

‘Binge’ Drinking, Neo-liberalism and Individualism

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Introduction

‘Binge’ drinking in the UK is perceived by government, media and academics alike as a topic of concern, despite the absence of any agreed definition. The current UK government’s approach to alcohol policy can be understood within the framework of neo-liberalism, its clear morals and ideals juxtaposed with increased opportunities for apparent transgression. ‘Binge’ drinking is constructed by government as such transgression, in contrast with the ideals of ‘responsible’ or ‘moderate’ drinking. ‘Binge’ drinkers are seen as hedonistic, excessive and irrational; the antithesis of the rational, self-governing, moral individual that is the ideal neo-liberal subject.

Conversely, most academic discussions of ‘binge’ drinking have focused on the contrast with what has been called ‘traditional’ drinking, based in community pubs and understood to have reinforced stable working-class, masculine identities based on workplace relations. ‘Binge’ drinking is presented as an individualistic practice, constructing identities through consumption under conditions determined by big business, with any sense of community being simply brand loyalty created by companies. ‘Binge’ drinking is thus understood not as the antithesis of neo-liberal ideals, but their apotheosis.

My ethnographic research of drinking cultures in Bournemouth, UK, suggests that the relationship between individualism and drinking on the British night-time high street is more varied and nuanced than either of these models suggest. Some drinkers did present individualistic identities constructed through consumption, but they emphasised self-control, rationality and ‘different’ tastes, trying to distance themselves from conceptions of ‘binge’ drinking. On the other hand, many who might commonly be identified as ‘binge’ drinkers denounced the construction of such identities as ‘stuck up’ because of the stress on ‘image’ over ‘having a laugh’, and emphasised instead a sense of community that built on relationships from school and work, not simply shared patterns of consumption.

Liberalisation?

The most striking and commented on feature of UK government policy in relation to alcohol in recent years has been the Licensing Act of 2003, which came into force in 2005 and fundamentally changed the basis on which venues in England are licensed to sell alcohol. Most notably, it made it possible for venues to open at all hours of the day (if they applied and paid for the appropriate license). This has commonly been understood as a ‘liberalisation’ of licensing in Britain (e.g. Plant and Plant 2006).

The government, too, has employed liberal rhetoric. In 2009, the Department for Children, Schools and Families’ *Consultation on Children, Young People and Alcohol*, spelled out the government’s attitude to alcohol neatly:

Drinking alcohol plays a long-standing, generally positive role in British culture. Ultimately, whether people drink alcohol and how much they drink is down to **individual choice**. (Department for Children, Schools and Families 2009: 5, emphasis in original)

However, this choice is not without limits. Tessa Jowell, then secretary of state for the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, explained the 2003 Licensing Act thus:

There is a simple logic to this new law. Adults should be trusted to make their own decisions about when and where they have a night out. But yobbish behaviour will be punished hard and swift (quoted in Plant and Plant 2006: 99).

The typical liberal ambivalence towards alcohol¹ is played out quite clearly here through the colourful phrase ‘yobbish behaviour’. It would not be liberal and fair to ban alcohol, and yet the government is guarded as it is not understood to be an entirely benevolent, or even neutral, substance – it is linked to antisocial behaviour, violence and other crimes, for example, not to mention long-term health problems. At the same time as it has apparently ‘liberalised’ licensing, then, the government has sought to target ‘antisocial behaviour’, through measures such as Antisocial Behaviour Orders (ASBOs), Alcohol Disorder Zones

¹ See Nicholls (2006) for a detailed discussion of the role of alcohol in liberal thought, with a particular focus on the nineteenth century.

(ADZs), Designated Public Place Orders (DPPOs) (see Department of Health 2008: 5) and, more generally, Prime Minister Tony Blair's 'Respect Agenda' (see Squires 2008). If 24-hour drinking is allowed in Britain, it is certainly within limits.

Indeed, the very existence of documents such as those quoted above is an illustration of how the government is concerned with alcohol consumption. In the light of the 2003 Act, the government brought out a succession of documents outlining how it would address what it perceived to be alcohol-related problems. To take just a selection of high-profile government documents, there was an 'Interim Analytic Report' on alcohol, produced in 2003 by the Prime Minister's Strategy Unit, which became the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England, published the following year (Cabinet Office 2004). There was then a document produced jointly by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Home Office and the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister called *Drinking Responsibly* (Department for Culture Media and Sport *et al.* 2005). This was in turn followed by an updated 'Strategy' – *Safe, Sensible, Social* (HM Government 2007) – and this has since been subject to review and further consultation (Department of Health 2008).

It might therefore be argued that to put in place conditions which facilitate the consumption of alcohol while trying to eradicate 'antisocial behaviour' is contradictory, and academics such as Dick Hobbs (2005) have warned of this, even accusing the government of 'hypocrisy' (Hobbs *et al.* 2005). However, I will argue in this paper that the two approaches are quite consistent with a neo-liberal approach to crime and disorder – though there is an unavoidable tension, as in all liberal thought, between tolerance and harm. This neo-liberalism, just like liberalism in the tradition of John Stuart Mill (1977; 1987), retains a belief in universal truths and some moral certainties. It is consistent in this approach to increase freedom to consume alcohol and simultaneously to increase the punishments for consumption that is considered inappropriate.

Neo-Liberalism and Responsibilization

David Garland (1996) has argued that governments' approach to crime has fundamentally changed over the past 30 or so years. Until the 1970s, the state presented itself as having the core aim of eliminating crime, whether this be by effective policing or addressing potential causes of crime such as poverty or inequality. From the 1970s on, Garland detects a change whereby: 'The state's claims in respect of crime control have become more modest and more

hesitant' (1996: 447), as he suggests that high rates of crime have become an accepted 'background' feature of people's lives (1996: 446). The state has come to see its role, he argues, as one of managing criminal opportunities, say through using credit cards instead of cash or installing CCTV. In this model, the individual comes to have more and more responsibility for their own safety, being encouraged to set up Neighbourhood Watch schemes for example, and generally to act in a way that minimizes criminal opportunities. The government's role is therefore to try to change the actions, routines and even mindsets of its citizens (Garland 1996: 454). Garland refers to this as the 'responsibilization strategy' – the citizen becomes responsible for their own safety, rather than it being the duty of the state to provide a safe, even crime-free environment (Garland 1996: 452).

We can see that this approach underlies a number of government and police initiatives regarding crime in the UK. In 2008, Andy Burnham, the incoming culture minister, explained that the 2003 Act had a dual thrust: first, granting 'freedoms' to drinkers, but also offering 'considerable powers' to 'crack down on irresponsible behaviour' (Burnham 2008). Alcohol policy has consistently been understood by this government in terms of 'rights and responsibilities' (Department for Culture Media and Sport *et al.* 2005: 3) – indeed the 2004 Alcohol Strategy contained a table for individuals, the alcohol industry and government, with columns of 'Responsibilities' and 'What they can expect from others', which surely can be read as some formulation of 'rights' (Cabinet Office 2004: 20-21).

In practice, this has included, for example, a role-playing game featured on the first Know Your Limits website (NHS and Home Office 2007), whereby players were advised on appropriate action to avoid being beaten up or sexually assaulted. Similarly, one of the posters for the more recent 'Would You?' campaign asks 'Would you get in with a man you've only just met?' The point seems to be that young women put themselves at risk (presumably of sexual assault) by getting into cars with unknown male drivers (Home Office 2008).

According to government formulations, the 'responsible' drinker will not only avoid behaving 'antisocially' and causing 'nuisance' to *other* people; they will also take appropriate care of *themselves*. They will plan how they are going to get home, eat before they drink, and set up strategies whereby they 'look out' for their 'mates' (Home Office and Directgov

2009). One Department of Health document expressed this idea of a duty of care to oneself as well as others explicitly:

It is up to individuals to decide whether to drink alcohol and how much they drink. It is not government's role to restrict this, *unless drinking would take place under circumstances that place this individual or others at unreasonable risk* (Department of Health 2008: 20, my emphasis).

Beyond Safety to Morality

Pat O'Malley (1996; 2000) has made similar arguments to Garland, and argues that within the 'prudentialism' of 'neo-liberalism' (analogous to Garland's concept of 'responsibilization'), 'two closely related images recur – those of the responsible (moral) and of the rational (calculating) individual' (1996: 199). The government public education campaigns on alcohol are immediately recognisable in these terms. The model of the individual behind the government's thinking is clearly both calculating and moral. When the 'Would You?' website (Home Office and Directgov 2009) asks people to 'be yourself' and 'stand your ground', and find new friends if you are finding it difficult to 'be yourself', there is an assumption that people inherently share the morality it is trying to promote. If only they only stayed true to their sober selves, and had all the necessary information, then there would be no 'yobbish' behaviour, as Tessa Jowell put it.

The government's concern with young people's drinking seems to be rooted in a fear of the loss of everyday norms. The government's most recent Alcohol Strategy (HM Government 2007: 3) outlined three types of drinking: binge, harmful, and sensible (see also Cabinet Office 2004: 12). Sensible drinking is the government's ideal, and is defined in terms of quantity of alcohol consumed, with daily and weekly limits specified. Harmful drinking is also defined in terms of quantity drunk, defined as those who regularly drink more than these recommended limits, and linked with social and health problems. In contrast, binge drinking is defined by government as drinking to get drunk – though it is often measured by proxies such as quantity drunk, or frequency of drunkenness.

The government suggests that there is no direct correlation between amount drunk and harm suffered or caused as these depend on other factors (Cabinet Office 2004: 12). Some of these factors are understood to be personal to the individual, such as their genes, life experiences,

personal circumstances and any history of substance abuse. However, the environment around them is also understood to play a role: ‘a crowded and noisy environment can increase the risk of disorderly behaviour’ (Cabinet Office 2004: 12). This is understood to indicate a change in norms:

In the culture of drinking to get drunk, which often sets the tone for the night-time economy, the norms differ from usual behaviour – noisy behaviour may be expected and aggressive behaviour tolerated, with drunkenness used as an excuse. Where there is little social control, such behaviour is likely to increase. (Cabinet Office 2004: 46)

The problem with ‘binge’ drinking, as perceived by government, therefore, is not simply quantity drunk, but the *way* in which this is drunk and the associated *behaviour*.

Given the emphasis on individual choice and liberalism outlined above, when people do not drink in the prescribed, ‘sensible’ manner, this is understood by government to be a failure of ‘individual choice’. The ‘binge’ drinker can therefore be understood as a ‘flawed consumer’ (Bauman 1997: 42). As a consequence, the government’s approach to the perceived ‘problem’ of alcohol consumption amongst young people has been public education campaigns, such as the ‘Would You?’ campaign, to try to ensure that individuals make ‘responsible’ choices. The message that comes across in these campaigns is not simply health-related, but *moral*. The campaign includes two TV advertisements: one showing a young man preparing to go out (NHS and Home Office 2008b), and the other showing a young woman (NHS and Home Office 2008a). As they get ready, the man urinates on his shoes, spills food on his t-shirt and rips his jacket. The woman gets her skirt wet, smudges her eye make-up and smears vomit in her hair. The advert then asks: ‘You wouldn’t start a night like this so why end it that way?’ The actions are symbolic of being excessive and irresponsible. They are not normal everyday (or daytime) behaviour.

It is not clear why the government should be concerned with all the actions in the advertisements from a crime and health perspective. It seems unlikely that having a torn jacket or smudging one’s make-up have any relationship with health or crime issues. Even urinating on one’s shoes or having a wet skirt are unlikely to cause a health problem, although the fact that one has vomited suggests that one has drunk more alcohol than one’s body can cope with. Notably the advertisements themselves, in contrast to the first Know

Your Limits campaign, do not make any link with any criminal or unhealthy behaviour; the point is simply that one would not act this way at other times, or if one was sober.

Academic Work

Much academic writing on young people's drinking sees young people's drinking practices as new. Kevin Brain (2000) has referred to 'the post-modern alcohol order' – or 'new culture of intoxication' (Measham and Brain 2005) – which is contrasted with the 'traditional' drinking outlined by Gofton (1990). This 'traditional' drinking was based on working-class masculinity, workplace ties and community pubs, and valued 'holding' one's drink as opposed to becoming intoxicated. In contrast, today's binge drinkers are seen as increasingly valuing alcohol on the basis of its 'hit value', as part of a 'search for pleasurable consumption and instant gratification', an outgrowth of the rave and ecstasy culture of the late 1980s and early 1990s which was seized on by the alcohol industry which rebranded its products as 'psychoactive' (Brain 2000; Measham 2004).

These changes in drinking practices are frequently linked with broader socio-economic changes, with Brain (2000) for example arguing that this new approach to drinking should be placed in the context of 'post-industrial consumer society'. Hobbs *et al.* (2005: 161-2) place young people's drinking in the context of two major changes in UK cities over the past 30 years:

The first is the shift from an economy based upon industrial production to a post-industrial consumer economy, and the second is the significant shift in urban governance away from the management of core local services towards a distinct focus upon economic growth.

In this post-industrial world, they argue, young people lack the stable jobs and class identities of the industrial age, and the correspondingly firm, deep friendships. Instead, identities are now constructed through consumption, particularly the 'hedonistic' consumption of the night-time economy (see also Hobbs *et al.* 2003). Winlow and Hall (2006) also place young people's drinking in the context of consumerism, and lament that 'traditional forms of friendship and community are being radically transformed' as 'advanced capitalism' gains sway (Hall and Winlow 2005: 32). Chatterton and Hollands (2001: 71) describe young people's drinking practices as 'lifestyle phenomena associated with fun, hedonism and

courtship', and contrast this with 'the days of ale houses' when young men were inducted into a culture of drinking where knowing one's 'limit' was valued. In Hollands' (1995; 1997) own work, he argues that drinking gone from being a 'rite of passage' to an ongoing 'socialising ritual' during a lengthened 'post-adolescent' phase, as a result of broad socio-economic changes, including the shift to 'post-industrialism'.

Consumerism, as well as structuring individuals' approaches to life, is also understood to influence government policy. Where government once tightly regulated alcohol through licensing laws to ensure the productivity of the workforce, in the post-industrial, consumerist age, drinking is no longer understood as a problem for productive work, and therefore for capitalism. Rather, it is re-framed as a form of consumption that is useful, even vital to post-modern, consumerist capitalism (e.g. Hayward and Hobbs 2007). These writers therefore position themselves against the writers of the Birmingham CCCS (e.g. Mungham and Pearson 1976; Willis 1977), whom they see as glorifying working class youth cultures as resistant to capitalism. The 'binge' drinking of today is lamented as neither a source of working-class solidarity nor resistance to capitalism; it is simply complicit with commercial interests, and as such is characteristic of neo-liberal capitalism.

Drinking Styles

As the sections above have hinted, there is a tendency for government and academic accounts to portray young people's drinking as somewhat monolithic – as if all young people do the same things, in the same sort of places at the same times, and think about them in the same way. In the case of the government, this comes from a focus on the perceived 'problem' – 'binge' drinking – and the characterisation of this as an issue for 18-25-year-olds. For academic accounts, this is a result of the focus on the factors that structure people's experiences and understandings of drinking: government policy, media discussions, and advertising for example.

I have tried to look at drinking from a different perspective, considering the potential *differences* in how young people behave and think about drinking with a specific focus on issues of gender and class. Therefore, I used ethnographic methods to observe and talk to drinkers themselves in Bournemouth. This entailed observations in a number of venues in the town (13 venues covered over a total of 27 hours), and then approaching managers and asking them if I could recruit participants in their venues. This led to conversations involving

113 drinkers (over the course of more than 18 hours), and 20 staff and related professionals. Some of these were in taped interviews or focus groups, but almost all the conversations were undertaken in the venues themselves while people were out drinking.

There are two 'ideal type' drinking styles which can be placed at either end of a continuum to make sense of participants' drinking practices and their understandings of these: the 'carnavalesque' and the 'everyday'. The carnivalesque is associated with excess, irrationality, familiarity and community, and can be seen as linked to government and media discourses of 'binge' drinking. Here the emphasis is on unusual behaviour and interaction, with value placed on features such as dancing, drinking games and funny stories of being drunk, and alcohol being treated quite openly as an intoxicating drug which is taken to achieve an altered mental state. In contrast, the everyday drinking style emphasises how drinking practices are not in conflict with norms of everyday social interaction, and the intoxicating properties of alcohol are played down, with the focus being more likely to be sitting down and talking to friends rather than dancing or playing drinking games.

These drinking styles are concepts that I have chosen to make sense of the data. They are not accurate, objective descriptions of actual drinking practices; rather, they are ways of understanding drinking practices, and thus also discourses to be drawn on and negotiated. I do not wish to argue that all participants would agree with my ideas of the 'everyday' and the 'carnavalesque', but I feel these concepts help to explain way in participants understood drinking.

Theories of the Carnival and the Everyday

Mike Featherstone (1991: 22) describes carnival thus:

The popular tradition of carnivals, fairs and festivals provided symbolic inversions and transgressions of the official 'civilized' culture and favoured excitement, uncontrolled emotions and the direct and vulgar grotesque bodily pleasures of fattening food, intoxicating drink and sexual promiscuity.

The parallels with portrayals of the UK night-time economy are immediately apparent, with its alcohol, excitement, transgression, kebabs and sexual promiscuity. There is also an immediate resonance with the explanations of several of my participants who said that having

a 'laugh' or 'letting off steam' was a key motivation for their drinking practices. In some ways such an understanding of alcohol is straightforward: drinking is a leisure activity for these people, and as such is frequently opposed to work. Moreover, the idea that a 'night out' implies a different set of norms from everyday life is by no means new, since this seems to have been seen as a feature of drinking alcohol throughout history – for example in Euripides' (1973) *Bacchae*, written in the 5th century BC, and in the 20th century anthropology of MacAndrew and Edgerton (1970), who saw drunkenness as a period of 'time out' when the normal rules of society were suspended (within certain limits).

However, I use the term carnivalesque to imply something more than simply 'letting off steam' or 'hedonism'. Featherstone was drawing on the work of Bakhtin (e.g. 1984) and Stallybrass and White (1986). Bakhtin sees the carnival as a time when the 'laws, prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life, are suspended' (1984: 122). The most striking feature of the carnival, according to Bakhtin, is the dissolution of the everyday 'hierarchical structure' of society in favour of 'free and familiar contact among people' (1984: 122-3). During the carnival, then, one interacts with different people from one's everyday life, and in a different way. Central to Bakhtin's idea of carnival is the involvement of all members of a community in a 'communal performance,' and a generally relaxed attitude towards life (1984: 160).

Given that the carnival is defined by its inversion of everyday culture and norms, the idea of the everyday is naturally opposed to it. Stallybrass and White (1986: 3) have suggested that the carnivalesque be understood as a form of 'transgression' and 'symbolic inversion' which can be placed in a broader schema of 'high/low' oppositions which is 'a fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European cultures'. The idea of the carnivalesque, then, has long been used in the construction of the 'Other' for the bourgeoisie to present itself as 'respectable and conventional', where the 'other' is the working or lower classes depending on the contemporary conception of society (Stallybrass and White 1986: 193).

This 'othering' of the carnivalesque, I suggest, includes condemnation not only of the transgressive behaviour, but also of the carnivalesque communality noted by Bakhtin. Through the everyday style some of my participants presented an alternative worldview, whereby they portrayed themselves not specifically as part of a community, but rather as

‘different’ from others, who were conceived of as all ‘the same’. The communality of the carnival can therefore be linked to ideas of the unthinking ‘mass’, as outlined by Raymond Williams (1990), seen as a threat to individual thought and culture.

‘Everything is Different’

This link to an unthinking mass evokes mechanisms of distinction through taste and culture, familiar from Bourdieu’s (e.g. 1984) work. This mode of distinction is seen as creating an impression of a rational, choosing individual. The most powerful way in which my participants expressed distinction was through the obvious word: ‘different’. When Frank as describing the venues available in Bournemouth, he described one particular venue that he liked because the music was ‘different’ from other venues, and it had some ‘different’ beers. At this point Anna chimed in, telling me that ‘everything’ was ‘different’ there. She had just responded to a question on the flyer I had handed out – ‘What do you like or dislike about a typical night out?’ – by saying that she disliked the very fact that a night out might be ‘typical’, describing this as comprising ‘Alcohol, drugs, girls – girls not well dressed – and sex, girls and boys’. She could have done little more to indicate that the ‘difference’ she was referring to was defined by its opposition to the carnivalesque drinking style, with its embrace of intoxication and apparently easy sex. Tilly praised this same venue for having strawberry beer available, ‘quirky’ glasses and a nice smoking area, and Nicole commented on the fact that it is ‘laid out’ nicely, and is somehow ‘alternative’. Tilly even claimed that there is a ‘diverse range’ of people there, which is ‘different’ from other places.

This venue was picked out by Danny and described thus: ‘it’s deliberately different and often that type of person can be perceived to be enjoying diff--, being alternative in eh inverted commas, often simply for the sake of being alternative’, which he clarified: ‘it gives you a sense of, of cultural snobbery’.

In more general terms, Toby told me that only a few venues in Bournemouth ‘stand out’, naming them and explaining that they played ‘different music’. These venues are understood as ‘standing out’ from an implicit crowd or mainstream, which plays the same music in contrast to their ‘different music’. Joey, Chris and their friends also made it clear that they liked ‘independent’ and ‘alternative’ music. The same idea lies behind Ellie’s comment on a pub she had liked which is now a ‘Harvester’: ‘it was always nice, and it is still a nice pub but

it's a bit, you know, naff now because it's a chain'. To be a part of a chain is to be uniform, an attribute which is not valued in this context.

While this sort of individualism values that the venues and activities are 'different' from those chosen by other people – i.e. 'binge' drinkers – what also seems to be important is the underlying idea of the individual as rational, sensible and calculating. One does not want to do the same thing as everyone else because that suggests being part of a crowd, but similarly, one does not want to do the same thing every time one goes out, as that suggests being on some kind of auto-pilot. This seems to be an additional undercurrent in Anna's comment that she does not like the typicality of nights out, mentioned above. It is not just that she wants to have a night out that is different from the 'typical' drinker, but it is also that the night out itself should not be typical for her – it should be exciting and different.

Everyday responsibility and control

This cultural individualism seemed to be tied to moral ideas of responsibility and 'sensible' drinking. While some drinkers celebrated out-of-the-ordinary behaviour through 'funny stories', others stressed their difference from such drinkers. Rachel said that one of the reasons she disliked a particular club was that people get too drunk there, and told me how on one night out in another club someone had been sick on her friend's hand. This was not told as a 'funny story', but rather with a sense of outrage. David was very clear in his disapproval of such drinking when he emailed me: 'Don't like to see the completely drunk people who have no self-mastery and have lost their respect of other people'. When Tilly expressed such views she did so in a way that made a clear distinction between drinking styles, outlining an understanding of 'sociable' and 'sensible' drinking as an alternative practice to getting drunk. As a final-year student, she did not like going to the student union nightclub, because the younger students would be 'over-hyped' and 'over-excited' because they had drunk too much.

Sam clearly outlined three possible drinking styles. He claimed that people in the pub where I met him could be (a) out to 'get bollocksed', (b) non-drinkers, or (c) simply looking to have 'a few drinks with friends', like him and his friends. In this way, the role of the alcohol in the night out is played down. He is not out to get drunk, but rather to talk with friends – an eminently everyday practice. Sam therefore argued that the concept of a 'binge' is a 'stupid' way to think about drinking. He and his friends had been drinking in the pub since 12.30pm

and it was now about 7.30pm yet they were not about to ‘kick off’ (i.e. become violent), even though according to some government definitions they had binged in terms of quantity of alcohol consumed. As far as he was concerned, quantity was irrelevant; what he was concerned about was people’s behaviour, and he stated in his defence that he and his friends were probably the ‘sanest’ people there, certainly more so than some ‘eighteen-year-olds’ who had had ‘a couple of pints of Stella’. Simon also denied that alcohol was central to his nights out, explaining neatly: ‘I enjoy a drink, rather than drink to enjoy myself’, and ‘I drink and have a laugh’ contrasting this with those who drink *in order to* have a laugh. He explained that, for him, drink *is* involved, but for most other ‘people today’ drink *has* to be part of their night out.

In this way, some drinkers in the ‘night-time high street’ (Hadfield 2005) clearly distanced themselves from the model of the ‘binge’ drinker visible in government discussions, who drinks to get drunk, and is uncontrolled, antisocial and violent. Instead, they invoke ideas of ‘self-mastery’ and ‘sanity’ as part of ‘sensible’ and ‘sociable’ drinking to explain their own practices.

The ‘Chav’ Other

Sometimes these themes of cultural distinction and moral restraint were clearly linked, most strikingly through the idea of the ‘chav’, which seemed to stand for all the aspects of the carnivalesque that the speakers wished to denigrate.

When Tilly spoke of the ‘diversity’ and ‘different’ clientele that could be found at the bar mentioned above, her friend Matt pointed out, with a slightly sceptical tone, that it was ‘quite elitist’ and did not allow ‘chavs’ or ‘skanks’ in. Tilly took this idea up, commenting favourably that she had seen ‘chavs’ being turned away for not having a membership card, and confiding with some obvious pleasure that she and her friends did not have membership cards either, but had never been asked.

Youth worker George confirmed that the bar turned certain people away. He described it as: ‘very discriminating. I mean not discriminating in a naughty way but door policy, you’ve got to be a regular to get in’. He came back to this theme later, saying, ‘they knew the vibe they wanted [WH Mm-mm] and they’ve managed to maintain the vibe’, and: ‘it’s a nice vibe in there which would be lost if it, if they were letting every--, not, and I don’t mean that in a

nasty way'. Here we can see that according to George, the venue has chosen to exclude a certain sort of person in order to foster a particular 'vibe', which we might understand as a drinking style – the everyday or 'distinctive' model. Since Tilly's account informs us that the judgement is not in practice made on the basis of a membership card, it must be made on the basis of people's appearance and manner – a 'corporeal' or 'cultural' style as Butler (1999: 177) or Skeggs (2004: 1) would understand it.

Hayward and Yar (2006) have argued that 'chav' has replaced 'underclass' as a term referring to those at the bottom of the socio-economic hierarchy, but is based on consumption rather than (lack of) production relations, in-keeping with the theories of post-industrialism and postmodernity discussed above. The 'chav' is defined by their 'vulgar' consumption that lacks 'distinction' according to 'superordinate classes', according to Hayward and Yar. One example of such 'excessive' and 'vulgar' consumption is "binge" drinking, especially "premium lagers" such as Stella Artois' (2006: 14). 'Chavs' might also be identified by their predilection for 'sports apparel'.

When Samir, Kurt and Steve were discussing the dismissal of someone from their firm for choosing to 'entertain' a set of clients by taking them to a strip club, Samir described this as part of a general rule: there is a 'line' the management do not want you to cross. He then explained that the policy could be understood simply as the fact that the management do not want their employees to behave in a 'chav' way – 'they don't use that language, but that's what they mean'. 'Chav' is somehow associated with sexual excess, immorality, or simply inappropriate behaviour – going to a strip club.

Another theme associated with 'chavs' was violence. Sally characterised the whole of the town centre of Bournemouth (in contrast to that 'West End') as 'chavvy' and 'aggressive', while Dean complained that the town centre on a Friday night is full of 'chavs' drinking and 'getting fighty'. He elucidated this by saying he did not have the time for an argument with a 'drunken chav' about 'what t-shirt' he was wearing, suggesting that as well as liking getting excessively drunk, and fighting, 'chavs' have a different sense of style – or 'taste', to think in Bourdieusian terms.

Sometimes 'chav' seemed to serve as little more than code for 'binge'. I asked Jane if she felt that drinking might be a problem for some people more than others, and she replied

‘Yeah, definitely’, going on to suggest that some people were more likely than others to get drunk ‘on a regular basis’ than others. When I asked if there were any reasons for this, or if she was referring to any particular people, she went on, after a pause, ‘I don’t know, oh I would say that quite often the really drunk people I see are quite chavvy looking, say that quietly’. This implicit linking of class with drinking came through in Samir’s comment that a ‘townie’, defined as someone on a ‘low income’, ‘doing the same job’ on a ‘9 to 5’, would be likely to just go out to get drunk, in contrast with him and his friends.

On a lighter note (though no less harshly criticised), this distaste for ‘chavs’ even extended to manners. Georgina, who worked in a town centre bar three or four days a week, started to tell me, without any prompting apart from my usual preamble introducing myself as researching drinking, ‘chavs are the worst’. When I asked what she meant, she explained that they were the most likely to cause ‘trouble’ (suggesting violence again) and were simply rude to the bar staff, expecting to be served first even if someone else had been waiting at the bar longer.

Rejection of Distinction

Not all participants distanced themselves from the figure of the ‘binge’ drinker through ideas of individuality and distinction; some embraced what I call the carnivalesque and even directly challenged notions of distinction. Sarah complained that some clubs were more about ‘image’ than having ‘a good time’, and her friends Lisa and Pete agreed. They were referring to the area of town where the ‘different’ bar so lauded by Tilly and others was situated. Sarah and Lisa, disparagingly, said that these were ‘celeb clubs’, and Pete told me they were too ‘stuck up’.

The three of them then contrasted this with their own approach to choosing a venue, which was simply that they did not mind where they went so long as it had a ‘good atmosphere’ and you could have ‘good fun’ there. As examples of such places, they named town centre clubs owned by large companies, one of which has a nationally recognisable name, flying in the face of the focus on individuality and rejection of chains that characterised other drinkers’ discussions.

The same disregard for distinction seemed to lie behind Sarah statement that when she is out all she is looking for in terms of music is something with a strong beat, so she can dance

easily, which was echoed in Lisa's preference for R&B and 'dance', and Pete's for 'dance' and 'cheese'. Given their comments on music cited above, I could not imagine Toby, Joey or Chris making such statements.

Community

In Bakhtin's account, a key aspect of the carnival there is the public display of community. I argue that this is linked with the rejection of distinction in favour of simply having a 'good time' as expressed by Sarah. Some researchers have been sceptical of the value of the apparently transitory sense of community as seen in the contemporary night-time economy. Hobbs *et al.* (2003: 46), for example, suggest that 'communitas' is little more than a selling point of many bars. What companies try to do is create an identity for the bar, or brand, and thus generate loyalty amongst customers. Hobbs *et al.* claim that the sense of community thus generated is 'temporary' and 'make-believe', as people do not really know each other. They then go further, arguing that friendships amongst young people are founded on 'consumption characteristics and patterns' – all these people know about each other is their drinking behaviour. This is contrasted with some kind of real friendship, characteristic of an earlier age of working-class solidarity and community when people knew about each others' 'lives . . . where they work, what they do at work, of family relationships, and schooling' (2003: 21).

My research, however, points to a key difference with such accounts: some participants interacted with people whom they knew in terms that Hobbs *et al.* would surely think of as traditional friendship, and therefore had loyalties to particular venues because these offered them the opportunity to bump into people they know from school or their local area. To make the most straightforward point, Jane had known some of the friends she drinks with almost all her life. She told me she always goes out with the same people:

The people I go out with at home we all went to school together. One of my friends used to live in the same road as me and we've been friends since we were three.

[WH: Right] Another two girls I know from primary, and another two from secondary. [WH: OK] So, yeah we just all went to school and 6th form together, stayed in touch through uni cos they went to uni quite close to me in Bristol and Oxford, [WH: Oh yeah] so it's only a little way away so we used to see each other all

the time. [WH: OK] And we're still really good friends, which is really good, so yeah.

Similarly, a group of recent graduates I spoke to had been to different universities, but were part of a group of friends who all went out together regularly as they knew each other from school. We can see that such groups were well aware of each others' 'lives' as Hobbs *et al.* put it – they could hardly fail to be aware of each other's schooling, for example, since they had all attended the same school, and the group of graduates teased each other about their jobs.

It might be argued that both of these accounts centre on recent graduates, who would be conventionally understood as middle-class, whereas Hobbs *et al.* are primarily concerned with people in new working-class service occupations, such call-centre workers.² However, I found these accounts of local friendships from people of all backgrounds. Crucially, the sense of local community is in fact constituted by young people's carnivalesque drinking practices, rather than simply being prior to them. Dawn, a bar worker, explained that one major attraction of going out for her was bumping into people she knows, joking that it can take her up to an hour to get to and from the toilets in some clubs because she meets so many friends and gets chatting. This lies behind her choosing particular places and areas rather than others – she likes meeting these people by chance. Similarly, brothers Ross and Lee explained that they go to two particular places more than any others because they can be sure they will meet people they know, and Lee explained that on Sunday nights in one of these, he will always see school friends by chance. Ross explained that a good night would involve bumping into people you had not planned on meeting.

Student cultures seem to have a similar attraction. Emma, a part-time bar worker and full-time student, said she liked being in places full of students where she would meet people she knew, and Frank told me this was the only reason for going to the student union nightclub, as it had no other redeeming features apart from cheap drinks.

This sense of local community and public display may not be a feature of the 'post-industrial city' considered by some previous researchers, but it certainly seemed to be important to a

² See the work of one of the contributors, Simon Winlow, with Steve Hall (e.g. Winlow and Hall 2006), which specifically focuses on call-centre workers.

number of my participants, based in the smaller conurbation of Bournemouth, and notably from the routine and intermediate occupations.

Conclusion

To conclude, then, 'binge' drinking, as an approach to going out, is not universal amongst young people who drink on the 'night time high street' (Hadfield 2005), and it cannot be understood as fundamentally individualistic and entirely moulded by commercial interests. The most striking expressions of consumerism and individualism in fact come from those who distance themselves from the figure of the 'binge' drinker, incorporating neo-liberal ideas of the responsible, sensible, sociable, moderate drinker familiar from government discussions of drinking. In contrast, the emphasis on communality within the carnivalesque can be seen as a rejection of distinctive individualism in favour of some sense of community, illustrating the agency of young people in creating local meanings for national and even global corporate branding.

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