



Beat Kümin. *Drinking Matters: Public Houses and Social Exchange in Early Modern Central Europe*. Early Modern History: Society and Culture. Houndsmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. xx + 283 pp. Plates. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-230-55408-5.

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The Diversity and Flexibility of Public Houses

Beat Kümin has written a sophisticated, nuanced study of public houses—taverns, inns, and other drinking places—in early modern Europe. This study owes something in form and breadth to Peter Burke’s classic *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* (1978) in that Kümin takes up the task of re-conceptualizing a large and important topic for all of (western) Europe over several centuries. Like Burke, Kümin provides an overview of the diversity of his subject matter, outlines general chronological change across the centuries from 1500 to 1800, and provides numerous examples of the function of public houses across the continent. Despite the title, this is a study of the social role of taverns and inns, not a discussion of drinking and its place in society.

Drinking Matters is both a synthesis of secondary work about taverns and inns around Europe and a regional study of the place and role of public houses in the region around Bern and in Bavaria. Some tension in the book arises between these two projects. At times the reader is a bit disconcerted by regular (and sometime sudden) excursions to England, where taverns and alehouses have been studied extensively. The regional studies of Bern and Bavaria are also scattered throughout the book, which has the positive effect of giving a real concreteness to Kümin’s themes and prevents the book from becoming a sort of handbook of the history of public houses. The back and forth between overview and regional studies is mostly successful, but at times some focus and specificity is lost.

The book is organized into three parts. Part 1 examines the context of public drinking. Kümin surveys the variety of drinking establishments and outlines the density of these institutions in various places, focusing here on Bern and Bavaria. Not surprisingly, a central theme is the diversity of public houses; the other is the ubiquity of these places. Taverns were not marginal institutions

in this society; rather, they were essential to the functioning of both villages and towns. Public houses could be very profitable businesses and publicans were sometimes wealthy and powerful men.

Part 2 looks at the function of public houses. They were flexible institutions and were important economically in many ways. They provided drinks and credit for locals, accommodation and food for travelers, and employment for many people. Taverns and inns were also centers of communication, even as modes of communication shifted toward less personal forms in the eighteenth century. Kümin reminds us that the “communications revolution” of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which was highlighted by the development of postal services, depended on a network of public houses as way stations. These new elements included the circulation of newspapers, journals, and tourists, which augmented, but did not replace, older forms of face-to-face sociability. Kümin also argues that public houses were *the* public forum during the early modern period. As such, they could have a stabilizing influence on local society by allowing political discussion, hosting communal meetings, and facilitating shared public discourse. On the other hand, while they were not the “anti-church” of some satires, taverns and inns were certainly settings for violence and conflict, and this status was further fueled by (as Kümin calls it) the social lubricant of drink. For example, one-third to one-half of all court cases could be traced to events that transpired in public houses. This range of functions shows the diversity of these institutions and also indicates the manner of their continual reconstitution. Tellingly, Kümin relates how “judges charged with the adjudication of tavern brawls might send quarrelling parties right back there for reconciliation” (p. 142).

Part 3 of *Drinking Matters* discusses the way in which public houses have been interpreted, both in the past

and by modern scholars. Early modern people had strong opinions about taverns, often lurching from extreme praise to harsh criticism of their destructiveness of society and morality. Kumin points out that public houses could be instrumentalized (by the state in particular, which held a great financial stake in the taxes collected there), could be lobbied for (by innkeepers and other stakeholders), or could be evaluated (generally by intellectuals). Modern analytical approaches consider the context of taverns, their marking of space, and their place in changing views of time. This section reads somewhat like a useful set of suggestions for further research.

Kumin's last chapter argues that taverns and inns grew in importance during the early modern period because of their prominent place in a number of broad developments of the period. Public houses were certainly the object of much state policy, as the expanding state sought both to raise money and to enforce social discipline, policies that often came into conflict in the context of a drinking establishment. Kumin also argues that public houses were central to new modes of communication and that a kind of public sphere developed there in

the centuries before Jürgen Habermas's "bourgeois public sphere" emerged from the coffee houses and reading libraries of the eighteenth century. The public sphere of the tavern was also generally socially diverse and could include artisans and peasants as well as more educated people. Kumin is careful not to push these provocative ideas too far, however, insisting throughout on the diversity and variety of these institutions and the "richness of social exchange in the world of the tavern" (p. 189).

Public houses were, to quote the conclusion of *Drinking Matters*, "the great facilitators of early modern social exchange" (p. 191). One can study many of the important developments of the early modern period in these spaces—new notions of time, the growth of a consumer culture, the increasing penetration of society by the state, growing economic ties across Europe, and new forms and increasing speed of communication. Kumin has laid out a whole research agenda or series of research agendas, as well as reminding historians that these issues cannot be understood without accounting for the central role of the public house in their development. This is an admirable study.

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