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Conviviality

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Mots-clés

Community
Conviviality
Hilarity
Politics
Song
Toasting

Résumé

This entry describes conviviality as it was practised in the eighteenth century with distinctions between sociability and conviviality. It also describes the use of the term, and the specific rituals associated with convivial culture.

Conviviality was a term used to describe a particular form of masculine sociable gathering that developed in the late eighteenth century which emphasized eating and drinking accompanied by a series of ritualized forms of entertainment such as collective singing, toasting, and speech-making.

The term ’convivial’ derives from the Latin term *convivialis* (pertaining to a feast), and means dining together, with connotations of light-hearted joviality and good fellowship.1 As an adjective it had been used in this way in English since the seventeenth century, but the

noun-form ‘conviviality‘ developed in the late 1760s giving a name to the growing culture of public dining practices.2 These practices were related to, but distinctive from, Addison and Steele’s ideal of sociability as informed but free-flowing conversation. Sociability and conviviality both idealized the importance of wit, spontaneity, and adapting words and actions to the particularities of the occasion. Where convivial meetings differed, however, was in their more structured proceedings, lending discussion an organized shape, often with a particular agenda in mind. Where the ideal of coffee-house conversation (however accurate) was that distinctions of rank and class could be suspended and the best argument would win the day, convivial gatherings would appoint a ‘chair‘ who would lead the proceedings, calling on ‘stewards‘ and pre-appointed guests to give speeches, toasts and sing songs. Meetings could vary in their formality but as the culture of conviviality matured, reaching its peak in the 1780s and early 1790s, these could be highly structured events, with both toasts and songs pre-arranged and sometimes printed in advance, forming a secular order of service to the convivial occasion.3

Structured convivial meetings can be helpfully contrasted with notions of sociability that emphasized conversation as competition, such as Samuel Johnson’s notion of conversation as a battle, or Godwin’s ‘collision of mind with mind‘.4 Unlike these conceptions of good conversation, conviviality was uninterested in declaring a victor, with the outcome often a precondition of the meeting. Convivial meetings existed to promote a cause or celebrate an anniversary, with participants expected to subscribe to the cause they were there to celebrate. The emphasis was thus on shared values, and already agreed upon opinions, which were expressed in a previously determined manner. The pleasure of convivial meetings was less the encounter with new and challenging ideas, than the pleasure of hearing one’s views accepted and reflected back by others (Newman 202-230).

The development of conviviality gave birth to a variety of print productions that served the needs of convivial meetings. A substantial print industry was dedicated to reproducing the words for convivial songs in ‘songsters‘.5 These existed alongside traditional ballad slip-sheets, and were intended for use in the convivial gathering itself. Evidence from the visual arts suggests that singers sometimes sang from sheets, rather than memorizing the words, although songsters and song sheets would have also functioned as keepsakes, providing a printed record of favourite convivial songs. Particularly popular songs were also sold with their tunes as more expensive sheet music, some of which ended up in collections of genteel music to be sung in the parlour rooms of the middle classes, although in general were considered more suitable for male tavern meetings than the mixed company of private performance.

Suggestions of toasts were often appended to the songs printed in convivial songsters, and sometimes in standalone collections such as *The Royal Toast Master* (1793). Many of these toasts were bawdy, particularly in collections of the 1760s and 1770s, revelling in sexual puns and double entendre. In print these collections of toasts operated as a form of bawdy joke book. Towards the end of the century, however, political songsters became increasingly common, especially after the French Revolution, and collections of political songs and toasts were published to promote political causes, both radical and loyalist.6 These political

songsters never entirely displaced the humorous songsters, however, which continued to be published well into the nineteenth century, becoming associated in particular with the song-and-supper clubs, such as the Coal Hole and Cyder Cellars.7

Newspapers also provided important print venues for publicizing the ideas discussed and proclamations made at convivial meetings. Newspaper advertisements would announce meetings before they happened, commonly listing the name of the organization responsible for the meeting, the venue, the time, the price of the tickets, the places tickets could be purchased, the name of the chair, and a list of stewards. At particularly contentious meetings these announcements alone were sufficient to generate extensive newspaper commentary in advance of a meeting.8 After the meeting newspapers provided extensive reports of what had happened at meetings, including brief summaries of speeches, a list of toasts made, and songs that were sung, offering commentary on how each aspect of the meeting was received, and noting if there were any moments of contention.9

Between these various print venues a particular language of conviviality emerged, which could at times be highly coded. Reports of meetings that were conducted with the ‘utmost conviviality‘ denoted that the participants had enjoyed themselves, but also implied that the drinking was heavy and went on late into the night, though these reports frequently insisted also on the respectability and good conduct of the meeting, indicating that heavy drinking was under suspicion, but that it was not necessarily inimical to respectability. Other terms that were frequently applied to convivial meetings were ‘mirth‘, ‘hilarity‘, ‘mutuality‘, and ‘ pleasure‘ which all emphasized the enjoyment of good company, but implying a pleasure that was socially constituted, not intrinsic to the individual.

The majority of eighteenth-century convivial meetings took place in taverns, either in private rooms hired out by a society or club or, in the case of large political meetings, in large assembly rooms accessible to the overwhelming male ticket-holding public. But the forms of conviviality were not restricted to taverns and could be frequently encountered elsewhere, particularly in alehouses and coffeehouses, but in private homes too. Richard Newton’s ‘ Soulagement en Prison, or comfort in Prison‘ for example, adapts the standard visual iconography used to represent a tavern meeting to show a meeting taking place in Newgate. At the other end of the social spectrum reports of elite balls celebrating Charles James Fox’s victory in the Westminster Election of 1784 make it clear convivial practices, including toasting, irreverent singing, and speech-making, were common in the mixed company of the Foxite Whigs, giving elite women access to forms of sociability that were generally considered to be masculine (Newman 119-124).

Opposition to conviviality took many varied forms. As the culture was first emerging in the 1760s and 1770s, a number of articles appeared complaining that the practice of having a chair in charge of proceedings interrupted the flow of conversation, and that toasting broke the chain by which one topic followed logically on from another. 10 William Godwin, too, claimed he preferred the intimacy of small gatherings to the kinds of demagoguery of a single orator in front of a large crowd that convivial political meetings encouraged. 11 Frequent

attacks on conviviality appeared in graphic satires by Gillray such as ‘The loyal toast‘, ‘The Union Club‘ and ‘Anacrontick’s In Full Song’, and in parodic poems and mock-reports in publications such as *The True Briton* and *The Anti-Jacobin.* These satires often associated conviviality with both drunken excess and with radical ideas that threatened political stability. A more dispersed, but nevertheless sustained pattern of critique emerges in women writers from across the political spectrum, including Maria Edgeworth, Elizabeth Inchbald, Hannah More, Charlotte Smith, and Mary Wollstonecraft. In the writings of these women conviviality is typically seen as an irresponsible indulgence that can lead to drunkenness and gambling, often at the expense of women and children. Many of these tropes would be taken up and expanded by the temperance movement later in the nineteenth century.

1. ‘conviviality, n.‘ OED Online, Oxford University Press, December 2019, (www.oed.com/view/Entry/40858 [accessed 25 February 2020]).

2. Ian Newman, The Romantic Tavern: Literature and Conviviality in the Age of Revolution (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), p. 24 and 239, n. 61.

3. See the List of Toasts used at the Reforming Society Meeting in Boro, December 1792, National Archives HO 42/23/128 fo. 292.

4. Jon Mee, Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention and Community 1762-1830 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.14.

5. On Songsters see Ian Newman and Gillian Russell, ‘Metropolitan Songs and Songsters: Ephemerality in the World City', Studies in Romanticism (vol. 58, no. 4, 2019), p. 429-449.

6. On political toasts see Rémy Duthille, ‘Political Toasting in the Age of Revolutions: Britain, America and France, 1765–1800’ in Gordon Pentland and Michael Davis (eds), Liberty, Property and Popular Politics: England and Scotland, 1688–1815. Essays in Honour of H. T. Dickinson (Edinburgh University Press, 2015), p. 73–86.

7. For the songsters associated with song-and-supper clubs, see Patrick Spedding and Paul Watt (gen eds), Bawdy Songbooks of the Romantic Period (Pickering and Chatto, 2001).

8. See for example the newspaper commentary surrounding the 1791 meeting at the Crown and Anchor tavern to celebrate the second anniversary of the fall of the bastille, discussed in Newman, Romantic Tavern, p. 80-88.

9. On newspaper reports on convivial meetings see Mee, Print Publicity and Popular Radicalism in the 1790s: The Laurel of Liberty (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), p. 49-50.

10. See for example the pair of articles on tavern meetings in The Public Advertiser, April 15 and April 16 1763, signed ‘Write More‘ and ‘A Constant Correspondent‘.

11. Jon Mee, Romanticism, Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 115.

Citer cet article

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The Public Advertiser, volume 6, issue 8882 (22 Apr. 1763).*

Public Advertiser (22 April 1763)