

ALCOHOL AS AN INSTRUMENT OF INTIMATE DOMINATION

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Alcohol as an Instrument of Intimate Domination

Much modern literature on drug policies has emphasized the denial of drugs to subject populations as a means of maintaining moral hegemony over them. Gusfield's classic work (1963) explored this theme in terms of the cultural conflict over alcohol in nineteenth century America. In the recent era of U.S. cultural conflict over opiates and marijuana, the emphasis has been on the processes of criminalization of what was seen as a subject group's drug. Stauffer (1971) and Himmelstein (1978) have re-emphasized, on the other hand, the use of drugs by dominant groups as an "opiate for the masses." The promotion -- rather than denial -- of use of drugs by dominant groups can function to divert or dissipate potential political energies or to promote confusion or dispiritedness. In a frontier or colonial situation, drugs -- particularly manufactured drugs like alcohol -- are a useful commodity for trade, since they are readily "used up" and tend to sustain their own demand, and thus can be used to create a perpetual flow of raw materials such as furs (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; Pan, 1975). In a related fashion in an industrialized statist society, alcohol is a cheaply-produced high-markup commodity for "using up" otherwise unsatisfied consumer purchasing power.

I would propose that there is another way in which drugs, and in particular alcohol, have been used as an instrument of domination. This is as an excuse or explanation for physical violence or other aggressive action on the part of the dominant party. Use of alcohol in this way is related to two cultural conditions on alcohol use:

(1) The tendency, noted some time ago by Knupfer (Knupfer and Room, 1964), for alcohol use, and particularly drunkenness, to be a prerogative of statuses with full citizenship rights in a society -- or, to put it the other way, for alcohol to be denied to slaves, women, servants, native populations, prisoners, children and other such subservient estates. While this denial is often legal (e.g. currently for children;

historically for American Indians), it often operates through informal cultural norms, e.g. the strong cultural norm in the contemporary U.S. against heavy drinking for women (Clark, 1964). Knufper (1964) has assembled data suggesting that for women in the U.S. the norm is not so much a generalized prescription that all women should drink less than all men but rather a prescription specified to the man with whom a woman keeps company -- that wives should drink less than whatever their husbands drink.

(2) The strong cultural belief that alcohol causes "disinhibition" (Pernanen, 1976), and thus that drinking or drunkenness explains violent, vicious or otherwise unconscionable behavior. This belief has held a powerful sway in our cultural milieu for many years, even attaining a formal status in the criminal law in some circumstances as an explanation mitigating murder or other serious offenses (Epstein, 1978). In a number of disparate fields, evidence has begun to build up that the connection between alcohol and disinhibition is a matter of cultural belief rather than pharmacological action. This is suggested by MacAndrew and Edgerton's (1969) review of anthropological data showing large cultural variations in the effects of drunkenness on comportment; by Levine's (1977) historical argument that while eighteenth-century Americans saw alcohol as making one clumsy, they did not usually see it as making one mean, vicious or violent -- the latter belief becoming accepted as part of nineteenth century temperance ideology; by experimental psychological findings in "balanced placebo designs" (Marlatt and Rohsenow, 1979) that the belief one is drinking alcohol, and not the actual fact of consumption of alcohol, produces aggression and male sexual arousal in college students; and by the general lack of findings of a pharmacological link of alcohol and aggression, despite extensive research (Pernanen, 1976).

The link between alcohol and disinhibition, whether cultural or pharmacological, creates a right for might: force is excused, where there is no other basis for legitimacy,

by the action of "the bottle." Where a dominating party has a monopoly of or advantage in the means of violence, the link between alcohol and disinhibition by itself makes alcohol a potent instrument of domination. Thus if two hostile parties both get drunk, both may become disinhibited and pick a fight; but if one party is armed with machine guns and the other with clubs, alcohol has de-facto become the means to domination by those with superior force. Similarly, if a husband gets drunk and has a fight with his wife, but he outweighs her by 50 pounds, outreaches her by three inches, and is physically stronger, he is likely to win a tussle no matter whether the wife is drunk or sober.

From the point of view of the dominant party, the trouble with this scenario is the existence of potential "equalizers": the Indians may acquire guns as well as the frontiersmen or the wife may pick up a kitchen knife to defend herself -- or the wife may outweigh the husband or the child outgrow the parent. The first cultural condition on alcohol use noted above, the denial of drinking or drunkenness to subservient statuses, solves this problem for the powerful, in part as a reflection of the cultural belief in alcohol's power to disinhibit: to limit access to alcohol is to limit access to the means of disinhibition. Alcohol then becomes an instrument of domination not only because it excuses otherwise illegitimate force where the parties have unequal access to force, but also because the excuse is only made available to the dominant party.

In present-day America, the use of alcohol for domination is clearest in the family situation. Researchers on family violence have suggested that in some wife-beating cases the husband gets drunk in order to beat the wife (Gelles, 1972). Dobash has noted how frequently alcohol serves as a rhetoric of explanation in such cases (Aarens et al., 1977, p.554). For child abuse, the evidence is more scattered, although McCaghy (1968) has noted the offender's preference for "drunkenness" explanations of child molestation. But historically, the use of alcohol for domination has occurred also at other status boundaries. Despite all the worries in the dominant white culture about Indian drinking and the various attempts to control it (Mosher, 1975), it can be

argued that the biggest problem on the frontier was the frontiersman's drinking (MacAndrew and Edgerton, 1969; Winkler, 1968; Rorabaugh, 1979). Similarly, after a careful consideration of white worries about slaves' drinking in the antebellum South, and of the reality of the lack of a serious drinking problem among the slaves, Genovese concludes that indeed "the slaves did have a drinking problem, about which they often commented, but it concerned their master's drinking" (1974, p. 646).

So far in the era of the modern feminist movement, little attention has been paid to the issue of alcohol as an instrument of domination in family life (but see Morgan, 1979). The major ripple of concern about women's issues in the alcoholism movement has been about gaining better treatment resources for female alcoholics. Meetings about women and alcoholism have in fact been cool or hostile to findings that heavy drinking among women has not increased and that problem-drinking women may not be hugely underrepresented in treatment facilities, and to the suggestion that women's biggest problem with drinking may be their men's drinking.* This lack of attention is in marked contrast to the earlier women's movement in its association with the temperance movement. The assertion that drinking caused "wifewhipping" was in fact a temperance tenet well before the rise of the women's movement (Chipman, 1845). But the hallmark of the Women's Christian Temperance Union in its dual commitment to temperance and women's issues was "home protection" (Levine, forthcoming). To some extent temperance was seen as a women's issue because of the status of the saloon as a counterattraction to the home, a masculine refuge (Powers, 1979). But a predominant concern was with the direct effects of alcohol in the home, as exemplified in hundreds of temperance novels and tales of the wife and children cowering before the husband's drunken onslaught (Levine, 1977; forthcoming).

So far the argument put forward here concerns alcohol's potential function as an instrument of domination, given the belief in disinhibition, in any situation of unequal

* This sentence reflects my experience with a mostly female audience at a Southeast States conference on the topic of women and alcoholism in South Carolina in 1978.

power. However, I would contend that there are particular situations of dominance where alcohol proves especially useful to the dominant party. There are, after all, many available instruments for establishing and maintaining power, and many of them are much more direct than alcohol. Where the two parties live apart from each other or contact is only sporadic, the powerful need have few compunctions about using more direct means of control, including straightforward terror or armed occupation. But where the parties live in close proximity every day, and where there is some mutual dependence so that the dominant party has continuing needs to be satisfied by the subservient party, many of the more direct means of control are unavailable or would be self-defeating. Even formal legal rights of one estate over another may be only uncomfortably enforced by a master on house slaves or on apprentices, a husband on a wife, or a parent on a child. It is in these circumstances that alcohol becomes a particularly useful tactic of domination. It legitimates irrationality, and thus cannot be countered with sweet reason. It is an external agent rather than an inherent characteristic of the actor, and thus the alcohol excuse does not permanently destroy the moral standing of the actor (see McCaghy, 1968; but also see below). Dobash suggests that for the wife as well as the husband, an alcohol explanation of wifebeating is often convenient, as an explanation of how she can continue to live with her husband after the beating: it "makes the fact of being beaten by one's husband somehow less personal and horrific" (Aarens, et al., 1977, p. 554). On the other hand, drunkenness is recognized by all concerned as a potentially repeatable performance. Thus the mere threat to go drinking acquires the power that a raised stick would have: a drunken beating can be used to terrorize the subordinate party long afterwards, without any threat of violence needing to be uttered.

A related type of situation where the alcohol explanation is particularly useful is where the norms of domination are in flux -- for instance, in periods of transition when the moral legitimacy of rules of domination from a previous era has been undermined. Examples would be where a husband's rights of domination are not legally

enforceable, or where a parent giving a child a thrashing is no longer supported by the larger society as admirable behavior. Here, again, the characteristics of alcohol as an external agent, of drinking as a potentially repeatable behavior, and of drunkenness as inherently unreasonable, support an exertion of raw power and the implicit threat of its repetition without directly and explicitly challenging the official egalitarian rules or ethos. Thus drunken wifewhipping in the 1830's and drunken childbeating in the 1940's may be viewed to some extent as rearguard actions in support of rules of domination of a previous era: a few years earlier, drunkenness would not have been needed as an explanation of an episode of customary behavior in which the actor may have gotten just a little "carried away." Alcohol thus becomes an instrument to reinforce or reassert intimate domination particularly in a time of at least partial emancipation of the subservient from the dominant.

What can the subservient do to neutralize alcohol's power as an instrument of domination? One obvious answer -- the approach of the nineteenth century women's movement -- is to deny alcohol to the dominant party through moral suasion or legal prohibition.

There is also the opposite alternative -- to make alcohol equally available to the subservient as to the dominant. Some scattered moves in this direction have been made in the era of the modern women's movement -- e.g. "integrating" or suing for equal access to bars, restaurants, clubs and other drinking places where business is customarily transacted. But apart from the question of whether issues of the rights of the subservient should be focused around equal access to liver cirrhosis and drunk driving casualties, this strategy has the difficulty, noted above, that equalizing drunkenness does not equalize strength or other power.

A third alternative strategy is already in practical effect for relations between husbands and wives, as an unnoticed side-effect of the success of the modern alcoholism movement. Most people in alcoholism treatment are male, most of them are in

treatment under some kind of pressure, and a great deal of the pressure comes from their family, and particularly their wives. Over half of all calls to alcoholism referral services come from relatives rather than from persons enquiring on their own behalf (Corrigan, 1974). Without a great deal of public consciousness about it, the alcoholism movement has put a number of new tools in the hand of those, mostly wives, who have reason to fear or worry about someone else's drinking. These tools potentially neutralize alcohol's role as an instrument of domination. The primary tool is an ideology -- the disease concept of alcoholism -- that redefines the problem from "the bottle" to "the man." Serious events associated with drunkenness are redefined as symptoms of an underlying moral disease for which the drinker needs help, and for which it is an act of loving care rather than treachery for the spouse to seek outside assistance. With this frame of consciousness, instead of calling in the police and risking the later recriminations, or retreating to a shelter for battered women and leaving the husband in possession of the home, the wife may be able to maneuver the husband into a period of treatment which gets him out of the home. Furthermore, the disease concept's definition of the husband's actions as sick rather than criminal or retrogressive denies his behavior authenticity in its own terms as rational and purposive action (Young, 1971).

Auxiliary tools offered to the wife by the alcoholism movement include a whole armamentarium of casefinding techniques which the burgeoning alcoholism treatment establishment has developed as means of "selling beds" (Room, 1979). These include television public service announcements showing a worried wife who calls out in anguish after a departing drunken husband, inviting those in this position to call for help, and ubiquitous lists of inclusively-oriented "warning signs" for alcoholism, which can function as authoritative references in domestic arguments over how behavior is to be interpreted. Various devices for consciousness-raising and collective support for emancipation for wives of alcoholics have also developed as part of the alcoholism movement, notably AlAnon, which starts from the premise of reassuring the wife that she is not responsible for her husband's drinking. Under the influence of alcoholism movement thought,

mechanisms have also developed to neutralize the husband's threat of future drinking. For instance, many courts impose, as a condition of probation for convictions for drunken acts, a requirement that the offender not drink at all for several years, which means that a threatened drinking episode might have more serious consequences for the offender than for the spouse.

Although it is thus a serviceable instrument for the oppressed, treatment for alcoholism is an expensive, cumbersome and often inappropriate strategy for removing alcohol's power as an instrument of intimate domination. But there is a potential fourth strategy. Unlike the three already mentioned, however, it depends upon the premise that the link between alcohol and violence is a matter of cultural belief rather than pharmacological action. With this premise, it is possible to embark on a strategy of cultural redefinition of the meaning of alcohol: that alcohol is not to be seen as an explanation of violence. If the power of alcohol as an instrument of domination is the power of a cultural belief that it causes violence, that power exists only so long as we go on believing in its power and acting and reacting on that basis.

To change this belief involves undoing one of the most durable conceptual legacies of the temperance movement, and is no light undertaking. By now the power of alcohol to make a person mean, vicious and violent is deeply entrenched in song, story, and consciousness. Such a redefinition is thus a matter for a sustained campaign of consciousness-changing, and not for a season of thirty-second television spots. But in the long run, such a strategy may be the most effective and socially desirable means of removing alcohol's power as an instrument of intimate domination.

An Afterword:

This piece is written in a propositional style, mostly without the usual "perhapses" and "partlies", to lay out the argument clearly. There are obviously other cultural

meanings of alcohol than those discussed here, and alcohol plays other roles in the interactions of intimate and other relations. Alcohol is sometimes a tool for the subordinate to manipulate the dominant (Trice and Belasco, 1970, pp. 225-230). In the rhetoric of the alcoholism movement and alcoholism treatment institutions about the effect of alcohol on the family, issues of domination have hardly been mentioned, although I would maintain they have had a covert reality. Sometimes spouses' worries about their partner's drinking seem exaggerated to an outside observer. Domination and force are not always in one direction across status boundaries — and if beaten wives are likely to hide themselves, beaten husbands are even more likely to do so. In intimate relations, physical force is often a process of reciprocal escalation, and in a struggle for psychological dominance the resort to physical force is often an admission of defeat. With all these caveats, I would still maintain that the argument presented here explores an important but neglected dimension of alcohol's action in social life, and that the directions of domination assumed in the text predominate by far in the status relations discussed.

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