

time and depth of research that went into the project. Having said that, I would wish to conclude by noting two criticisms, the first of which is minor, while the second is more substantive.

First, although the book generally hangs together as a coherent and integrated account, I did occasionally become aware of the book's origins as a series of separate chapters. Second, although the book succeeds admirably in its task of documenting working class public drinking practices, my one regret is that these drinking practices were not compared with those of the middle class. Yet again social scientists have gone out to uncover the habits of the "lower classes", while ignoring the cultural practices of their own social class. Sociological accounts, and especially those within the alcohol research field, are still too prone to "studying down" and even though the authors are to be commended for producing a sensitive analysis of "the other", they have still confirmed Colin Bell's 1961 remark that: "...the working class are those that the sociologist writes about most but mixes with least...the reverse is unfortunately also true".

Geoffrey Hunt

#### NOTE

1. This data base begun in 1988, contains over 100,000 alcohol specific references. The data base became publicly available on the Web in 1997.

## A Storm in a Whiskey Glass

### TIINA ARPPE: THE FEASTING INTELLIGENTSIA AND THE

**SANCTIFICATION OF "THE ACCURSED".** Drinking and the existentialist lifestyle rebellion. (A case study). Reports from the Social Research Institute of Alcohol Studies No. 190. Helsinki 1996, 68 pp.

● The Paris-based Finnish sociologist Tiina Arppe is best known, in Finland, for her study *Pyhän jäännökset* (The Remains of the Sacred) (1992). The study discusses the French tradition of sociological thought. In this tradition, society is not seen primarily as an economic or utilitarian phenomenon, but as a profoundly religious one. What makes society a reality of its own, are the commonly held values, beliefs, myths and the ritual behaviour reinforcing them. These integrating characteristics are interpreted as the religious core of the society.

In her new study, *The feasting intelligentsia and the sanctification of the accursed*, a case study, Arppe applies the theories of the French sociologists to religion in modern society. More specifically, she is interested in the role of the so-called existentialist intellectuals in France during and immediately after the Second World War.

The label "existentialist" was given to a group of intellectuals, of which Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir were the most prominent members. But the name was also applied to a wider group of people that

chose to follow the way of life of those celebrated few and often aspired to artistic fame, albeit without a lot of success.

Arppe is not primarily interested in the philosophical thought of existentialism. Rather she concentrates on the lifestyle associated with the existentialists, which was actually an apparent contradiction to the main emphases of their philosophy's focus on individual freedom and transcendence. During the period under study, their lifestyle was characterized by unconventional habits, feasting and "uncivilized" drinking. Using the autobiographical writings of Sartre and de Beauvoir as her main source, Arppe brings out the excessive, ritual and communal nature of the existentialist gatherings.

Arppe's main focus is on the significations given to this lifestyle, both by the existentialists themselves and by the popular press of the day. From these significations, she analyses the specific position of this intellectual group in French society. What makes this particularly interesting is the fact that the existentialists wanted to stress their social responsibility, their

role as critics of the established order and their commitment on the struggles of the working class. Sartre, especially, had the status of a truth-preaching prophet. At stake, then, are the problems inherent in the position of a radical critic and the possibility of intellectual criticism in modern society. In her treatment, Arppe loses none of her erudition. The popularisation (that the French call *vulgarisation*) of scientific representation does not belong to her mission.

To analyse the structures of signification through which the existentialists were positioned, and positioned themselves, Arppe makes use of the ideas that Roger Caillois sets forth in his book *L'homme et le sacré* (Man and the Sacred). Caillois' book summarises a lot of what is essential in the French sociology of religion. Of special importance to Arppe is the idea of "the sacred" not only as a central category of signification, but also as a category that has always had an ambivalent meaning. What is sacred is what is set apart as forbidden and pure, as worthy of respect and held in awe. However, the reactions it inspires are mixed: fascination and horror alike arise in its presence. Its purity is not thinkable without impurity, its constant companion and its underside.

These features are illustrated in Caillois' understanding of the feast. During a profane period of time, the sacred mainly signifies the pure, manifested through the various religious

restrictions forbidding certain actions and designating certain things as untouchable. Purity is defiled, however, in the ritual festival. The feast inverts the normal course of things and transgresses the forbidden borders. The sacred of this transgression is impure, violent and ecstatic. The pure and the impure require one another: pure implies the possibility of the impure and, in fact, the impure is the condition of the pure. It is namely the transgression that, according to Caillois, renews the order of the signified world and finally restores the pure in its untouchability.

Using these ideas means that Arppe's interpretation is not based on the historical context. The specifics of French society – the importance assigned in France to the artist or the intellectual and the catastrophe of the Second World War – are treated as necessary background, but the decadence of the existentialist lifestyle is seen in broader terms. According to Arppe, it "could be seen as part of the mythical dimension of signification related to the sacred, which has a structure of its own and cannot be reduced to the singularity of the historical situation".

But what does Arppe commit herself to by using Caillois' theory? Following in the footsteps of the classical sociologists, Caillois mainly refers to the so-called archaic societies. Like the other sociologist before him, he sees the archaic social life as impregnated with religion. Religion and society

are one. Arppe points out that it may seem far-fetched to choose a theory of archaic society for an analysis of modern society. But drawing from the writings of de Beauvoir, she seeks to illustrate the appropriateness of Caillois' model in this particular case, claiming that even the existentialists themselves clearly interpreted their celebrations as having a sacred character. Besides, Caillois presents his theory as a "syntax" of religion, supposedly a suitable model for the religious any time and any place. For Arppe, Caillois' theory is a heuristic tool. This tool admittedly has its advantages.

It has often been claimed that a virtue of the French sociologists is that they "rectify" the Christian influence in our understanding of religion. The Christian religion, that directs our view on religion in general, is God- and individual-centered. Sacred, in Christianity, is good and pure. Arppe indicates, that the prominence of Christianity has often hindered us from interpreting the problematics of impurity and the ambivalence of religious forces as a part of religion.

This point would obviously require closer thought. For isn't it in Christianity, that purity and impurity are so tightly interwoven in the ideas of sin and redemption, sacrifice and assumption, and good and bad? Isn't a Christian precisely she or he who is inseparably sinner and saved, impure and pure? Why not see Christianity as our best guide to ambiguity?

Be this as it may, Christian-influenced understanding of religion easily reduces it to a relationship between God and the individual. The sociological approach places purity and impurity at the level of social actions and significations.

Taking Caillois' views as her guide, Arppe interprets the position of existential intellectuals as attaining ritual and mythical significations, embraced both by the existentialists and by the journalists representing the values of bourgeois society. The rebellious lifestyle of the intellectuals was condemned in the name of order, good taste and tradition. At the same time, however, a constant fascination and admiration surrounded them. The same twosidedness marked the self-portrait of the existentialists, particularly that of Jean-Paul Sartre. In his understanding of his own role, the glory of a prophet and the humiliation of a martyr seem to go hand in hand.

Excessive drinking was one part of the existentialist lifestyle. It hardly seems decisive in the significations given to Sartre, for instance, and Arppe doesn't try to force this theme to be more than it is. Nevertheless, the specifics of the existentialist drinking habits, or more precisely a detail that Arppe picks out, does illustrate the contradictions of their position. In bourgeois society, which was becoming more and more Americanised, the existentialists wanted to stand by the proletariat and dreamed of a communist society. But what

was consumed during the long hours of night? It was whisky, gin and champagne, drinks that were fashionable in America. Also, the critics of sad bourgeois life found it hard to resist the phenomena of the media culture (that Arppe sees as a singularly American export) that was to become an ever greater force. The media included celebrities, music, movies and new exciting habits of consumption.

Using the language of the sociology of religion, the ambiguity of significations attached to the existentialist lifestyle reveals their position as sacred. Their rebellious celebrations seem to have the nature of a transgressive feast, turning upside down the order of society. For this they were despised. But the condemnation of their "impurity" wasn't a straightforward rejection. The media also celebrated their life, albeit in an ironic manner. For the bourgeois public, they were disgusting and attractive at the same time. Their sacredness meant, that the ambivalence of meanings attached to them was, in the last analysis, a contribution to the order of society.

The "mechanics" of the modern society, in which the mass media becomes more and more important, is thus analysed in religious terms. This is the vocabulary of Caillois and other French sociologists. But I am left wondering what the meaning of "religion" is here. There are other theories, that set out to analyse order and disorder, purity and impurity.

I have in mind the ideas Mary Douglas presented in *Purity and Danger*, as well as certain versions of psychoanalytical theory (that doesn't deal solely with the individual), presented by, e.g., Julia Kristeva. Her concept abject refers to an ambivalent (non)object, that has a special role in the construction of social and individual identity. Neither of them, however, talk of the phenomena of modern society as explicitly religious.

Now, using the vocabulary of French sociology obviously means inheriting its concepts. But apart from this fact, what do we gain by seeing these phenomena as religious? What would be the difference between two analyses of the same thing, essentially similar except that one would name the thing "religious"? I'm not sure. Arppe's use of these concepts means, at least, that the concept of religion is radically de-essentialized. Religion is not one thing, but a structure of signification that doesn't need an organized church to manifest itself. (On the other hand, religious in this sense could be seen as gaining a position of an unchangeable cultural fact. Arppe by no means states this; this is simply what this kind of use of the word could mean.) Following what I understand Julia Kristeva is implying in *Pouvoirs de l'horreur*, one could say that the culturally necessary meaning-structures, that were previously handled through organized religion, are in the modern world to a large extent

dealt with in a secular context.

But whatever the meaning of the religious, Arppe indicates that it is increasingly banalised. The life-style rebellion of the existentialists was doomed to fail, because it is only an instance of the society they criticise. This society is what grants them their special position. Their "bad habits" could never really transgress the values of the times, if transgression is taken to indicate a state of radical otherness which allows the possibility of a real change.

The fate of their critique is thus sealed. In Arppe's picture, they can never say or do anything really radical, because whatever they come up with is already part of the logic of things, in which the laws of media and values of consumption have incorporated the mythical meaning-structures of the society. In this light, the fate of the intellectual could be called tragic, if this word were not far too grandiose to fit the cynicism of Arppe's view.

A curious path is followed by Arppe's study: from the model of archaic religion, to the possibility of modern intellectual criticism and, from there, to the "collapsing" of this criticism into the embrace of the omnipresent media. But what exactly is the status of Caillois' "archaic", setting a syntax of "any" religious structure? It is in fact a theory, that is created at the same time and in the same place as the phenomena that Arppe studies. (Caillois' theory was first published in 1939; in the second edition, a

chapter dealing with war as a modern version of the violent festival was added.) If a theory is always also a production of its context, maybe making bed-fellows of Caillois' theory and the intellectual lifestyle rebellion is more appropriate than Arppe herself suggests, when she explains her use of such an improbable theory.

Caillois' model talks of the periodical recreation of the world through a violent transgression during the festivals. But in fact, nothing new is ever created: the possibility of introducing anything new is precluded. Society repeats itself: the disorder and impurity are necessary instances of this repetition. What if this is a more suitable way to analyse modern society (especially as it developed during the mental climate of the war and the aftermath) than those "others", of which Caillois had, at best, only sec-

ond-hand experience?

With less than 60 pages, Arppe's study leaves the reader with wide-ranging questions such as: What is the relationship of theory and material of the study, the role of religion in modern society, the status of the deep meaning-structures of society and their appropriation into the media reality and the possibility of critique in modernity? Is an intellectual, in the context of society as a whole, a fascinating face like any other celebrity? Is the only chance to say anything to become an ambiguous object of image consumption? But is it an option that effectively bars any serious criticism? Would this apply to Scandinavia as well as to France? These open questions make Arppe's study not easy to swallow, but real food for thought.

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## A Resource Handbook on Women and Alcohol

**MOIRA PLANT: WOMEN AND ALCOHOL.** Contemporary and Historical Perspectives. Free Association Books Ltd, London/New York 1997, 388 pp.

● *Women and Alcohol* is an ambitious book which aims to bring "together a wide range of contemporary and historical evidence on the consumption of alcohol and its associated adverse consequences and benefits for women". This book does not concentrate solely upon the ill effects associated with heavy or inappropriate drinking by women. A much