

Understanding English alcohol policy as a neoliberal condemnation of the carnivalesque

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Abstract

Much academic work has argued that alcohol policy in England over the past 25 years can be characterised as neoliberal, particularly in regard to the night-time economy and attempts to address “binge” drinking. Understanding neoliberalism as a particular “mentality of government” that circumscribes the range of policy options considered appropriate and practical for a government to take, this article notes how the particular application of policy can vary by local context. This article argues that the approach of successive governments in relation to alcohol should be seen as based on a fear and condemnation of the carnivalesque, understood as a time when everyday norms and conventions are set aside, and the world is – for a limited period only – turned inside out. This analysis is contrasted with previous interpretations that have characterised government as condemning intoxication and particular forms of pleasure taken in drinking. Although these concepts are useful in such analysis, this article suggests that government concerns are broader and relate to wider cultures surrounding drunkenness. Moreover, there is an ambivalence to policy in relation to alcohol that is better conveyed by the concept of the carnivalesque than imagining simply a condemnation of pleasure or intoxication.

Introduction

Alcohol policy in England has often been characterised by academics as an instance of neoliberalism, shaped by the influence of international capital and trade. Government is seen to have taken a light-touch approach to regulating the market in alcohol, while attempting to foster the regeneration of cities by the growth of the night-time economy (NTE) (Chatterton & Hollands, 2003; Hadfield, 2004; Roberts, 2006; Talbot, 2006; Winlow & Hall, 2006).

Neoliberalism in this context implies a “mentality of government” that circumscribes the options considered appropriate and practical for a government to take in respect of alcohol consumption (Dean, 1999; Foucault, 1991). The key feature of neoliberalism in this sense is the fact that government retains clear (moral) aims even as market mechanisms are preserved – or even expanded (Peck & Tickell, 2002). The neoliberal response when these aims are not achieved is not to restructure the environment or mechanisms through which these results have been produced, nor to accept the outcomes as legitimate, but rather to reshape individuals to change the way they behave

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within the established framework (e.g. Burchell, 1996; Rose, 1999).

This approach has led some academics to argue that there has been a certain “hypocrisy” to policy in recent years (Hobbs, Winlow, Hadfield, & Lister, 2005). In this formulation, British people have been “invited to binge” (Hadfield, 2004) by the regulatory and economic context, and yet, taking on Bauman’s (1992, 1997) framework of seduction and repression, “it is those most thoroughly seduced of consumers, to the tune of a dozen lagers, who are most inclined to be targeted by swarming police units, teams of bouncers and couplets of street wardens” (Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister, & Winlow, 2003, p. 273).

This article accepts this broad argument, but seeks to respond to the work of Kingfisher and Maskovsky (2008), who emphasise that any neoliberal policy is formed and operates within a specific cultural context. Precisely what activities are targeted for “repression” under such a system depends on the cultural norms of policymakers regarding what forms of drinking are admirable. A neoliberal approach to alcohol might frame concerns in terms of public health, or alternatively consider heavy public drinking a valuable form of (conspicuous and characteristically postmodern) consumption.

It is suggested in this article that the particular context that has shaped English alcohol policy under successive governments can be understood using the concept of the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque here is understood as a time when everyday norms and conventions are set aside, and the world is – for a limited period only – turned inside out. Other academic work has drawn attention to ways in

which UK government policy on alcohol and other drugs can be read as a “criminalisation of intoxication” (Measham & Moore, 2008) or a condemnation of “impermissible pleasures” (Bunton, 2011; Moore & Measham, 2012), with echoes of Victorian temperance or earlier Puritanism (Yeomans, 2009, 2013). I argue here that although there is validity to such interpretations – and some policies clearly do target deliberate intoxication – successive governments’ uneasy relationship with alcohol takes in wider behaviour and norms associated with drinking, and the concepts of pleasure and intoxication alone cannot make sense of this.

The application of the concept of the carnivalesque to the NTE in particular has previously been criticised as idealising drinking practices and seeing in them a revolutionary potential they simply do not possess (Winlow & Hall, 2006, p. 97). However, I argue that inherent in the concept of carnival is an ambivalence in terms of resistance or conservatism – it both questions and reinforces everyday norms and hierarchies, and has never been separated from political and commercial dynamics. This same ambivalence can be found at the heart of policy dynamics today regarding alcohol.

This analysis has implications for policymaking, as it illuminates how current debates are – for better or worse – structured by certain assumptions regarding the nature of appropriate alcohol consumption. Keane (2011) has argued that Australian alcohol policy cannot be effective while it denies the experience and beliefs of many drinkers: that intoxication can be sociable and pleasurable. Similarly, the analysis presented in this article has two key potential applications. First, by identifying clearly underlying concerns, it should be possible to assess and design policy more accurately to address these. Second, and more fundamentally, it should allow for an open discussion of whether these are aims that a government should be pursuing to begin with.

This article is concerned primarily with alcohol policy within England, rather than the wider UK, as key policy levers relating to alcohol are devolved responsibilities and have been managed quite differently, for example, in Scotland (Mahon & Nicholls, 2014). I draw on analysis of government documents relating to alcohol, including all strategies and consultations during the ten-year period from 2004 to 2013, as well as initiatives devised as part of these strategies, such as social marketing commissioned by government.

Theories of the carnival

The concept of the carnivalesque is based on the idea of a carnival as “time out” from everyday responsibilities and norms. Mike Featherstone (1991, p. 22) describes the carnival tradition thus: “The popular tradition of carnivals, fairs and festivals provided symbolic inversions and transgressions of the official ‘civilized’ culture and favoured excitement, uncontrolled emotions and the direct and vulgar grotesque bodily pleasures of fattening food, intoxicating drink and sexual promiscuity”. Parallels with the alcohol, excitement, (apparent) transgression, kebabs and sexual promiscuity of the NTE and its “binge” drinking are immediately apparent.

Much academic work on the carnivalesque has drawn on Bakhtin, who saw the carnival as a time when the “laws,

prohibitions, and restrictions that determine the structure and order of ordinary, that is noncarnival, life, are suspended” (1984a, p. 122). Carnival is a time when rituals turn the world “inside out” – for example, when a peasant is made “carnival king” for a day. Features of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque include free and familiar contact, profane speech and grotesque realism, with an emphasis on the body, and attention drawn to its natural features and functions, such as sex and excretion (Bakhtin, 1984b, p. 29).

Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2009) argue that the carnival represents struggle over moral codes, as it illustrates alternative ways of being – and it can therefore be understood as a time of political struggle. Bakhtin’s work certainly takes such a perspective, viewing the carnival as a transgressive, potentially revolutionary moment that disrupts existing power relations.

As noted above, this has led to criticism of Bakhtin for his “utopian” view of carnival (e.g. Bauer, 1997, p. 711) and of those who would suggest the application of the metaphor to describe the NTE (Winlow & Hall, 2006, p. 97). However, while Bakhtin may idealise a “golden era” of the carnival, he also describes the way in which such festivals and impulses were co-opted by institutions such as state and church. Moreover, his analysis of Rabelais is centred on the ambivalence of profanity and carnival laughter, through which shame and triumph, death and life, are felt simultaneously. This article follows Stallybrass and White (1986, p. 14) in being based on the premise that it “makes little sense to fight out the issue of whether or not carnivals are *intrinsically* radical or conservative, for to do so automatically involves the false essentializing of carnivalesque transgression”. Indeed, as Terry Eagleton (1981, p. 148) has argued:

Carnival, after all, is a licensed affair in every sense, a permissible rupture of hegemony, a contained popular blow-off and disturbing and relatively ineffectual as a revolutionary work of art. As Shakespeare’s Olivia remarks, there is no slander in an allowed fool.

I would suggest that this ambivalence is the key strength of the concept of the carnivalesque in analysing alcohol policy. In Eagleton’s formulation, the carnival can be seen as conveying precisely those features that concern Winlow and Hall: “From one viewpoint carnival may feature as a prime example of that mutual complicity of law and liberation, power and desire, that has become a dominant theme of contemporary post-Marxist pessimism” (Eagleton, 1981, p. 149).

That is, the carnivalesque conveys a time of altered norms that is ambivalent from the perspective of government, since it is both a time when alternative ways of living are hinted at but also “time out” that may buttress everyday norms and ways of life. Moreover, it has commercial benefits and links with established rituals, and state and community institutions.

Alcohol as “important and useful” to government

A key tenet of some approaches to alcohol policy is that the substance is “no ordinary commodity” (Babor et al., 2010) – that is, it should be treated as a substance that is inherently

problematic for everyone who uses it. Such a view encourages acceptance of population-wide approaches to address alcohol-related issues. Some commentators have argued that minimum unit pricing (MUP) is underpinned by precisely this philosophy, since it would affect the market in which every drinker buys alcohol (Morris, 2012).

Crucially, successive UK governments have not taken this approach. Although they have not treated alcohol quite like an ordinary commodity – one must be licensed to sell it, and abide by certain conditions – when problems have been identified, the target for addressing these has not been the substance, but the individual “irresponsible” retailers and consumers (Hackley, Bengry-Howell, Griffin, Mistral, & Szmigin, 2008). By contrast, “responsible” consumption of alcohol has been encouraged for its social, economic and even health benefits.

This approach can be seen clearly in the three alcohol strategies since the Licensing Act 2003. The 2004 Strategy aimed at “achieving a long-term change in attitudes to irresponsible drinking and behaviour” (Cabinet Office, 2004, p. 5), but set this in the context of the claim that “the vast majority of people enjoy alcohol without causing harm to themselves or to others” (Cabinet Office, 2004, p. 4), noting the “health and social benefits” individuals might reap from alcohol use, as well as the benefits to the society: “Alcohol plays an important and useful role both in the economy and in British society generally” (Cabinet Office, 2004, p. 9).

In 2007 this approach was reiterated with the statement that “the police and local authorities will continue to target law-breaking and irresponsible behaviour, by both individual drinkers and retailers of alcohol” (HM Government, 2007, p. 10). When the economic costs of alcohol consumption were noted, it was carefully stated that this “should not be viewed in isolation, as alcohol consumption can also have positive effects” with employment figures cited, along with the claim that “the development of the evening economy, driven by the alcohol leisure industry, has supported a revival of city centres across England and Wales” (HM Government, 2007, p. 30).

The 2012 strategy, similarly, noted that, “in moderation, alcohol consumption can have a positive impact on adults’ wellbeing, especially where this encourages sociability”, but contrasted this with the “combination of irresponsibility, ignorance and poor habits – whether by individuals, parents or businesses” that had resulted in crime and health costs (HM Government, 2012, p. 3).

MUP, the one policy that might have challenged this general approach, has been shelved by the Coalition government (Browne, 2013). However, even when the government seemed to be in favour of the policy, it was not presented as an intervention designed for a problematic substance, so much as targeted at problematic individuals. David Cameron justified the policy by explaining that “a family with a reasonable drinking habit – and I put myself in that category – a reasonable drinking habit might find they’re actually subsidising the binge drinker because of the way the pricing’s working” (quoted in Hope, 2012).

However, “binge” is not a clearly defined term. Berridge, Herring, and Thom (2009) have suggested that “binge”

drinking is a “confused concept”, as it has been used to refer to so many different practices. The key question in the context of this article is what this term and government policy more broadly imply about the forms of drinking that are to be condemned.

Government-endorsed pleasure

Just as alcohol consumption is endorsed by government, so pleasure in its consumption is also perfectly “permissible”. The most obviously acceptable form of consumption to government is when it is associated with hard work. Labour Home Office minister Alan Campbell (2009), for example, expressed his scepticism about MUP for this very reason:

My concern during an economic downturn but indeed at any time is that people go out to work, they work very hard, they come home at the end of the week, you know, they want to go to the pub and have a reasonably priced drink or they want to go to the supermarket and get a bottle of wine to enjoy in the comfort of their own home with their families.

The enjoyment of the bottle of wine is not itself deemed a problem. Though Yeomans (2013, p. 74) has suggested that public health perspectives on alcohol policy have been “failing to acknowledge . . . the enjoyment and social benefits that many people derive from alcohol consumption”, the same cannot be said of recent English governments.

This acceptance of pleasure is not restricted to domestic drinking or what one academic commentator referred to as “traditional” drinking in pubs (Gofton, 1990). Despite the associated problems that spawned successive alcohol strategies and led Prime Minister David Cameron to state baldly “We can’t go on like this” (HM Government, 2012, p. 2), the NTE is a consequence of conscious government policy. Where academics have traced the emergence of the NTE and what has been referred to as “the new culture of intoxication” (Measham & Brain, 2005), this is often linked to broader economic and political developments. Brain (2000) has suggested that this new approach to drinking should be placed in the context of “post-industrial consumer society”, while Hobbs et al. (2005, pp. 161–162) draw attention to two major changes in UK cities over the past 30 years:

The first is the shift from an economy based upon industrial production to a postindustrial consumer economy, and the second is the significant shift in urban governance away from the management of core local services towards a distinct focus upon economic growth.

In this way, Hobbs, Lister, Hadfield, Winlow, and Hall (2000, p. 703) characterise twenty-first-century local government as “municipal capitalism” in contrast with the “municipal socialism” of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. According to such a view, where government once tightly regulated alcohol through licensing laws to ensure the productivity of the workforce, in the post-industrial, consumerist age, drinking is no longer understood as a problem for productive work, and therefore for capitalism.

Rather, the development of the NTE through “city centre pleasure zones” (Hobbs et al., 2005, p. 166) – distinctly in contrast with the “traditional” pubs and forms of drinking – has been actively encouraged by government through documents such as *The Evening Economy and the Urban Renaissance* (ODPM, 2003). Drinking and its attendant pleasures of consumption are reframed as useful, even vital to postmodern, consumerist capitalism (e.g. Hayward & Hobbs, 2007).

The pleasures of intoxication

Such an analysis, however, is not at odds with the view that certain forms of drinking are deemed “impermissible pleasures” for government. Bunton (2011), thinking about the status of pleasure in society, distinguishes between four key types of pleasure: disciplined, ascetic, carnal and ecstatic. Different categories are in the ascendancy in different societies or periods, with disciplined and ascetic generally carrying greater weight. In relation to alcohol, though, Bunton acknowledges that the government has an “ambivalent” attitude to the NTE, since as well as generating undesirable carnal and possibly ecstatic pleasure through “binge” drinking it also provides employment and economic growth.

The sanctioned pleasures relating to alcohol are not exclusively intellectual or ascetic. It is perfectly possible to frame the enjoyment of bottle of wine as a reward for a hard day’s work – so clearly defended by Alan Campbell as quoted above – as a (legitimate) form of immediate, embodied pleasure. Such drinking is not a form of “ascetic” denial nor in accordance with the intellectualised pleasures often opposed to “binge” drinking (Nicholls, 2010).

However, Moore and Measham (2012, p. 68) argue that “whereas pleasure is recognised as a possible feature of moderate alcohol consumption ... no such recognition is afforded immoderate drinking”. It is true that deliberate drinking to drunkenness is condemned by government. In 2010, new regulations were introduced that sought to tax “industrial” or “white” cider at a different rate from “traditional” cider, on the basis that such products are drunk only for their alcohol content, rather than taste or wider cultural value (Haydock, 2014; HM Treasury, 2010). I wish to suggest here that although such consumption is condemned – and the 2012 Strategy railed against “those who drink to get drunk” (HM Government, 2012, p. 4) – this does not tell the whole story of governmental concern regarding alcohol, and in particular, the apparently excessive drinking and behaviour associated with the NTE.

One crucial term in analysing government alcohol is “binge”. Although it has been described by Berridge et al. (2009) as a “confused concept” – so much so that the *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* (2014) has written specific guidance on use of the term in academic work – “binge” retains remarkable currency in government policy discussions, opening and closing the Prime Minister’s foreword to the 2012 Strategy, for example (HM Government, 2012, p. 2).

Although unit measures of consumption are often used to define the concept for the purpose of surveys (of twice the daily recommended consumption limits, for example

(HM Government, 2012, p. 5)), the foundation of the concern expressed by government appears to initially relate to a type of drinking Measham and Brain (2005) have described as “determined drunkenness”. The definition of “binge” drinking in this sense was perhaps expressed most clearly in a 2008 consultation document which described “those who binge drink” as those who “drink to get drunk” (Department of Health, 2008, p. 9).

However, this is not a straightforward condemnation of those who seek the “pleasure of intoxication” (Moore & Measham, 2012, p. 69). The 2004 strategy noted that “there is no direct relationship between the amounts or patterns of consumption and types or levels of harm caused or experienced” (Cabinet Office, 2004, p. 12), and therefore a quantity-based definition of problematic drinking in the context of the NTE would not have been workable. Rather, the concern centred on a particular culture surrounding alcohol in this setting:

In the culture of drinking to get drunk, which often sets the tone for the night-time economy, the norms differ from usual behaviour – noisy behaviour may be expected and aggressive behaviour tolerated, with drunkenness used as an excuse. Where there is little social control, such behaviour is likely to increase (Cabinet Office, 2004, p. 46).

The government approach is therefore based on the understanding that drunkenness is not simply pharmacological intoxication. If the dangers followed directly from certain levels of intoxication, then a formulation could be applied similar to that for drunk driving, whereby one’s faculties are impaired by a specific blood alcohol concentration. Instead, the concern is with changed “norms” and “little social control” – not a direct consequence of intoxication.

This is very much in tune with ethnographic and sociological work on alcohol, which suggests that drunkenness is something distinct from a pharmacological or physiological definition of intoxication. “Drunken comportment”, as MacAndrew and Edgerton (1970) put it in their synthesis of anthropological research, is learned behaviour, still constrained by certain norms, which vary from one group of people to another. The concerns regarding “binge” drinking are about precisely this: “the *culture* of drinking to get drunk”, which is in distinct contrast with what has been called “traditional” drinking, where “the cultural rules surrounding drinking resulted in surprisingly tight regulation of behaviour during drinking sessions” (Gofton, 1990, p. 35). In this way, government criticism of “binge” drinking can be understood as a struggle over cultural rules and therefore evocative of the carnivalesque as a political struggle as described by Ravenscroft and Gilchrist (2009).

Such a distinction between drunkenness and intoxication might seem like pedantic game of semantics. However, I would suggest that it is crucial in understanding what is really of concern to government regarding alcohol consumption – and specifically the NTE. The focus on norms and social control allows for a distinction between different drinking practices that would not be possible using either the

public health definition of moderation as analysed by Yeomans (2013), or an idea of embodied, pharmacological pleasure in alcohol (Moore & Measham, 2012). Neither would allow for the identification of the government concerns surrounding “binge” drinking specifically. A public health definition could also include domestic consumption above recommended consumption limits, while a definition focused on the pleasures of pharmacological intoxication might include the sort of drinking endorsed by ministers such as Alan Campbell and successive government strategies.

The permissible discomfort of the carnivalesque

More than this, it is not just that drunkenness rather than simply intoxication is condemned; it is that what is condemned in the questionable practices associated with such drunkenness is not pleasure. First, it can be argued that the NTE is not experienced in terms of pleasure by participants; it has an ambivalent status for them as well as government. Barton and Husk (2014), for example, note how those who “pre-load” (drinking before they go out into a town centre) do so in part because they find the domestic setting safe, comfortable and pleasurable in contrast with the “chaos” of the night-time high street, when people find they are “scared” by “lairy idiots” – and yet the “night-time high street” retains a certain attraction, as a different environment to the domestic setting.

However, this article is not about the actual practices or beliefs of drinkers themselves; those have been persuasively described as carnivalesque or Bakhtinian elsewhere (Hackley et al., 2013; Haydock, 2010; Hubbard, 2013). What I wish to suggest here is that government does not have a perceived pleasure in mind when it censures certain practices.

An examination of a social marketing campaign launched by the Labour Government in 2008 illustrates this point. The “Would You?” campaign aimed “to highlight the negative consequences of drinking excessively” by playing on a sense of shock, disgust and shame on the part of the drinkers, seeing themselves in the depictions of apparently outrageous behaviour (Home Office & NHS, 2008). This campaign featured two television advertisements. One showed a man getting ready to go out for the evening and urinating on his shoes, spilling food on his t-shirt and ripping his jacket (NHS & Home Office, 2008b). A woman in a separate advert was shown getting her skirt wet, smudging her eye make-up and smearing vomit in her hair (NHS & Home Office, 2008a). Both closed by asking: “You wouldn’t start a night like this so why end it that way?”

The actions shown and the way in which they are portrayed are characteristic of the carnivalesque. The world is quite clearly turned “inside out” by people being shown to start the night as they might end it. This highlights the distance of such practices from the everyday and it is the alteration in norms that is considered to be of concern. What is shown is redolent of the “grotesque” body described by Bakhtin, with the flow of bodily fluids – urine, blood, vomit – and pain and destruction shown with indifference or even approval by the actors.

The appeal to the viewer is that “you wouldn’t do this sober”, assuming not only that in everyday, sober life certain

norms are shared between viewer and government, but also that such norms could and should apply to the NTE. In this attempt, the adverts are not suggesting that drinkers should deny themselves the pleasure of this behaviour in favour of higher or deferred pleasures, or because the actions are selfish and impinge on others (the whole scene takes place within a private place where each actor is alone). Instead, the adverts seek to highlight that these actions and consequences are specifically not pleasurable, and so behaving in a different way would be more pleasurable as well as sensible.

Such an interpretation is in-keeping with the claim of Yeomans and Critcher (2013, pp. 313–314) that, in alcohol policy discussions, “The struggle here is not between sobriety and inebriation, order and disorder or self-indulgence and self-control. The struggle is between different kinds of self”. This is precisely what the carnivalesque label suggests, with its echoes of highly structured, ritualised behaviour – not simply a free-for-all – and the inherently political struggle over moral codes and ways of being that was noted above.

The idea of the NTE being a site of political struggle has been challenged by some, such as Winlow and Hall (2006, p. 9), who therefore reject the use of the carnivalesque in this context, because the behaviour is predictable given the regulatory environment and is consistent with the interests of international corporations and capital that have produced this “post-industrial pleasure-dome”. Campaigns such as “Would You?” can therefore be read as cynical attempts not to persuade drinkers to change their behaviour, but to reassure concerned members of the public that action is being taken on this issue, with the adverts portraying the sort of behaviour that is thought to be undesirable.¹ However, as noted above, carnival has always been a “licensed affair” with a “mutual complicity of law and liberation, power and desire”, rather than being immune from the influences of commerce and authority (Eagleton, 1981, pp. 148, 149).ⁱ

Crucially, then, this behaviour is not criminalised, and though government expresses disapproval, it is still permitted (or “permissible”). The dynamic of seduction and repression is applicable, but interventions such as the differential taxation of white cider (HM Treasury, 2010) and the introduction of drinking banning orders and sobriety tags (HM Government, 2012, p. 14; Home Office, 2009) illustrate how drinking by particular groups of people can be more actively and directly targeted.

Conclusion

This article has sought to understand some of the underlying concerns and context that have shaped English alcohol policy over the past 10 years. Although it is accepted that the approach can be characterised as neoliberal, this “mentality of government” has been applied within a particular framework of thought regarding alcohol. This approach to alcohol policy sees problems not in drinking per se, nor in pleasure or pharmacological intoxication. There is certainly condemnation of

¹I am grateful to David Faulkner for this observation, offered at the 2009 NatCen conference “Informing Public Policy”, held at LSE.

intoxication as an end in itself, but the concerns are broader, and relate to wider cultures surrounding drunkenness.

What is censured – but not criminalised – is a particular form of behaviour associated with drinking that seems to turn the world “inside out”, and disrupt everyday norms of social interaction. This perceived disruption includes the embrace of the “grotesque” body and its fluids, including urine, blood and vomit. It is argued that this set of concerns is well conveyed by the concept of the carnivalesque. Where some would see hypocrisy in government policy, this concept emphasises ambivalence. The toleration but unease is characteristic of the carnival, conceived of as a “licensed . . . blow off” (Eagleton, 1981, p. 148).

This analysis opens up a particular perspective for assessing English alcohol policy. Arguably in contrast with Scotland, a population-based approach has not been adopted (Mahon & Nicholls, 2014), but seeing current policy as consistently underpinned by concern regarding the carnivalesque allows for, first, an evaluation of policy on its own terms, and, second, a discussion of whether these are appropriate aims for alcohol policy.

This article makes no claim to be a comprehensive or conclusive analysis of government alcohol policy, and offers only a partial picture and some tentative conclusions. There are several areas where further analysis could develop or debunk the claims made here regarding the carnivalesque. First, this analysis, of necessity, relies heavily on published documents and statements. Thus, even if one accepts the utility of the carnivalesque in understanding how government policy is presented and explained, it does not follow that the same claim can be made of the policymaking process itself. As John Greenaway (2003) has observed, there are many factors and interests at play in formulating alcohol policy, and the reality of the process may bear little relation to its public rationalisation. A different approach would be required to assess the role of the carnivalesque in policymaking itself, and perhaps further distance in time, to allow interview and documentary evidence to become more available.

Moreover, as observed by Kingfisher and Maskovsky (2008) in the analysis of neoliberalism that underpins this article, government policy documents are not created in a vacuum and the context for policymaking includes influences outside of government. Therefore, it would be appropriate if further analysis considered whether the conceptual framework of the carnivalesque would be applicable to media discussions of alcohol policy, for example.

In addition, in the limited space available here I have not discussed key factors that structure the carnivalesque, such as gender (Bauer, 1997; Russo, 1997) and class (Stallybrass & White, 1986) – though I would tentatively suggest that these do play a role in both media and government discussions of drinking (Day, Gough, & McFadden, 2004; Haydock, 2014). As noted, a key attraction of the term “binge” is the way in which it enables a distinction to be drawn between “responsible” and “irresponsible” consumption. These boundaries are not drawn without effects of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1990).

Despite these limitations, there are strengths of the concept, which may also have further application more

widely in studies of drug and alcohol policy. Understanding of the beliefs and assumptions underpinning government policy would be strengthened by comparison with illicit substances, particularly emerging “legal highs” and human enhancement drugs (Evans-Brown, McVeigh, Perkins, & Bellis, 2012). Such analysis could shed light on whether this carnivalesque framework is only apparent in relation to legal substances, where government feels obliged to distinguish between legitimate and illegitimate forms of consumption.

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