

The Politics of Alcohol: a History of the Drink Question in England

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In Britain today, alcohol is a topic of concern to the government, media, and academics alike. The papers tell of 'Binge Britain', and academics inform us that there is a new kind of drinking and intoxication that attracts young people to our city centres. In 2003 the government made perhaps the most dramatic change to licensing since the First World War – in the name of changing people's drinking habits – and has commissioned research and spent millions of pounds on public education campaigns to address what it sees as the serious problem of young people's drinking. James Nicholls' historical consideration of drinking and the politics surrounding it is therefore timely, particularly given the way in which historical precedent such as the 'Gin Craze' is itself invoked in the media to understand British drinking patterns today [\(1\)](#) and the common criticism that New Labour (and especially Tony Blair) have no 'sense of history'. [\(2\)](#)

Despite being called *The Politics of Alcohol*, the book is not a study of high politics and policy-making. John Greenaway has already provided an account of alcohol policy in Britain in this vein, running from 1830 to 1970. [\(3\)](#) Nicholls' work differs from this in two key respects. First, he covers a much broader period, from the Reformation up to the present day, with a discussion of 24-hour drinking in the light of the implementation of the 2003 Licensing Act. Second, he makes a more determined attempt to place government debates in the wider cultural context of the time, looking at parallel discussions in the media and developments in contemporary political philosophy. As a result, Nicholls pays significant attention to public debates, including the course of the Temperance movement. Yet unlike Brian Harrison's influential *Drink and the Victorians* [\(4\)](#), his analytic objectives take the book beyond a focus on the Temperance movement alone, though partly simply as a consequence of the wide historical sweep of the work. *The Politics of Alcohol* therefore addresses something of a gap in the existing literature, where there is little work focused solely on alcohol with such a broad analytical and chronological sweep.

Nicholls' starting point is that 'ideas about drink provide an insight into the wider culture' of British society (pp. 2–3). Thus, the views he traces regarding alcohol and intoxication are marshalled to tell us something about how society viewed wider issues such as rationality, responsibility, godliness and pleasure. Nicholls is drawn again and again to the nature of freedom and liberty (and indeed *liberalism*) in relation to alcohol and the state. In a sense, the book is an attempt to tell the story of the never-ending waxing and waning of the competing philosophies of persuasion and coercion in effecting a solution to the underlying 'question' of alcohol.

The book is arranged into short chapters each broadly covering a short chronological period. These bite size chunks, along with Nicholls' easy style of writing, make the book an entertaining and engaging read. However, in this sense Nicholls is a victim of his own success, as the vignettes in each chapter often whet the appetite for a more detailed examination of the complex and intriguing issues he sketches – a detailed and nuanced examination which is often lacking in the existing literature, but which this work cannot fully offer due to its wide sweep.

Importantly, Nicholls succeeds in drawing out the ways in which consumption of alcohol was viewed differently depending on what was drunk, by whom, and where. In discussing the differences in drinking, Nicholls reveals issues of class, wealth and status. The strength of his account here is its careful analysis. He observes that distinctions were not simply created through a condemnation of lower-class drinking and silence on the issue of consumption by elites. Rather, the elite was actively constructed through the formalisation of distinctions between, for example, alehouses and taverns in the 16th century. The 1552 Licensing Act set limits on the number of taverns allowed in each city, and imposed strict approval processes for becoming a tavern keeper. Taverns were not the category of establishments associated with the lower classes; they were in fact the most exclusive of the three-tiered system of licensing: alehouses, inns and taverns. The purpose of these exacting regulations was not to limit drinking, but to protect the social status of a set of elite establishments being devalued by proliferation. Conversely, in the 17th century, alcohol consumption became a phenomenon through which, according to Nicholls, the social elite could be attacked by the aspirational middle classes for a lack of godliness and public morality.

In this way, Nicholls illustrates the importance of class without reducing the issue to a conception of the out-of-control carnivalesque working classes in opposition to the controlled, rational middle classes – a theme on which there is already plenty of material.⁽⁵⁾ The history of the construction of class through drinking is about much more than the denigration of excessive working-class practices and turning a blind eye to middle- or upper-class actions, a complexity Nicholls conveys well.

At the same time, he does not disregard the way in which excessive drinking was frequently construed as a problem exclusive to the lower orders of society. He observes, for example, that the 1736 Gin Act stated that action was necessary because of the prevalence of gin consumption among 'the people of lower and inferior rank', which led to 'the destruction of their healths, rendering them unfit for useful labour and business, debauching their morals, and citing them to all manner of vices' (quoted p. 38). Notably, all these perceived problems of alcohol consumption have been invoked in the past hundred years to regulate (or de-regulate) the alcohol industry in Britain.

Nicholls looks at stated motivations and accounts of drinking practices with a critical (some might say cynical) eye. He describes how Habermas has portrayed the coffee houses as emblematic and supporting of sober Enlightenment rationality in contrast with the drunkenness of alehouses and taverns, before attacking this argument. Nicholls instead sees in coffee house culture a deliberate, oppositional cultivation of an impression of sobriety and rationality to acquire cultural power. Similarly, on the early temperance societies, with their reluctance to condemn alcohol consumption *per se*, preferring to condemn spirit drinking specifically, Nicholls states: 'Abstaining from spirits, even when coupled with the promise to only use other drinks in moderation, was without doubt an act of cultural self-assertion as much as it was an act of moral reform' (p. 98). The idea that the discourses surrounding alcohol worked to cement forms of social

distinction is a persuasive one; but this is not quite the same as the idea that the adherence to such discourses is a deliberate act of self-assertion. Nicholls' presentation of these ideas can be seen to suggest that class and power are formed through calculated, rational actions (or statements). However, one of the reasons class is so powerful and pervasive is that, as Bourdieu argues, it works at a deeper level: we are *disgusted* by something that does not accord with our aesthetic disposition, and this disposition is so inculcated that it (often, of not always) seems *natural*, rather than something consciously created.[\(6\)](#)

Nicholls is adept at drawing attention to how drinking practices, tastes and fashions were related to politics and technology. It is worth remembering Hogarth's 'Beer Street' as well as his 'Gin Lane', and recalling the association of Whigs with beer and Tories with wine. Wine was not always a respectable establishment drink; indeed, it was understood by many in the 17th century to be a sign of loyalty to the Popish French. Port was invented as a way of drinking wine without sacrificing one's principles of politics or taste, and therefore was as much a drink of political necessity as one of social distinction.

The combination of politics and technology is also important to Nicholls in understanding the 'Gin Craze'. He describes distillation as a 'paradigm shift' (p. 35), which, despite the popularity of whisk(e)y in Scotland and Ireland, only took hold in England with the emergence of brandy into the market in the 17th century. However, as with wine, brandy suffered from being manufactured in France, and the consumption of a patriotic alternative – Dutch 'geneva', which became known as gin – was therefore encouraged by William III.

Later, the new drink of porter and the general development of the brewing industry in the late 19th century were results of technical changes in the brewing process that enabled beer to last for longer, and also developments in transport technology that allowed it to be transported more quickly. Breweries became national companies, and this shaped the scene in which alcohol policy was made – brewers became rich and influential in politics – a point reflected in their prominence in Greenaway's account of policy-making in the 19th century.[\(7\)](#)

As well as linking developments to technology, Nicholls takes pains to point out how alcohol policy changed according to economic factors. In 1724 Bernard Mandeville pointed out that while alcohol (specifically gin) induced vice its manufacture created numerous respectable jobs: toolmakers, corn-reapers, maltsters and carriage-drivers, for example. Gin – and more generally alcohol – was, and has been since, a prism through which society's debates surrounding the moral status of the economy are focused. In fact, as Nicholls suggests, alcohol can be seen as something of a perfect product for selling in the 'market', given its 'extraordinary capacity to dematerialise money' (p. 52).

The economic value of the alcohol industry is still emphasised by the UK government. Policy documents aiming to reduce 'harms' associated with alcohol are framed by the acknowledgements of the value of alcohol to the UK economy. The 2004 Alcohol Strategy for England, produced to account for concern that the implementation of the 2003 Licensing Act would lead to an increase in alcohol-related harms, was careful to observe that the latest statistics available showed that the alcohol industry was worth over £30bn, and supported a million jobs.[\(8\)](#)

Nicholls is at his strongest when he relates attitudes towards alcohol to the political philosophy of the time. For example, even while he attacks the Habermasian ideal of communication, he is careful to show how the ideal was powerful *as an idea*, rather than an objective description of reality. Lockean distinctions between rationality and irrationality were crucial to political and philosophical debates of the day, and thus framed discussions of alcohol – as indeed they do today. As Nicholls puts it: ‘If drunkenness was a voluntary reordering of the self, then which part of an individual’s humanity was curtailed when a person apparently lost the capacity to choose whether to drink or not?’ (pp. 63–4). In this in-depth (if somewhat inconclusive) discussion of drunkenness, rationality, self and addiction, Nicholls goes further than many sociologists and social psychologists, who tend to recycle the adage that addiction is a modern concept born of 19th- and 20th-century psychology.

This theme of the unavoidable tensions surrounding alcohol in terms of individual responsibility, rationality and liberalism runs right through the book. While Fielding agonised over a ‘new kind of drunkenness’, Daniel Defoe set up a defence of the distillers on the basis of the principles of free trade and individual responsibility. The same dialectic animates contemporary debates surrounding alcohol. As Nicholls himself suggests, prohibition has been demonstrated to be at best ineffectual, but many would argue that the current liberal system in place in Britain is equally unworkable given the time, money and lives that are lost in the face of alcohol consumption. The lesson that Nicholls offers us from history, then, is that there are no complete solutions to the problem of drinking.

I would have liked to know more about those who were actually drinking, and their motivations and perceptions of the public discourses Nicholls so fluently discusses. However, Nicholls makes no claim to be writing a social history of alcohol; this is a book about changing attempt over time to govern and regulate alcohol consumption, and how these attempts made sense as part of broader ideologies. As I suggested above, this is certainly where the work is strongest, outing particularly persuasive links between class and discourses surrounding drink.

The expansive historical sweep of Nicholls’ book draws out an important theme that is often lost in contemporary debate surrounding alcohol: the current political approach represents a ‘sea-change’ from the long-term historical tendency (p. 226). The economy in alcohol has long been viewed as something to be controlled; at most the brewers were to be left to their own devices. Now, this alcoholic economy is something to be actively cultivated and supported. The ‘sea-change’ might therefore be seen as part of a broader trend towards *neo-liberalism* in politics, though that would be a claim for a different book to address. Nicholls is right to state that *Time for Reform* – the White Paper that morphed into the Licensing Act 2003 – was ‘written as if history was a mere diversion’ (p. 228). One might hope that this book will help to change such attitudes.

Notes

1. See *Sunday Express*, ‘Time to get tough and end a binge-drinking epidemic’, 22 March 2009 < <http://www.express.co.uk/posts/view/90532/Time-to-get-tough-and-end-a-binge-drinking-epidemic> [2] > [accessed 31 December 2009]. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. E.g. Helena Kennedy, cited in Huw Richards, ‘How will history judge Prime Minister Tony Blair?’, *Times Higher Education*, 4 March 2005 < <http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=194553§ioncode=26> [3] > [accessed 4 January 2010]. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. John Greenaway, *Drink and British Politics since 1830: a Study in Policy-Making* (Basingstoke, 2003). [Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Brian Harrison, *Drink and The Victorians: The Temperance Question in England 1815–1872* (2nd ed., Keele, 1994). [Back to \(4\)](#)
5. E.g. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1984); Peter Stallybrass and Allon White, *The Politics and Poetics of Transgression*.

(Ithaca, NY, 1986).[Back to \(5\)](#)

6. Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice (London, 1984).[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. For a single case of how this occurred in Liverpool, see Christopher Routledge, *Cain's: The Story of Liverpool in a Pint* (Liverpool, 2008).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. Cabinet Office, *Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England* (London, 2004).[Back to \(8\)](#)

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