**The Drinking Establishment as a Political Space**

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*Introduction*

There is a wealth of academic research concerning the privatization and de-politicization of public spaces, such as the city park or sidewalk and public/private spaces such as shopping malls. One such space which has undergone stark transformation, but unlike shopping malls has received less attention, is the drinking establishment (saloon, tavern, bar, pub). The drinking establishment, to be sure, is and has been a place of entertainment, diversion, solace, and convivial social interaction. Historically it has also served as a social welfare agency and an employment recruitment center. But importantly, the drinking establishment has also been a space of political socialization and a place for political movement formation. This paper offers a historical and theoretical study of drinking establishments in the US as spaces of political socialization, where people exchanged and debated political ideas and public policies, mobilized for political action, and formulated enduring social movements.

Since the days of British colonialism in America, drinking establishments, then commonly known as taverns, and later saloons (especially, urban ones, not the ones of Wild West lore) embodied the political public sphere. Taverns and urban workingman’s saloons were places where political ideas were exchanged, public opinion crafted, actions planned, participants recruited and mobilized, and political movements born and bred. They were irreplaceable and key spaces where American colonists tired of British oppression were transformed into revolutionaries. They were havens for the workingman to meet and organize against the daily oppressions of his employer. They were spaces for socialists, syndicalists, and anarchists to raise consciousness by engaging with a broader public through speeches, lectures, meetings, and organized actions. And in the 20th century gays and lesbians used the gay/lesbian bar as a space of free association, a place where they became conscious of their collective identity and through their struggle to preserve the space for themselves launched a political movement.

Despite this rich history of the drinking establishment’s political function it is hard to imagine that a contemporary tavern/saloon/bar would be the cradle or home of a political movement on par with antecedents like the American Revolution in the 18th century, the radical and labor movements in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and the gay rights movement. The transformation of the drinking establishment as a political public space and from a space of political movement formation and mobilization to a largely apolitical space that it is today is the subject of this essay.

I focus on taverns/saloons/bars because I see these places as unique spaces for political socialization and movement formation. All political movements need spaces where people can meet, be made politically conscious, strategize, organize and ultimately mobilize for political action. Broadly speaking the black church, the Nation of Islam’s mosque, and the college campus served this function during the civil rights movement. Likewise, did the union hall during the New Deal and postwar era. But drinking establishments are unlike these other spaces because they are truly public spaces. They are places where people want to come, to linger over a drink, to converse, and in years past, to be politically socialized and mobilized. They were the “great, good third spaces” that Oldenburg and Sismondo suggest are bound up with the democratic political project of the United States.

The relative openness/accessibility or the public nature of working class saloons, combined with the fact that they welcomed political gatherings made the saloons unique institutions and spaces in democratic life. Saloons were quasi-public spaces which meant that the politics that happened there were public. As unions and politically radical groups were forced to retreat from the saloon and move into spaces where their members met privately (i.e. union halls, conference rooms, private living rooms) the workingman’s saloon role as a political forum was minimized. While drinking establishments are more open and accessible today than ever before to women, gays/lesbians, racial/ethnic groups, there is no expectation that politics would be done there. Indeed it would be quite out of the ordinary if it was. Certainly, people continue to go to bars today and talk about current events and politics, politicians might still make deals over drinks at the bar, but civil society organizations, such as labor unions, environmental groups, etc. do not see and occupy these spaces as important forums for political socialization.

*Political Education and Activism in the Urban Working Class Saloon*

There are several informative and fascinating social histories of drinking establishments and their transformation in the US. With the exception of Christine Sismondo's recently published and cleverly titled *America Walks into a Bar*, none of the accounts of the drinking establishment's transformation focuses exclusively on its function as a political public space. Yet, it is a transformation that has not gone unnoticed. Most of the accounts attribute the transformation of the drinking establishment from a political public space, i.e. its de-politicization, to changes in the built environment, especially suburbanization; expansion of entertainment opportunities as “substitutes” for the saloon; technological innovation in the mass media that either lessened conversation or replaced the communicative function of drinking establishments; or institutional explanations that as voluntary organizations grew in size and resources they left the saloons for larger infrastructural spaces.[[1]](#endnote-1) Sismondo is one scholar who has focused her research on the drinking establishment and political movements. She offers a fascinating history of the centrality of the drinking establishment in American social movements dating back to the colonial era and the Salem witch trials, but in her survey of the contemporary scene the link between the drinking establishment and politics is rather tenuous. She focuses on the licensing of bars and community opposition or about equal access for parents with children's strollers. However, important these may be neither issue speaks to drinking establishments as political spaces of political consciousness and movement formation. In the 21st century drinking establishments are largely apolitical places. Clearly, for Sismondo, they no longer serve as an instrumental element in political life, but she does not explain why.

My contention is that the de-politicization of the drinking establishment, in particular, the urban workingman’s saloon and beer hall frequented by the working class was the product of a multi-pronged effort by political and economic elites to repress labor militancy and political radicalism in the late 1800s and early 1900s. The transformation of the working class saloon from a political arena to a largely apolitical entertainment arena must take stock of how class conflict informed the transformation of the space. Working class saloons were the “home” of radical labor, socialist, syndicalist, and anarchist who met, lectured, and organized there. While Prohibition ultimately closed the saloons and other drinking establishments, by the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1919, workingman saloons had already been depoliticized in the face of political repression. Whatever effect this had on labor and radical movements, this transformation that was intended as an attack on radicalism, had the result of transforming the drinking establishment from a social and cultural institution with an important political socialization function to an apolitical space primarily devoted to diversion and entertainment.

I build on the research of Sismondo (as mentioned above), Perry R. Duis, Roy Rosenzweig, and Madelon Powers. These scholars agree that the saloon was dying before Prohibition. Even before its legal death saloons became more orderly, professional, much more tame. By the turn of the twentieth century, saloons, always a business, began to prioritize profits, efficiency and consumerism in ways they had not before. Duis suggests that suburbanization; the invention and popularity of the automobile; and the popularity of substitutes for the saloon, especially workingmen's movie theatres (nickelodeons); the expansion of the bottle trade, which made the sale of alcohol directly to the consumer and therefore cutting out the saloon keeper as middleman very profitable for brewers were key to the saloons transformation. According to Duis, combined with increasing influence of Prohibitionists on government officials at all levels these innovations threatened saloon keepers’ revenues and profits. To keep customers coming in and to clean up their public image which had been demonized by Prohibitionists, many urban saloons reinvented themselves into entertainment venues such as cabaret and dance halls.[[2]](#endnote-2)

Similar to Duis, social historian Roy Rosenzweig argues that the transformation of working class saloons took place before prohibition. For Rosenzweig the key to the transformation lay in Prohibitionists success in making liquor licenses expensive as a means to put saloon keepers out of business. In order to stay in business saloon keepers were forced to rely on brewers to purchase the licenses for them and in exchange saloon keepers were forced to cede much of their business decisions to the regulation of the brewers. Through the brewers’ directives the saloons were made more orderly and businesslike. Having much to lose, especially large investments in equipment and fixtures the brewers forced saloon keepers to comply with the rules set by licensing commissions which banned some to the more communal aspects of saloon life including the free lunch and treating of customers. Fearing police harassment and the threat of being shutdown saloons transformed themselves to stay in business. In Rosenzweig's view, the brewers and to a lesser extent, the saloon keepers who depended on them, were the “agents of the commercializing process.” “Over the fifty years between 1870 and 1920, the saloon gradually became much more of a conventional commercial enterprise.”[[3]](#endnote-3)

Like Duis and Rosenzweig, Powers argues that pre-Prohibition saloons underwent significant change. She attributes the transformation of the late 19th century workingman's saloon to the labor unions outgrowing the cramped spatial confines of workingman's saloons. Indeed, union ranks did grow in the late 19th century, as did those of political radical groups, in particular the socialists, but this does not mean that institutional growth by itself was responsible for their exodus from the saloon. Similar to Duis and Rosenzweig, Powers underestimates the role that repression by the state and business elites of militant labor and political radicalism had in their flight from workingmen’s saloons. I am suggesting that unions and political radicals left the saloons, and with their departure saloons were depoliticized, not solely because of institutional growth, but because of political repression that was the product of class conflict in the US.

The transformation of saloons from political to apolitical spaces must be read in the context of class conflict as it was manifested in the middle and upper class backlash against organized labor and especially, political radicalism in the fifty years between 1870 and 1920. The saloon became a target because it was a haven for unions and radical groups. “At the turn of the century,” writes Powers, “a great many union chapters assembled in saloons, including approximately 30 percent of the Brotherhood of Boiler Makers and Iron Shipbuilders, 50 percent of the Wood Carver’s Association, 75 percent of the Amalgamated Wood Workers, and nearly 100 percent of the United Brewery Workers.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Likewise, the fledgling Socialist Labor Party for years held its meetings in the back rooms of saloons. [[5]](#endnote-5) Future labor and radical leaders including William “Big Bill” Haywood and Eugene Debs gained their political consciousness in workingmen’s saloons.

Working-class saloons were relatively open and accessible places for the working class and they were also spaces of political education and organization. Of course, urban political machines had their headquarters in saloons as well, but I am not referring to them here, as political machines were essentially state actors and could hardly be considered civil society groups. The electioneering and patronage of urban political machines never challenged the political and economic status quo as did militant unions and political radicals. It is these groups that sought to build a social movement that made political and business elites fearful of revolution. And it was they who were the target of elites' crackdown on saloons. According to Calkins, socialists and the socialist labor party often met in urban saloons and beer halls. Sometimes club rooms in saloons functioned as party headquarters where radicals and unions hosted lectures and discussions combining them with “other means of recreation” intended “chiefly to make the club an attractive rendezvous as a place for the teaching of socialism.”[[6]](#endnote-6)

As journalist Hutchins Hapgood wrote of the turn of the 20th century saloon, it “is the principal place in which ideas underlying the labor movement originate, or at any rate become consciously held. It is there where men talk over, think, and exchange feelings and ideas relating to their labor and their lives. The social philosophers take their fragmentary thoughts and construct them as to programmes and systems.”[[7]](#endnote-7) Similarly, sociologist Royal Melendy, wrote in 1900 about the political socialization function of Chicago workingman's saloons:

Here men “shake out their hearts together.” Intercourse quickens the thought, feeling, and action. In many of these discussions, to which I have listened and in which I have joined, there has been revealed a deeper insight into the real cause of present evils than is often manifested from lecture platforms, but their remedies are wide of the mark, each bringing forward a theory which is the panacea for all social ills. The names of Karl Marx and leaders of political and social thought are often heard here. This is the workingman's school. He is both scholar and teacher. The problems of national welfare are solved here. Many as patriotic men as our country produces learn here their lessons in patriotism and brotherhood. Here the masses receive their lessons in civil government, learning less of our ideals, but more of the practical workings than the public schools teach. It is the most cosmopolitan institution in the most cosmopolitan of cities...Men of all nationalities meet and mingle, and by the interchange of views and opinions their own are modified. Nothing short of travel could exert so broadening an influence upon these men. It does much to assimilate the heterogeneous crowds that are constantly pouring into our city from foreign shores. But here, too, they learn their lessons in corruption and vice. It is their school for good and evil.[[8]](#endnote-8)

The philosophizing and political ruminations that were commonplace in workingman's saloons were not just idle chatter or an interesting observation for turn of the twentieth century sociologist and ethnographers. Sometimes the political education the working class received in saloons translated into labor and political activism. Labor agitation in the mines of Pennsylvania in the 1870s brought repression directly linked to saloons. As Sismondo and Powers have written, labor legend has it that the Molly Maguires, a secret society (debatable whether they actually existed in Pennsylvania) with links to miners and labor actions were framed by a Pinkerton Agency spy who tied union activist miners and local tavern keepers to the murder of a night patrolman. The story goes that Franklin B. Gowen, president of the Philadelphia and Reading Railroad with large ownership interests in Pennsylvania mining, appointed himself special prosecutor. At the conclusion of a very legally suspect trial nineteen people were hanged in the conspiracy including six Irish tavern keepers.[[9]](#endnote-9)

In 1886, the Haymarket Massacre in Chicago brought massive repression against labor leaders and political radicals who agitated for an eight-hour workday. Business and political elites were fearful of an impending revolution. Accusing anarchists and syndicalists for the bomb throwing and agitation at Haymarket authorities zealously cracked down on them and on the German beer halls where they were known to meet. Additionally, the elites strengthened local police, militia and the US Army. Vigilante groups proliferated, as did company employed spies and Pinkerton agents charged with spying on, infiltrating, and sabotaging labor unions. All of these developments, as they became common practice, had a chilling effect radicals' and militant unionists speech-making and organizing in quasi-public forums like saloons and beer halls. Indeed, as Sismondo and Nelson document, following Haymarket, more than 200 people were arrested and Chicago police monitored, and in some cases closed beer halls, including Zepf's, Greif's Emma Street Hall, Northwestern Hall, and Thalia Hall, plus seventeen unnamed saloons where, according to Chicago police captain Michael Schaack, anarchist met “night and day.”[[10]](#endnote-10)

Businessmen understood the link between the workingman’s saloon and labor militancy and political radicalism. When the railroad magnate, George Pullman, founded his company town, Pullman, Illinois in the 1880s he banned both unions and saloons. As did businessman Turlington Harvey when he established Harvey, Illinois.[[11]](#endnote-11)

Through their action and in words business and political elites made clear that their opposition to saloons and their often generous support for Prohibition campaigns were means to avert movements challenging the political and economic status quo. Following the massacre of striking miners and their families in Ludlow, Colorado in 1914 by drunk Colorado National Guardsmen business and political elites blamed alcohol and the saloon for the incident. However, this time it was not the labor militancy that was fostered there, but to the alcoholism that the elites pointed to as the cause of the behavior of the guardsmen. Propelled by John D. Rockefeller’s donations (incidentally, Rockefeller owned the Colorado Fuel and Oil Company that the Ludlow miners were striking) the prohibition campaign succeeded in making Colorado a dry state. Indeed, doing so argued the leader of the Colorado dry campaign, Howard Russell, prohibition would help maintain “the peace and order of the state against anarchy and revolution.”[[12]](#endnote-12)

As I suggest above the growth of substitute venues and the profusion of technology in and of itself did not lead to the de-politicization of the drinking establishment and the transformation of it from a political public space to an apolitical entertainment centered space. The transformation of the drinking establishment in making it more professional and orderly, which culminated in its legal Prohibition, in part, was a conscious political project to change how the working class was politically socialized. To be sure, the transformation of the drinking establishment and its prohibition, can be linked to other causes as well, including, native xenophobia of immigrants and their cultural practices[[13]](#endnote-13) as well as, reformers’ well-intentioned but ill-conceived notion to combat poverty by laying its causes at the doorstep of the saloon. Nevertheless, the creation of “substitutes” for the saloon, such as the workingman's movie theatre; the erection of “dry” company towns; the high cost of saloon licenses; Prohibition, itself; and official and vigilante political and violent repression of political radicals and the saloons that hosted them was a conscious political and cultural project to against labor militancy and political radicalism. The project may have met with only partial success in mitigating labor militancy and political radicalism (not the subject of this paper) but it did succeed in gradually depoliticizing drinking establishments even before Prohibition, solidifying its de-politicization during Prohibition, and keeping it depoliticized when drinking establishments were reopened.

*Gay/lesbian Activism and the Gay/Lesbian Bar*

The exception to the depoliticized drinking establishment in the 20th and 21st centuries is the gay/lesbian liberation movements. Gay/lesbian bars survived as politicized spaces, as workingman saloons were depoliticized prior to and during Prohibition, because gay/lesbian bars were among the few institutions that were safe for gays/lesbians to socialize publicly. Gay/lesbian bars faced a tremendous amount of scapegoating, police harassment and repression. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, gay/lesbian bars fostered a collective identity and consciousness that was the foundation of queer political activism. As John D’Emilio writes of the gay/lesbian bars in the 1950s and 1960s, they “were seedbeds for a collective consciousness that might one day flower politically.”[[14]](#endnote-14) As students of the gay/lesbian liberation movement argue the Stonewall Riot in New York City in 1969 and the eruption of queer political activism in its aftermath did not come spontaneously out of nowhere. Nor was it born by the riot itself. Instead, gay/lesbian political activism to which the mainstream public had been awakened by Stonewall was a product of the “pre-political” and the political functions of the gay/lesbian bar in the years and decades before Stonewall.[[15]](#endnote-15) It was there that gays/lesbians crafted a collective consciousness that was a necessary precursor for the growth of formal, member-ship based political organizations such as the Daughters of Bilitis and the Mattachine Society. In addition to the contribution that gay/lesbian bar culture made to formal political organizations through membership and resources, the community that formed in gay/lesbian bars fought its own political battles outside of and sometimes opposed to the confines set by the formal organizations, and thus politicized its patrons, in their political struggled to claim a space of their own. As Nan Alamilla Boyd writes, “the roots of queer activism are more fundamentally found in the less organized (but numerically stronger) pockets of queer association and camaraderie that existed in bars and taverns.”[[16]](#endnote-16)

*Conclusion*

As this brief, incomplete, and very much a work-in-progress narrative about the role that taverns/saloons/bars have had in American social movements illustrates the drinking establishment has been an important space for political education and political consciousness-raising. Not every workingman’s saloon or every gay/lesbian bar was a politicized place. But unlike contemporary drinking establishments, many of them were. Because of the uniqueness of the drinking establishment, in the sense that it is an open and accessible place, now more than ever, where people walk in and stay to drink and converse, or what Ray Oldenburg dubbed, “the talking/drinking synergism that is at the foundation of the third place,” drinking establishments have once again the potential to be key forums where the public might acquire a collective, political consciousness.[[17]](#endnote-17) We need to rethink the political potential of drinking establishments as political democratic spaces. Perhaps we have gotten accustomed to thinking about drinking establishments in a certain apolitical way. That is a challenge that can be overcome by taking a glimpse into the drinking establishment’s past, perhaps we may re-imagine its future.

1. See, Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafes, Coffee Shops, Bookstores, Bars, Hair Salons and Other Hangouts at the Heart of a Community* (Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press, 1999); Christine Sismondo, *America Walks into a Bar: A Spirited History of Taverns and Saloons, Speakeasies and Grog Shops* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Madelon Powers, *Faces Along the Bar: Lore and Order in the Workingman's Saloon, 1870-1920* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 131-132, 234 . [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Perry R. Duis, *The Saloon: Public Drinking in Chicago and Boston, 1880-1920* (Urbana, Ill.: University of Illinois Press, 1983), 274-294. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Roy Rosenzweig, *Eight Hours For What We Will: Workers and Leisure in an Industrial City, 1970-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 184. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Powers, *Faces Along the Bar*, 55. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Powers, *Faces Along the Bar*, 131. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Raymond Calkins, *Substitutes for the Saloon* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1971), 55-56. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Hutchings Hapgood, “McSorley’s Saloon,” *Harper’s Weekly* 58 (October 25, 1913)

   <http://books.google.com/books?id=-WktAQAAMAAJ&pg=RA1-PA47&lpg=RA1-PA47&dq=%22mcsorley%27s+saloon%22+harper%27s+weekly&source=bl&ots=67iefN7tgp&sig=PK7c4vl1VsMbz2cv66-6He0la0U&hl=en&sa=X&ei=-cM-U4TaLcTMsQTcnoDICw&ved=0CC8Q6AEwAQ#v=onepage&q=%22mcsorley's%20saloon%22%20harper's%20weekly&f=false> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Royal Melendy, “Quittin’ Time: A Visit to Chicago’s Saloons,” *History Matters: The U.S. Survey Course on the Web*, 4. <http://historymatters.gmu.edu/d/5765/> [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Sismondo, *America Walks into a Bar*, 152-155; Powers, *Faces Along the Bar*, 175-176. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Bruce C. Nelson, “From Beyond the Martyrs: A Social History of Chicago's Anarchist,” in Daniel Pope, ed. *American Radicalism* (Malden, Mass: Blackwell Publishing, 2001), 148-149; Sismondi, 160-161. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Powers, *Faces Along the Bar*, 177, 292. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Quoted in Sismondi, *America Walks into a Bar,* 209-210. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. The anti-German jingoistic hysteria during World War I also contributed to the demonization of alcohol and dealt a blow to the alcohol industry, especially brewers, (and as a consequence, urban saloon keepers linked with the brewers) many of whom were German-Americans. Iain Gately describes Palmer Raids against brewers who were accused of being German “subversives,” see Iain Gately, *Drink: A Cultural History of Alcohol* (New York: Gotham Books, 2009), 371. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 32-33. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. For the “pre-political” and political role of gay/lesbian bars see, George Chauncey, *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940* (New York: Basic Books, 1994); Allan Berube, *Coming Out under Fire: The History of Gay Men and Women in World War Two* (New York: Free Press, 1990); Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community* (New York: Routledge, 1993); Marc Stein, *City of Sisterly and Brotherly Loves: Lesbian and Gay Philadelphia, 1945-1972* (Chicago: University of Chicago Presss, 2000); Vicki Eaklor, “Learning from History: A Queer Problem,” *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Identity* 3, no. 3 (1998): 195-211. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Nan Alamilla Boyd, *Wide Open Town: A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place*, 167. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)