

Between culture and nature. Intoxication in cultural studies of alcohol and drug use

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ABSTRACT

Theoretical attempts to formulate cultural theories of drinking and drug use have traditionally stemmed from norm-theory or functionalism. These tend to reduce drinking and drug practices to intoxication alone or to neglect intoxication altogether.. The semiotic turn in the 1980s brought "meaning" to the focus of cultural studies. This article proposes, following Bruno Latour, that cultural practices and discourses should be seen as translations of each other. Intoxication is a proto-semiotic fact between culture and nature, not being completely meaningful but not possible without meanings either. This is the reason why images of intoxication are powerful translations of social relationships and the relationships between humans and nature. It is especially powerful language to articulate status distinctions that are shaky or confused, such as between youth and adults.

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by

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#### INTRODUCTION: TOO MUCH INTOCIXATION, OR TOO LITTLE?

Problem-oriented studies on alcohol and drug use tend to focus on causal explanations of risk-prone behaviour and its consequences. The semiotic turn that reached general sociology and gradually also alcohol research in the 1980s placed emphasis on cultural explanations or interpretations of drinking patterns and the images people have of them. There have been cultural approaches to drug and alcohol use before, but their background has been either norm-theory or functionalism. The semiotic approach restored the interest in cultural explanations formulated in terms of meaning and understandability. This interest had, of course, been central in classical sociology, especially in Weber's, Simmel's and Durkheim's work, but it was swept aside by later developments in sociological theory.

Cultural explanations of drinking or drug use patterns tend to drift towards one of two extremes. They may either reduce the practices to intoxication; or they neglect the role of intoxication altogether. These interpretations are frequent particularly in policy discourse. For much of the twentieth century alcohol policy has been directed to 'civilize the drinking culture', especially in the monopoly countries. The Nordic monopolies have introduced new beverages, recommended wine instead of vodka etc. (Sulkunen et al 2000). The alternatives have been presented as *mild* alcohol; in other words, as means of intoxication - only of a less potent kind, advised to be used maybe more often but in small doses rather than larger doses but less frequently.

The second interpretation appears in anti-paternalistic policy discourse. Drinking is looked at from the point of view of cultural competence and distinction, similar to any other consumer behaviour and good taste, without any reference to intoxication at all.

The real challenge in cultural studies of drug and alcohol use is to theorise intoxication itself. Radical constructivists tend to associate intoxication with culture and socialisation: conventions, labels and rituals determine how substances are used and how their effects are experienced. On the other hand, intoxicants obviously work on the human body and have "natural effects" on the mind independently of cultural factors. Bruno Latour (<1993) has argued about discourses on technologies that a usual intellectual strategy to deal with the problem is a "balanced use of the trope 'both-and'". Technical and other natural objects are *both* part of the "nature out

there" *and* have symbolic, functional and normative attributes ascribed to them by culture.

The same applies to alcohol and drugs. In order to replace such a "disgusting brew", as Latour calls such dualistic arguments, with a more coherent view, I first take a look at norms and functions, and then go on to two issues - the reflexivity problem and the instability of meanings - in semiotic theories of culture. I then discuss their implications for the cultural study of intoxication.

## NORMS AND FUNCTIONS

The earliest sociological use of "culture" as an explanatory factor of drinking problems and drinking behaviour was the so-called socio-cultural theory. An illustrative examples are David Pittman's (<1967) classification of cultures into abstinent, ambivalent, permissive and over-permissive types; and Bales's typology: abstinent, convivial and utilitarian (<1946).

Sociological norm-theory is, as Habermas (<1987, 199-282) has argued, a theory of social order rather than understandability of human action. The individual is seen as a desiring and pleasure-seeking animal, and the function of the normative order is to bring the individual under social control. Ambivalence and inconsistencies of the norm-system lead to problems, conflicts and disorder (Room 1976). Norm-theoretical approaches reduce the relevant part of drinking and drug behaviour to intoxication, which in turn is assumed to satisfy the same desire in all cultural contexts. Only the norms that regulate the satisfaction of the desire are thought to vary.

In contrast, approaches that look for functions that alcohol or drugs satisfy tend to stress variations in the societal contexts or individual needs and motives, sometimes focusing on intoxication but often looking mostly at other things. Anthropological studies have analysed the functions of alcohol and drug use in the ritual systems of small, often non-Western societies. They reveal important variability in the way alcohol or drugs are used in different cultural contexts (<Heath 1975; <SOU 1974:90; Washburne 1961). Their use or their effects can not be seen as universal, grounded in "human nature" or in the pharmacology of the substances. These studies have argued that drunken comportment is learned behaviour, not attributable to the properties of alcohol itself. Drinking helps to maintain the tribal status system (Heath 1958; MacAndrew and Edgerton <1969). This research has been criticised for tending towards "problem deflation" (<Room 1984). Maggie Brady (1992) has argued that it risks to idealise traditional drinking and drug cultures, underestimating their role in maintaining high current problem rates among indigenous groups (<Brady 1992).

Psychologically oriented cross-cultural studies have directly opposite intentions. They have sought to identify universal psychological motivations to drink, such as reduction of anxiety and fear (<Horton 1943;<Washburne 1961; <Field 1962; <Bacon et al. 1965 and <1974;<McClelland et al. 1972; <Mäkelä 1979). Like norm-theoretical cultural explanations the approach is reductionist - the effects of drinking are understood to be pre-social and based on intoxication alone.

The third type of functional explanations refers to effects of drinking on social relationships in small groups and face-to face interaction Bruun (1959). More generally, drinking and drug use may be seen as functional factors in many forms of sociability (Partanen<1991, 221-235). In contrast to psychological cross-culturalism this theoretical approach focuses on the social and ritualised functions of intoxication in limited social situations.

A fourth variety of functional explanations of alcohol use is the analysis of alcohol and its functions in modern society. A classic still worth reading is the essay by Selden Bacon (1945 and 1962, 79-85). Following the Durkheimian tradition he characterized modern society as complex and its social relationships as specialized, stratified, interdependent, and individualistic. Drinking is functional in supporting social integration, depressing certain inhibitions, anxieties, aggressions and tensions, and relaxation. Obviously, alcohol also has dysfunctions in complex societies.

One difficulty of functional theories of alcohol and modernity such as Bacon's is how to deal with functional equivalents. Why is it just alcohol, but not other drugs, that so well serves the social functions in modern Western society, and why alcoholic beverages on the other hand may also serve other functions such as nutrition in some - also modern - societies.

In my own dissertation (Sulkunen 1983) I tried to solve this issue with the theory of political economy, using the term "use-value" rather than function for the need that alcohol satisfies. Some use-values are based on its intoxicating effects but not all. It is the combination of both supply and demand that determines to what kinds of uses different alcoholic beverages would be put.

#### *Norm and function in research and lay discourse on youth cultures*

The theoretical approaches outlined above have been important in studies on alcohol and drug use among youth, also in recent studies of the new drug wave. They appear, although not always explicitly, in research reports but also in lay discourses.

For example both the self-understanding and social scientific interpretations of romantic youth cultures of the 1960s have relied on norm-theoretical foundations. These movements were, particularly in English-speaking countries quite drug-oriented and liberal, breaking down conventional norms (Bell 1976; Roszak 1968). Similar arguments about norms and anti-conformism have recently been reported by Pauliina Seppälä (<1999) in her study of recreational drug use in Helsinki. Participants identify themselves as an alternative counter-culture that opposes the dull, vulgar and alcohol-centred "mainstream". The most important value they expressed in an Internet-survey was "freedom".

The most sophisticated approach to young people's cultural practices has been the work of British "culturalists": Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson, and a generation later in the 1970s and early 1980s Paul Willis, Steward Hall, Dick Hebdidge, Angela McRobbie. The approach was inspired by the semiotic turn, but it also tended towards functionalism (Lähteenmaa 2000). For the "Birmingham school", a cultural explanation of social practice is to see it in the context of *a whole way of life*; not determined by external conditions but meaningfully produced and reproduced by acting and creative people. The culture of a (working-class) community arises from similar living conditions; it produces common meanings that help participants to understand each other, to act together and to reproduce their community.

For the Birmingham approach the central category of interpretation is that of homology rather than function. Paul Willis (1978), for example, used the concept of homology to understand the sub-culture of the "motorbike boys" in terms of how the roaring rock and fast driving reflect the "serious" reality of life through the mediation of meaningful feelings. They articulate the life-view of the working class man: command of technology, feeling of power over nature, and

masculinity. At the same time the subculture has the function of helping the boys to adjust to that life.

The studies by Willis, Hebdidge and McRobbie influenced our *Urban Pub* (Sulkunen et al. 1997), where the chatting, dart games, music, dancing and drinking of the bar room sociability were seen in the light of a homology to the life of suburban working-class dwellers. The emphasis was on coherence: the working class habitus integrates different aspects of the life styles - work, family and the bar room sociability - into a consistent whole.

The homology principle is an important interpretative framework in several studies on young sub-cultures in Finland <although it was also criticized, problematized and tried to be cultivated to fit to Finnish reality by the researchers who used it> (Ehrnrooth 1988; Hoikkala 1989, Lähteenmaa 1991). More recently its influence is felt, with a functionalist slant, in Swedish and Norwegian studies on young people and alcohol: Lalander's *Anden i flaskan* (Spirit in the bottle) (<1998) and *Berättelser om ruset* (Stories of intoxication) by Norell and Törnqvist (<1995) and the bar study by Træn and Hovland (1999) in Oslo. Selden Bacon's functional theory of alcohol in modern society suggests itself in these studies, which explicitly refer to the sociological literature on late modernity (Bauman, Beck, Giddens, Ziehe, Fornäs).

Træn and Hovland analyse (<1999) young urban Norwegians and their 'self-actualization' or 'impression-management' in a way that is close to Bacon's argument although they refer to Goffman's dramaturgical sociology. Similar suggestions of macro-structural functionalism appear in Lalander's (<1998) analysis of a group of female media workers, and in his comparison between working-class oriented and middle-class oriented school children (<2000). The middle-class adults' image of their own drinking is that it serves important social functions in a complex network of relationships while it is kept under careful individual control.

The study by Norell and Törnqvist also resembles the early theory by Donald Horton. They interpret that intoxication alleviates anxiety and fear at the face of uncertainty. In each of the three groups they studied - middle-class students, workers and avant-garde rock subculture - the fears were different. Uncertainty about career success was important in the first group, doubts about being as good as the others was the worry of the second, and unpredictability of artistic achievement in the third.

Paradoxically, Allan Sande (<2000) identifies similar functions of constructing individuality and interpersonal interaction patterns in what would appear to be a traditional, even pre-modern rite of passage involving 17 days of continuous drinking by teenagers after graduation.

The self-understanding of recreational drug-users is also constructed on several kinds of functional arguments. Social relationships, relaxation and disinhibition are used as functional explanations of drug use (<Seppälä 1999). Many participants are students or employed in new technology, and they argue that raving and drugging during the week-end helps to recover from work-based intellectual stress and fatigue. Even the Baconian argument about integration and reduction of anxieties, aggressions and tensions in complex societies, were referred to (<Seppälä and Salasuo 2001). The modality of competence dominates the self-image, stressing their role as agents rather than passive participants in a cultural structure. This is functional in terms of re-inforcing their self-identity as competent individuals in competitive and responsible jobs, in distinction with the inferior conventionalism of the "mainstream" culture of the lower classes.

These examples illustrate how norm-theoretical or functional accounts can make drinking and drug cultures understandable, even if they do not explain them in a rigorous sense. The accounts resemble the theoretical approaches outlined earlier in this article but they are also close to the images that people themselves have of their own drinking and drug practices.

## THE SEMIOTIC TURN: TWO THEORETICAL ISSUES

### *The reflexivity problem*

Pierre Bourdieu was one of the sociologists who influenced the semiotic turn in cultural sociology by focusing on the theory of meaning instead of norms and functions. One argument that made his work theoretically important (<e.g. 1980, 51-70) was that functional and normative explanations represent an objectivistic view of human behaviour, as if it was determined by the environment without the mediation of 'le sens pratique', the practical sense. The objectivistic view creates the illusion that research is looking at culture and society from the outside.

But this is only an illusion. We do not just react to external circumstances, and adjust to - or deviate from - norms set from the outside. Human conduct is not only *understandable* and should be studied as meaningful; it is also *understood* by agents themselves, and therefore subject to individual choice, strategy and play. We construct images of our practices and environment by classifying, explaining and interpreting; in other words we *make* them meaningful. The actions of others and of ourselves are guided by such images, not completely and not in full awareness but nevertheless in a way that "makes sense".

According to Anthony Giddens (1979) the semiotic turn was preceded by a long trend in human sciences during the twentieth century towards recognizing that the language of science is part of the same world of meanings as the language of lay discourse. Also Bourdieu's critique of objectivist sociology stresses the fact that researchers participate in the symbolic construction of reality. Lay people may know little or nothing of the theories on which researchers base their accounts of behaviour. Nevertheless their accounts are potentially understood and used to justify people's own practices and to criticize or take a distance from those of others. Research not only studies the culture from the outside, it also influences it by its activity of interpretation. This has far-reaching consequences on social structure and on the struggle for "symbolic power" and for material interests. The history of alcohol control is full of examples of symbolic crusades where new meanings are given to alcohol, and conflicts over it actually represent wider and more complex social issues than those directly related to drinking (Gusfield 1963).

If we recognize that research participates in the symbolic construction of reality, we face the *reflexivity problem*: how research should see and handle itself in its own descriptions of reality. Berger and Luckmann (1966,26) formulated the problem by saying that semiotic sociology - or, as they would say, the sociology of knowledge - is like pushing a bus in which one is sitting.

All constructivist or cultural sociologies face the reflexivity problem. It is a logical consequence of the view that scientific and everyday accounts of social reality are part of the same symbolic world. They are influenced by and they have effects on symbolic interests, and if we agree that symbolic constructions of the world have practical consequences, they have "political"

relevance.

Facing the reflexivity problem, researchers have two options. They can either commit themselves to certain discourses and work to establish their validity or to disqualify them on empirical, logical or theoretical accounts. Or they may try to do what Bourdieu (1980, 1979) calls "objectifying the objectification". Discourses such as norm-theory or functional theories construct the world as objects of knowledge, but instead of committing itself to one of them, sociology can take the discourses as objects of their reflection and study their presuppositions, ideological connexions, practical implications and relationships and examine their validity in this light. This will not take sociology away from the "field" of competing symbolic interests but it does construct a critical distance between the sociological "view from afar" and the social world constructed in the discourses that are its objects.

Lay and expert accounts of alcohol and drug practices in terms of norms or functions also participate in their symbolic construction as meaningful, and therefore as potential objects of a sociological analysis. Before going further on this point, let me take up another general issue that has been raised in the course of the semiotic turn in the sociology of culture.

### *The instability of "meaning"*

Many writers have applauded the semiotic or constructivist turn in sociology for a new subjective point of view: "for scientific purposes, treat people as if they were human beings" (Eskola <1982). This subjectivity is often associated with *relativism*: because the meanings people associate with their practices are subjective, their interpretations by researchers also are subjective and depend on their "point of view". That in turn depends on many kinds of interests, some related to the role of sociologists as professionals and intellectuals, some dictated by others.

In contrast, structuralist currents of the semiotic turn have stressed the objectivity of meaning structures. In this view reflexivity is not a problem, since objective meanings can be studied like any other aspect of social reality. For a structuralist the idea of subjective voluntary meanings makes no sense; culture is not possible outside collectivity, and the cultural study of drinking behaviour should treat people as if they were not in fact human individuals but representatives of a collectivity. This is why such studies of alcohol prefer cultural documents to individual interviews as data. In such documents the collective representations are recorded in a fashion that is automatically corrected against all sorts of subjective biases introduced either by the subjects themselves or by the researcher.

Our analysis of the mythical male fantasies in the drinking scenes of Finnish films belongs to the structuralist tradition (Falk and Sulkunen 1983). We interpreted the representations of empty solidarity and cosmic solitude of drinking men, in isolation from women and from the normal life context, as cultural documentations of the unconscious self-understanding of men of their male condition. The interpretations of the viewers, as well as the intentions of the creators of these images were bracketed out. The structure of the drinking scenes was taken for face-value evidence of the "third subject": that of the collective cultural unconsciousness that operates behind the back of the real cognitive subjects and influences their awareness whether they want it or not.

The structuralist view has been challenged by media researchers who have argued that the meaning of media messages is produced by the consumers. The only way to know what people

make of media messages is to ask them (Morley 1992; <Palmer 1988; <1980; Törrönen 2000). Another challenge to structuralist study of culture has come from the "pragmatic revolution" in linguistics (<Levinson 1983; <Sperber and Wilson 1986). The argument is that language - and meaning in general - is not based on a system but on interaction (Arminen <1988).

*Meanings as translations: incomplete, partial, endless*

The structuralist and the subjective or interactive approaches to meaning blend no better than oil and water. The question is, whose meanings are we talking about. Do we believe that there is a collective "culture", a subject that "has" meanings; or should we rather think that meanings are invented and produced by people contextually? Empirical research designs, such as reception studies, cannot solve the problem. In reception studies the researcher will, after all, face a "text" and make interpretations of it. It is not the same text as that which the viewers interpret: it is the text of interpretation produced by the viewers. A structuralist would argue that such texts can be interpreted as objective representations of the collective culture; a subjectivist would reply that such interpretations are part of the interaction that produces the culture. And so on.

Both sides of the dispute are correct - partially. There is no doubt a lot of encoded "meaning" in a bottle of wine, in taking or serving a drink, or in a glass of beer. But there is also meaning in the way participants interpret those encoded meanings, and these interpretations again are the object of the researchers' interpretations. *And so on.* The chain of interpretations is always partial, incomplete and never ending.

Bruno Latour has argued that we should not be preplexed by the instability of meanings but take it as a corner-stone of our sociology of any knowledge, not just of cultural representations. Even natural science does not produce pure "objective" knowledge of nature in the sense that it would only depend on the natural properties of objects. Knowledges are produced in a field of intersecting interests and practices. Different knowledges - technological, philosophical or practical everyday understandings - are "translations" of each other. For example, a technological innovation is a technical translation by engineers of practical interests and scientific knowledge into a product, plus a web of actors and knowledges that make the technology work (Latour 1993).

Everyday accounts of drinking or drug experiences and interpretations of them by cultural sociologists are also translations - incomplete, partial and endless - that depend on a number of sociological determinants of knowledge. The semiotic turn in cultural studies has spawned an epistemological break in sociology with the understanding that the linguistic worlds of research and of the researched persons are overlapping but not identical, so that translations between them can be made and are relevant. What are drinking and drug use or images of them translations of? And how could they be translated back to normal language, or maybe into the language of sociological theory?

## INTOXICATION AS A SIGNIFIER

*Transgression*

I have suggested above that traditional sociologies of culture have tended towards two rather uninteresting translations of drinking and drug practices: those that reduce them to a one-dimensional idea of intoxication, and those that neglect the role of intoxication altogether. A more interesting translation strategy would take intoxication itself - or its representations - for signifiers of something else.

From the theoretical point of view the error in such reductionist translations is that they attempt at completeness: to give an unambiguous name and linguistic formulation to the phenomenon.

To explain drinking practices or drug use functionally or in terms of norms is to give them a name, to make them meaningful and therefore part of culture. However, intoxication is one of the areas of human experience where culture and nature overlap and form a relationship of tension. It is a sticky surface onto which complicated meanings can be projected and where they can be understood even beyond words or other discourses. Getting drunk or high presupposes culture in the sense that it requires a minimum awareness of the normality to which the altered state of mind is an exception. Therefore it is always transgressing the boundaries of cultured normality, even when it is highly ritualised and sanctioned. It may be well-structured social behaviour but the element of transgression - even just a hint of it - is not irrelevant. Intoxication is a social fact while it is not unambiguously describable. It lies in the grey area between the usual dualisms of nature and culture, where the social is that which is understood and ordered, and the natural is that which is unsaid and nameless. Intoxication is proto-semiotic yet social: *a proto-semiotic social fact*.

### *Progressive and regressive relationships between culture and nature*

Since intoxication as an experience is in the grey and highly equivocal zone between nature and culture, also its representations can be used as powerful articulations of this relationship. This is probably the reason why representations of intoxication in films, fiction and everyday narratives of ordinary people are so effective in articulating values and beliefs about collective identities, social relationships and self-images. These are possible ways of defining the social as cultured, belonging to the ordered social world of distinctions and differences, in contrast to that which is nature and beyond discourse.

Claude Lévi-Strauss (1964; 1965) observed in his studies on mythologies that myths - cultural products themselves - are representations of the relationship between culture and nature. They describe how humans as cultured beings make distinctions between themselves and between cultural and natural objects. The relationship between culture and nature can be either a progressive movement from nature to culture, or a regressive movement from culture back to nature. The origin of human life is natural, but progress through cultural definitions of that which is permitted and proper turns us to persons and members of society. On the other hand, the temptation of regressing back to a state of nature through that which is forbidden and dirty - above all incestuous relationships - is always present. These relationships of progression and regression are, according to Lévi-Strauss, articulated in mythical narratives and thereby maintained in collective awareness. Myths also articulate the world of objects, notably the food system, in terms of raw and natural versus elaborated (cooked, progressed) versus spoiled (rotten, regressed).

Representations of intoxication often appear to follow this pattern. One example is a beer

advertisement that was published in Finnish media in 1997. The poster version shows a picture of a tuxedo-clad young man in the lobby of the opera, drinking beer from a bottle that is in a vertical position. The logo of the brand is shown with the text "Drinking culture is culture too". In the movie version of the advertisement, he is first shown in the stalls with a woman who listens to the diva, but with a hint of boredom on her face. Suddenly the man disappears, and is re-found in the lobby, drinking beer from the bottle with his friends.

The advertisement presents alcohol as a vehicle of transgression. But the transgressive image of alcohol itself is a signifier of something else. The drinking men represent raw masculinity and youth (unspoiled nature), the opera symbolises conventional normality, adulthood and the female world (culture). The opposite of the virile world of the drinking boys is decayed boredom, being old, and not drinking (regressed, rotten culture).

FIGURE 1. Young men's intoxication as a signifier in the beer advertisement analysed in the text.

The advertisement repeats the tension between wild masculinity and orderly femininity that has appeared in studies of Finnish drinking images. It appears in films (Falk and Sulkunen 1983), in the urban pubs (Sulkunen et al 1997) and even in middle-class milieus (Sulkunen 1992). A transformed version of it is articulated in Jaana Jaatinen's (2000) study of the images that young high school students have about alcohol. It is systematically understood as implying drunkenness, but drunkenness itself can be seen as a signifier of the children's fragile relationship with adulthood. Getting drunk is associated with things that can be interpreted to symbolise progress from childhood to cultured worlds of adults: the city centre, money, carnival and sexuality. On the other hand, even for girls the natural consequence of drinking was to become helpless: emotionally disturbed, vomiting and sick. In other words, also the image of regression back to nature through intoxication can be detected in Jaatinen's description.

Such symbolic tensions often develop in situations where status distinctions become shaky and confused. We construct symbolic devices to restore clarity by exaggerating the features of status identity. In contemporary society the status of youth as non-adults is mercurial. Youth culture is being exploited by the media; the adult cult of youthfulness and the prolonged transition from youth to adulthood have turned youth into a confusing and unclear category. Representations of intoxication may be translations of that confusion; at least it is worth a closer study.

### *We and they*

The beer advertisement presents a speaker image, "us", "the boys" but leaves the other, "them", tactfully invisible. In interview studies, especially in group interviews, the difference between "our group" and "the others" is usually more explicit and elaborated. The middle-class groups in Lalander's study (1998) both take a distance from traditional Swedish conscientiousness, as well as from working-class style of drinking. Their new conscientiousness is based on awareness of self-control, style and individual freedom, for example in the choice of day for a party or for a drink. "Groggs" are associated with old, controlling men and business parties, they are "unfresh" and "tastless" - in a sense symbols of rotten decay. Week-end binges are associated with the working class - "the overalls" - and its conformism ("... it's Friday so they're gonna get drunk"). They represent themselves as cultured in the progressive sense.

Norell and Törnqvist (1995, 121-154) emphasise the classifications that the middle-class-oriented students make between everyday and the rituals of festivities, between the kinds of drinks one likes and the kinds of people one is with, partnership and distanced conversation on public issues in parties. These distinctions are contrasted with the others, the working class conformists who only drink on week-ends but do not dress up for the occasion, they fight and engage in personal arguments, and their women may get drunk and become easy prey for sexual contacts.

In my own middle-class study the same features appeared important. My interviewees were older than those of Norell and Törnqvist or Lalander, which might explain that the regressive images of "others" were more predominant in their accounts. Proselytism, intimacy, physical contact and untidiness were images associated with the "cap-heads" who visit urban pubs. In contrast, the clients in the more exclusive clubs and bars where they meet their friends keep a distance to others, avoid personal matters in conversations and regulate body contact carefully (Sulkunen 1992).

The two-directional gravitation from nature to culture and back is not unique to middle-class images of intoxication. Working-class images of drinking already referred to, and even in Pertti Alasuutari's (1992) study of alcoholics in Finnish A-Clinics for example have their own systems of distancing from raw uncultivated nature as well as from the decayed and disgusting "others". Intoxication in any cultural milieu, evokes images of "us" and "the others", because it is inherently both a symbol of belonging to culture, i.e. a collectivity, and a symbol of transgressing the boundaries of that culture.

It is the dual position of intoxication in the margins between culture and raw/regressed nature that makes classification so important in discourses about it. Not only the users but the context, the functions, and the manners of use, but above all the substances themselves are invariably the object of elaborate classifications. This has always been the case in alcohol culture, and it seems to be so in the current recreational drug culture too (Salasuo and Rantala, forthcoming).

Although images of intoxication everywhere acquires their expressive potential from the tension between nature and culture, national and other differences between groups may be great in how the tension is handled. The Finnish male-centred image of leaving culture and women behind on a drinking excursion in a forest valorises not only the progressive but also the regressive side of intoxication. In other cultures the theme of escaping from the ordered normality is perhaps less strong and less positive, but probably not completely absent.

## CONCLUSION

The semiotic - or hermeneutic - turn that reached alcohol studies in the early 1980s has fertilised the studies of drinking and drug culture considerably. Norm-theoretical and functional understandings of culture have of course not lost their role in lay discourse and even in sociological analysis they may serve a purpose. It is still important to pay attention to where the limits of acceptability are drawn, who draws them, how consistent they are and what kinds of ambivalences are embedded in the norm-systems.

The first key idea that has been introduced by the semiotic turn in social science is that human practices including the use of intoxicants is not only understandable but also understood, although in very different ways. The second key idea is that meanings produced and

understood by people are part of the same world of understandability as that of science. Sociology is an interpretative activity, itself an element in a web of incomplete, partial and never ending translations, and subject to the same sociology of knowledge as all other knowledges.

This second point is not always reflected in the work of cultural sociologists, although it is central in their theoretical references, especially in Bourdieu and Giddens. Reactions to it may vary, but unless they are made explicit, the research risks to loose distance to its objects and become part of the discourses it pretends to study.

The great challenge to cultural studies on drugs and alcohol is the theory of intoxication. The data that we get on intoxication is discourse, something that already has been brought into semiosis, whereas intoxication itself is a proto-semiotic social fact. The representations of intoxication are only one - although important - part of the experience, and they have usually been used to analyse how different groups see their lives in relationship to others. The two-way gravitation of images of intoxication from nature to culture and back is a very powerful device in people's articulations of their social relationships, aspirations and values. The cultural study of intoxication as a signifier therefore always reaches towards other realities beyond drug use itself.

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