

Book Review

INTOXICATION AND SOCIETY: PROBLEMATIC PLEASURES OF DRUGS AND ALCOHOL

JONATHAN HERRING, CIARAN REGAN, DARIN WEINBERG & PHIL WITHINGTON (Editors)
Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, 2013, 305 pp,
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In *Intoxication and Society*, sociologists, historians, lawyers, geographers, neuropharmacologists, psychologists and literary experts present multiple perspectives on intoxication, with the stated aim of building bridges between different academic domains. This collection of 14 essays in five sections has something to appeal to everyone who is interested in the relationships between intoxication and society. Each essay takes its own particular approach, but with acknowledgements to other views, and a respectful understanding that contributions from several disciplines will increase our capacity for understanding.

In the Introduction, Herring *et al.* argue that although social conditions may shape how expertise is formed, this does not undermine the position of the expert. Further, scientists, sociologists, medics and lawyers can and should contribute, and the past should be juxtaposed with the present. They also state that at the core of this book is a debate over personal responsibility, both for becoming intoxicated and for actions carried out while intoxicated, and their goal is to start conversations rather than to offer definitive and conclusive remarks.

In the first section, 'Formation of expertise', Clemis lays out the development of medical expertise in the field of intoxication in the years 1660–1830 from the works of Brooke to Trotter, with expert observations from a few well-chosen doctors and clergymen along the way. Loughnan then lays out how intoxication is dealt with by the law, with clear and concise summaries of controversial and confusing concepts such as the extent to which a person who is intoxicated is responsible, differences between character and capacity, and how lay knowledge is incorporated into law. Finally, Berridge's essay on 20th-century formation of health expertise summarizes developments in expertise in drugs, alcohol and tobacco, charting the transition from intoxicants as a medical problem to a psychiatric problem to a public health problem.

The second section, 'Spatial politics', presents findings from historical sources to illustrate the experiences of ordinary people. In the story of the widening of the life

assurance industry from the middle to the working classes, Kneale & French demonstrate how drinking habits have long been linked to economic decisions. Brown delves back to the Licensing Act of 1552, using the example of Southampton to illustrate the relationship between local and national legislation for licensed premises, and sites this within a wider context of state formation.

Section 3 is entitled 'Culture and practice'. Withington argues persuasively that researchers have been looking in the wrong places when drawing conclusions that excessive alcohol use has historically been an exclusive property of the poor, citing literary evidence for Renaissance drinking in the elite classes, beginning in the universities and the Inns of Court. Next, Reinerman argues that intoxicants can be culturally domesticated, using paired case studies to compare different intoxicants in different cultures. Although he mentions the pharmacological aspects of drugs, it could be argued that by not attaching much weight to the differences in drug effects and addictive properties of, for example, crack cocaine and coca leaves, he undermines his position. This section is completed by Bancroft who, in his essay on 'nudge' policy and embodiment, raises several questions in new frameworks, such as neuroculture and neuropolitics. Again, notions of responsibility and free will are examined, along with how much actions are embodied in the actor, in the context of the external influences of power and group interest.

In 'Intoxication and self', the fourth section, Shrank draws upon sources from the Bible to Shakespeare describing the linking of intoxication with bestial urges, followed by Ersche's clear, lucid and straightforward description of the neuroscience known to be involved in compulsive behaviour. The section is completed by Weinberg, who argues persuasively that both biological and sociological explanations of addiction are helpful, but that neither explain how overwhelming is the urge to use intoxicants. The theme of responsibility appears again in this section, but this time in the shape of human and non-human agency, and the giving of properties to the non-human addiction.

The final section is entitled 'Law, morality and science'. Bogg & Herring broadly support the current laws concerning alcohol and personal responsibility, but use the disease concept and the moral aspects incorporated into the 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous to argue for a modification which would allow a defence of diminished responsibility/capacity in those who are

intoxicated when they commit a crime. Williams is then voluble in her criticism of the *status quo*—the laws are ‘an uneasy compromise’ which need improvement. In the final chapter, Regan brings the reader back to neuroscience, genes and epigenetics, an important reminder of the interactions between brain processes and addictive behaviours, but at times overlapping with Ersche’s earlier chapter.

This collection raises many questions and highlights the contributions that different disciplines can make to

the field, and thus achieves its stated aim to start conversations. *Intoxication and Society*, as the title suggests, is ambitious in its scope. Its success lies in its thoughtful execution.

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