## '20 tins of Stella for a fiver': The making of class through the regulation of alcohol consumption

### *Abstract*

Concerns surrounding alcohol use in Britain have been a key concern to both the Labour and Coalition governments, as well as commanding considerable attention in the media and indeed academic discussions.  In this article, I analyse in detail how current and recent government policy discussions have defined particular forms of drinking as problematic, and how these definitions and associated policy initiatives can be seen as part of a wider symbolic economy through which people come to be valued differently, incorporating ideas of economic, cultural and social capital.  In this way, I argue that government policies and discussions of 'binge' drinking are a key way in which class is constituted in contemporary Britain.

### *Introduction*

Concerns surrounding alcohol use in Britain have been a key concern to both the Labour and Coalition governments, as well as commanding considerable

1

attention in the media and indeed academic discussions.  In this article, I analyse in more detail how current and recent government policy discussions have defined particular forms of drinking as problematic, and how these definitions and associated policy initiatives can be seen as linked to a wider symbolic economy through which people come to be valued differently.  In this way, I argue that government policies and discussions of 'binge' drinking are a key way in which class is constituted in contemporary Britain.

I understand class to be something more than occupation or income – something that helps to *explain* such differences and inequalities.  Following Bourdieu, I note the congruence of economic, social and cultural factors which are used in the valuing of people.  Such valuing of people, and the worldviews associated with it, affect how the world and the possibilities within it are understood, and therefore are part of the operation of power.  When such power involves economic characteristics alongside social and cultural perspectives, and these are used to identify groups of people, it can be understood to constitute class.

I argue that government discussions of 'binge' drinking focus on broader concerns than health, safety, criminal actions or even nuisance.  'Binge' drinking is defined by the approach drinkers take towards alcohol: deliberately drinking to get drunk, and more generally engaging in out-of-the-ordinary behaviour.  Binge drinking is therefore constructed as something broader than a set of risky activities; it is considered to be a culture.

This portrayal of undesirable drinking in cultural and aesthetic terms has historical echoes of the carnival and carnivalesque behaviour, ideas which have played a significant role in helping to present the 'rational' bourgeoisie as distinct from the working class, understood as facile and often unproductive. In the same way, although successive governments have emphasised that drinking behaviour is the responsibility of the individual concerned, current policy discussions surrounding 'binge' drinking serve to construct 'binge' drinkers as a *group* of people with particular cultural and aesthetic attributes.

The way that these people are understood and the ways in which regulatory measures are targeted at them reveal a confluence of social and economic factors, which can be understood to support the idea that there is a broad symbolic economy by which value and power within society can be understood. The groupings that occur on the basis of this value schema suggest that the operation of alcohol policy in the UK serves to construct and reinforce ideas of class. I therefore argue that current governmental approaches to young people's drinking are significant in the persistent construction of class in contemporary Britain.

## *Theoretical framework: groups, class, taste and distinction*

Class is understood in this article in the light of a broad conception of a symbolic economy, linking together a variety of forms of inequality and power. Class must refer to a group, and be based on some form of exploitation, explaining the operation of power within a society. As Rosemary Crompton (1993: 1) has explained, societies produce an 'unequal distribution of material

and symbolic rewards', and 'class' is a concept employed in order to explain these inequalities.  In this way it is more than a measure of income or status; it seeks to *explain* the reproduction of these inequalities as well as measure them.

The use of the term 'symbolic' as well as 'material' is important in this context. I follow Bourdieu (e.g. 1984; 1987) in understanding class to be the summary of 'cultural' and 'social' capital, as well as the more conventional 'economic' capital.  Cultural capital can be understood as a person's cultural practices and knowledge.  Social capital amounts to connections, networks and group memberships which can be used as resources (Skeggs 2004: 17).  It might be informally summed up as who one knows.  When these different forms of capital are recognised by others as legitimate, they can be considered 'symbolic' capital (Bourdieu 1994: 127).

Bourdieu is interested in symbolic capital because he sees it as affecting one's power.  Even if one were only interested in economic inequality, the links between this and cultural and social forms of capital mean that a full analysis would have to include these elements.  This broader notion of a symbolic economy also has implications for forms of exploitation other than the directly economic.  Bourdieu's (e.g. 1990: Ch 8) concept of 'symbolic violence' – when someone imposes their worldview on someone else – captures one key way in which symbolic capital affects the operation of power.  Affecting people's worldview is crucial to politics, since it alters how the world is viewed and the perceived possibility of change (Bourdieu 1977:

165).  It also affects how one sees other people, and therefore human interaction more generally – what characteristics are valued, for example, can affect who is given a particular job.

Class, understood as a grouping of individuals, can be understood as one way in which this form of symbolic violence can operate.  Bourdieu (1989) suggests that the formation of a class as a group requires 'political work'.  The title of EP Thompson's (1991) influential work – *The Making of the English Working Class* – should be taken literally, therefore: it is through banners, organisations, and a particular vocabulary (the 'proletariat', 'working class', 'workers' etc) that the working class is recognised as (and therefore becomes) a group.  However, this 'political work' is not neutral, and could be undertaken not only by members of the relevant group, but by others outside.  In the context of the working class, for example, this might lead to references to 'mass' rather than community or solidarity (see, e.g. Carey 1992; Williams 1990).  This symbolic power is central to politics, which is the struggle of differing views of the social world.

Bourdieu (1984) argues that 'taste' is a key way in which this form of group making occurs, as the mechanism of distinction delineates class groups based on aesthetic preferences.  Symbolic capital only operates as such when it is recognised by others, and the system by which cultural capital is recognised can be understood as aesthetics, or, more straightforwardly, taste. Bourdieu suggests that the dominant system of cultural value legitimates those cultural practices that broadly accord with a Kantian aesthetic – and that

taste of this kind is most common amongst the 'dominant class'. He claims that this legitimate taste is defined by its distance from sensual, 'naïve' pleasures – the complex as opposed to the 'facile'. 'Popular' taste, by contrast, is more satisfied by a 'sense of revelry, the plain speaking and hearty laughter which liberate by setting the social world head over heels, overturning conventions and proprieties' (Bourdieu 1984: 34). The Kantian aesthetic can be considered a form of symbolic violence, as it devalues the 'popular' pleasures and desires.

### *'Binge' Drinking as a culture*

One way in which class operates with respect to alcohol and government discourses and policies is the identification of a particular drinking culture as being problematic. In the case of public policy this is most clear with respect to what is referred to as 'binge' drinking.

The Labour Government has been understood by some to have liberalised licensing laws in the UK, ushering in an area of so-called 24-hour drinking (e.g. Codd 2006). Despite some rhetorical flourishes, threatening to 'tear up' the 2003 Licensing Act that introduced the reforms (Grayling 2009; May 2010), the fundamental commitment to the principle of liberalisation remains under the Coalition Government, which stated in its response to the 2010 Consultation on the Licensing Act that it was 'continuing to look for ways to *reduce* the regulatory burden on businesses and local authorities' (Home Office 2010: 2).

However, the very existence of alcohol strategies and such consultations betrays that successive governments have had some conception that alcohol consumption is not universally positive.  As well as publishing two alcohol strategies of its own, the Labour Government published numerous other documents outlining its particular approach to alcohol.  One common feature of these documents is that they tend to delineate different models of drinking to illustrate what is considered problematic about alcohol consumption.  The 2004 strategy stated that particular drinking 'patterns' were particularly likely to cause problems; namely, 'binge' and 'chronic' drinking (Cabinet Office 2004: 4).  In the 2007 strategy this terminology was updated to outline three 'types of drinking': 'binge', 'harmful', and 'sensible' (HM Government 2007: 3). Sensible drinking was the government's ideal, and was defined in terms of quantity of alcohol consumed, with daily and weekly limits specified.  Harmful drinking was also defined in terms of quantity drunk, covering those who regularly drink more than these recommended limits.  In contrast, binge drinking was defined by government as drinking 'too much' (without reference to an amount of units) over a short period of time and becoming drunk.  The definition of 'binge' drinking was expressed even more clearly in a 2008 consultation document which described 'those who binge drink' as those who 'drink to get drunk' (Department of Health 2008: 9).[i]

That is, the defining feature of this problematic behaviour was not the quantity of alcohol consumed, or even necessarily the consequence of becoming drunk, but individuals' motivation for drinking: deliberately seeking intoxication.  The problems caused by 'binge' drinking were largely ascribed to

'the culture of drinking to get drunk', given 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: 12).  This 'binge' drinking 'culture' was described by the 2004 Strategy thus:

> 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: 46).

The Coalition Government has continued to define 'binge' drinking in much the same way, with the 2012 Alcohol Strategy focusing on 'those who drink to get drunk'.  This is again explicitly referred to as 'a culture . . . where is has become acceptable to be excessively drunk in public' (HM Government 2012: 2, 3).

The culture of 'binge' drinking is therefore condemned according to this schema of concerns because it interferes with rational decision-making.  One key concern is that it leaves individuals more vulnerable, and also more liable to commit criminal acts.  The Know Your Limits public education campaign run by the Labour Government, for example, had as its stated aim to highlight 'the vulnerability of binge drinkers and emphasised both the physical and criminal consequences that can arise from irresponsible alcohol consumption' (HM Government 2007: 33).  It therefore showed, in its television format, a

young man falling from some scaffolding as he reached for some balloons that had been let go by a hen party.  He had overestimated his abilities because he had been drunk.

At the same time, government's discomfort with the 'binge' drinking 'culture' extended beyond putting one's life or health at risk.  The television advertisements in the 'Would You?' campaign illustrate this well.  The stated aim of this broader campaign, which also included print and radio advertisements, was 'to highlight the possible negative consequences of drinking excessively' (Home Office and NHS 2008: 1).  One of the television advertisements shows a young man preparing to go out (NHS and Home Office 2008b), and the other shows a young woman (NHS and Home Office 2008a).  As they get ready, the man urinates on his shoes, spills food on his t-shirt and rips his jacket.  The woman gets her skirt wet, smudges her eye make-up and smears vomit in her hair.  The advert then asks: 'You wouldn't start a night like this so why end it that way?'

The actions are symbolic of being excessive and irresponsible.  They are not normal everyday (or daytime) behaviour.  However, it is difficult to draw a clear line between what constitutes anti-social behaviour and what simply constitutes a transgression of personal morality, and it is not immediately clear why the government should be concerned with all the actions in the advertisements, such as having a torn jacket or smudging one's make-up, from a crime and health perspective.  Even urinating on one's shoes or having a wet skirt are unlikely to cause a health problem, although the fact that one

has vomited suggests that one has drunk more alcohol than one's body can cope with.  Notably the advertisements themselves, in contrast with the Know Your Limits campaign, do not make any link with any criminal or unhealthy behaviour; the point is simply that one would not act this way at other times, or if one was sober.[ii]

The point I wish to emphasise here is how the idea of excess that has been condemned by successive governments goes beyond risk to oneself and harm or inconvenience to others.  The 'Would You?' campaign contrasts the effort that may be put into ensuring the desired presentation of oneself at the beginning of the night with how one may appear by the end.  The focus is on the presentation of a responsible, orderly, respectable self as valued in the everyday, sober world.  It is not only that the apparent offences in the advertisements have no victim apart from the protagonists themselves, but also that the actions are only 'offences' from a particular moral standpoint.  It is almost as if the government is giving advice on how to construct a (performative) responsible self.  In this way, it can be argued that governmental objections to the perceived 'binge' drinking culture are manifested in moral terms rather than simply focusing on crime and risk management.  They are part of a broader aesthetic that reflects how certain behaviour is viewed and classified.  As such, the 'Would You?' advertisements can be considered attempts to foster a sense of disgust at certain actions and then mobilise this through (self-)discipline to mould young people's drinking practices.

A number of writers have emphasised the resonance and importance of disgust in the process of class formation (e.g. Bourdieu 1984; Lawler 2005; Tyler 2008).  Nevertheless, this idea of a binge-drinking 'culture' of excess could be seen as something almost independent of individual identity; something that can be adopted or rejected as a set of behaviours.  However, in policy from both Labour and the Coalition the overwhelming impression is not of a style of drinking that could be occasionally indulged in; rather, it is the defining feature of a particular group of people: 'binge' drinkers, who are understood as a particular section of society.  In the 2004 Strategy, then Prime Minister Tony Blair condemned 'binge' drinking by a 'small minority' of the population (Cabinet Office 2004: 2). In 2007 the Strategy foreword was signed by the departmental ministers, who lamented that there was 'the idea (among some of the population) that drunken antisocial behaviour is acceptable or normal' (HM Government 2007: 1).  In 2012, although David Cameron stated that 'binge drinking isn't some fringe issue', the Strategy was still at pains to point out that 'the majority of people who drink do so in an entirely responsible way', in contrast with 'those who drink to get drunk' who are 'irresponsible citizens' (HM Government 2012: 2-4).

It is possible that the issue of alcohol consumption could be framed at a population level, arguing that the British public as a whole drink too much. Indeed, one key recommendation of some commentators is that 'population level' policies to reduce alcohol consumption should be introduced (e.g. Casswell 1997; Morris 2012).  Nevertheless, at least for public consumption, it is clear that when government targets 'binge' drinking they consider

themselves to be targeting not simply a leisure choice that we might all engage in, but a specific group of individuals: that 'small minority' of 'binge' drinkers. The following sections argue that due to the confluence of economic and cultural factors, this group-making can be considered classed.

## *Historical resonances*

The 'binge' drinking culture defined by successive governments, with its deliberate seeking of irrationality through intoxication and abandonment of everyday norms, has strong historical resonances with notions of class. At its simplest level, the association of rationality and sobriety with the middle class, in contrast with the excessive irrationality and intoxication at either end of the social spectrum, has been argued by James Nicholls (2009: 98) to be a key theme in the formation of the middle class in the eighteenth century.[iii] As well as having links with notions of industriousness and rationality, there is also an element to this understanding of intoxication that portrays it as an immediate, sensate, and therefore 'facile' pleasure, following a Kantian aesthetic identified by Bourdieu (1984) as central to the construction of class through culture.

'Binge' drinking – as a description of others' behaviour – can also be argued to have historical resonances with the broader concept of the carnivalesque, which has strong class connotations. In words that closely parallel current portrayals of the night-time economy, Mike Featherstone (1991: 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.

Stallybrass and White (1986) have suggested that the carnivalesque is one key element of a more general symbolic system, ordered by the high/low opposition, which is fundamental basis to mechanisms of ordering and sense-making in European cultures. It is in this context that Skeggs (2004) argues that almost the defining feature of the working class in today's United Kingdom is its apparent 'excessiveness'.

In its traditional form, the carnivalesque has often been understood as a challenge to the dominant norms and understandings (Bakhtin 1984; Easton et al. 1988; Ravenscroft and Gilchrist 2009). If current 'binge' drinking were understood in the same way, it might be considered a form of cultural resistance, as has been hinted at in the work of Griffin *et al.* (2009; see also Hackley et al. 2012). However, this would not necessarily make it a form of class resistance and group-making; it could be a sub-culture challenging the dominant culture, and there is little agreement that such cultures are necessarily classed (see, for example, Bennett 1999). On the other hand, it need not be celebrated as a form of resistance simply because of its associations with class structures. Rather, I use the term here as a way of

characterising governmental and wider discussions of other people's drinking, in order to illuminate the operation of power.

The association of the binge drinking 'culture' with the working class is not simply through implicit historical resonance, however. There are more direct class references in contemporary public policy discussions of 'binge' drinking. Tessa Jowell, for example, explained the introduction of the 2003 Licensing Act as follows:

> There is a simple logic to this new law. Adults should be trusted to make their own decisions about when and where they have a night out. But yobbish behaviour will be punished hard and swift. (Quoted in Plant and Plant 2006: 99)

In this formulation, the language used by Jowell reveals an association of undesirable, apparently excessive 'binge' drinking behaviour with the working class. The term 'yob' originates in cockney backslang, where words were reversed, and thus means 'boy'. This form of slang was primarily associated with barrow-boys and thieves (Ayto 2007: 92) – notably not the respectable classes. It has passed in common usage to refer to those who are violent and disorderly, by virtue of the association with the young men of this class. The following sections look at this classing of problematic drinking in more detail, with particular reference to how economic value is linked to wider notion of morality and symbolic capital.

## Economics and valuing drinking cultures

This section demonstrates how government measures to combat 'binge' drinking and broader public policy discussions around these reveal an

understanding that problematic alcohol use is undertaken by those who are economically unproductive, live in particular (deprived) areas of the country, and choose particular drinks which are considered to be simple and cheap and opposed to more complex (expensive) pleasures.  In this way, the general understanding of 'binge' drinkers is explicitly associated with economic capital, linked to cultural capital, suggesting that 'binge' drinking is valued according to a broad symbolic economy that links various conceptions of value, and serves to construct individuals as part of groupings that are classed.

In framing public policy surrounding alcohol, successive governments have emphasised that there are positive aspects to alcohol consumption.  For example, a document published by the Department for Children, Schools and Families under the Labour government set the context thus:

> Drinking alcohol plays a long-standing, generally positive role in British culture.  (DCSF 2009: 5)

In government policies and statements, this 'positive role' is frequently conceived of in economic terms.  All three recent alcohol strategies – in 2004, 2007 and most recently 2012 – have placed emphasis on the value of the alcohol industry at £29bn-£30bn.  Under the Labour Government particularly, the alcohol industry was seen as central to 'a revival of city centres across England and Wales (HM Government 2007: 30), with the hope that a new night time economy would create 'Bologna in Birmingham, Madrid in

Manchester' (ODPM 2003).  This approach was already in place in the 1990s, leading Hobbs *et al.* (2000: 703) to argue that the approach to alcohol regulation could be seen as part of a broader shift in the mentality of local government from 'municipal socialism' to 'municipal capitalism', whereby the market in alcohol consumption is expanded, and indeed the active consumer of alcohol is seen as a good citizen.  Here, I want to analyse how, given this emphasis on economic value, this ideal citizen-drinker's consumption patterns are judged in the same terms, meaning that such status is only available to those with sufficient economic capital.

At the broadest level, ideas of economic productivity and wealth are key criteria for understanding who is able to drink without censure.  Labour Home Office minister Alan Campbell (2009), for example, stated with respect to alcohol pricing policies:

> 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.

In this formulation those who work hard are seen as deserving a drink, and they should not be penalised for this.  That is, their right to drink depends on their having gone out to work and been productive.

This apparent causal link is also understood to operate, in some senses, in the opposite direction. That is, just as the economically valuable citizen is understood to have earned the right to drink alcohol, so those who have apparently transgressed in their consumption are understood to be economically less productive. Targeted economic measures are understood to address not only consumption, but issues of behaviour and culture, reflecting an understanding that 'binge' drinking means more than a certain quantity of alcohol being consumed. In this way, the apparently undesirable culture of 'binge' drinking is linked with a lack of economic capital.[iv]

Measures introduced in Oldham in 2009 offer one particular example of how the economic and cultural can converge. In response to concerns surrounding alcohol-related behaviour, the council in Oldham set a minimum price of 75p per unit of alcohol to apply to on-license sales within the town. In terms of its most immediate consequences, such minimum pricing, whether at a town level as in Oldham, or at a national level as outlined by the Coalition government, will affect those who buy the cheapest alcohol, and who have the least money, as the price of more expensive drinks, which the more wealthy are able to afford, is not (directly) affected. However, more than this, such price mechanisms, in Oldham at least, were accompanied by a set of regulations that showed a broader antipathy towards those with less spending power. If a venue wanted to sell drinks for less than the specified minimum, it was obliged to fulfil additional requirements in order to retain its license. These included: funding additional police officers who are permanently

stationed in the venue for the course of the offer in question, operating a 'post office style' queue whereby customers formally line up in rows delineated by ropes, and allowing each customer to buy only two drinks at a time (BBC 2009a).

According to the Oldham formulation, then, the moment when the state should intervene in the running of drinking venues, and consequently the activities of drinkers, is when alcohol is being sold at a low price.  It should be noted that a policy could alternatively have been applied to venues on the basis of behaviour, or consequences of drinking, rather than the prices.  This price-based policy was justified not simply on the basis that selling alcohol too cheaply makes anyone drink too much; rather, that it attracted a particular category of person.  When questioned about the policies in Oldham, a council official gave this explanation:

> The price of alcohol became so cheap that it was attracting people who didn't have a lot of money to spend.  That type of clientele was attracted to the town and that, we think, led to more issues concerned with their – that overconsumption.  (BBC 2009a)

In this formulation, those with little money are constructed as more likely to cause trouble.  Access to money is thus associated with access to responsibility.  This is a familiar echo of longstanding concerns regarding the working classes having 'money in their pockets' (see McRobbie 2009).

In the statements of both Alan Campbell and the Oldham council official, ideas of class are mobilised by linking on the one hand undesirable consumption with a lack of money and on the other desirable consumption with hard work.  This theme is echoed throughout discussions of alcohol pricing policies.  Ian Gilmore, past president of the Royal College of Physicians and chair of the UK Alcohol Health Alliance, who frequently makes public commentary on government alcohol policy, is reported as being specifically worried about white cider, 'sold very cheaply in cut-price supermarkets such as Lidl and Aldi in deprived areas'.  In similar terms, he has stated of a pricing policy: 'There is no point in Waitrose in Godalming doing it and not Lidl in inner-city Liverpool' (quoted in Boseley and Wintour 2008).  In this way, the 'problem' of alcohol consumption is again conceived of as being linked to price, and thus associated with those from low-income or 'deprived' backgrounds.

The Conservative Party in Opposition, and subsequently the Coalition Government, has taken up Gilmore's concern with white cider specifically.  In this case, a particular drink becomes a signifier for a particular type of behaviour and, through this, a particular type of person.  In a speech to the Conservative Party conference in 2009, Chris Grayling made it clear that his target was strong cider, not 'the ordinary pint in the pub' (Grayling 2009).  In 2010, the Treasury released a report transforming this position into policy. This report reveals clearly the underlying matrix that ties together motivation, price and aesthetic enjoyment.  White cider is stated as being problematic due to its links with disorder and health issues, and the fact that it is 'cheap' and

'strong' in terms of alcohol content.  It is understood that increasing the price of the drink may address its affordability and desirability, and therefore potentially reduce the problems currently associated with it.  There is indeed strong evidence for the argument that the most 'harmful' drinkers disproportionately consume cheap alcohol – and specifically cheap cider (Chick and Gill 2013; Purhouse et al. 2009).  However, the regulatory measure – increasing the duty payable – is not based on price; it has not been introduced for all cheap drinks or all strong drinks, or even for all strong or cheap cider specifically, which would be possible given that duty varies by type of drink (wine, beer, cider or spirits).  Rather, a specific rate of duty is targeted at 'white' or 'industrial' cider on the basis of its manufacturing process: according to the Alcoholic Duties (Definition of Cider) Order 2010, white cider is defined in terms of its 'juice content'.  In this way, other strong ciders brewed in a different way are immune from this increase in duty.  The document describes these other strong ciders as 'traditional cider', and states that they are 'often premium products and are not associated with problem drinking' (HM Treasury 2010: 14).

The rationale underpinning this economic initiative is a cultural, or aesthetic, one.  Despite their high alcohol content, 'traditional' ciders are not to be targeted because they are thought to be drunk by different people with different people, with different motivations and understandings.  The rationale for drinking 'industrial' cider is understood to be instrumental – for the end of intoxication.  In contrast, 'traditional' strong cider is drunk for reasons of 'pure' taste in the Kantian sense.

The parallels with Bourdieu's analysis of classed taste are striking.  In terms of food, for example, Bourdieu (1984: 196) contrasts the apparent working-class practice of eating food that efficiently provides the body with fuel for little money in an efficient manner with the elite's approach that emphasises the distance from necessity of both the type of food and the manner of eating it.  This distance from the inherent properties of objects, and their necessary function, is understood to be part of a 'pure' taste.  Immediate pleasures – such as intoxication, or even music to some extent – are understood to be inferior and facile.

The Treasury document makes the same argument in even more explicit terms with regard to beer.  Just as a distinction was drawn between 'industrial' and 'traditional' ciders, so one is drawn between 'super-strength' lagers and 'highly-priced, premium beers' – both of which may have a distinctly high alcohol content.  In introducing 'super-strength' lagers, the document states simply: 'they are consumed disproportionately by men, and those in lower socio-economic groups' (HM Treasury 2010: 13).  It is not made clear why this is of any relevance, and yet the remainder of the section shows that class – defined both in terms of economics and culture – is central to the discussion.  The features that allow a beer to be exempt from regulation are that it be 'highly priced' and 'premium'.  However, a solely price-based mechanism – such as minimum unit pricing (MUP) – could avoid targeting such drinks.  The key characteristic of this measure is that it regulates on the basis of both the economic and the cultural.  The document explains the dual nature of the

measure in terms resonant with Bourdieu's model of taste, economics and distinction:

> These niche, premium products are often consumed in a different way to the 'super-strength' lagers because they are served in lower volumes (330ml) and frequently consumed with a meal. They will face only a small percentage increase in price and it is likely that their consumers are not very price sensitive because they choose these beers specifically for their taste and already pay a high price. (HM Treasury 2010: 13)

Strikingly, although references to evidence are offered for other sections of the report's claims regarding drinking styles – for example that on 'up tempo' nights out more spirits are proportionally consumed – there are no references offered for either the idea that 'premium' beers are often served in 330ml measures, or that people drink these beers with a meal.

This association of 'premium' products with 'responsible' drinking has been enthusiastically taken up by sections of the alcohol industry, with Pernod Ricard (2009) stating on its website that 'our business strategy of promoting the premium nature of our wine and spirits brands goes a long way to encourage consumers to enjoy a drink responsibly'. Similarly, James Watt, founder of the Brew Dog brewery, responded to the media furore surrounding the launch of their unusually strong 'Tokyo*' beer by drawing on discourses of complexity and responsibility:

Mass-market, industrially-brewed lagers are so bland and tasteless that you are seduced into drinking a lot of them. We've been challenging people to drink less alcohol, and educating the palates of drinkers with progressive craft-brewed beers which have an amazing depth of flavour, body and character. The beers made at Brew Dog, including Tokyo*, are providing a cure to binge beer-drinking. (BBC 2009b)

Since the publication of the Treasury document, minimum unit pricing (MUP) has become Coalition Government policy. In terms of its potential impact on public health, such policies have been justified on the basis that they will affect consumption across a population, rather than being specifically targeted at individuals who consume in problematic ways (Morris 2012). Where the effects of such universal policies are considered to be targeted, this is justified on the basis that those who drink the lowest priced products tend to have the most alcohol-related problems (Purhouse et al. 2009). Despite its ostensible universal application, the proposals for MUP are presented by the Government as targeting a classed group of problematic drinkers. Thus Prime Minister David Cameron has justified MUP on the basis that it will stop 'a family with a reasonable drinking habit', which *The Telegraph*, reporting on the statement, calls 'middle class', subsidising 'the binge drinker' (Hope 2012). In another instance, Cameron has singled out a particular drink with classed connotations as emblematic of the target of MUP, stating that consumers should not be able to buy '20 tins of Stella for a fiver' (quoted in Daily Mail 2010). This drink – Stella Artois lager – has strong associations

with class.  As Hayward  and Yar (2006) have suggested, drinking 'Stella' is one of the key consumption-based identifiers of 'chavs'.  Stella Artois is chosen in this context not for its price alone, particularly given that its advertising slogan from 1982 to 2007 was 'reassuringly expensive' (Suggett 2012), but for its particular class connotations: to make the point that the consumption being targeted is problematic in a specific way.  That is, in order to justify a policy ostensibly based solely on price, cultural motifs are employed.  In this way, government discussions of alcohol policy link economics and culture as part of a broader understanding of what sort of drinking is problematic.  Even where a policy is apparently universal, then, its presentation continues to construct problematic drinking as a phenomenon associated with the working-class other.

## *Conclusion*

This article has argued that government discussions of alcohol, most notably in the case of 'binge' drinking, have employed and reinforced classed understandings of social practices.  'Binge' drinking, the archetype of drinking behaviour that has been condemned by both the recent Labour government and its Coalition successor, has been defined not in terms of quantity of alcohol consumed, or criminal actions in itself, but as a wider culture that values intoxication.  Already, such a classification draws on historical associations of the carnivalesque with the working class, and ideas of pure as opposed to facile taste.  However, the distinction is not only a historical one; it is alive in contemporary forms in today's Britain.

In the case of the regulation of alcohol in contemporary Britain, then, we can see how the different forms of inequality and distinction are weaved together to create a sense of distinction that can be understood by reference to a broad symbolic economy. In determining price policies relating to alcohol, the wider aesthetic approach of the drinker is considered. There are certain drinks that are seen to be drunk *purely* for their taste, and it is not considered appropriate that these should be the target of pricing policies. A key indicator that a drink is likely to have this high aesthetic status is that it is expensive. That is, the economic is taken to be an indicator of the social. On the other hand, drinks that are assumed to be drunk for only their intoxicating properties are considered to be a more appropriate target for price mechanisms. In this way, economic divisions are reinforced by social and cultural divisions, and these divisions structure the policy-making process surrounding alcohol. Understanding the formation of class as the congruence and interplay of economic, cultural and social forces, alcohol policy and the surrounding discussions can therefore be seen as a key way in which class is constituted in contemporary Britain.

---

[i] It should be noted that government surveys and statistics, however, frequently measure the prevalence of this 'binge' drinking though proxies such as quantity drunk, or frequency of drunkenness.

[ii] Issues of crime and health are covered in the 'Would You?' poster campaign, however.

[iii] See Haydock (2010) for a discussion of the merits of emphasising that mechanisms of class distinction are not consistently conscious and calculating.

[iv] As one of the few examples of recent expansion of formal regulation of the alcohol industry, this could be understood to construct those without economic resources as doubly subaltern – taking an understanding of Garland's (1996) 'criminology of the other', these are people who are seen as beyond the pale, as their behaviour cannot be changed by methods of persuasion; they require formal structures. They are understood to lack the controlled, rational self that Skeggs (2004) notes as being almost the defining feature of middle-classness.

## *References*

Ayto, J. (2007). Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable. Edinburgh, Chambers.

Bakhtin, M. (1984). Rabelais and His World. Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press.

BBC (2009a). Panorama: The Truth About Happy Hour. TV, BBC One. 10th August. 20.30hrs.

BBC (2009b) 'UK's 'strongest beer' condemned'. BBC News 27th July, Available from: http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/north_east/8170813.stm [Accessed 29th July 2009]

Bennett, A. (1999). 'Subcultures or neo-tribes? Rethinking the relationship between youth, style and musical taste.' Sociology 33(3): 599-617.

Boseley, S. and P. Wintour (2008) 'Supermarket alcohol price 'fix' to curb binge drinkers'. The Guardian 1st March, Available from: http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2008/mar/01/drugsandalcohol.supermarkets [Accessed 3rd March 2008]

Bourdieu, P. (1977). Outline of a Theory of Practice. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1984). Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste. London, Routledge.

Bourdieu, P. (1987). 'What Makes a Social Class? On The Theoretical and Practical Existence Of Groups.' Berkeley Journal of Sociology 32: 1-17.

Bourdieu, P. (1990). The Logic Of Practice. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Bourdieu, P. (1994). In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology. Cambridge, Polity.

Cabinet Office (2004). Alcohol Harm Reduction Strategy for England. London, Prime Minister's Strategy Unit.

Campbell, A. (2009). Interview: Calling Time on the Binge Drinkers. Radio, BBC Radio 4. 27th July.

Carey, J. (1992). The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939. London, Faber and Faber.

Casswell, S. (1997). 'Population level policies on alcohol: are they still appropriate given that 'alcohol is good for the heart'?' Addiction 92(Supplement 1): S81-S90.

Chick, J. and J. Gill (2013). 'A Tale of Two Cities'. <u>Alcohol and British Society (Conference)</u>. London, Alcohol Research UK.

Codd, J. (2006) 'Violent crime up since 24-hour drinking laws, claims MP'. <u>Daily Echo</u> 23rd November, Available from: [http://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/search/display.var.1036773.0.violent_crime_up_since_24hour_drinking_laws_claims_mp.php](http://www.bournemouthecho.co.uk/search/display.var.1036773.0.violent_crime_up_since_24hour_drinking_laws_claims_mp.php) [Accessed 5th December 2006]

Crompton, R. (1993). <u>Class and Stratification: An Introduction to Current Debates</u>. Cambridge, Polity Press.

Daily Mail (2010) 'Cheap booze to be banned under 'radical' plans to curb binge drinking, Health Secretary warns'. <u>Daily Mail</u> 29 November, Available from: [http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1333808/Cheap-booze-ban-radical-plans-curb-binge-drinking.html](http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1333808/Cheap-booze-ban-radical-plans-curb-binge-drinking.html) [Accessed 27 February 2011]

DCSF (2009). <u>Consultation on Children, Young People and Alcohol</u>. London, Department for Children, Schools and Families.

Department of Health (2008). <u>Safe, Sensible, Social - Consultation on further action</u>. London, Department of Health.

Easton, S., et al. (1988). <u>Disorder and Discipline: Popular Culture from 1550 to the Present</u>. Aldershot, Temple Smith.

Featherstone, M. (1991). <u>Consumer Culture and Postmodernism</u>. London, Sage.

Garland, D. (1996). 'The Limits of the Sovereign State: Strategies of Crime and Control in Contemporary Society.' <u>The British Journal of Sociology</u> 36(4): 445-471.

Grayling, C. (2009) 'A no-nonsense approach to crime and disorder'. Conservative Party Conference, Available from: http://www.conservatives.com/News/Speeches/2009/10/Chris_Grayling_A_no-nonsense_approach_to_crime_and_disorder.aspx [Accessed 22nd March 2011]

Griffin, C., et al. (2009). ''Every Time I Do It I Annihilate Myself': Loss of (Self-)Consciousness and Loss of Memory in Young People's Drinking Narratives.' Sociology 43(3): 457-476.

Hackley, C., et al. (2012). 'Young adults and 'binge' drinking: A Bakhtinian analysis.' Journal of Marketing Management DOI:10.1080/0267257X.2012.729074.

Haydock, W. (2010) 'Review of 'The Politics of Alcohol: A History of the Drink Question in England''. Reviews in History (894), Available from: http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/894 [Accessed 17th February 2013]

Hayward, K. and M. Yar (2006). 'The 'chav' phenomenon: Consumption, media and the construction of a new underclass.' Crime, Media, Culture 2(1): 9-28.

HM Government (2007). Safe.  Sensible.  Social.  The next steps in the National Alcohol Strategy. London, TSO.

HM Government (2012). The Government's Alcohol Strategy. London, The Stationery Office.

HM Treasury (2010). Review of alcohol taxation. Available from: http://www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/d/alcohol_tax_review301110.pdf [Accessed 22 March 2011]

Hobbs, D., et al. (2000). 'Receiving shadows: governance and liminality in the night-time economy.' British Journal of Sociology 51(4): 701-717.

Home Office (2010). Responses to Consultation: rebalancing the Licensing Act. Available from: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/publications/consultations/cons-2010-licensing-act/responses-licensing-consult?view=Binary [Accessed 27th February 2011]

Home Office and NHS (2008) Alcohol Know Your Limits: Stakeholder Update 9(May), Available from: http://www.alcoholstakeholders.nhs.uk/pdf/Newsletter.pdf [Accessed 16th January 2009]

Hope, C. (2012) 'Families like mine pay more for food to subsidise binge drinking, says David Cameron'. Daily Telegraph 14 December, Available from: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron/9746352/Families-like-mine-pay-more-for-food-to-subsidise-binge-drinking-says-David-Cameron.html [Accessed 17 December 2012]

Lawler, S. (2005). 'Disgusted subjects: the making of middle-class identities.' The Sociological Review 53(3): 429-446.

May, T. (2010) 'Theresa May on making cities safer'. Available from: http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/news/safer-cities [Accessed 6 February 2013]

McRobbie, A. (2009). The aftermath of feminism: gender, culture and social change. London, Sage.

Morris, J. (2012) 'Minimum pricing is not what it seems'. The Information Daily.com 18 December, Available from: http://www.theinformationdaily.com/2012/12/18/minimum-pricing-is-not-what-it-seems/ [Accessed 6 February 2013]

NHS and Home Office. (2008a) Would You? Female TV Advert. Available from:

http://www.alcoholstakeholders.nhs.uk/media/Alcohol_Harm_Reduction_Girl.mpg [Accessed 19th January 2009]

NHS and Home Office. (2008b) Would You? Male TV Advert. Available from: http://www.alcoholstakeholders.nhs.uk/media/Alcohol_Harm_Reduction_Boy.mpg [Accessed 19th January 2009]

Nicholls, J. (2009). The politics of alcohol: A history of the drink question in England. Manchester, Manchester University Press.

ODPM (2003). The Evening Economy and the Urban Renaissance. London, The Stationery Office.

Pernod Ricard. (2009) Accept Responsibility. Available from: http://acceptresponsibility.org.uk/welcome.php [Accessed 1st August 2009]

Plant, M. and M. Plant (2006). Binge Britain: Alcohol and the National Response. Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Purhouse, R., et al. (2009) 'Modelling to assess the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of public health related strategies and intervention to reduce alcohol attributable harm in England using the Sheffield Alcohol Policy Model version 2.0'. Report to the NICE Public Health Programme Development Group, Available from: http://www.nice.org.uk/nicemedia/live/11828/46443/46443.pdf [Accessed 17th February 2013]

Ravenscroft, N. and P. Gilchrist (2009). 'Spaces of transgression: governance, discipline and reworking the carnivalesque.' Leisure Studies 28(1): 35-49.

Skeggs, B. (2004). Class, Self, Culture. London, Routledge.

Stallybrass, P. and A. White (1986). <u>The Politics and Poetics of Transgression</u>. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press.

Suggett, P. (2012) <u>The Stella Artois "Reassuringly Expensive" Campaign</u>. Available from: http://advertising.about.com/od/history/p/The-Stella-Artois-Reassuringly-Expensive-Campaign.htm [Accessed 17 February 2013]

Thompson, E. P. (1991). <u>The Making of the English Working Class</u>. London, Penguin.

Tyler, I. (2008). '"Chav Mum Chav Scum": class disgust in contemporary Britain.' <u>Feminist Media Studies</u> 8(1): 17-34.

Williams, R. (1990). <u>Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell</u>. London, The Hogarth Press.