

Chapter 2: A brief history of alcohol in Europe

Alcohol has been produced and drunk in Europe for thousands of years, usually made out of whatever materials were locally available. Fermented alcoholic drinks and (from the thirteenth century) spirits were often also used as a medicine, a practice that continued until the early twentieth century and the advent of modern medicine. Alcoholic drinks were commonly preferred as they were less likely to be damaging to health than (impure) water, and drunkenness was also common, although repeated drunkenness was sometimes condemned. Laws on alcohol did exist, but normally for reasons of public order or to regulate the market rather than for public health. However, this picture changed with a series of developments in mediæval and early modern Europe, including industrialization, improved communications links, and the discovery of stronger, distilled beverages. European elites were faced with a situation of urban squalor that included unprecedented public drunkenness in lower classes – and both they and (in some countries) emerging workers' movements attributed much of this to alcohol.

Large 'temperance' movements, therefore, spread across much of Europe in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, driven by concerns over spirits before often moving on to an opposition to all alcoholic drinks. In some cases this led to a complete ban on alcohol in a country or area, although elsewhere less drastic systems of alcohol control were adopted. In most, but not all, countries the temperance movement has since faded, to a position of little significance by the end of the twentieth century. The idea of 'alcoholism' as a disease also grew during the nineteenth century, with many European countries developing homes or asylums to treat 'alcoholics'. Although temporarily out of fashion at the height of the temperance period, the 'addiction concept' fitted the ideological climate of the mid-twentieth century and became popular once again. Yet in recent years, the 'new public health movement' has become the dominant paradigm for discussing alcohol-related problems, allowing a broader discussion than a focus on a small subset of 'alcoholics'.

Today's Europe includes a wide range of uses and meanings of alcohol, ranging from an accompaniment to family meals to a major part of rites of passage. Alcoholic drinks are full of meaning, with drinking behaviour able to communicate the formality of an event or the division between work and leisure. Drunkenness is equally symbolic, with 'drunken comportment' – how people act under the influence of alcohol – varying across Europe. Meanings and practices vary within as well as between countries, sometimes linked to the identities of different groups. This can occur through many alcohol-related channels, from the association of a particular drink with regional or national identity, to the meaningful non-use of alcohol in many European Muslim communities.

ALCOHOL IN EVERYDAY LIFE

The deliberate creation of drinkable alcohol is thought to date back roughly ten thousand years, and most of the ancient world was very familiar with alcoholic drinks (Austin 1985; Sournia 1990). Beer without hops and drinks made from honey ('mead') are likely to have been the first alcoholic beverages, but other drinks were quickly discovered and produced from whatever was locally available. Wine cultivation came later but still dates back at least 5000-6000 years (Burnett 1999), although wine was still a relatively scarce commodity in Ancient Greece and the early Roman Empire. Viticulture only became widespread in Italy from the 2nd century BC, but wine-making then spread quickly through the Roman conquests (Jellinek 1976).

The Roman Empire was also linked to the spread of Christianity in Europe, and given the crucial role of wine in Christian mass this may well have helped the spread of wine production. Several positive references to wine are contained in the bible, while many monasteries have produced alcoholic drinks, although the clergy have also issued condemnations of drunkenness which was seen as a form of gluttony (see e.g., Edwards 2000). Ambivalences can also be seen in European Judaism – the Torah discusses alcohol as a gift from God, and wine forms a part of most Jewish festivals include Shabbat (the Sabbath). However, the Torah also describes how alcohol can lead to violence and a loss of consciousness, and intoxication is generally stigmatized in the Jewish community (Sournia 1990).

Seemingly from the time of the very first alcoholic drinks, claims have been made that they can treat a huge array of illnesses. Cato the Elder (234-149BC), for example, defended the medicinal value of wine in moderation for treating snake bites (Sournia 1990), while even in the eighteenth-century English doctors were advocating the use of wine to treat gout and venereal infections (Porter 1985). Although known in Europe in the thirteenth century, distilled beverages – commonly called *aqua vitae*, the “water of life” – were almost solely used as medicines for several hundred years (Austin 1985). Even less than a hundred years ago, the Norwegian spirits prohibition was partly lifted to enable households to buy half a bottle of spirits as treatment against Spanish influenza (Hauge 1978). Ultimately it took increasing medical knowledge of the harmful effects of alcohol (Knapp 1998) and in particular the advent of effective modern medicines for alcohol to be removed from the doctor’s cabinet (Sournia 1990; Edwards 2000).

From antiquity to the early nineteenth century, water was often seen as unfit for human consumption, and there were benefits to be had from drinking beer given the purification methods unknowingly used in the brewing process (as well as from the calorific intake; Vallee 1993; Burnett 1999). ‘Weak beer’ and other weak drinks, therefore, seem to have been common even before the industrial revolution, although in some cases they were barely alcoholic (Wilson and Gourvish 1993:4). Drunkenness was generally accepted as part of human life but repeated drunkenness was sometimes seen negatively, and there are many cases of a ‘generalized disapproval’ of breaking legal or moral codes (Thom 2001). In some cases this disapproval has been heightened by the perception that alcohol could fuel challenges to the social order, leading to a long history of access to alcohol reflecting external power structures (Tannahill 1988). Slaves, for example, have nearly always been forced to be abstinent (Sournia 1990), while women’s drinking was disapproved of in, for example, Ancient Greece – in contrast to women’s close involvement in the production and sale of alcohol prior to the industrial revolution (Plant 1997).

It is, therefore, unsurprising that the first legal considerations of alcohol dealt with either public order or issues relating to the production of alcoholic drinks, such as forbidding their adulteration (the earliest globally being 4,000 years ago (Hammurabi (translated by King) 2000)). Other laws were motivated by the particular concerns of the specific time and place (such as grain shortages), but these again rarely included public health. Sometimes public drinking places were associated with public order disturbances and unrest, and English justices of the peace could suppress alehouses in the fifteenth century (Thom 2001). In the mid-nineteenth century in France they were even associated with rebellion, leading to attempts by Louis Napoleon to suppress French drinking establishments in 1848 (Barrows and Room 1991; Haine 2003). Rulers often also tried to gain economically from the production and distribution of alcohol, with alcohol duties forming a large part of government income in the early modern period before the introduction of income taxes (Moskalewicz and

Zielinski 1995; see also Chapter 3). Despite these concerns, alternate uses and power structures, all levels of society seem to have got drunk on certain occasions, with, if anything, the higher classes having had the greater access to alcohol (Porter 1985).

DRINKING THROUGH THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Although a trade in alcohol had existed since Roman times, this was hampered by both the scale of production and the difficulties in getting perishable, bulky products across long distances. This all changed in Europe from the late middle ages, with stronger, less-perishable spirits and fortified wines becoming widely available by the end of the sixteenth century (Sournia 1990; Vallee 1993). Accompanying these stronger drinks were wider changes in the world around alcohol, including urbanization, improved transportation links and the wider consequences of the industrial revolution, itself encompassing a number of moves that evolved at different speeds and in different ways across Europe. These created previously unthinkable markets for commercial producers, with family businesses ever-more replaced by large breweries and distilleries, who were able to take advantage of later scientific advances to further improve the scale of production (Wilson and Gourvish 1993; Anderson 2003; Room 2006).

These developments meant that from an early stage of the industrial revolution, alcohol was more available, stronger and cheaper than ever before. Unsurprisingly, this led to sharp increases in the consumption of alcohol across Europe (Knapp 1998) – and in particular, in the consumption of the urban working classes. Drunkenness, therefore, became progressively more common, more public and more associated with poverty (Porter 1985; Barrows and Room 1991). The most commonly cited example of this can be found in the ‘gin mania’ in England from the late seventeenth to mid-eighteenth centuries, following abundant grain harvests and political moves to increase spirits production to undercut the burgeoning trade in imported French products. The number of gin shops exploded – one estimate suggests that one in four houses in the Westminster and City areas of London were dram-shops (Burnett 1999) – and the visible problems prompted a series of legislation in the first half of the eighteenth century (Warner 2002).

Other explosions of drunkenness can be seen elsewhere in Europe during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, sometimes similarly prompted by liberalising policy measures. For example, the 1816 Spirits Act in Norway allowing home distillation was followed by an estimated fivefold increase in spirits consumption, eventually drawing a response in more restrictive Acts in the 1840s (Hauge 1978). Concerns in France in the late nineteenth century, however, were triggered by non-government forces, primarily the phylloxera virus that devastated French vines and led to a growing taste for spirits. When the new grafted hybrid vines eventually produced new wine crops, the French added the spirits to their original wine consumption (Brennan 2003), resulting in substantially increased consumption and growing public concern (Barrows and Room 1991; Preswich 2003). Despite this, the changes of the early modern period were much less dramatic in parts of Europe where industrialization was slower or shallower, including many of the wine-producing regions (wine being relatively harder to mass produce than beer or spirits).

MASS MOVEMENTS AND ALCOHOL

The period of change from the late eighteenth and especially nineteenth centuries saw the rise of a 'temperance movement' across much of Europe, looking to respond to the increasingly visible problems from alcohol. The movement was not initially for prohibition but instead focused on members drinking in moderation in their own lives (as the word 'temperate' suggests), motivated by an opposition to the "evils of spirits". In several countries it became a broad working-class movement (Barrows and Room 1991), being both relevant to everyday concerns (Tyrell 1991) and providing an opportunity to participate in public life (Thom 2001). The temperance message, nevertheless, spread unevenly in Europe, tending to be stronger in Protestant countries than Catholic ones and amongst Protestants than Catholics (Barrows and Room 1991; Levine 1993) – although there were exceptions, such as the Catholic temperance movements in Ireland and Poland (Bretherton 1991; Swiatkiewicz and Moskalewicz 2003).

The movement was generally largest in English-speaking and Nordic countries, but there were also significant groups in some central and eastern European countries, with peak membership of 100,000 or more in Denmark, France, and Poland (Swiatkiewicz and Moskalewicz 2003; Preswich 2003; Eriksen 2003). There were, however, some countries where temperance was never adopted outside of small, usually religious elites, and these tended to be in southern Europe (e.g. Spain, Italy). The temperance movement also had some impact internationally, due to concerns that the trade in spirits (with some of the indigenous populations of colonial territories) was fuelling violence that in turn fed the slave trade (Fidler 2001; Willis 2003; Lewis 2003). Despite tentative agreements with other European colonial powers on restricting the spirits trade, the main result of this movement was the prohibition zones in British colonies in East and West Africa (Room 2005a).

Many of the countries where temperance was strongest adopted a prohibition of alcohol in the early years of the twentieth century (Finland, Iceland, the US, and Russia), while other countries either adopted partial prohibitions (Norway) or allowed individual areas to vote on prohibition (including Denmark, Poland and Norway), often known as the 'local option'. Where support was less strong, or after prohibition was seen to fail, political elites often adopted a compromise position of alcohol control; that is, a way of making alcohol available in a way to minimize the harms from drinking through such policies as state monopolies (Room 2004; Room 2005a). Many of the laws were explicitly targeted at the 'new problem' of spirits, including heavy taxes in Denmark (1917) and Germany (1887) that in both cases contributed to a move towards beer (Eriksen 2003; Spode 2003).

THE IDEA OF ADDICTION

Although habitual drunkenness was sometimes the subject of disapproval throughout European history, it was only in the late-eighteenth- and early nineteenth-centuries that the loss of self-control began to be seen as part of the explanation. The new paradigm of addiction is usually attributed to Thomas Trotter and particularly Benjamin Rush (physicians from Scotland and America respectively), who argued that these people suffered from a 'disease of the will' (Levine 1978; Thom 2001). Nevertheless, there were several less-developed precursors to this during the earlier part of the eighteenth-century (Porter 1985; Knapp 1998), and it is better to see these

ideas as the culmination of developments such as the increase in general medical understanding and the medicalization of new fields such as mental illness. Perhaps the most important of these contextual factors is the ideology of personal willpower (Levine 1978), which has been argued to explain the much greater concerns with drinking and drunkenness in the Protestant countries where self-control is culturally salient (Levine 1993; Engs 1995).

The first voluntary homes for inebriates were set up in the US, generally reflecting the ideologies and spirituality of the temperance groups that ran them (Baumohl and Room 1987). However, the medical recognition of alcohol addiction that took root during the nineteenth century led to the movement of treatment into the medical sphere with larger, compulsory asylums run on less spiritual lines (Porter 1985). Both the homes and then the asylums were copied by European countries, and by the year 1900 there were treatment facilities of some form in Austria, Finland, France, Germany, Ireland, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the UK (Baumohl and Room 1987). By the early twentieth century there were quite sophisticated structures in several of these countries, with several levels of remedy available to coordinated boards or committees including both social control (such as work camps) and rehabilitation. Nevertheless, problems of addiction were sometimes marginalised at the turn of the century given the temperance focus on broader political solutions.

Addiction concepts swung back into fashion in the post-prohibition era in the USA, reformulated to look more at the 'sick individual' than anything intrinsic to alcohol itself (Levine 1978; Roizen 1991). This spread to Europe after World War Two, helped by the expanding Alcoholics Anonymous movement, and also fitted the dominant ideologies of consumerism and personal freedom (Mann, Hermann, and Heinz 2000; Room 2004). Such an ideology was however invisible in countries such as East Germany and Poland within the Soviet sphere of influence, where 'alcoholism' was instead seen as a relic of capitalist society for many years. It was only in the 1970s that humanistic psychiatric approaches to treatment emerged in these countries (Swiatkiewicz and Moskalewicz 2003; Spode 2003).

Most recently of all, the 'new public health movement' (of which this report is a part) once again feels comfortable looking at the full scale of 'alcohol-related harm', rather than compartmentalising all alcohol-related problems with a small number of 'alcoholics' (Berridge 1989; Thom 2001).

ALCOHOL IN EUROPE: PAST AND PRESENT

In today's Europe, alcohol is a part of events as diverse as everyday meals, religious services and celebrations (e.g. Gamella 1995; Beccaria and Sande 2003). People drink for many more reasons than the single factors proposed by early anthropologists, reflecting the variety of meanings which alcohol possesses for different people at different times (Moore 2001; see also the discussion of young people in Chapter 4). Meaning is also evident in the *production* of alcohol in many parts of Europe, such as the importance of the home-made *Vin Santo* reported in Tuscany by Calabresi (Calabresi 1987; see also the discussion of production in Chapter 3). Despite this variety of meanings, drinking can generally be described as a social activity (at least for most drinkers), taking part within the context of drinkers' relationships with each other and with the world more generally (Hunt and Barker 2001).

It is therefore, unsurprising, that drinking is also a highly symbolic activity, with all aspects of drinking – type of drink, time and place of drinking, drinking companions and way of drinking – containing meanings for both the drinker and those around them. For example, alcoholic drinks in modern industrialised societies can serve as a marker of time and mood, dividing between alcohol-free work environments and leisure time in evenings and particularly weekends (Gusfield 1987). It can also be part of the definition of a particular social event, such as the separation between *sekt* (drunk on formal, fixed, traditional holidays) and *schnapps* (drunk to show intimacy at spontaneous moments) in the Viennese basin in Austria (Thornton 1987). Drunkenness itself is also subject to social expectations and interpretations, with ‘drunken comportment’ – how people act under the influence of alcohol – varying across countries (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969; Room 2001). Evidently these expectations can also be different as times and contexts change, as is clear from a description of the Munich Oktoberfest as unusually “close to a visit to the wilderness” in some *Kniepe* (German pubs; Vogt 1995). Drunken comportment has significant implications for certain consequences of drinking, and is discussed in more detail in Chapters 5 and 6.

Given that this report focuses primarily on countries, it must be remembered that ‘one country’ does not equal ‘one culture’, with boundaries between ‘cultures’ reflecting more than mere political definitions (Wilson 2004). Cultures also include different groups and subcultures who vary in their drinking behaviour, some of which (age, gender, socioeconomic status) are looked at in the latter half of Chapter 4. Identity can be important in these patterned differences, as described for drunkenness in different youth networks within a single school in New Zealand (Abel and Plumridge 2004). Certain drinks and ways of using alcohol are felt to be linked to a regional or national identity, with the identity itself partially constructed through drinking behaviour (Moore 1990; Nahoum-Grappe 1995; Gamella 1995; Wilson 2004). *Non*-use of alcohol can equally be an important marker, such as by contemporary Muslims in European societies for whom abstinence is linked to religious belief, and in turn can become a mark of identity (Amundsen, Rossow, and Skurtveit 2005; Room 2005b).

Despite the variety of meanings of drinking in Europe, several overarching typologies of ‘drinking cultures’ have been attempted (see review in Room and Mäkelä 2000), sometimes arguing that these reflect the historical legacies described above dating back to Roman times (Engs 1995). These divide countries into such divisions as ‘wet’ versus ‘dry’ or ‘temperance’ versus ‘non-temperance’ cultures, often packaging the production, pattern, ‘drunken comportment’ and response to alcohol within these dichotomies.

However, to take but one example, the picture produced by the (albeit limited) studies of disapproval and peer/family influence do not bear out such simple divisions. One relatively small study found variations between cultures in levels of disapproval but this generally reflected patterns in disapproving of a whole range of conditions (ranging from pregnancy to obesity). For drunkenness, the UK and Spain showed similar levels of disapproval, and no systematic trend could be seen overall (Room *et al.* 2001).¹ Similarly, a single question in the ECAS surveys asking if people had attempted to influence anyone they know about their drinking found no

¹ Given the context of the research investigation (universalism and diversity in views on disability), it is possible that the results are reactions to alcohol dependence rather than simply intoxication. Furthermore, comparative surveys are subject to multiple possible biases (see chapter 4), and this survey had a very small sample size. Nevertheless, the indicative results from the study are of interest here, particularly in the context of results discussed later in the report.

clear pattern. For example, those in Italy were more likely to say anything than those in Finland or Sweden, who in turn were more likely to say something than those in France (Hemström, Leifman, and Ramstedt 2001; Hemström 2002b). Further examples of related generalisations, exceptions and complications are discussed throughout this report, particularly in Chapters 4 and 6.

Irrespective of these debates, the essence of this section is to show that alcohol has both meaning and history within Europe – or more properly, meanings and histories that vary within and between countries. The world that the coming chapters investigate – covering the production, use, consequences of and responses to alcohol – is, therefore, one that is meaningful for drinkers and non-drinkers alike. The present situation of alcohol in Europe does not come from a blank slate, but instead comes from a long history of practices and meanings, that are themselves changing, as will be outlined in this report.

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