relationship between macro and micro history, cultural history, and so on. When looking at the development of the nation-states and the foundation of political parties in particular, more research needs to be done on the public house of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Further regional studies are desperately needed. Reading Kümin’s excellent book is great fun and makes us want more field research.

MARTIN SCHEUTZ is Professor of Modern History at the University of Vienna. He has published widely on urban history, the history of crime and poverty, and autobiographical documents of the early modern era. Among his publications are Alltag und Kriminalität: Disziplinierungsversuche im steirisch-österreichischen Grenzgebiet im 18. Jahrhundert (2001), Ausgesperrt und gejagt, geduldet und versteckt; Bettlervisitationen im Niederösterreich des 18. Jahrhunderts (2002), and numerous edited volumes.