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Drink and British Politics since 1830: a Study in Policy-Making

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Alcohol is one aspect of twentieth-century British popular culture that has received comparatively little attention. While other specific items of consumption - cars, music halls, the cinema, seaside holidays, and so on - have received sustained scholarly treatment in one or more monographs each, the central role of the public house in everyday life has not been reflected in the historical literature. Undoubtedly, aspects of twentieth-century drinking have received some attention. Gourvish and Wilson have provided a comprehensive study of the brewing industry.(1) Burnett has placed beers, wines and spirits alongside a range of other liquid refreshments over a much longer time-scale.(2) Barr, too, has covered the century within a much longer historical framework in his social history of drink.(3) And specific aspects of alcohol, such as the relationship between addiction and social policy, have more recently been explored in great depth.(4) But twentieth-century drink in all its historical manifestations - its regulation, distribution, social role, cultural significance, medical effects - has not been the subject of a specific work.

The reasons for such an omission might be explained by two shadows which loom over the subject and the period (notwithstanding the long-awaited study of drink by David Gutzke in Manchester University Press' 'Studies in Popular Culture' series). Firstly, there is the scholarship on the period prior to the First World War, led by the magisterial account of 'the temperance question' by Harrison, but backed up by other studies of the prohibition movement and the politics of drink, as well as more cultural accounts of, for

instance, the image of the bar maid.(5) It is as though the quality of this research has put off scholars from attempting similar comprehensive analyses of the twentieth century. Secondly, though, there is the presence of a quite exceptional primary resource. Mass-Observation's *The Pub and the People* is so thorough in its examination of drinking habits in Bolton in 1937 that it might be better to re-print the volume rather than to commission any new history.(6) Mass-Observation's anthropological investigations recorded what was drunk, who drank, who got drunk, who served it, how long it took to drink, what was said during drinking, who spat, who smoked, who sang, who came at weekends, who came at lunch, who came at last orders and who did not drink.

So impressive a record is the Mass-Observation material of drinking habits that scholars who have used it as a source in studies of alcohol have tended simply to summarise it, rather than incorporate it within their own analytical framework.(7) Perhaps, therefore, it is a sensible decision on John Greenaway's part to take a very different approach in his study of *Drink and British Politics since 1830*. For Greenaway's approach is explicitly 'high' political. His concerns are with how politicians - in Parliament, in Cabinet, in official committees, in Whitehall and in contact with pressure groups - have dealt with, and understood, the 'problem' of drink. His concerns are those of the political scientist, rather than those explored by the historians of the 'minor vices' and he explains at the start that, although interesting topics, he will not deal with the culture of drinking, the inner workings of pressure groups, questions of social control or the impact of moral panics. Instead, his questions relate to why issues come on and off the agenda, what determines the discourses surrounding a subject, the relationship with more general political ideologies, the influence of bureaucratic structures and the role of individual politicians. There is, then, something of a missed opportunity to relate the high politics of regulating the drink problem with the social historian's interest in broader cultural attitudes and practices: although the sheer volume of material Greenaway draws upon is one explanation for the limits he places on his narrative scope. But as the aim of his book is to link high politics to 'the role of ideas or general intellectual paradigms in policy-making' (p. 6), his focus is at least suggestive of the benefits of relating the questions of the political scientist to established historical concerns.

His method is to adopt a chronological structure, narrating some familiar issues of licensing reform, temperance politics, government regulation and the influence of the drink trade, before using his case study in a final chapter to assess a number of theories of the policy-making process. His focus is skewed towards the period leading up to the establishment of Britain's long-standing, well-known and (to visitors from abroad) eccentric licensing regulations of 1921 and his account almost comes to a complete halt in 1970, determined as it is by the availability of sources at the Public Record Office. But one could ask for little more on the asserted focus of his book - the high politics of drink reform - and Greenaway is to be congratulated first of all for his authoritative account of the intricacies of policy formation over a reasonably substantial historical period.

He begins by setting out what he identifies as six groups which shaped approaches to the drink problem in early Victorian Britain: the moral suasionists; those who believed intemperance was a product of a faulty social order; those advocates of the 'traditional' system of regulation which stretched back to 1552; the proponents of laissez-faire and the freeing of licensing from the magistrates; the prohibitionists of the United Kingdom Alliance; and the progressive temperance reformers who explored a variety of means to restrict drinking. MPs shied away from taking up the issue in Parliament before 1870 but, thereafter, Greenaway argues, drink became a party political issue and he details the background to legislative measures such as the 1872 Licensing Act and the 1878 Habitual Drunkards Act.

The onset of the twentieth century was marked by a turn to seeing drink as much as a social issue for society to deal with as a whole than as a moral issue for the individual conscience. Tackling drink in the national interest became a matter of some urgency, though reformers remained divided over the solution, as witnessed in an 1896 Royal Commission and in the work of Joseph Rowntree and Arthur Sherwell, who promoted the idea of 'disinterested management': that is, the removal of profit from the drinks trade through some degree of state control of distribution, a policy which to prohibitionists seemed a devilish compromise. The drink problem became most prominent in 1908 when the Licensing Bill attempted to reduce the number of licences by one third, a measure which resulted in riots in Hyde Park and the brewing trade organising

130 special trains to London on 27 September to carry their protestors.

The First World War helped reposition drink as an aspect of national efficiency instead of temperance, though politicians such as Lloyd George were not averse to drawing on an older rhetoric to whip up support for his plans to create a more sober and productive workforce. The wartime measures, which severely limited the opening hours of pubs and which were administered by the Central Control Board, set the precedent for the post-war settlement of 1921 that put in place the licensing regulations with which we are still largely familiar.

Thereafter, the temperance movement was no longer a powerful pressure group and the drink 'problem' was eased through the rise of alternative leisure pursuits. Drink was therefore pushed to the political margins in the interwar period, a Royal Commission on licensing report of 1931 being almost entirely ignored, while brewers favoured the expansion of improved pubs more suitable to a leisured suburban population. No political attention was given to drink in the Second World War and subsequently it has become attached to a range of other issues. Here, Greenaway provides three case studies: on plans for licensing reforms in New Towns;, on the rise of medical knowledge about alcoholism; and on the drink-driving campaigns of the 1960s, culminating in Barbara Castle's introduction of the breathalyser in 1966. A brief chapter on developments since 1970 attempts to mention everything (for example, drink and public health, safer drinking promoters such as Alcohol Concern, the appearance of alcopops in the 1990s) but ends up being a list of areas which Greenaway would presumably liked to have explored, had the official records been available to him.

Greenaway does not seek to offer an overarching thesis on the nature of the drink problem over the last two centuries. Instead his focus is always on 'complexity'. 'Drink' was 'redefined again and again' and policy formed a 'complex story'.(p. 6) While some might think this ought to be the starting point for a research agenda rather than a conclusion, Greenaway is persistent in his belief that drink policy does not fit any existing models. In a final chapter, he skilfully outlines an impressive range of theories of the changing nature of the political system, carefully crossing off each and every one of them, since all fail to capture all aspects of the history of drink. Ultimately, he argues, 'any model is a simplification into which the complexity of the real world of policy making rarely fits'.(p. 211) For example, drink does not fit a model of the rise of party politics since there were many divisions within all three parties over the nature of the problem (or, indeed, if drink was a problem at all). Likewise, he points to the inapplicability of models emphasising the self-generating growth of government through the bureaucratic machine, the development of a corporatist state after the First World War, the transition from a community to a class-based politics or the notion that high politics was autonomous from wider developments.

On the one hand, Greenaway's focus on the specific and the complex promotes a healthy scepticism but on the other, it is difficult to understand what one is left with. If one rejects overarching interpretations, then it is difficult to discriminate between the importance of various explanatory factors. Certainly, this is the case in all of the book's narrative chapters. All potential explanations are given and all relevant details are mentioned. This leads to a rather dense writing style on Greenaway's part and a certain lack of clarity as to his structure and argument. In his defence, this only points to the complexity of the position which Greenaway has himself emphasised; but it is infuriating to be constantly informed that the means to understand drink are so specific that one cannot make broader generalisations about political attitudes to psychoactive substances, consumption, working-class culture, and so on. And if change over time is only ever to be understood through a multitude of factors, the historical account can become a mere narrative of events (regardless of whether the case study fits existing models familiar to the political scientist).

To be sure, Greenaway does commit himself to a methodology which stresses the interplay between institutional politics and the ideological frameworks within which they operate, although even here it is the specificity of the case which interests him: 'the result was that Drink tended to generate its own ideological schools'.(p. 5) But even then, one can differ on just how broadly this ideological school has to be understood. Politicians do not operate in a vacuum, as Greenaway would agree, but just how wide should we understand the social, political, cultural, economic and intellectual space within which they operate to be? Greenaway

admits the influence of war, Europe, science and social and cultural changes such as the decline of nonconformity and the greater participation of women in the leisure industry, but these are treated as externalities rather than intrinsic means to understanding changing high political beliefs and reform agendas.

No-one can fault the depth of research conducted by Greenaway and the near-definitive account he has provided of the discussion of drink within the official institutions of the state, but there is a wider methodological point to be made here. The ideological context has to be understood as more than just the explicit references to belief made by high political actors. Where, for instance, do such ideas come from? There is a social history of ideas to be written which clearly impacts upon political reform. And should causal factors only be identified in the immediate debates prior to the implementation of a regulation or creation of a bureaucratic measure? There are other longer-term issues to explore, such as the changing relationship between the state and the individual, and how the former can intervene in the consumption decisions of the latter. How have notions of liberal governance influenced, or been adapted by, the 'problem' of drink? And how have moral frameworks (or ideological paradigms) at their broadest influenced policy? Greenaway points to the decline of nonconformity, but does this necessarily imply a more secular attitude to drink? Or are there other dominant frameworks to point to in the story, such as how it is that the public health professional has replaced the temperance reformer as the foremost spokesperson on the drink problem within the institutions of government? These battles are part of a more diverse debate within civil society, admittedly an arena often overlooked or ignored by high politics, but equally often the origin for new 'discourses of drink' (as Greenaway puts it), which in turn shape the speech and reform patterns of politicians.

Even more broadly, to understand the politics of drink is to understand the social role it has played in everyday life. In the Mass-Observation study cited earlier, the anthropologists went on to describe how central an institution the pub was in working-class life. In the interwar period, the pub had adapted to take account of the competition from other sources of entertainment, such that pianos were played regularly, while the pub itself became the centre for many sporting clubs from fishing to bowling, bookies, pigeon fanciers and dog breeders. It served a variety of functions and remained an essential feature of popular culture despite the decrease in alcohol consumption and drunkenness that marked the national trend in the first half of the twentieth century. But to know this is not simply to be able to chart better the resistance to any regulations or reforms instituted from on 'high'. It is to know a culture that influenced not only the drinkers themselves, but the politicians who, despite social difference, were never entirely divorced from the 'ideology' of drinking practices. In future works (which will no doubt appear on twentieth-century drink) there is no reason why high politics cannot be made to relate to the wider social world which it serves.

Notes

Notes

1. T. R. Gourvish & R. G. Wilson, *The British Brewing Industry, 1830-1980*, research by Fiona Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994).Back to (1)
2. J. Burnett, *Liquid Pleasures: A Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain* (London: Routledge, 1999). Back to (2)
3. A. Barr, *Drink: A Social History* (London: Bantam, 1998).Back to (3)
4. B. Thom, *Dealing with Drink: Alcohol and Social Policy from Treatment to Prevention* (London: Free Association Books, 1999).Back to (4)
5. B. Harrison, *Drink and the Victorians: The Temperance Question in England, 1815-1872* (2nd edn, Keele: Keele University Press, 1994); N. Longmate, *The Waterdrinkers: A History of Temperance* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1968); A. E. Dingle, *The Campaign for Prohibition in Victorian England* (London: Croom Helm, 1980); L. L. Shiman, *Crusade Against Drink in Victorian England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988); P. Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), Chapter 7.Back to (5)

6. Mass-Observation, *The Pub and the People: A Worktown Study* (London, 1938). Later editions have indeed been published, in 1970 and 1988. [Editor's note: for electronic details of the Worktown Mass-Observation study, please see the University of Sussex Library Archives, where the Mass-Observation Archives are deposited: http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/massobs/worktown_1937-40.html. [2]Back to (6)
7. V. Hey, *Patriarchy and Pub Culture* (London: Tavistock, 1986).Back to (7)

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