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Alcohol and Crime: What Kind of Links, and Can We Break Them?¹

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It is a pleasure to be with you here and an honour to be starting off our substantive discussion. The topic we have taken on discussing together is enormously complicated, and we must not imagine that our weekend together will knit up all its complexities, but I hope we shall be able to do some unraveling that gives us some good loose ends for future weaving.

If you asked the conventional wisdom one hundred years ago whether alcohol caused crime, the most likely answer would be an unequivocal "yes". Temperance scholars had made exhaustive tours of the prisons, and had duly ascertained that two-thirds or three-quarters of prisoners admitted or were said to have been drunk when they committed their crime.

If you asked the same question twenty years ago, the answer from conventional wisdom would more likely have been "no". In fact, the question was mostly not asked, since even asking the question seemed an embarrassing throwback to temperance thinking. It was pointed out that the prisoners the Victorian reformers talked to also did a lot of drinking when they weren't committing crimes, and that it was also likely that drinking criminals were more likely to be caught and thus in prison than sober criminals, since drinking undoubtedly makes one clumsy. All the undoubted methodological problems in the old temperance-oriented studies were picked over and examined, leaving the conclusion that the relationship was not proven and the implication that it did not exist.

Now the pendulum has swung partway back, at least. In my own view, there are ways in which it makes sense to say drinking causes crime. In my remarks now, I want to lay out some ways in which that statement now makes sense.

Let us dispose first of the more trivial or obvious ways this is true. There are, first of all, a number of alcohol-specific crimes, some of which bulk large in the statistics. Drinking driving offenses are one large class, public drunkenness (or the disorderly conduct offenses that public drunkenness often masquerades behind in case public drunkenness is formally decriminalized) is another large class. Control of the conditions of selling and consumption of alcohol is mainly enforced by the licensing laws, but there are residual criminal offenses of illegal manufacture and sale and of underage drinking.

Secondly, I take it that noone would argue against the proposition that drinking is victimogenic) that is, that an intoxicated person is an easy mark for predatory crimes. In

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American slang, there is a specific and traditional criminal trade, the jackroller, who specializes in robbing drunks. Drunkenness in the victim also in some circumstances is taken as an invitation to rape.

We pay far too little attention to drunkenness in a victim as part of the causal structure of crime. The reason for the inattention, I believe, is that we still see drunkenness as a moral issue, and drunkenness in a victim of crime as diminishing the moral worthiness of the victim. Some years ago, David Miers demonstrated that victims who were drunk were substantially less likely than sober victims to receive compensation from the state victim compensation schemes in Britain and in Ontario. So there is good reason for those interested in the rights of the victim to shut up in our societies about the victim's drinking. Yet from a prevention perspective this is a mistake, since the interests of the victim and of state policy coincide in breaking the link between drinking and crime, while this is not necessarily the case for the perpetrator. There are things we can accomplish by recognizing that being intoxicated invites victimization.

So alcohol by definition causes alcohol-specific offenses, and undoubtedly contributes to victimization. But these are not the links which most interest people when they ask does drinking cause crime. What people are interested in instead is whether drunkenness does something pharmacologically to the mind of the drinker to turn Dr. Jekyll into Mr. Hyde, to turn a law-abiding citizen into a criminal monster. Popular thought about this is still redolent of nineteenth-century faculty-psychology thinking about drinking suppressing the action of the "higher centres of the brain") what Kai Pernanen has called the "disinhibition theory" of the link between alcohol and crime.

Ten or twenty years ago, people like myself tended to scoff at this theory. MacAndrew and Edgerton pointed out in their landmark book on Drunken Compartment that behavior when intoxicated took very different forms in different cultures. In some societies, the rules of behavior when intoxicated are extremely different from those when sober. The experience of feeling different which goes with intoxication is interpreted as time out, as a time for Dionysiac or heroic acts very much separated from ordinary life. In the middle are cultures like ours, where drinking does to some extent give a license for "time-out" behaviour, but where heroic intoxication is confined mostly to special circumstances or subcultures. The idea of a license for "time out" behaviour is supported by elegant experiments by Marlatt, Lang and other social psychologists who showed that, for American college students, it was the belief they were getting alcohol rather than whether there was actually alcohol in the drink which changed their behavior. At the other extreme in terms of drinking and disinhibition are southern European wine cultures, which you could argue have spent a thousand years perfecting the miracle of turning wine into water) constructing rules of behavior that force working class men to struggle heroically to show no effects no matter how much they have drunk.

Now we are not so sure that culture and personality are all there is to disinhibition. Steele and others have talked of an "alcoholic myopia") that drunkenness foreshortens our view of the past and the future, and thus partly uncouples our behavior in the present from our apprehension of possible future consequences. In this sense, some vestige of the idea of pharmacological disinhibition has come back into the literature.

Even so, MacAndrew and Edgerton and others have reminded us how different drunken compartment is in different cultures, and thus how large the cultural element must be in any

linking of drunkenness with criminal behavior. It is clear that a large part of what drinking does to us is determined by what we believe drinking will do to us.

The strongest evidence at this point of a direct link between drinking and crime comes from aggregate-level data. Lenke and Norström have each shown, in well-constructed autoregressive time series analyses, that the homicide rate goes up and down in Sweden in accordance with the rise and fall of alcohol consumption levels in the society. A series of studies of what happens when alcohol distribution strikes temporarily affect the availability of alcohol have shown dramatic short-term effects from even modest changes in the supply) - effects on casualty ward injury admission rates, on assault and battery case rates, on family violence rates. It is possible that these changes simply reflect changes in the rates of drunken potential victims, but it seems likely they also reflect changes in rates of alcohol-related aggressive behavior.

One caveat about these studies is that, like alcohol research in general, they tend to have been done in societies which worry a lot about alcohol -- cultures like Scandinavia and the English-speaking countries which combine, by no accident, histories of more or less explosive drunkenness with histories of strong temperance sentiments. There are some straws in the wind which suggest that the link between alcohol consumption levels and violent criminality may be much weaker in southern European wine cultures, where, as we have mentioned, alcohol has a very different cultural position.

What can be done about the link between drinking and violent behavior in cultures like ours? One answer, a very popular answer because it caters to economic vested interests and fits our libertarian predilections, is the argument for integrated drinking. If we just drank like the Italians, or the Jews, or the Chinese, the argument goes, if we just stopped worrying about drinking and relaxed and enjoyed it, the violent behavior would go away. This argument not just for social but for cultural engineering is breath-taking in its ambitions. Can one culture really learn to drink like another culture without taking on other linked attributes, without in a sense becoming the other culture? Even if this is possible, are we likely to have patience and sit back and absorb all the casualties along the way?

I would argue that more realistic strategies are needed. And these must be grounded in what we know about drinking, and for that matter about violence and other crime.

One thing which we know about drinking which is pretty much a cultural universal is that it is a social behavior -) that most drinking goes on in groups and that in fact drinking and the behavior that goes with it is often a performance in front of the others present. Drinking is, in fact, a medium of sociability, as Juha Partanen has recently argued) - the act of drinking together tends to carry a myriad of symbolic messages about comradeship and communion. Behavior while drinking is subject to a long list of shared expectancies: what the drinker and others in the situation think drinking will do or might do to the drinker's behavior. Influencing expectancies about drinking becomes, then, a plausible approach to preventing bad behavior related to drinking.

It is a plausible approach, but it may well prove difficult. Partanen goes on to argue that there is an inherent link between the sociability of drinking and intoxication from drinking, and that there are strong functions in societies like ours for what he calls "heroic drinking". To try to argue young unemployed men out of the idea that drunkenness offers a temporary respite from boredom, a quick entry into feelings of powerfulness and being of consequence, may be a difficult task indeed.

The social nature of most drinking is related to the pattern that drunkenness may be especially strongly related to group or collective violence. The football hooliganism which may well spring to your mind is just one manifestation of this. In a way that has been less noted, drunkenness seems to play a role in war crimes, and particularly in collective war crimes. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the free availability of spirits to the militias in former Yugoslavia has contributed to the viciousness of the war crimes there. Drunken collective violence may spiral into something really serious particularly in anomic situations, where the social rules are unclear or there is no clear authority. Often, then, it can be prevented simply by a police or other authoritative presence. If prevention fails, and if enough drinking has been going on, the drinking group will be in no shape to deal with serious resistance.

Even more commonplace than its association with public and collective violence is the association of drinking with intimate violence. I have already mentioned the victimogenic role of drinking. But drinking by the perpetrator also plays a role, in part because of our shared beliefs in the disinhibitory power of alcohol, that drinking can cause violence. Drunkenness thus becomes a quasi-legitimation for domination through violence or the threat of violence in an intimate relation. I have argued that it particularly takes on this role in times or situations when the social rules are in transition or unclear, when dominance is no longer automatic and legitimated, and an excuse is needed for reestablishing it by force.

I say "quasi-legitimation" because drunkenness is indeed something of an excuse in our everyday behaviour, and even in some circumstances in a criminal court. But it is not a very good excuse; both in everyday life and in law, it is an excuse to fall back on only when nothing better is available. Knowledge of the availability of even a half-excuse, however, may be enough to make a difference in what occurs. A clear public discussion of personal responsibility after drinking may well have some value in preventing violence, and particularly intimate violence.

What I have tried to do in these few minutes is to lay out some of the agendas for our discussions over the weekend. I hope that some of what I have said will provoke discussion, and that with the contributions, formal and informal, of other participants, we shall be able together to push forward a little our ideas and knowledge.