

Theories and evidence: a response to David Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the history of the public house, 1850-1950'

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I. Introduction

I am grateful to the editors of *Cultural and Social History* for the opportunity to respond in brief to David Gutzke's recent article, much of which centres on a critique of work I have previously presented in this journal.¹ Much of Gutzke's surprisingly overheated response refers to rather minor issues (spending three paragraphs at the beginning of his article, for example, on a discussion of control before conceding that 'this is only a minor point') and it would be tedious for the general reader to go through these point by point.² Rather, I wish to use the available space to tackle three inter-related issues:

1. The point of the original article, which Gutzke seems to have missed but which I think is important for general readers – the need for cultural and social historians to take business history seriously.
2. The nature of the improved public house movement, which is in truth Gutzke's central concern. A careful reading of my original article will indicate that I find little to object to here, given that I draw attention to the importance of this movement as a limited example of the imposition of 'central interpretation' on the pub. My concern here will be simply to draw attention to some factors which might moderate Gutzke's enthusiasm for the importance of this movement and suggest where further work might be useful
3. The nature of theory and evidence in history, which I think is the heart of Gutzke's views of my work. I fear that Gutzke seeks to drag historians back to a form of naïve empiricism, from which the bridges to other domains (such as organizational theory) which *Cultural and Social History* seeks to build will be harder to construct.

II. The importance of business history for social and cultural history

My purpose in writing the article which has attracted the ire of Gutzke was to suggest that, using the pub as an example, social and cultural historians needed to operate with a rather more nuanced view of 'commercialised leisure' than they had often displayed. They needed to do so, I argued, because the strategies adopted by companies could form part of the complex mediations which produced particular settings for social action. As I seem to have rather confused Gutzke (who notes on

page 235 that ‘to brewers he allots a relatively insignificant role’ and then two pages later ‘he sees innovations as promoted by breweries or ambitious tenants, not by those outside the trade’) I have probably not stated my central thesis clearly enough.³ As the nature of the article is important in judging the evidence used (that is, it was never claimed that this was an article which presented primarily empirical evidence, rather that it was a general argument supported by primary and secondary evidence) then it is perhaps worth restating the significance of business strategies.

Taking business strategies seriously is important for two reasons. One is that different companies can adopt very different responses to what are ‘objectively’ the same market conditions. Thus, for example, there was a secular trend in the years from 1950 to 1990 in the brewing sector, particularly among the major companies which dominated the industry, away from a logic based on the primacy of brewing, in which retail outlets were seen predominantly as distribution outlets, to a logic of retailing, in which pubs were seen as the prime point of contact with customers.⁴ Such a trend was a response to a number of factors, particularly the changing demands of customers faced with an increasing range of leisure opportunities. However, different companies shifted at very different paces with consequences for the nature of their pubs.

Whitbread, for example, embraced the shift with considerable enthusiasm, particularly in its adoption of novel forms of market research drawing from experience in the USA and in other forms of retailing. Other companies, notably Bass and Allied Breweries, found the shift more difficult. While it would be right to see this period as one in which many pubs changed in character based on the new business strategies being adopted, the impact on particular pubs might be very different based on corporate ownership. While such ownership is not the only factor which shapes the nature of the social setting which is the pub, it is one important factor – as those who drank in Watney’s pubs found when their pub was converted to a theme pub in a rush of enthusiasm in the 1960s.

However, it is not only that companies respond to perceived changes in the nature of their markets with different strategies but also that those perceptions are profoundly shaped by factors which go beyond the economic. This is the central insight of the ‘new institutionalist’ perspective within organization studies.⁵ Developed largely in North America, this approach argues that organizations are faced not only with the problem of competition but also with that of legitimacy. That is, not all actions are purely economic responses, but also have to take into account what is counted as legitimate forms of competing in particular societal contexts. So it is that organizations also have to take into account regulatory pressures, pressure groups and political movements. Indeed, based on historical investigations, key proponents such as Fligstein and Dobbin have argued that standards of economic performance are themselves shaped by broader social and cultural forces.⁶ Adopting such a perspective enables us to make sense of the company as a mediator of a number of pressures, pressures which I attempted to outline in my article.

In so doing, I alluded in passing to aspects of the history of pubs such as the Carlisle state management scheme, the trust house movement and the Birmingham surrender movement. Gutzke supplies valuable evidence on these aspects, and I am happy to be corrected on matters of detail, but given that my aim was not to supply a detailed account of them, it seems a little unfair to be subject to this level of critique. I will turn to the improved public house movement in a moment, but this seems to be so

much the focus of Gutzke's claim that it distorts his arguments. So, for example, it is a little naughty of him to write that 'For Mutch, brewers embraced the managerial system to 'maximise financial returns' in the interwar years, but only on 'an individual basis'' when the two elements of the 'citation' are five pages apart.⁷ When we turn to look at the first phrase, it turns out that it is my summary of the evidence about the actions of two companies, Peter Walker & Son and Mitchells and Butlers, in the years before 1914.⁸ I want to pull out one further example from the footnotes (Gutzke has a habit of conducting key parts of the argument in the footnotes, something I'll try to avoid). This is the question of the 'long pull'. Gutzke's comment is that

Mutch interprets Peter Walker & Sons' [sic – it is Son's] use of the 'long pull' in Liverpool as a marketing tactic aimed at increasing market share. But this seems illogical, given the brewery's standing as the largest owner of tied houses in Liverpool. Such tactics would simply deprive Walker & Sons' tenants of profits and foster acrimony.⁹

What is central here is the distinction between managers and tenants. Twenty-first century allegations about the use of predatory pricing tactics by coffee houses and supermarkets, where the resources of a centralized organization operating through managers obliged to carry out central policy are used to force local independent competitors out of business, are surely common enough for us to recognize this distinction. The crucial aspect of Peter Walker & Son's Liverpool estate was that the majority of the estate was managed, a situation in which any losses in one outlet brought about by particular strategies could be balanced by the benefit for the whole group.¹⁰ Again, these were allegations made at the time and we would want to balance them against other evidence. But the example is instructive in suggesting that business strategies are *one* factor among several which shape the nature of social settings.

III. The improved public house: centralized interpretation at work.

This brings us to what is the core of Gutzke's argument: that 'it was thus Progressivism more than any other factor that was responsible for redefining the image, functions, layout and amenities of the public house from the 1890s until 1950s.'¹¹ While I might have some reservations about the use of the term Progressivism, there is no doubt that Gutzke is to be congratulated on supplying us with a considerable amount of additional evidence about the nature of the Improved Public House movement. Whether such evidence can stand the weight of the putative association with Progressivism or had the impact that Gutzke suggests is open to a little more doubt. These are large questions which I do not have the space to tackle here, but I want to address a couple of aspects of Gutzke's argument. Before I do so, let me reiterate what I said in the original article, that the improved public house movement was 'the strongest expression of central interpretation'.¹² Because of this, I can accept much of what Gutzke has to say, but not the interpretation he places on it. He argues that I

am inaccurate in saying either of the government or the breweries that 'efforts to gain a much deeper understanding of consumer needs, to recognize new and different types of customers and to both meet and shape those customer needs were not to happen in any significant form until after 1950' Such social engineering began decades earlier in the First World War with the CCB and continued with the improved public house in interwar England.¹³

I want to draw a distinction in assessing this statement, one which I should perhaps have made clearer in the original article, between market research and social engineering. I am quite happy to entertain an argument that marketing is an attempt at a form of social engineering, but this is one very different from that engaged in by the heroes of Gutzke's tale. He himself admits elsewhere that the improved public house movement was based on 'rudimentary market research'.¹⁴ Indeed, one of the reasons why the *Brewers' Journal* was enthusiastic about Mass Observation's account of drinking habits in 'Worktown' was not because of its conclusions about pubs (which it felt would be difficult to generalize) but because of its pioneering attempt to develop new ways of ascertaining just what consumers wanted (which contributed to its later forays into market research).¹⁵ I want to return to the example of the Downham Tavern that I developed in the original article (and which Gutzke ignores) to illustrate this difference.

The Downham Tavern was a cavernous improved house built by Barclay Perkins in conjunction with the development of the massive London County Council housing estate on which it was the only pub.¹⁶ It was celebrated for its wide range of recreational facilities and featured waitress only service. However, in 1937, as I outline in my original article, the company returned to the licensing justices asking permission to re-introduce bar service. They were worried that customers would desert the Downham for a new pub being built on the edge of the estate, with the key factor being that customers were suspicious if they couldn't see their beer being poured. This is only one example, but it is interesting in suggesting that the rather Olympian views of some of the improvers were not shared by those whose habits they were seeking to engineer.

Food, of course, was at the heart of such improved pubs, and Gutzke takes me to task for neglecting its influence. However, I want to suggest that Gutzke in his turn neglects other forms of evidence in order to emphasize the importance of the improved public house movement. Before I introduce this evidence, let me be clear that I am not seeking by so doing to downplay some significant aspects of the improved public house movement, nor to suggest that the pre-war pub was in general anything other than primarily a place to drink. However, I think it does rather put the improved public house movement in its place as one factor amongst several influencing the pub over this period. In 1893 the *Liverpool Daily Post* (not a source altogether uncritical of the conduct of pubs in the city) noted in its obituary of Sir Andrew Barclay Walker that

A marked feature in Sir Andrew's public-house management was that it was mainly due to him and the late Alderman Rigby that public-houses were converted really into victualling houses. In Walker's, as well as Rigby's, public-houses meals and refreshments are furnished to customers at all times, and this innovation became an important portion of his business.¹⁷

In his history of Whitbread, Ritchie notes the collapse of the Central Catering Company in 1906.¹⁸ This had been set up by the company to supply London pubs with meals but more publicans than had been realized carried out their own catering and it proved impossible to supply food at the right time. These are small examples, but Gutzke does tend to neglect earlier developments (as he does the pre-war activities of Sydney Nevile in seeking better training for publicans) in order to press his notion of Progressivism.¹⁹ This then leads to the final area for concern, the nature of theory in historical work.

IV Theory and evidence in historical work.

Gutzke lambastes me for the ‘confusing, ambiguous and misleading’ nature of the concepts I deploy. Far worse,

Our interpretations indicate different ways of conducting historical research. Mutch couples theory with limited research, whereas I regard theory, though a useful analytical tool, as a poor substitute for extensive research. From my research emerges an interpretation; Mutch prefers theory as his guide.²⁰

This is a fairly serious accusation with, I think, some potentially deleterious effects for the conduct of historical research. Gutzke goes on to parade his extensive archival research. I do not want to engage in some sort of tit for tat listing of archives visited and books read; I’ll let my other published work demonstrate my use of a range of evidence. What I’m more concerned with is the notion that interpretations ‘emerge’ from the evidence, as if by sheer weight of evidence something which was inherently present is simply brought to light by the historian. It is perhaps helpful if I explain something of my journey towards my interest in the pub and those who run it as illustrating the mutually constitutive pairing of theory and evidence.

My interest actually stems from work with a leisure retailing company in the 1990s which operated 1,700 managed pubs as well as a much bigger tenanted estate and a significant brewing operation. Until I conducted work on the way in which house managers used information, I had not realized that one could draw a distinction between free landlords (those running their own pubs), tenants and managers. These distinctions were not ‘arbitrary and historically unsound’ in this world, but one with very real impacts on how pubs were run.²¹ However, in order to understand the historical roots of these divisions I turned to the standard histories, only to find that they were sketchy on the origins of house management. This led me to Birmingham and Liverpool and to the archives. So puzzles about current practice led me to questions which directed my search for evidence. From this evidence I turned back to organization theory for concepts which would help me understand the differences I was observing. This led me to the related notions of interpretation and control and so to my original article.

The reason for selecting *Cultural and Social History* was that part of the ‘mission’ which reads

The journal seeks to make connections across the broad territory of cultural and social history and across chronological and geographical boundaries. It also aims to make links across the neighbouring sub-disciplines of History (economic, social, cultural and political) and between History and closely related disciplines which concern themselves with the history of culture (primarily Literature, History of Art, Anthropology, Cultural/Media Studies) and between History and the Social Sciences

While organization studies is not mentioned, I consider it an important part of the social sciences. Within this it is ironic that I have published material which draws attention not only to the importance of historical forms of inquiry but also to the status of evidence!²² Endeavours like the relatively new journal *Management and Organizational History* are important points of contact with history and need to be carefully nurtured. I worry that articles like that by Gutzke seek to drag us back to a 'pure' form of history in which disciplinary norms prevent dialogue across what must always be artificial disciplinary boundaries.

Of course, what is ironic is that in holding me to 'pure' standards of historical debate, Gutzke is himself guilty in quite a few places of stretching the evidence to suit a particular interpretation. I alluded earlier to my discomfort about the notion of Progressivism in this context. I have not the expertise to make any judgement about the value of such a concept, but it is certain that it has the status of a concept developed from a theory. 'Progressivism' is not a natural kind, particularly not in the context of the history of the UK. The more I read of Gutzke's work, the more it seems to me to take some very interesting evidence and force fit it into an inappropriate conceptual scheme.²³ I am happy to accept that some of my concepts may need revision and that I could have been a little more cautious in some of my forms of expression. The improved public house movement was indeed important in shaping the pub, even if not as important as Gutzke would have us believe. I think there is still valuable work to be done on examining how brewers learned from the experience to shape the pub in the years after the Second World War, when retailing, market research, branding and management made their full impact.²⁴ But I stand by the central contention of my original article, that the pub is shaped by multiple forces and that business strategies are an important part of these forces. For this reason, they deserve to be taken seriously by social and cultural historians.

¹ D. Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House, 1850-1950', *Cultural and Social History*, 4 (2007), pp. 235-260; A. Mutch, 'Shaping the Public House, 1850-1950: Business Strategies, State Regulation and Social History', *Cultural and Social History*, 1 (2004), pp. 179-200.

² Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House', p. 237.

³ Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House', pp. 235, 237.

⁴ A. Mutch, *Strategic and Organizational Change: From Production to Retailing in UK Brewing 1950-1990* (London, 2006).

⁵ W. W Powell and P. J DiMaggio, *The New Institutionalism in Organizational Analysis* (Chicago, 1991).

⁶ N. Fligstein, *The Transformation of Corporate Control* (Cambridge MA, 1990); F. Dobbin, *Forging Industrial Policy: The United States, Britain, and France in the Railway Age* (Cambridge, 1994).

⁷ Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House', p. 248.

⁸ Mutch, 'Shaping the Public House', p. 195.

⁹ Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House', p. 254, n24.

¹⁰ A. Mutch, 'Public Houses as Multiple Retailing: Peter Walker & Son 1846-1914', *Business History*, 48(1), (2006), pp. 1-17.

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- ¹¹ Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House', p. 252.
- ¹² Mutch, 'Shaping the Public House', p. 199.
- ¹³ Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House', p. 240.
- ¹⁴ D. Gutzke, *Pubs and Progressives: Reinventing the Public House in England 1896-1960*, (DeKalb 2006).
- ¹⁵ 'The Pub and the People', *Brewers' Journal*, LLXXIX, 1943, pp. 238-40.
- ¹⁶ Mutch, 'Shaping the Public House', p. 197.
- ¹⁷ 'Andrew Barclay Walker', *Liverpool Daily Post*, 28 February 1893.
- ¹⁸ B. Ritchie, *An Uncommon Brewer*, (London, 1992), pp. 76-7.
- ¹⁹ S. Nevile 'Cellar Management', *Journal of the Federated Institute of Brewing*, 1911, pp. 556-568.
- ²⁰ Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House', p. 251.
- ²¹ Gutzke, 'Progressivism and the History of the Public House', p. 251.
- ²² A. Mutch, 'The Institutional Shaping of Management: In the Tracks of English Individualism', *Management & Organization History*, 1(3), (2006), 251-271; A. Mutch, 'Reflexivity and the Institutional Entrepreneur: A Historical Exploration', *Organization Studies*, 28(7), (2007), 1123-1140.
- ²³ J. K. Walton, 'David W. Gutzke, *Pubs and Progressives: Reinventing the Public House in England 1896-1960*', *American Historical Review* 112 (2) (2007) p. 592-3.
- ²⁴ A. Mutch, 'Allied Breweries and the development of the area manager, 1950-1984', *Enterprise and Society*, 7(2), (2006), pp. 353-379.