

Taverns and Drinking in Early America

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Tavern-going was as an important a part of the social fabric of early America as churchgoing. Even in the most obscure communities Americans visited a tavern regularly if not daily. Legislators could no more prescribe a healthy provision of taverns, or appropriate uses of them, than they could foist religious conformity on communities through established churches. Colonial Americans were as determined to exercise choice in matters of sociability as they were in matters of religious observance, and as willing to break the law in order so to do. Colonial Americans drank what modern observers would regard as excessive quantities of alcohol, often in public houses entirely devoid of charm. This must seem as alien as witchcraft to today's health-conscious Americans, yet a rich historiography has grown up around witchcraft while the study of tavern-going is in its infancy. Unlike churchgoing or witchcraft, tavern-going is still regarded by much of the historical profession as a frivolous topic.

One problem bedeviling the literature on tavern-going is that readers and authors tend to assume they know what drew people to public houses in the past. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century writing on tavern-going was riddled with untested assumptions about the immorality or, alternatively, the cheery vivacity of the taverngoer. An objective historical study of drinking and tavern-going needs to start with some fundamental questions. Why, if colonial Americans could and did drink at home, at work and even on the streets, did they need public houses at all? How do we account for the fact that cities founded by Protestant sectarians – Boston and Philadelphia for example – had in the mid-eighteenth century more taverns per capita than Paris or Amsterdam?

The materials available for a study of taverns and drinking in early America do not easily supply responses to these questions. Magistrates and moralists, concerned with suppression of demand and the prosecution of

unlicensed supply, were responsible for producing by far the largest portion of the evidence on tavern-going now extant. They thought they knew what drew Americans to taverns, but their testimony requires careful interpretation. Journals, diaries and letters also suggest why Americans might have visited taverns and what they found when they got there, but these sources often leave underlying assumptions unstated. White adult males were responsible for producing the vast majority of the evidence we have to work with and some of their testimony on the subject could, at first and even second glance, be described as 'frivolous'. It is easier to provide an 'entree' into 'the place of public houses and drinking in colonists' lives' (p. 5), as Sharon Salinger puts it, than it is to provide definitive answers to the questions of why, and with what effect, Americans used public houses – and yet these are the questions that need to be addressed.

Sharon Salinger has read extremely widely to produce a synoptic account of tavern-going and drinking across colonial America in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The chief advantage of this approach is that it establishes the sheer scale of the phenomena under discussion. (This is graphically demonstrated by the maps of tavern density in seaport cities contained in Chapter six and by calculations of per capita provision elsewhere in the text). The tavern may have been a familiar landmark in the old world but it was high on ubiquitous in the new. Salinger's continental focus also allows her to draw an important negative conclusion: the uses to which Americans put public houses were surprisingly uninfluenced by local or regional cultures. Licensing policy and attitudes toward drunkenness varied across the colonies, but these variations had little purchase on the behaviour of patrons.

So why did so many colonial Americans use taverns? Or, if this is an impossible question, what wider social forces were reflected in and promoted by the act of tavern-going? In Chapter one Salinger locates the services public houses provided colonial Americans within the contexts of inherited Dutch and English traditions and distinctive American legislation. As it evolved, American legislation governing public houses departed from European norms by prohibiting particular groups of potential drinkers, notably native Americans, apprentices, slaves and sailors, from frequenting public houses. This serves to introduce Salinger's main argument: that over the course of the eighteenth century colonial taverns became exclusionary, ultimately serving specific sections of society rather than the community as a whole. This argument is developed in Chapter two, where, drawing chiefly on evidence from the city of Philadelphia, Salinger argues that the exercise of affinities of class and ethnicity, coupled with the uneven distribution of services, pushed the tavern trade as a whole toward the service of 'knots of men rightly sorted'. It is also pursued in subsequent chapters treating attitudes toward drunkenness, prosecutions for infractions of licensing law, and licensing policy itself. Both by choice and as a result of social control exerted from above, over the course of the eighteenth century taverngoers drank increasingly with 'their own kind'. Since the tavern was overwhelmingly the preserve of adult white males in unhindered possession of their labour, tavern-going fostered particular racial and gender identities as well as contributing to an embryonic class-consciousness.

Whatever limitations this argument possesses are in no way attributable to a lack of research. Salinger has read just about every shred of evidence on colonial tavern-going that the archives will yield. Before evaluating her argument I should note that Salinger generously praises my own book on tavern-going in eighteenth-century Philadelphia (which has a different emphasis), and, although I'm not wildly excited by the framework in which she places her evidence, there is no doubt that *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* is highly readable, thoroughly researched and cogently argued. By providing the first modern account of tavern-going in the colonies as a whole, Salinger will, hopefully, reinvigorate the study of an aspect of America's social history too long neglected.

Where, with whom, and under what conditions men choose to drink with one another together constitute some of the most sensitive cultural indicators imaginable. Since there is no dispute that by the end of the eighteenth century Americans tended to drink and socialise in class-specific establishments, whereas two or three generations before they typically drank in heterogeneous companies, what is wrong with the conclusion that tavern-going illuminates class formation?

At issue here is how one interprets that period, in some communities quite lengthy, during which the rich

commonly drank in the same surroundings as the poor, the intelligent bent elbows with the uneducated, and the traveller mucked in with the locals. If one attributes this situation to forces of provision, or, as in the case of colonial Philadelphia, to the way in which licensing laws forced publicans to be generalists rather than specialists, then it might be considered a phenomenon of only passing interest. Moreover, travel narratives, in which well-to-do men castigated the mixed company they typically encountered in colonial taverns, suggest that wealthier Americans wished to drink among 'their own kind' long before even big cities such as Philadelphia possessed establishments wherein they could indulge their desire. (We simply cannot tell from the available records whether labouring Americans were equally infuriated by the experience of drinking with gentlemen). It would seem then that period in which colonial Americans routinely drank and conversed in mixed companies is an aberration (although, even if it were, it would be worthy of note, for at no time since have wealthy Americans possessed a comparable knowledge of the appearance and opinions of labouring men and women).

However the evidence on mixed companies is open to variant interpretations, as readers of *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* can judge from a close reading of chapter seven. Here Salinger presents evidence of the extent to which men of wealth and education disliked drinking in mixed company, to establish an antipathy that helps explain the creation of exclusive establishments such as Philadelphia's City Tavern, and which presumably fostered an equal and opposite reaction among labourers. However the crucial question is why did men like Alexander Hamilton or Daniel Fisher, authors of some of the more pungent commentary on Philadelphia's taverns cited in this chapter, visit or stay in taverns at all? Broadly speaking, they did so out of choice: more specifically from a desire learn from and participate in the talk of the town. (Again we have no way of knowing whether labouring Americans were drawn to taverns for similar reasons – although Franklin's *Autobiography* suggests that at least some labourers wished to participate in civic discourse). Given that much nonsense was talked among gentlemen in club settings, and much liquor was consumed there besides, the fact some taverns and some taverngoers were incapable of supplying the peculiar civility a man such as Alexander Hamilton sought is perhaps less interesting than the fact that apparently he believed that some did or could. The willingness of men such Daniel Fisher and Alexander Hamilton to drink in mixed tavern company contained within it a grudging acceptance of the idea that at least some members of the labouring classes were capable of intelligent and 'civilised' conversation and behaviour. If something like this was the case then the subsequent development of the tavern trade along 'exclusionary' and class-specific lines takes on an altogether darker complexion.

Taverns and Drinking in Early America employs 'class' in the relatively loose sense that is a term of art in the literature on the social history of early America. By 'class' Salinger means to indicate a consciousness of one's place in a social hierarchy, a hierarchy shaped by the existence of a degree of social mobility unknown in Europe. The organisation of the tavern trade and the practice of tavern-going speak both to the existence of this hierarchy and to the cultural forces challenging it. Clearly a class analysis places the available evidence on tavern-going in a coherent framework. It does so however by downplaying some of other themes that emerge from that evidence. For example, taverns and tavern-going were clearly implicated in phenomenal rates of alcohol consumption and drunkenness. Quite how heavy or even destructive drinking fits within a framework designed to illuminate the salience of class-consciousness is unclear. Taverns and tavern-going also provide the best evidence we have on the separation of public from private life in early America. Once again, this aspect of the evidence bears on class formation but presents other interesting themes and problems besides. One could make the same point in relation to the fact that the tavern was a male world. Moreover men began seeking ever more socially homogenous settings in which to drink at the same time and in the same communities as they began protesting against imperial measures and setting about the business of forming independent governments. *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* has relatively little to say about the political functions of taverns. One can readily appreciate why Salinger chose to build her analysis of taverns and drinking around the concept of class. However, partly because the evidence she presents is so rich, readers of *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* may find themselves wishing for a more sustained discussion of the alternative themes suggested by Salinger's research.

Hopefully *Taverns and Drinking in Early America* will mark the end of a first phase of inquiry into the

subject. The historiography now contains a comprehensive survey of the topic, as well as a number of studies focussed on specific communities. There is broad agreement in the literature as to the basic development of the tavern trade over the course of the eighteenth century. Sharon Salinger has suggested a framework within which that development might be interpreted. This framework deserves to be discussed, developed, refined or perhaps rebutted in future studies. The existing historiography also highlights the existence of a significant gap in our knowledge. We know very little about the social history of the hotels, pleasure gardens and clubs that in the early nineteenth century replaced the colonial tavern as the primary site of discretionary sociability. And although there are a number of studies of saloon-going in mid- to late nineteenth-century America, there is work to be done on working class drinking in the early national period. Hopefully Salinger's survey will be picked up in graduate classes on American social history and serve as the inspiration for further reflection and research.

The author is pleased to accept this review and thanks Dr Thompson for his comments.

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