The Great British Binge Drinking Debate

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Guy Redden questions some of the assumptions behind recent measures to discourage binge drinking.

Over the last few years hardly a week has gone by without the public being told that Britain is held in the thrall of a binge-drinking epidemic. The allure of the topic for the media is obvious. Excessive drinking is a public health issue rivalled only by obesity as a vehicle for raising fears about the future fitness of the nation. It also slots neatly into concerns about the anti-social behaviour of the young. Relatively little attention is given to the kind of private drinking practices more typical of older and more middle-class citizens. Instead, the media construct of ‘Binge Britain’ is a ritual repetition of the idea that night-time public space has been transformed into a violent vomitorium that is a no-go zone for all but the carousing youth who are lost to it.

Many will recognise this kind of media alarm as an example of moral panic. Plenty of the coverage has been dubious. For instance, special attention is given to binge drinking among women, even though it is no more prevalent among women than men - the achievement of general gender parity in nightlife participation makes a convenient focus for conservative narratives of social decline. And images of drink-fuelled disorder take their place alongside other ways of demonising the young. Their simple presence in any numbers in public places, especially when donning hoodies, seems to signify non-specific threat, even in an era of falling...
crime. In much media discourse, affluent, responsible Britain has somehow become their generalised victim. The stylised representation of the binge menace is accompanied by the other main ingredient of moral panic: the concerned voices which proffer solutions to the problematic behaviour. An alcohol misuse lobby, comprising medical organisations and a range of other groups, is currently providing this commentary.

Yet, while there is much unfair and limiting representation of those involved, the binge phenomenon sits less easily in the moral panic frame in other ways. The classic application of the concept was in Stuart Hall et al’s *Policing the Crisis*, published in 1978. The book revealed the way that muggings carried out by black youths, which accounted for a very small proportion of crimes against the person in the 1970s, were amplified into a major threat to society, warranting a law and order campaign. Binge Britain is a different phenomenon in a number of ways. There is ample evidence to show that alcohol-related violence is a significant social problem; while a tough disciplinary government response has so far been absent.

The policy response to binge drinking is still evolving. Measures that have been proposed to ameliorate its negative consequences include the Government’s Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy, which is now in its second phase, and a range of proposals that have not (as yet) been adopted. My argument here is not about the legitimacy of any particular strategy, however; it is concerned, rather, with the need to question the terms upon which the debate is being conducted. One of the reasons for this is that the social group most often represented as culpable - the young - is the one whose members experience most of the actual negative consequences, as victims of violence or as its criminalised perpetrators. Another is that the government nowhere explicitly acknowledges that binge drinking is a mode of consumption shaped by deliberate and continuing industry attempts to maximise alcohol sales. Through this denial of economic determination, the inebriated young are being set up as self-responsible agents of the problem, in a debate dominated by liberal suppositions about personal freedom, its dysfunctions, and congruous means of persuading or compelling individuals to behave differently. The challenge for the left lies in joining the policy debate in ways that recognise the need for harm-minimisation, while highlighting the social embeddedness of actors and the principle of equity in matters of cultural participation.
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The binge phenomenon

The binge issue is indissolubly linked to the New Labour era. During the campaign for the 1997 General Election, the Labour Party famously courted the student vote by sending out the following SMS text message: ‘Cldnt gve a XXXX 4 lst ordrs? Thn vte Labr on thrsday 4 extra time’. They were eventually to deliver on their promise in the Licensing Act of 2003, which allowed bars to open for up to 24 hours a day. The Act, implemented in November 2005, provided a focal point for coverage of binge drinking. In the face of growing media interest in alcohol-related disorder, it provided the policy dimension to complement the spectacle of drunkenness.

However, the extent to which binge drinking is a recent phenomenon is a moot point. When Dostoevsky visited England in 1862, he noted that: ‘On Saturday nights, a half-million workers flood the city like a sea, flocking into certain sections to celebrate the Sabbath all night until five in the morning. They stuff themselves and drink like animals … They all race against time to drink themselves insensate.’

Seen in the longue durée, we have to ask what, if anything, has changed. The British drink similar amounts to the French and the Germans, but apparently they like to drink in public places, episodically, and in compressed time-scales. If binge drinking is defined as drinking to get drunk (or, technically, consuming over two times the government’s recommended daily limit in one session), the British have long since proven themselves masters of the art.

But recent research does suggest that drinking culture has changed over recent decades. Young people are eschewing the idea of ‘holding your drink’ - associated with the social institution of the pub (functioning as a kind of alternative front room) - in favour of an explicit ‘culture of intoxication’ that has been influenced by the rise of recreational drugs. More than ever, it appears that drinking is linked to the pursuit of peak experiences that leave quotidian concerns and behaviour entirely behind, as encapsulated by such phrases as ‘getting off your face’, ‘having a laugh’, and ‘going mental’. This was certainly my own impression as a Briton returning to live in the UK in 2004 after eight years abroad. In comparison with Britain in the mid-1990s (and also Australia where I had been living) I was surprised by the large numbers of very drunk people carousing in city centres of a night.

Alcohol consumption in Britain has now returned to pre-temperance levels, after it peaked and then declined towards the end of the nineteenth century. Reduction
in alcohol consumption continued in the early twentieth century as the temperance movement carried on gaining ground, remaining a strong social force until the First World War. After the war, when temperance began to lose its broad relevance, the diversification of leisure opportunities meant that this downward trend continued. While Britons averaged 11 litres of pure alcohol each per year in 1900, from the 1920s until the 1960s annual consumption was mostly in the band of 4 to 5 litres. However the later twentieth century saw a steady rise in overall alcohol consumption. Between 1970 and 1995 annual intakes rose by between 2 and 3 litres of pure alcohol per person.\(^2\) Government excise revenues indicate that this growth has continued, with the average adult purchasing 11.3 litres of alcohol in 2005.\(^3\)

As the media are wont to emphasise, binge drinking is prevalent among the young. Teenagers now drink twice as much as they did in 1992.\(^4\) According to the 2003 Youth Lifestyle Survey, 39 per cent of 18- to 24-year-olds can be classified as ‘binge drinkers’ (those who get very drunk at least once a month). The 2003 Offending, Crime and Justice Survey has the figure at 44 per cent.

The YLS found a close relationship between offending and binge drinking. After other factors were taken into account, frequency of drunkenness remained strongly associated with both general offending and criminal and disorderly behaviour. Binge drinkers were more likely to offend than other young adults. Thirty-nine per cent reported committing an offence in the twelve months prior to interview, compared with 14 per cent of regular drinkers. Sixty per cent of binge drinkers admitted involvement in criminal and/or disorderly behaviour during or after drinking, compared with 25 per cent of regular drinkers. The chances of being both a perpetrator or victim of alcohol-related violence are highest among the young.

Overall, alcohol is linked to 1.2 million violent incidents a year, which accounts for nearly half of all of violent crimes, according to the British Crime Survey. Although violent crime has fallen since the 1990s, it remains high by historical standards. The proportion committed against strangers has increased, and the more serious the crime, the more likely alcohol is to be a factor. It is also worth noting that violence in the UK is high by international standards, with rates of victim-reported threats and assaults being the second highest (after Australia) among industrialised countries, and almost twice the average. One of the most marked trends in recent surveys has been the rise in perceived anti-social behaviour and fear of crime. The 2004/5 BCS found that ‘drunk and rowdy behaviour’ was the second
most experienced form of anti-social behaviour, behind ‘young people hanging around’. Sixty-one per cent of the population perceive alcohol-related violence to be worsening.

There are of course many other statistics cited by the alcohol misuse lobby as evidence of the consequences of excessive drinking. These include rates of unplanned pregnancies and accidents befalling the drunk. The combined financial cost of related harms to the NHS, emergency services and the economy is estimated to be approximately 20 billion a year.

The debate

Binge drinking is a classic liberal problem. It raises questions about liberty and the legitimacy of checks upon it. At what point does a person’s freedom to act harm others, limiting their rights in turn? And when and how should a government intervene to arbitrate? Over recent years these regulatory questions have been increasingly applied to public health issues that are anchored in personal lifestyle choices. Passive smoking is no longer regarded as an acceptable outcome of a person’s decision to smoke around strangers, which has resulted in a ban on smoking in public places. Charges are then often made that such constraints upon individual freedom are evidence of a ‘nanny state’. Governments are also concerned about the aggregate effects of other behaviours, such as diet. The ‘obesity crisis’ is not so much about direct harm to others, it is more a question of the indirect threat it poses to the population, in the loss of production and the costs of health care. Nonetheless, eating is also now a site of intervention by the government over private conduct, even if that has so far taken the form of promoting awareness of the issue among citizens, rather than taking measures to compel behavioural change.

As Professor Sir Michael Marmot - one of the prominent medical experts in the field - says: ‘The pleasure alcohol brings has to be balanced against the harms’. The organisations that have set about establishing effective means of reducing the harms include the Institute of Alcohol Studies, the BMA, the Royal College of Physicians, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation and The Nuffield Foundation. Marmot, who chaired an Academy of Medical Sciences review of alcohol in 2004, sees the increasing of prices as the only really effective means of reducing alcohol-related crime and ill health. For him, the appropriate balance between pleasure and
harm-reduction would be achieved with nothing less than a doubling of the price of alcohol. This is one of the more extreme proposals; others, such as the Alcohol Health Alliance, suggest more modest increases. However, the evidence does suggest that price and availability of alcohol are the two factors that most affect how it is consumed. A range of other measures, such as restrictions on discounting and promotion, have also been suggested. Reducing licensing hours once more has also been proposed, but there is little evidence that 24 hour drinking has itself increased consumption or drunken disorder.

The government’s first major response to binge drinking came in 2004, with the publication of the Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England. This was the first attempt to create an overall plan to reduce harms without ‘interfering with the pleasure enjoyed by the millions of people who drink responsibly’. The strategy included some measures directed at the drunk and disorderly; greater use of existing on-the-spot fines for anti-social behaviour was advocated, and there was a new provision to ban known troublemakers from bars and entire town centres. Beyond this the emphasis fell squarely on corporate social responsibility and public information campaigns. The government worked with alcohol industry’s Portman Group to produce voluntary codes of conduct for the industry. These included a proposal on packaging and promotion that stated that marketing communications should avoid messages that might appeal to underage drinkers, glamorise immoderate drinking, or associate drinks with sexual success. The government also launched the ‘Know your limits’ awareness campaign on television and the Web, to highlight the potential dangers of excessive drinking for young people.

Those who advocate stronger measures were sceptical about the strategy. It was mostly based on improving information provided to drinkers, so as to better inform their choices - on persuasion rather than compulsion. The debate has now moved on to a phase where price and other methods for restricting availability are on the agenda. The murder of Gary Newlove in August 2007, by a group of teenagers who had been drinking, prompted a new round of media interest. Peter Fahy, Chief Constable of Cheshire (where the murder took place), called for the drinking age to be raised to 21 and for drinking to be banned in public places. The second phase of the alcohol strategy, ‘Safe, Sensible, and Social’, was also released in mid-2007. It extended the corporate responsibility line, for instance announcing an agreement with the industry to add sensible drinking messages to drinks labels from late 2008.
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However, it also promised an independent review and consultation about alcohol pricing and promotion. The first signs of the government’s willingness to raise prices came in the 2008 budget, which raised alcohol duties by 6 per cent above inflation, followed by 2 per cent for each of the next four years.

Issues for the left

Scanning the coverage reveals very little commentary that links binge drinking to issues of social equity and corporate power. Given that drinking is a mode of consumption that is at the heart of youth culture today, cultural studies has also been surprisingly quiet. The obvious harms it entails may be an embarrassment, since it has become de rigueur in the field to stress the legitimacy of popular pleasures derived from the creative activity of consumption.

However, to represent the drinking young as the victims of symbolic violence - unfairly criticised for engaging in ‘their’ culture, that they have a ‘right to’ - is an inadequate response. There is a problem, of which the young themselves bear many of the consequences. And as the evolution of the debate shows, some kind of regulatory response is inevitable. The issue that needs addressing is the ways in which the debate has been framed. Attributions of causation and responsibility, and courses of action, have been left to groups with certain interests and powers, in a particular socio-historical formation. Worryingly, youth culture - in the sense of the apparently freely chosen ways of acting of the young - has largely been presented as the main cause of binge drinking. The logical corollary of this is that young people are viewed as responsible for the ways their drinking cultures operate, and thus any measures to tackle drink-related disorder are best directed at modifying their behaviour.

The cultures of having a laugh, getting off your face, etc, no doubt do shape the attitudes, identities and practices of young drinkers. But this does not mean that participants act on their own terms, autonomously of socio-economic forces. The contemporary rise in binge drinking can be seen as a consequence of liberal regulation of industry by the same government that is responsible for mitigating the negative consequences. The development of the night-time economy is part and parcel of a New Labour strategy to boost cultural industries. The transformation of post-industrial city centres into sites of leisure was effected by a liberal licensing
regime that allowed virtually unchecked growth in the numbers of licensed premises. This spatial intensification was one of the structural changes underlying the development of the fractious drunken crowd. Another was the business model of the new generation of bars. The drinks industry has used economies of scale, selling high volumes of low cost per unit drinks to the young in densely packed venues made up largely of standing room. Promotions such as all you can drink in exchange for a cover charge and two-for-one offers have become normal. The ‘deep discounting’ of alcohol in supermarkets, where it is often sold as a loss leader below cost price, has also encouraged drinking before going out, meaning that patrons are often drunk by the time they start drinking in public.

In short, nights out are packaged by the industry. What they have to sell is alcohol. As all businesses exist to maximise profits, they have found ways to sell more drinks by harnessing the hedonism of youth. Youth drinking cultures are operationalised and translated into sales maximisation. Drinkers are, in turn, dependent on the opportunities for consumption that the alcohol industry provides. For young consumers this almost exclusively centres upon cheap alcohol, sold with financial incentives and symbolic incitement to excessive and rapid consumption.

The 2004 strategy revolved around the myth of the sovereign consumer. Its bid to better inform drinkers while changing little else treated drinkers as self-directed economic agents responsible for generating their own wants and making decisions from available information. This is to deny any economic determination of drunks’ actions. It shifts culpability away from the administered culture of the alcohol industry, and denies the fact that alcohol is, to cite the title of a WHO report, ‘no ordinary commodity’ - precisely because it leads to the suspension of the kind of rationally-choosing human agency upon which ideals of the economic actor are based.

In my view, the key missing ingredient in the debate so far has been that virtually all parties (including the alcohol misuse lobby) have ignored the only proximate cause of public drunken disorder: the systematic industry practice of overserving patrons to levels of inebriation that are not compatible with public safety. Logically, binge-related violence cannot eventuate unless excessive alcohol has been supplied, fuelling crimes that are then committed non compos mentis by the minority that loses control under the influence.

The problem isn’t youth culture per se; it is establishments that produce
drunk and disorderly people without much care for the consequences. It is these establishments that have a duty to reduce the chances of people lapsing into criminality at the point of intoxication. It seems odd that little has been made of the existing legal responsibility of licensees to not serve patrons who are obviously ‘drunk and incapable’, while allowing others to enjoy their freedom to pursue pleasure - until it is acknowledged that an economically neoliberal government supports freedom to trade above any restriction, and the alcohol misuse lobby has a narrow interest in effective harm reduction. This means that the argument is drawn towards price and other levers for restricting availability that do not revolve around tackling the normalisation of overserving, and do not isolate inebriated drinkers from those who are actually in control of themselves. Only alcohol servers truly have the ability to distinguish. Licensing regimes based upon enforcement of licensee responsibilities are possible, as has been shown in other countries. In 1992 Queensland introduced one of Australia's more successful frameworks, one part of which was aimed at creating awareness of laws by the use compulsory signage that informed patrons of the heavy penalties upon licensees (£20,000) and bar staff (£3,000) for overserving. While the UK has an occasional programme of test purchasing to uncover the serving of underage drinkers, it has no provision for enforcing overserving laws. Whatever other factors influence consumption and behaviour, there has been no attempt to address the root cause.

My argument is that the government should first try legal means to target the party that remains sober and calculative in sponsoring binge drinking: the industry. The 2004 strategy was bound to make no real difference, as it included no compulsion at all to restrict supply. Increasing duty is the most obvious means of restricting through price, and this process has started. But irresponsible price promotions and deep discounting are harder to tackle, as government restriction of price-based marketing methods is inimical to current competition law. In the name of a generally tough approach it is easy to conflate different measures. Increasing prices will no doubt influence consumer behaviour directly, but when it is acknowledged that economic activity is also cultural participation, this becomes problematic. Solutions based on restricting consumer access to alcohol rather than regulating it on the supply side - measures such as changing the drinking age to 21, greatly increasing alcohol taxes, and reducing licensing hours - raise serious issues of cultural rights. How fair would it be that, in a land that likes to go out for a drink, an entire generation found that this was no longer a permissible part of young
adulthood, or an affordable one?

The consumer qua free economic actor can be deconstructed in another way: their freedom to buy is relative to resources at their disposal. When people choose to engage in similar cultural practices, the cost of their access varies when measured relative to income. Sales taxes are a liberal form of taxation in comparison with progressive taxes on income and wealth. That is to say they act as a tax on choice that factors wealth out of the equation. In combination with tax avoidance schemes, such taxes already ensure that the working class pays a higher proportion of its income in tax than the rich. In this light, I was somewhat surprised to find that, in the course of a recent diatribe on class in contemporary Britain (which made no mention of the redistribution of wealth), Polly Toynbee imagined that one of the means through which health and lifestyle inequalities might be narrowed would be ‘a state unashamed to be the good nanny and raise drink prices steeply’ (Guardian, 19.10.07). There is no doubt that such a measure as a Marmot-style hiking of prices would be ‘effective’ in reducing alcohol-related harms and their disproportionate effects on the working class - because many citizens wouldn’t be able to afford a meaningful nightlife.

Conclusion

What is at stake in Binge Britain is not only the issue of how to reduce alcohol-related violence and disorder - which is important and challenging in its own right. There is also the question of the political implications and consequences of the ways in which this might be achieved. It is not the problem of binge-related harm that needs debunking, but solutions that revolve around myths of the self-determining (yet dysfunctional) individual. If the voluntaristic approach of persuasion fails, liberal regulation can also compel the abstract individual that it sees as making up the crowd, thereby forcing real people to accept responsibility for market failure. A materialist interpretation of binge drinking would aim to re-socialise the subjects of drinking culture, and situate them amid the socio-economic forces that shape their agency. This means recognising that they do not act independently of influences, nor independently from resources.

So far, legally binding compulsion of the industry to change its behaviour, and questions of social equity, have largely been excluded from the debate. The
tougher measures on pricing and generalised restriction of availability now being introduced make no allowance for differential access to the social goods represented by participation in drinking culture. In theory there is no problem with taxes on elective action that help minimise and pay for its negative consequences: it represents individuals as accepting responsibility for actions they have chosen to undertake. But that theory rests on ignoring actual differences in wealth - inequalities that are worsening under a Labour government. There might be an argument for rises in alcohol duty in a budget if these are compensated for in measures that raise the relative incomes of the poorest. Then no-one need lose out financially because of their choice to drink, while all would experience an incentive not to drink excessively because of its high cost relative to other goods (that they would have more money to spend on).

The issue remains a difficult one: there is a genuine need to find ways to balance harm and equity. The travails of the nanny state may be relatively new, but they are not about to leave us. With a ‘fat tax’ (on fatty foods) and other possible ‘abuser pays’ taxes lurking around the next corner, the left would do well to watch this space, and above all to apply equity tests to lifestyle-oriented policy measures, and to defend the principle of a wide social distribution of access to pleasure.

Notes

1. Quoted by Duncan Campbell, 'In the Heart of Babylon', Guardian, 6.1.07.
4. Statistics in the next four paragraphs are taken from the Institute of Alcohol Studies Factsheet, Alcohol and Crime; and the Prime Minister’s Strategy Unit, Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy For England, 2004.