The concepts of public and private remain central to much current historical analysis. Recent writing has transcended the older private/public dichotomy to trace the mutability and ambiguity of these concepts, in both material and discursive realms where identities and, hence, power were claimed. What these studies have shown is that by the mid-nineteenth century numerous extra-state institutions, most notably voluntary societies and the press, but also staged events like exhibitions and parades, provided scope for a flourishing public culture in which practices of sociability and deliberation defined boundaries between private and public life by sketching out terrains of common interest. Central to these practices, however, were ingrained problems of identity and difference which reveal the profound distinctions that shaped public practice and the places where public life was enacted.[1]

A recent intervention into this ongoing project is Julia Roberts’s *In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada*. Roberts’s study provides an overdue reconsideration of the extended network of drinking places and inns that dotted the map of Upper Canada.[2] Influenced by the work of Peter Thompson and David Conroy on the role of public houses in the colonial and revolutionary United States, Roberts argues that the tavern’s traditional function as “public space” opened it up to a surprising diversity of peoples and uses.[3] According to Roberts, long-standing custom, ritual, and informal regulations characterized how these taverns were ordered and used, representing an unwritten code that permitted a degree of heterogeneous interaction. But it was hierarchically ordered interaction, a fact literally built into the taverns themselves with their purposeful arrangement of buildings, rooms, and other subspaces. For Roberts, then, the tavern serves as a window on “wider social and cultural patterns” (p. 2). By re-examining them in this wider context, she adds a new critical dimension not only to the rather dated historiography of taverns in Upper Canada but also to studies concerned with the development of a colonial public.

Indeed, it is the very publicness of the colonial tavern that permits this renewal, since the particular ways in which colonials conceptualized their taverns as public places allows a close analysis of how they constructed and negotiated class, gender, and ethnicity/race. In her introduction, Roberts asserts that “a tavern in the colonial context was a building that was open to the public” (p. 2). She distinguishes the “informal” nature of the tavern’s publicness from three more technically specific constructions of the term “public,” which include the world of politics and market, the intellectual and associational sphere devoted the production of public opinion, and organized public activities such as parading (p. 3). By “informal” Roberts argues for a casual, loosely structured public open to practices and attitudes—such as intoxication, silliness, and revelry—that were squeezed out of the rationalist political and economic publics or carefully channeled or policed in the more staged publics. Like any social and cultural practice, the tavern public abided by a practical and symbolic set of rules, bound-
aries, and customs aimed at establishing reasonable expectations and norms as to one’s deportment and what one ought likely to encounter while patronizing an establishment. But according to Roberts, the very nature of “mixed” colonial society meant that these guidelines and the culture of drinking and sociability were, at their core, subject to ambiguity and ongoing negotiation (p. 3).

This tidy theoretical framework guides the thematically arranged chapters that follow. Since Roberts focuses on a grounded as opposed to a notional public, the concept of space figures prominently throughout the analysis and is one of the more revealing and refreshing dimensions of the work. In her preliminary discussion of the architecture and design of the typical Upper Canadian tavern Roberts argues for its distinct spatial arrangement as a deliberate balancing strategy which preserved a level of inclusivity appropriate to a “public establishment” while channeling the resulting diversity into more or less acceptable arrangements. While clear distinctions were apparent between the more genteel “principle houses” of urban centers and the working-class saloon, there was, according to Roberts, some overlap. In general, however, the taverns were notable for the way in which they facilitated “cohesive rituals of mutual belonging over drink” while also accommodating through their spatial design the “powerful differences separating members of the colonial public” (p. 13).

In the second chapter, Roberts interrogates one of her key sources, the journal of York tavern keeper Ely Playter, for what it reveals about the spatial ordering of colonial gender difference. One of the primary insights here is the degree to which taverns such as Playter’s blended the household world and the tavern world. Clearly masculinized spaces like the barroom were reserved almost exclusively for male patrons but adjacent parlors, sitting rooms, and chambers which served as occasional public spaces were also places where family life, leisure, and female sociability were permitted at a remove from the business of the tavern. Roberts’s reading of this flexible ordering emphasizes the mutual and often peaceful interdependence of these social spaces but also the possibility for tension and transgression. But what this discussion serves to underline is the flexibility of public and private as framed by taverns as “shared space” (p. 47). It suggests that, while men retained authority over the tavern space, women’s sociability nonetheless “enacted an alternative vision of public life and association” (p. 54).

As key institutions in a wider colonial public, taverns present a conundrum for the historian interested in tracking difference and identity—elements that were by definition, if not practice, vetted out of the notional public sphere. Roberts dedicates the third chapter to exploring this problem. She characterizes the tavern as a community institution in which gathering and discussion about seemingly private matters often crystallized into “informal courts of public opinion” about wider political issues (p. 75). An assortment of colonial types—travelers, doctors, tradespeople, artists—made regular use of taverns and when there often gave vent to their views on topics of general interest. Moreover, taking cues from Jeffrey McNairn’s work on public opinion in Upper Canada, Roberts points out that voluntary associations made regular use of taverns as handy meeting places, a practice that lingered until purpose-built meeting places began to emerge by mid-century. As a hub of community life, then, the tavern mediated private and public in ways other institutions of the public sphere did not, or by definition could not. Given their placement at the center of community life, they made, in Roberts’s terms, the private political by providing space for the airing of private concerns and thus rendering them, at least temporarily, matters of common interest.

The remaining three chapters explore the themes of tavern space and race, taverns and masculine respectability, and taverns as legitimate sites of women’s public life. Roberts employs a counter-reading of received ideas about the tavern as a frequently hostile, entirely masculinized space as a subtle rhetorical strategy linking these themes. Nowhere perhaps is the notion of violence and exclusion more prevalent than as regards racialized “others”—here Roberts focuses on natives and blacks—whose contested presence in Upper Canada was so central to the construction of colonial “whiteness.” Yet Roberts points out that in innumerable ways, while these groups often faced exclusion, the tavern also often provided a space for cross-cultural encounter. As with white patrons, the tavern served a wide range of purposes for blacks and natives as places of employment, meeting places, and sites of entertainment. Even so, Roberts does not dismiss the important function of tavern violence; on the contrary she notes that violence was often sanctioned in taverns as a means of asserting identity and power in a mixed colonial society.

If race was a major point of contention and focus of this hostility, Roberts notes that religion and ethnic-nationalism were also matters of heated confrontation (indeed, one wonders here about the oddly cursory chapter title, “Race and Space”). Yet in this regard Roberts ap-
pears to strain her point about taverns as sites of mixed sociability. After detailing several cases of tavern violence between religious and ethnic-national antagonists, Roberts concludes that taverns “more commonly supported amicable relations between Catholic and Protestant,” citing the single supporting example of a tavern in Prescott (p. 116). Still, her overarching point stands: that tavern life was very much concerned with forging a sense of belonging, a practice that often entailed hostility and violence towards “othered” groups, and that these practices reflected the mixed nature of Upper Canadian society.

Class identities were similarly mixed in the taverns. It is not the case, however, that taverns functioned as a colonial melting pot. Rather their publicness permitted the cohabitation of discrete forms of class identity and meaning. Countering the perceived view of taverns as a surrogate working man’s club, Roberts argues that men of middling, “gentlemanly” status found an outlet for the expression of this identity in the tavern. Based largely on the personal accounts of Crown lands agent Harry Jones, Roberts shows how men of his ilk prized the tavern’s sociability and warm mutuality while also chafing at the presence of rough types, artisans, and women. They also challenged rising concerns on the part of colonial clergy and increasingly vocal social reformers for the effect that even temperate drinking cultures had on tavern-goers. Roberts’s key theme here is that of reconciliation: if the benefits of tavern patronage to those claiming or aspiring to respectable status outweighed the costs, it nonetheless required a good deal of cultural justification. In that sense, tavern-going met the “cultural needs” of men like Jones by providing a range of rituals (dinners, “informed conversation”) and the opportunity to mark and maintain social distance (p. 136).

One of the main strengths of this study is its theoretical orientation. By connecting with the growing literature on public life Roberts is able to avoid the empirical traps set by even the more critical approaches to a “separate spheres” analysis. The latter, she suggests, tend to “theorize” women out of a public world as antithetical to its masculinized precepts; when women do appear in public domains it is in contravention of an unwritten code (p. 141). In her last chapter, Roberts challenges this idea, acknowledging that while tavern spaces themselves often clearly designated separate rooms for women, such as “ladies’ parlours,” these rigid and very real boundaries were not prima facie evidence of a deeper cultural rigidity. Rather Roberts includes women in the “mixed company” of the tavern public; not typically as single patrons or in “single-sex clusters” but as members of groups—“mixed couples, families, traveling parties”—and in rare instances as tavern keepers (p. 141). Examining the case of a Kingston area farm woman named Hope Shewman, Roberts contends that, like men who used the tavern to extrapolate the public meanings of their private affairs, Shewman did the same quite independently of any presiding sense of separate gendered spheres. The events in question involved Shewman defending her respectability as an honest woman in the face of a legal challenge involving accusations of the theft of a flock of geese. Shewman not only appeared in court on the charges but felt compelled to appear before “the tavern-based court of community opinion that demanded of her a public, performative presence—which she delivered” (p. 142). For Roberts, events like these, as well as the more mundane uses of the tavern by women, underline the fact that taverns functioned as a place where gendered publics were enacted, at times overlapped, or were even indistinguishable. Certainly, these happened within the structural restraints of the time (Shewman, for instance, was accompanied by her husband). But as Roberts contends, in practice such constraints entailed much wider scope of interpretation and action than they often implied.

In detailing this rich culture of taverns as central community institutions tied into the concept of public life Roberts provides an impressive depth of analysis. Not only does she manage to show the diversity of Upper Canadian society but she reveals how one of its most ubiquitous institutions refracted this diversity in ways that have to date not been taken seriously into account. For all of its depth of insight, however, the study is perhaps too single-minded in its focus on developing the idea of the taverns as a manifestation of a mixed colonial public. The work, for instance, is largely unconcerned with what made this society a colonial one. An exploration into the rich literature on the implantation of metropolitan institutions and their adaptation in colonial settings would not only have provided a historicized context but also important theoretical clues to how colonials interpreted their subjectivity in a colonized space amongst colonized peoples. In that regard, the analysis is at times oddly synchronic for a work of cultural history concerned with meaning and symbolic interpretation. By the same token, in tracing the use of the tavern as an institution connected to the market place, to the rising transportation networks of roads, canals, and railways, and to the political community, Roberts convincingly places the tavern in a wider developmental context that expands our understanding of Upper Canadian so-
cial, cultural, and political history. At its most basic level, the Upper Canadian tavern reflected the desire of colonial people for sociability, for “dissolving their ‘solitari-ness’ into ‘togetherness’” (p. 76). The result, as Roberts shows, was a complex set of practices and relations that allowed colonials to determine what they had in common and what they did not.

Notes

[1]. Some of the major works in this broad and diverse field include Mary P. Ryan, Civic Wars: Democracy and Public Life in the American City during the Nineteenth Century (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); E. A. Heaman, The Inglorious Arts of Peace: Exhibitions in Canadian Society during the Nineteenth Century (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999); Jeffrey L. McNairn, The Capacity to Judge: Public Opinion and Deliberative Democracy in Upper Canada, 1791-1854 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000); and Bettina Bradbury and Tamara Myers, eds., Negotiating Identities in 19th- and 20th-Century Montreal (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2005).

[2]. The possibilities for such a reconsideration are strongly hinted at in the early chapters of Craig Heron’s recent synthesis, Booze: A Distilled History (Toronto: Between the Lines, 2003).


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