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The Urban Pub

PEKKA SULKUNEN & PERTTI ALASUUTARI & RITVA NÄTKIN & MERJA KINNUNEN: THE URBAN PUB. Stakes, National Research and Development Centre of Welfare and Health. Helsinki 1997, 290 pp.

● The Urban Pub" was originally published in Finland in 1985. It began as a series of separate chapters, written by each of the individual authors, which were then joined together to form a coherent monograph. Given the fact that the research on which the book is based was conducted in the early 1980's, one might justifiably ask: what relevance can a book, based on research in Finland nearly twenty years ago, have for a contemporary English speaking readership? The answer to this question is quite simple – a great deal. However, the reasons for why this should be are many and they in turn illuminate some of the characteristics of the alcohol research field today.

Research on the pub, the bar or the tavern, in spite of their importance, is still sparse. Although research on alcohol problems, especially in the U.S. has increased tremendously since this book was first published, much of that research has concentrated on alcohol problems and has neglected to investigate the culture of drinking and the arenas in which that drinking takes place. For example, if we examine the National Institute on Alcoholism and Alcohol Abuse

data base ETOH¹, we find exactly 6 references on this topic since 1990. Consequently, the English publication of "The Urban Pub" which examines in detail the internal workings of two working class pubs is an important contribution to the field. Portrayed within its pages, we view the activities of the regular pub-goers – their dart playing, their relationships, their jokes, the songs they listen to, and their drinking behaviors.

However, unlike many of the existing studies of the pub, the bar or the tavern, this book not merely provides a detailed account of the inner workings, dynamics, rituals and cultural practices of the regulars, it also situates the pub within a wider social context, and attempts to examine the way in which these practices reflect the norms and values of the social groups which frequent the pub. As the authors note, their aim is "...to discover the way in which ... people's relationship to drinking ... are related to the cultural milieu in which local pubs are set". Even the classic work on the English pub "The Pub and the People" or the ground breaking U.S. study "Liquor License" fail to situate their studies within a wider context.

Furthermore, because this study looks at pubs in two working class suburbs, its findings are still relevant to the present day. Few studies of drinking places and suburbs come to mind. The authors examine the way in which working class culture, and specifically gender relations, have been modified by the building of the suburbs. They show that far from the suburbs lacking a sense of community, they operate as "moral communities" which exert social control over their residents. These moral communities with their norms and ideals are maintained and fortified by their own antithesis which, in part, is represented by the values and ideals of the pub. The authors examine those elements of pub life which are condemned. For example, residents characterize pub-goers as being "always the same lot" and "welfare scroungers", and they portray the pub as the epitome of untidiness, disorder, aimless conversation and wasted time.

Having documented the external environment within which the pubs operate, the authors then analyze its internal activities. Here the authors bring to their subject an informed sociological and anthropological perspective which examines the drinkers and their public drinking within a social context. Both the darts players in the "Off Duty" pub and the storytellers in the "Juniper" are viewed as social actors, whose drinking behavior is an integral part of a wider

working class male culture. Using this perspective the authors view the drinking, and especially drunkenness and intoxication, not as problematic behavior per se, but as meaningful behavior which has to be explained within the social context in which it takes place. This is not to imply that the authors minimize the negative or unproductive consequences which can emanate from this behavior, but instead they provide the reader with an understanding of the drinkers' attitudes and rationale for getting drunk. Unlike so much research in the alcohol field, where drinking and drunken behavior is defined as problematic, this study makes no such assumptions and instead sees the behavior from the perspective of the social actors involved.

Although this study was initially completed nearly 20 years ago, its analysis still exhibits a contemporary feeling. Two features account for this. First, the study examines all forms of cultural practice that operate within the pubs. More specifically, the authors devote one whole chapter to an analysis and discussion of the music played. As the authors note a dominant characteristic of the pubs is noise; "...the clamor of raised voices and the rhythmic racket of the juke-box". In examining the lyrics of the most popular songs played, they analyze the extent to which they express "...cultural points of view which the pub-goers use to analyze their own reality".

The four dominant themes found within the lyrics of love, marriage, divorce and loneliness are indicative of the concern that pub-goers seem to express "about emotional relationships between men and women". Given this concern, the authors devote another chapter to examining gender relationships both between men and women within the pubs, and between the pub-goers and their wives, many of whom never visit the pub. This chapter, viewed from the perspective of the women, traces the paradoxes experienced by working class women who live in the suburbs. On the one hand, moving to the suburbs meant that women became independent from their parents, and from other women within their kinship group. On the other hand, although they gained independence, they simultaneously lost the "community" of the women which operated in the older working class communities. Life in the suburbs meant that they were now more isolated and consequently more dependent on their husbands. Within this context, some of the women attempted, with greater or lesser degrees of success, to carve out their own arena within the male dominated culture of the pub.

Overall, "The Urban Pub" is a comprehensive account of the social role of pubs within the suburbs. Its account is rich in analytical insight and ethnographic detail, the latter characteristic clearly reflecting the

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 reenforcing 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