

Producing, consuming and regulating alcohol in the UK: the relevance of the ambivalence of the carnivalesque

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Abstract

Alcohol consumption in 21st-century Britain is of significant interest to government, media and academics. Some have referred to a 'new culture of intoxication', fostered by the drinks industry, and enabled by a neoliberal policymaking context. This article argues that the 'carnavalesque' is a better concept through which to understand alcohol's place in British society today, in terms of production, regulation and consumption. The concept of the carnivalesque highlights how UK alcohol policy, though neoliberal, is located in a historical and moral context. It also illuminates the ambivalence in drinkers' relationship with the contemporary night-time economy. In this way, productive avenues are opened for understanding drinking behaviour in today's Britain, considering what elements of this might be deemed problematic and why, and developing constructive regulatory policies.

Introduction

Alcohol consumption in 21st-century Britain is a key focus of policymaking, media and academic discussions. Much academic commentary on alcohol policy has focused on the night-time economy (NTE) and its development in the UK over the past 20-30 years. Generally, such work has identified a neoliberal mentality of government that can be seen as circumscribing successive governments' approaches to regulation through planning and licensing policy, for example (e.g. Haydock, 2014; Hobbs et al., 2005).

Shaw (2010) has argued that much analysis of the neoliberal NTE has somewhat failed to adequately engage with how drinkers actively negotiate these spaces and associated pressures (see also Jayne et al., 2006). The strength of the carnivalesque as a concept around which to build an analysis is that it enables us to simultaneously consider regulatory approaches and subjectivities. This article therefore follows the structure of analysis of Chatterton and Hollands (2003) in considering production, regulation and consumption of alcohol in the UK today.

As Kingfisher and Maskovsky (2008) argue, neoliberalism has limits and operates within particular contexts, with local variations. Although a key element of neoliberalism is the model of the ideal

citizen as a rational consumer, there can be debate about what actions are considered rational and acceptable. A neoliberal perspective, with its emphasis on rational self-discipline, might view many forms of alcohol consumption as problematic, for the long-term health effects as well as the immediate intoxication (Haydock, 2014). Successive governments have drawn attention to 'binge' drinking as problematic. The analysis presented on this article suggests that it is the altered norms of the NTE that are the cause of government concern, rather than narrow ideas of intoxication or health harm. The concept of the carnivalesque, as developed by writers such as Bakhtin (1984b) and Eagleton (1981), particularly with its echoes of class and gender, is a useful concept to understand the historical and cultural context that shapes the definitions of rationality that underpin the 'thwarted totalization' (Kingfisher and Maskovsky, 2008: 118) of neoliberal alcohol policy in Britain today.

Academic work tracing the emergence of a 'new culture of intoxication' (Measham and Brain, 2005) has often drawn attention to the role of the industry in marketing alcoholic drinks using the tropes of dance culture, with alcohol re-branded as an intoxicating drug. This article draws attention to how the marketing of the exuberant NTE is about more than intoxication and reflects a particular – carnivalesque – idea of fun and drunkenness.

As Hackley et al (2008) have suggested, 'binge' drinking is a term that fails to capture the sense in which drinking is practised and understood by young people themselves. A variety of terms have been applied to describe young people's 'determined drunkenness' or 'calculated hedonism' within the 'new culture of intoxication' (Measham and Brain, 2005; Szmigin et al., 2008). However, as noted by MacAndrew and Edgerton (1970), a range of behaviours can be associated with drunkenness; the particular culture identified by these terms is better understood as carnivalesque, reflecting the overthrow of everyday norms and the key role of sociability in the 'night out' as much as alcoholic intoxication (Hackley et al., 2013).

This state of altered norms has an ambivalent position relative to the neoliberal regulatory context for the NTE. At the same time as the British have been 'invited to binge' (Hadfield, 2004) by the neoliberal NTE, the irrationality and exuberance of their behaviour there challenges conventional notions of neoliberal rationality (Griffin et al., 2009b; Haydock, 2009a). A similar strain of ambivalence applies to the way in which people relate to the NTE: it is not a 'comfortable' space (Eldridge and Roberts, 2008), and yet it is the uncertainty that gives it a 'buzz' and makes it attractive. Not all drinkers identify this form of drinking as attractive, however. Following Stallybrass and White (1986), the carnivalesque as employed in this article seeks to convey how distinctions are drawn in relation to the NTE – both by external observers (largely through the media) and by drinkers themselves.

Despite its coverage of elements of production, regulation and consumption, this article has notable limitations. It does not consider all aspects of alcohol policy, and focuses on issues surrounding 'binge' drinking, rather than addiction or dependence. A whole range of moral and policy issues are brought into focus by alcohol (Nicholls, 2009) that are not touched upon here.

Methodology

The ideas underpinning this article are largely based on ethnographic research conducted with drinkers themselves and related professionals, based in Bournemouth, a seaside town in the south

of England between 2007 and 2009 (Haydock, 2009b). The research comprised preliminary observation in drinking venues in the town totalling approximately 27 hours, followed by conversations with a total of 113 drinkers over 13 sessions of participant-observation totalling more than 18 hours. Although most of these conversations took place in drinking venues, they also included one individual interview and three group interviews, as well as two open-ended surveys conducted via email. In terms of professionals, I conducted interviews with the 'club chaplain'ⁱ, four youth work professionals, two drug and alcohol professionals, one bar manager, five bar workers, one door supervisor, the two MPs for Bournemouth and the night-time economy coordinator.ⁱⁱ In addition, when I initially spoke to the night-time economy coordinator and the bar manager, who was chair of Town Watch, the local trade organisation, also present were two other venue managers, who were the co-chair and treasurer of the organisation. All interviewees quoted herein are anonymised.

Theories of the carnival

Most work on the carnivalesque draws on Mikhail Bakhtin (1984a; 1984b). For example, Hackley et al (2013) describe their analysis of 'binge' drinking as Bakhtinian. It is helpful to set the scene for this discussion by returning to Rabelais, on whom much of Bakhtin's analysis is based. Rabelais (1955) opens the prologue to *The Histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel* by addressing readers as 'My most noble boozers', and the drinking, feasting and carousing described are deliberately at odds with ideas of rationality and control, often including graphic, gratuitous violence.

Bakhtin (1984a: 122) 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.' Features include free and familiar contact, profane speech and grotesque realism, with an emphasis on the body, and attention drawn to its natural features and functions, such as sex, excretion (Bakhtin, 1984b: 29).

As Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2009) have suggested, the carnival is therefore, by its nature as a time when normative constraints are changed, a struggle over moral codes, as it illustrates alternative ways of being – and as such can be understood as a time of political struggle. Affecting people's worldview is crucial to politics, since it alters how the world is viewed and the perceived possibility of change (Bourdieu, 1977: 165) – hence Bourdieu's concept of 'symbolic violence' to describe when someone imposes their worldview on someone else (e.g. , 1990: Ch 8). Bakhtin's work certainly takes such a perspective, viewing the carnival as a transgressive, potentially revolutionary moment that disrupts existing power relations.

It is this idea of the carnival as revolutionary that leads Winlow and Hall (2006: 97) to counsel against using the concept of the carnivalesque to describe the contemporary NTE: 'the traditional temporary inversion of political power that featured in traditional carnival no longer takes place in this quite systematically depoliticized consumerist simulation'. However, I wish to suggest that this argument is better understood as a criticism of Bakhtin's particular interpretation of the carnivalesque. As Bauer (1997: 711) puts it: 'He does not work out the contradiction between the promise of utopia or community and the battle which is always waged for control'.

This article follows Stallybrass and White (1986: 14), being based on the premise that it 'makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to

do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression.’ Indeed, as Terry Eagleton (1981: 148) has argued:

Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off and disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.

It is this ambivalence that is the key strength of the concept of the carnivalesque in this interpretation of the NTE. In Eagleton’s formulation, the carnival can be seen as conveying precisely those features that concern Winlow and Hall:

[F]rom one viewpoint carnival may feature as a prime example of that mutual complicity of law and liberation, power and desire, that has become a dominant theme of contemporary post-Marxist pessimism. (Eagleton, 1981: 149)

Bakhtin (1984b: 7) states that ‘carnival does not know footlights’, rejecting the metaphor of a theatrical performance because there is no distinction between actors and spectators as ‘everyone participates’. However, an alternative understanding can focus on distinctions within and without the carnival. Easton et al (1988: 43) note the change in forms and dynamics of carnival with the development of the private middle-class house as a setting for leisure pursuits. Stallybrass and White (1986: 42) state that ‘plebeian fair-goers were themselves part of the spectacle for the bourgeois observer. At the fair the subordinate classes became the subject of a gaze constituting itself as respectable and superior by substituting observation for participation’.

Importantly, however, this form of distinction is not only applicable to external observers. Stallybrass and White (1986: 87-88) draw attention to Dryden’s attempt to enforce a distinction between high and popular culture, even while individuals may be participants in both. There is some resonance in this idea when we consider how participants in the NTE themselves understand their own and others’ behaviour; in this carnival, the spectator is key. The carnival can be viewed from outside, from above, and aestheticized, converted into a spectacle for delight and disgust of middle-class observers, seeking to distinguish themselves from the plebeian other (1986: 118-119). This curious combination of disgust and desire – a theme taken up in more recent analyses of class and affect (e.g. Skeggs, 2004; Tyler, 2008) – is a reminder of the ambivalent nature of carnival.

Producing the carnivalesque

When the emergence of a ‘new culture of intoxication’ has been traced, the industry has played a starring role (Brain and Parker, 1997; Measham and Brain, 2005). Marketing of particular drinks, beginning in the early 1990s, it is argued, sought to attract young people back to alcohol and pubs and bars, in light of fears that a whole generation might be failing to engage with alcohol due to the 1980s and 1990s rave culture, where ecstasy (MDMA) was more popular than alcohol and warehouse parties more popular than pubs.

Thus drinks were marketed as deliberately intoxicating, both in terms of content and symbolism. Brain (2000) noted ‘buzz’ drinks that combined alcohol and caffeine, and drew on drug terminology in their names – for example in ‘Virgin High Flyer’ – and design. Similarly, alcohol-based venues were redesigned to fit with a clubbing approach to going out in the evening, in contrast with the traditional pub (Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Measham, 2004).

However, at least in today's NTE the options are shaped by more than simply intoxication. Hubbard (2013) has suggested that Carnage UK (2008) is 'promoting carnivalesque behaviour'. One can still trace the influence of dance culture, with its neon colours and loud music, and warehouse design of some venues, but the marketing of some venues offers something more, and draws on ideas of the carnivalesque.

The website of Bar:[Me] in Bournemouth, at the time of this ethnography, claimed there was 'fancy dress a plenty [sic]' and stated 'There is literally nowhere else in town where you can let your hair down and go crazy as at Bar:[ME] seven nights a week. With no pomp or pretense [sic], everyone here is just up for a good time' (Bar:[ME], 2009). Its very name, a pun on 'barmy', is suggestive of the sort of atmosphere it tries to foster. The venue also has a particular reputation locally: youth worker Ethan commented that it is diametrically opposed to drinking in traditional pubs, and Ed and his friends claimed that people 'down WKD' there and there is a glass ceiling so that people can see up girls' skirts when they are upstairs.

The link made by Ed and his friends to WKD is illustrative of the ways in which this carnivalesque approach structures marketing for both venues and drinks. WKD – an alcopop that is coloured neon blue – can certainly be seen as a product that is characteristic of the 'post-modern alcohol order' (Brain, 2000), but its advertisements play on something more than intoxication; they can be understood as examples of the carnivalesque. They are typically structured around the tagline 'Have you got a WKD [wicked] side?' and feature practical jokes or semi-shocking behaviour. They have more in common with the 'new laddism' (Benwell, 2002) than rave culture (Thornton, 1995), with the idea of being WKD/wicked and disrupting expected norms echoing the carnivalesque (e.g. visit4ads, 2002).

However, this approach to alcohol is not inevitable for all manufacturers or retailers. Matthew (2013) has argued that brewers in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century had a particular interest in ensuring the respectability of drinking and public houses to help ensure that they would not become subject to temperance-influenced regulation. Similarly, today not all drinks or venues are advertised like WKD and Bar:[ME]. Diageo, for example, has recently portrayed Guinness as symbolising a passage to play (Gusfield, 1987) without drawing heavily on carnivalesque themes. Through a play on the year in which the beer was first brewed (1759) and a time people might leave work (17:59) the advertisement suggests 'it's Guinness time' when work is over (visit4ads, 2013).

Regulating the carnivalesque

Although it has not been the only form of drinking identified as problematic by the government, in recent years 'binge' drinking has commanded the most attention from government in terms of rhetoric and policy initiatives. 'Binge' drinking, along with 'chronic' or 'harmful' drinking, was identified as one of the two problematic types of drinking in both the 2004 and 2007 alcohol strategies (Cabinet Office, 2004; HM Government, 2007). It had even greater prominence in the 2012 strategy, as the Prime Minister's Foreword set the tone by opening with the statement: 'Binge drinking isn't some fringe issue' (HM Government, 2012). Even minimum unit pricing (MUP), often understood as a classic public health intervention, applying across a population (Morris, 2012) and confirming the idea that alcohol – for all consumers – is 'no ordinary commodity' (Babor et al., 2010), was presented in this strategy and subsequently (Hope, 2012) as a targeted intervention to address 'binge' drinking.

Virginia Berridge (2009) has suggested that 'binge' drinking is a 'confused concept', having implied several different patterns of alcohol consumption as it has changed its meaning over time. However, there is a consistent theme in successive governments' characterisation of this issue. 'Binge' drinkers were defined in the 2004 Strategy as 'those who drink to get drunk' (Cabinet Office, 2004: 4), and in 2007 as those who engage in 'drinking that leads to drunkenness' (HM Government, 2007: 3). That is, the defining feature of this problematic behaviour was not the quantity of alcohol consumed, or even necessarily the consequence of becoming drunk, but individuals' motivation for drinking: deliberately seeking intoxication.

Where MUP would apply on the basis of alcoholic content, the Labour government ascribed the problems caused by 'binge' drinking to 'the culture of drinking to get drunk', stating that 'there is no direct relationship between the amounts or patterns of consumption and types or levels of harm caused or experienced' (Cabinet Office, 2004: 12). This 'binge' drinking 'culture' was described by the 2004 Strategy thus:

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 Coalition Government has continued to define 'binge' drinking in much the same way, with the 2012 Alcohol Strategy focusing on 'those who drink to get drunk'. Again, this was placed in the context of 'a culture . . . where it has become acceptable to be excessively drunk in public' (HM Government, 2012: 2 & 3). The parallels with the carnivalesque of such a time when 'the norms differ from usual behaviour' are immediately apparent.

Although some government social marketing has focused on clearly negative consequences (HM Government, 2007: 33), other initiatives showed actions and results that could well appear in the 'funny stories' told by drinkers (e.g. Griffin et al., 2009a). The 'Would You?' campaign sought 'to highlight the possible negative consequences of drinking excessively' (Home Office and NHS, 2008: 1), but in the television advertisements in particular the focus is on a broad carnivalesque culture. They show a man getting ready to go out for the evening and urinating on his shoes, spilling food on his t-shirt and ripping his jacket (NHS and Home Office, 2008b). A woman in a separate advert gets her skirt wet, smudges her eye make-up and smears vomit in her hair (NHS and Home Office, 2008a). Both close by asking: '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 behaviour, but neither are they directly crime or health issues (although the fact that one has vomited suggests that one has drunk more alcohol than one's body can cope with).ⁱⁱⁱ It could be argued that these adverts aim to mobilise latent shame to change wider behaviour. Even if this were the case, the target of the campaign is a broad culture understood as excessive and with different norms from the everyday, where injuries, material damage and bodily fluids are amusing – precisely the themes of Rabelaisian (carnivalesque) literature (Rabelais, 1955). As I discuss below, it is precisely this difference from the everyday that is attractive to many drinkers.

Carnavalesque consumption

A concern with the term 'binge', as mentioned above, is that it fails to capture the subjectivities of drinkers themselves within the NTE. The carnivalesque succeeds far better in this. Many of the elements of the carnivalesque can be seen in the activities of drinkers in the UK night-time economy, as Hackley et al (2013) have observed. The idea of free and familiar contact, for example, is a key element of many people's characterisation of their nights out. Lisa explained to me that one of the attractions of going out for her is meeting new people – and this is much easier in the night-time economy than the everyday, as you can just strike up a conversation with someone in the toilets.

The social element of the NTE, however, is about more than easy contact with apparent strangers. For Bakhtin, ideas of community are central to understanding the carnival. Drinkers in the NTE remain embedded in wider social and economic relations. They drink with work colleagues and friends from school or the local neighbourhood. Frequently, participants talked about the pleasures of going and meeting friends, with some taking particular enjoyment in unplanned meetings with friends. 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 Rapture and the Coliseum more than any other venues because they can be sure they will meet people they know. These findings echo those of other researchers – for example Roberts et al (2012: 20), who emphasise the importance of sociability to the 'night out', stating that 'the paramount motivations [for going out] were ones of laughter, friendship and social solidarity'. These points raise the question of whether such nights out might be better terms 'determined sociability' rather than 'determined drunkenness' as Measham and Brain (2005) put it.^{iv}

Other Bakhtinian elements such as profane speech and carnival laughter can also be discerned in young people's behaviour (and their accounts of it). For example, on a night out with friends to celebrate Chris' birthday, his best friend Bradley shouted 'Cunt, cunt, cunt' and later, 'Sex, sex, sex' – as if trying to provoke a shocked reaction from staff or other customers.^v

Ollie explained to me in no uncertain terms that the best thing about drinking is that 'unusual' stuff happens which makes the night 'legendary'. He acknowledged that 'unusual' events might seem 'bad' at the time, but afterwards would be funny. Similarly, on the same night, Noel told me how Phil (who was standing next to him at the time) had 'got his cock out' at the end of a night out when they had gone back to someone's room, and started hitting it against a wardrobe. This was considered amongst the group to be hilarious, and Phil's reaction seemed to be one of a mixture of shame and pride. Here there are clear resonances with Bakhtin's idea of grotesque realism and carnival laughter. The laughter is shared amongst the group, and what is amusing is Phil's use of the sexual body. This is not to suggest that everyday life is not sexualised, but to state that there are certain legitimate ways of displaying the body and expressing sexuality. Hitting one's 'cock' against someone else's wardrobe is not one of them.

Although this story of Phil could be understood as a construction for a particular setting, including a researcher (Silverman, 2003), it is clear from other research that such events are partly valuable for their currency when they are later recycled as funny stories, cementing young people's friendship

(e.g. Griffin et al., 2009a). This was certainly the case with one story told to me by Hannah, who recounted how she had, while very drunk, walked out of the toilets in a pub and made it to the centre of the room before her friend stopped her and pointed out that both her trousers and underwear were still around her ankles. This had been when she was 17 and at college; she was now 20 and at university in a different town and yet had told this apparently embarrassing story to several of her new acquaintances, who would have otherwise had no way of knowing about it.

All these features cannot be well understood simply as drunkenness or intoxication, given the variety of behaviour typically expected or associated with alcohol (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1970). Pub cultures have, in other times and places, laid great emphasis on the ability to 'hold' one's drink and continue to behave in line with everyday norms despite the consumption of large amounts of alcohol (Campbell, 2000; Gofton, 1983).

The carnivalesque implies an element of ritual occasion, with order in its disorder through standard forms of apparent transgression. This can be seen in Ollie's idea of the 'legendary' and Hannah's telling of her stories. As Roberts et al (2012: 5) put it: 'the "night out" had elements of predictability and spontaneity'. That is, the transgression of the carnivalesque fits with conceptions of 'binge' drinking as a form of 'bounded' or 'calculated' hedonism (Brain, 2000; Szmigin et al., 2008) – there are limits through these standard forms. For example, Hannah did not tell me all her stories of getting drunk:

Hannah I feel like having a drink makes me feel more confident. I can go out and I don't care what people think when I've been drinking. Yeah I'm making an idiot of myself but I know I can go out and, and do something that I wouldn't generally do if I was sober...

Megan But then that can backfire on you, as you found out.

Hannah Yeah.

Megan ((laughs)). I'm not going to say.

Hannah No. ((laughs)) We don't want to talk about that.

Megan No we don't want to talk about that.

Hannah Ever, ever ((laughingly)) again. ((laughs))

Megan Yeah.

Hannah Yeah.

Between friends they could (nervously) laugh about this incident, but it wasn't suitable for public consumption, even when their anonymity was assured. It is possible that their concern was about the 'fine line' of acceptable femininity within the night-time economy (Farrington et al., 2000).

Therefore, the pleasure of apparent transgression is not unqualified. A key strength of the carnivalesque is its ability to capture this ambivalence. Previous research has noted how drinkers do not view drinking, or the NTE as unquestionably positive (e.g. Brooks, 2013; de Visser and Smith,

2007), and recent research suggests this is a key attraction of ‘pre-loading’ for young people: it takes place in a domestic setting, where the social group is circumscribed and the setting is comfortable (Barton and Husk, Forthcoming; Roberts et al., 2012). However, the discomfort of the NTE is part of its ‘buzz’ (Niland et al., 2013) that a domestic setting cannot generally provide. Instrumental drinking to get drunk, which could perfectly effectively and cheaply be achieved by continuing the pre-loading at home, is not the specific attraction of the NTE – it is the broader culture.

Consuming the carnivalesque

In Bakhtin’s formulation, the carnival ‘does not know footlights’ (1984b: 7). However, as Stallybrass and White have observed, the bourgeois gaze was a central element of the carnival as lived in the seventeenth century, for example. The carnival, then, was and is a form of consumption, but is also itself consumed – as a form of entertainment for external observers, with a combination of fascination and disgust. It is precisely in this light that we can understand stories such as the front page of the *Daily Express* from 2008, shown in Figure 1.^{vi}

INSERT FIGURE 1 HERE.

Hayward and Hobbs (2007) have noted how ‘binge’ drinking is as much a spectacle and form of entertainment as a subjective experience of drinking. Hubbard (2013: 265) has powerfully analysed this dynamic, using the concept of the carnivalesque to highlight how ‘social anxieties about disorderly bodies, invoking distinctions based on classed, sexed and gendered notions of respectability and desirability’. To take the example given above, in the *Express* coverage of ‘Binge Britain’s Night of Shame’ shown in Figure 1, the shock and images are clearly gendered – in the *Express* the ‘girls’ are ‘wearing very little’, while the ‘boys’ are victims and perpetrators of ‘murderous violence’ (Daily Express, 2008; Stote and Twomey, 2008). Mary Russo (1997) argues that carnival holds a ‘double jeopardy’ for women, regarding them making a spectacle of themselves. This is precisely the argument made by Mackiewicz (2013) on how women must participate in the night-time economy to be seen as feminine, but not too much – the ‘fine line’ as Farrington et al (2000) put it.

As I have discussed in more detail elsewhere (Haydock, 2010) there is also a classed element to drinkers’ understandings of the carnivalesque. There is a tendency – on the part of both academic and media commentators – to look at the ‘night-time high street’ (Hadfield, 2005) as a space where ‘the consumer experience is increasingly framed by the brand and characterised by sameness and sanitisation’ (Chatterton and Hollands, 2002: 111), resulting in the creation of ‘a homogenized drinking culture’ (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 93). However, despite this feeling that young people create identities that are ‘off the peg rather than authentic’ (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 94), research does suggest considerable diversity in the ways in which people at least present their drinking practices.

Hubbard (2007) has noted how some drinkers distance themselves from this carnivalesque formulation, going to other locations with quite different spatial configurations and norms – such as out-of-town leisure parks. Others might drink in the same locations, but think of their own and others’ practices in quite different ways (Haydock, 2010; Hollands, 2002). In my research (Haydock, 2010), some participants accepted the figure of the ‘binge’ drinker, and used it as an ‘other’ against which to define themselves as responsible and distinctive.

Sam argued that the concept of a 'binge' in terms of quantity of alcohol consumed was a 'stupid' way to think about drinking. He and his friends had been drinking in the Rose and Crown since 12.30pm when I spoke to them it was about 7.30pm, yet he was keen to emphasise that they were not about to 'kick off'. As far as Sam 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'.

Tilly and her friends lamented that the media portrayals were 'pretty accurate', with Nicole arguing that reports are usually accompanied by videos or photographs, and so there is evidence which cannot be dramatically manipulated. Tilly mentioned an article she had read in *The Guardian* (Jeffries, 2007) about drinking in Liverpool, which she found embarrassing for 'our nation'. When I later emailed her a link to the electronic version to check that I was thinking of the same article, she commented on the picture embedded in the article (copied below as Figure 2): 'don't the girls look classy?!'

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Several carnivalesque elements can be seen in this picture and the representation of it in the article – entitled 'Excess all areas'. The hand gestures could be seen as a non-verbal instance of Bakhtin's profane speech, while the fancy dress outfits fit with the carnival element of dressing up. Moreover, Tilly's view of the women embodies the classed and gendered elements of the carnival discussed above. The excess of the title can be seen in this context as referring not solely to the drinking of the women, but also their femininity. Tilly explicitly links their appearance with class. In this way, we can see echoes of Skeggs' (1997; 2001; 2004) discussions of how, from a middle-class perspective, working-class femininity is read as excessive femininity. However, in this case, the femininity is deliberately excessive, as part of carnivalesque fancy dress. The very idea of this playing with norms was anathema to Tilly.

This carnivalesque interpretation of others' drinking has relevance beyond understanding the night-time economy itself. Wilson et al (2013), for example, note how older people in their research judged whether or not alcohol consumption not by factors such as quantity consumed, or standard measures of dependence or health harm as much as 'propriety'.

This understanding of the NTE can also influence parental approaches to alcohol. Jayne et al (2012) have noted that parents tend to view the home as a safe place in which to introduce their children to alcohol. By contrast, public spaces are associated with violence and disorder, and therefore are not chosen as part of this introduction process. Such a distinction relies on a conception of the night- (and even day-) time economy as carnivalesque: disruptive, unsafe, unusual, uncontrolled. Jayne et al argue that this understanding is misleading and unhelpful in shaping young people's attitudes to alcohol.

The trope is also drawn upon by the alcohol industry. BrewDog, for instance, have made great play of being distinct from the facile pleasures of the carnivalesque. James Watt, founder of the brewery, responded to the media furore surrounding the launch of their unusually strong 'Tokyo*' beer by drawing on discourses of complexity and responsibility:

Mass-market, industrially-brewed lagers are so bland and tasteless that you are seduced into drinking a lot of them. We've been challenging people to drink less alcohol, and educating the palates of drinkers with progressive craft-brewed beers which have an amazing depth of flavour, body and character. The beers made at Brew Dog, including Tokyo*, are providing a cure to binge beer-drinking. (BBC, 2009)

The company has since made the same arguments in – successfully – appealing the decision of Leeds City Council not to grant them a licence for a pub in a cumulative impact zone. As one report put it:

BrewDog wanted different hours, had different marketing operations and attracted a different type of customer. BrewDog services expensive beers in expensive measures and the judge decided that it would not attract 'getting it down your neck' drinkers but rather well-heeled customers instead. (Allen, 2012)

Conclusion

The overall argument of this article should not be understood as a claim that "the kids are alright", that they are free-willed, resistant and innovative' (Winlow and Hall, 2006: 194). Rather, the carnivalesque helps capture the complexity and ambivalence of the contemporary British NTE. This is not to suggest that formulations such as 'new culture of intoxication' (Measham and Brain, 2005) or 'calculated hedonism' (Szmigin et al., 2008) are unhelpful. However, by placing these within the framework of the carnivalesque, the historical continuities and resonances of class and gender are highlighted.

In the way that it illuminates both industry and consumer attitudes, as well as government policy positions, the carnivalesque has key implications for alcohol policy. Tutenges (2013) suggests policymakers need to 'make better use' of young people's 'effervescence', which is currently channelled into drinking. This article has suggested that the discomfort with 'binge' drinking is as much about this effervescence as pharmacological intoxication. By viewing the issue through the prism of the carnivalesque, questions are raised that can be absent from alcohol policy debates. Is intoxication per se problematic? Or should the focus be on demonstrable harm, such as health damage and crime?

Having identified these concerns more clearly, the concept also helps to understand how policies might be formulated. Taking Tutenges' conception of effervescence, and the argument of Roberts et al (2012) emphasising the role of sociability over intoxication in the night out, there may be ways of providing a carnivalesque experience that place less emphasis on heavy alcohol consumption. Conversely, understanding drinkers pre-loading with reference to the ambivalent, uncomfortable carnivalesque NTE highlights how there may be opportunities for the industry in providing an alternative – more domestic and everyday – environment and atmosphere.

Even taking the existing drinking culture and environment as fixed, the concept offers some insights. As de Visser and Smith (2007: 356) found, drinkers taking a carnivalesque approach do not behave in a way that supports models of rational decision-making – indeed counting units and knowing one's limits 'is incompatible with the fun of altered consciousness, disinhibition and distraction from responsibility'. In this sense, terms such as 'calculated hedonism' can be misleading, though the carnivalesque is certainly bounded and has ritualistic elements. Moreover, as noted, ideas of

carnavalesque drinking may also shape older drinkers' attitudes – including 'binge' drinkers' parents – which can affect attempts to foster behaviour change.

Finally, if the carnivalesque is genuinely felt to be problematic, it is worth noting that the industry is not monolithic in taking an approach that (explicitly at least) promotes such attitudes and consumption patterns. If the carnivalesque is to be discouraged, it may be desirable to promote some aspects of the NTE through work with the alcohol industry.

There may also be benefits in applying the concept of the carnivalesque more widely to contemporary policy fields, most obviously drug policy, given Duff's (2008) discussion of 'the rush of difference' associated with substance use. Although the idea of the abject 'addict' has a greater focus in government drug policy than alcohol policy, and at first sight there might seem to be little scope for the 'responsible' consumer of illicit substances (so important to the construction of the carnivalesque/'binge' drinker), not all illicit consumption is understood in the same way. For example, Evans-Brown et al (2012) have drawn attention to the growing market in – and dangers of – human enhancement drugs that are not generally psychoactive. In formulating policy, mephedrone, for example, may be viewed quite differently from a tanning enhancer or anabolic steroid by both consumers and government, while some of the issues surrounding harm reduction and information may be similar. As a way of illuminating issues surrounding the nature of the mind, body and self, which structure discussions of substance use policies, I suggest that the carnivalesque has wide and powerful applications.

ⁱ This was a post for a youth worker to offer help to drinkers on the streets, particularly on Friday and Saturday nights, funded by a number of town centre churches.

ⁱⁱⁱ This is a post jointly funded by the Borough Council, the local Police and the on-licensed venues in the town centre to "lead on projects and initiatives to ensure that Bournemouth's Night-time Economy is safe, inclusive, vibrant and market leading" (Bournemouth Borough Council, 2006).

ⁱⁱⁱ Issues of crime and health are covered in the 'Would You?' poster campaign, however.

^{iv} My thanks to James Nicholls for this neat phrase.

^v This behaviour may not fit the Bakhtinian ideal of profane speech, but it is fitting with the notion of the carnivalesque as outlined in this article.

^{vi} Although this is now some time ago, similar stories have been run at the New Year in subsequent years. This, however, is a particularly striking example, deliberately chosen to illuminate the themes discussed.

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Figure 1: Illustration from *Daily Express* (2008)



Figure 2: Illustration from Jeffries (2007)