Comments, Ann Tlusty

The papers presented here are typical of the wide range of opportunities presented by the study of the early modern public house – they are also typical of the fairly narrow geographical range that has thus far drawn the attention of historians of Europe (that is, they are concerned with England, France, and the German-speaking lands of the Holy Roman Empire). I have been tasked with assessing the findings presented here and drawing out some areas for discussion and further research. To this end, I’ll start by focusing on some questions that logically arise out of the papers, starting with the last of them; that is, Luiz Soares’s examination of the development of an entertainment and “gentlemen’s” culture in the eighteenth century.

Soares’s remarks raise the important issue of the relationship of the public house to consumer culture. Inns and taverns had served as centers of urban entertainments since the late middle ages, the period associated with the professionalization of the hospitality trade. This development was an early step in the commercialization of leisure and the recognition of its economic potential. Soares’s 18th-century model suggests an association of certain kinds of establishments with a particular class of customers. Most of the specific functions that Soares associates with 18th-century coffee houses and taverns, however – focal points for debate and the sharing of news, for transacting business, for discussing philosophy, for music and games, for delivering letters, etc., – were certainly not new for the 18th c., although, as he suggests, the refined character of the clientele for some houses, and the self-conscious efforts of the middle classes to create a public forum for intellectual exchange, may have been. Surprising to me was the characterization of the public house as the inheritor of activities common to coffee houses – as someone who has studied pubs in the world before coffee, I have naturally always thought of this relationship in opposite terms. It would be interesting, then, to clarify more specifically how
this “new sociability” in fact differed from that already established for earlier centuries, and to what extent it was specific to certain establishments. A related question is raised by Soares’s list of the illicit activities that also were common to 18th-century taverns; one wonders if more clarity isn’t possible, as Peter Clark suggests, about exactly what kinds of landlords catered to what sort of clientele. For example, is there a direct connection between the more “gentlemanly” entertainments that Soares associates with the 18th century (philosophy lectures, reading of newspapers, gentlemen’s clubs), and the rise of the more financially stable institutions described by Clark? And how do these various kinds of establishments, respectively and comparatively, contribute to local economies?

A partial answer to that last question is suggested by Peter Clark’s paper, in which he notes that what makes public houses particularly worthy of careful regulation by the 18th century is the value of excise taxes on the drinks, which by then were making up a quarter of national revenue in England. Clark points up the need, especially in this context, to differentiate between different types of landlords and establishments in considering their economic contribution (or, in some cases, perhaps even their role as an economic drain). The interest of government officials in keeping tax incomes stable favored the development of more respectable establishments, and led to greater controls on less orderly houses.

To Clark’s suggestion at the end of his paper – that looking for the rise of a class of economically healthy and socially respectable landlords elsewhere in Europe would prove a fruitful exercise – I can certainly provide a partial answer. All of the characteristics he describes – control of licensing, requirements to provide stabling for horses, the obligatory swearing by landlords of civic oaths of obedience, restrictions on noise, clearly defined operating hours, the development of established families of publicans who passed their business on over several generations, and especially the levying of a significant tax burden were clearly identifiable in the
urban taverns of Germany two centuries earlier. Those of us working on the Empire are very familiar with the symbiotic economic relationship that existed between the landlord and the authorities at the latest by the sixteenth century. The fact that this trend is identified so late for England is likely related to another point made in Clark’s paper: “The excise tax on ale and beer was first levied [there] in 1643.” The right to collect this lucrative and flexible tax was granted to the independent German cities by various kings and emperors beginning in the early fourteenth century and was a major source of civic income by the fifteenth – as Beat Kümin noted in his introductory remarks, the drink tax could at times reach levels of 50% or more of city budgets. From the economic standpoint, then, one relevant question might be, why do excise taxes, and their related regulation, come so late to England, as compared to the Empire? And how do the variations in this important development relate to more general differences in English and German fiscal policies? Here we have a suggestion for one of the various ways in which a focus on public houses can open windows on much larger economic and political questions.

If we have already seen the need to differentiate between types and nationalities of establishments, Tom Brennan’s work on eighteenth-century France also points up the need to pay close attention to regional differences, and especially to consider a variety of sources in drawing conclusions. Brennan’s rural example particularly clarifies the dangers of depending on one set of records, which can easily lead to skewed results; it also demonstrates once again the important role of taxes on drinks, both as income for early modern budgets and as sources for historians. Tax avoidance and illegal trading are of course natural by-products of the drink trade, so that some establishments remain intentionally invisible; other records, however, especially those produced by moralists who were generally critical of tavern drinking, tend to exaggerate the success of the landlord’s business. Brennan’s paper draws on a variety of archival documents to tease out a starting point for examining rural patterns of tavern geography, village economics,
and peasant sociability, an area that is especially under-represented in studies of the drink trade. Particularly in the case of rural taverns, those studies that do exist suggest that variety is the norm, with establishments ranging from the well-established hotel-like institutions described by elite travelers such as Montaigne and Hans von Schweinichen, to temporary Tyrolean wine pubs that came and went with the season, or the Reihebraurecht or “serial brewing rights” identified by Barbara Krug-Richter in the eighteenth-century village of Udorf, in which the tavern sign was passed from house to house, giving every member of the village in turn a chance to be a publican. Krug-Richter’s lively description of sociability in peasant homes with serial brewing rights was based largely on complaints filed in territorial courts, records that exist in large numbers in German regional archives, but are apparently less common in France. A complete picture of this practice, however, also required reading a variety of financial and other records (of the sort examined by Brennan).

The need for careful attention to multiple types of sources, and especially willingness to consider the possibility of hitherto unknown economic experiments, is also well-demonstrated by James Brown’s work on early modern Southampton. So often, first impressions of tavern life are based either on published sources designed for the public eye, or on court records. Although both of these provide valuable descriptions of tavern comportment, both are also likely to be dominated by a moralizing tone, and rarely do they consider the hard facts of local economies. Only by considering a complicated cross-section of archival records do we really understand what’s behind the decisions reflected in the more easily accessible ordinances, decrees, and judicial verdicts. And what we often find is that, even during the height of the period of moralizing associated with the sixteenth century, practical economic concerns frequently overrode these religious worries. Brown has provided a particularly colorful example of how creative early modern authorities could be in drawing on the profits of the trade to finance civic
programs, and especially to deal with crises. In this case, the crisis was economic, leading to an increase in numbers of poor. The experiments in providing for the poor that Brown outlines reflect the fact that England was still in a pre-excise phase, so that a variety of other means of extracting profits from the drink trade were tried in order to solve an existing economic problem. Clearly, the authorities had already recognized the social and economic value to be gained from the sale of ale, even as they railed against the alehouses for encouraging poorer craftsmen to squander their money on drinks and games. This pattern is familiar: In my own research on the Free Imperial City of Augsburg, I found documents showing that the authorities were at one point publishing ordinances supposedly aimed at restricting drunkenness in the city on the one hand, while actually working behind the scenes to encourage increased drinking in local taverns on the other, in order to increase tax revenues. As we know, this positive relationship between alehouses and the economy in England would also be cemented later by the levying of standard drink taxes.

Finally, Beat Kümin’s introductory essay provides a logical jumping-off point for considering where we are in the economic history of the public house, and where we might go from here. Kümin has provided us with a concise example of the wealth of information about tavern economies that can be gleaned from existing records, along with pointing out some of the problems encountered where records are spotty. His summary of the many ways in which public houses contributed to European economies demonstrates that we have come a long way towards establishing general patterns linking taverns to economic development, and especially towards recognizing the importance of these establishments to local and national budgets. Certainly, the use of alcohol occasionally leads to abuse, and with it social and economic costs – but these are harder to quantify (not only for us as historians, but also for the leaders of state responsible for regulation). The positive contributions of the drink trade to the economies of early modern
Europe, on the other hand, have by now been well documented. Still, as more than one of our presenters has noted, many avenues remain open to researchers interested in the relationship of public houses to economic exchange.

In terms of geography, as Tom Brennan notes, we know much more about urban public houses and their role in local economies than we do about the countryside; there is still much to be done on the economy of the rural drink trade. Existing studies, as noted above, also tend to concentrate on England, France, and the German-speaking lands. Although there is a tradition of attention to the economic importance of the wine trade in the major wine-producing areas of the Mediterranean, we know little about the role of public houses in the economies of Italy, Spain, or Greece. There has also been very little work done on northern and eastern Europe. And as I have suggested in an earlier essay, even in England and Germany, we are still in the case study stage when it comes to archival research. More comprehensive local and regional studies are needed before we can make any claims to a “grand theory” of drinking economies.

Topically, Beat Kümin has already presented us with a long list of ways in which taverns stood at the center of economic exchange which in itself represents an impressive research agenda. Rather than reiterate that list, I would like to conclude by concentrating on two particular directions that I find especially interesting, and that have received little attention from scholars. First, an area suggested by each of these papers in turn, and one that offers many connections to larger historical questions, is the relationship of the public house to the rise of a “consumer culture.” Opportunities here are wide-ranging, from the examination of trade in the non-liquid tavern-related commodities mentioned by Kümin (crockery, artwork, furniture, etc.) and the social studies of tavern space (touched on in one form or another by all the papers) to macro studies of government finance and taxes. The recognition that catering to consumer tastes and fashions could be profitable is often cited as a keystone of “modern” economic thinking.
Taverns provided some of the earliest forms of commercialized entertainment, and those responsible for public finance – whether as territorial prince, urban patrician, or representative of the English or French crown – were quick to recognize the ease with which “entertainments” could become sources of revenue. Alcoholic beverages had the simple advantage that they were at once a luxury, and at the same time a commodity no one wanted to do without. Contrary to some odd myths about early modern diets, water was available to everyone, and pretty much everyone drank it – but after all, beer tasted better. All but the truly impoverished were willing to pay the price, even after a penny or two in taxes was thrown in. Drink taxes were introduced, raised, lowered, and otherwise manipulated based both on shifting fashions and tastes, and on the degree of economic stress faced by the community. Rulers learned, for example, that expensive wines could be taxed at a higher rate than cheap ale; that higher taxes were more easily justified during periods of war than during periods of famine; and that taxing fashionable new drinks like wheat beer and gin was better for state budgets than trying to forbid them. Higher taxes, meaning higher prices, also raised the status of certain drinks, limiting their availability to common folk and helping to delineate social boundaries.

And once we begin to recognize the connections between consumer tastes and government policy; between raising drink taxes and financing a war; between manipulating license fees and supporting the poor – then the potential for studying the public house as an entry into larger economic issues becomes clear. This is the second topical direction that I would like to emphasize. The fact that it took the English crown 250 years longer than it did the German princes to levy excise taxes on alcohol is not a result of differences in drinking patterns, but of differences in governing. The same is true of decisions regarding licensing, variations in the way the landlords’ trade was regulated, public use of tavern space, and a variety of other areas related to the functions of public houses.
In fact, I’m beginning to wonder how it has ever been possible to study economies at all without concerning oneself with public houses. To reiterate this crucial point – again and again, individuals studying the drink trade in one context or another have come to the same conclusion: European governments could not have existed without income from alcohol sales, whether in the form of taxes, license sales, or direct trading in wine or beer. Alcohol sales provided 30-40% of civic incomes for most German cities; a quarter of national revenue in England; 50% or more of the state income of Muscovy; 50% of noble incomes in Switzerland.¹ Add to that the central role of the public house to trade, transport, business communication, and job markets, and it seems that a large part of economic history is about taverns and inns. And yet, the public house is still characterized in much of the literature as somehow marginal, warranting no mention at all in economic surveys such as the *Cambridge Economic History of Europe* or, more recently, the *Early Modern Economy* (already mentioned by Kümin). You don’t have to take our word for it; just ask anyone who was trying to run a government between 1500 and 1800. They can still answer. The records are there – it’s only a matter of the reading.

¹ These and other statistics can be found in the essay collection *The World of the Tavern: The Public House in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Beat Kümin and Ann Tlusty (Aldershot, 2002).