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**YOUTH CULTURES AND THE IMAGES OF ALCOHOL - THEORETICAL ISSUES**

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## INTRODUCTION

In "Alcohol, Society and the State 1" (< Mäkelä et al. 1981) we find a number of statements that refer to cultural change and cultural differences between countries as to drinking behaviour and drinking problems:

- "In the last 30 years, the disreputability of alcohol has dwindled, and drinking is now accepted in a much wider repertoire of situations than before. The position of alcohol as a special commodity and of drinking as a compartmentalized activity has been undermined, and alcoholic beverages now rank in more or less the same category as any other item of leisure equipment." (30)

- "Changes in the levels and patterns of alcohol consumption in the period 1950 - 1975 may perhaps best be viewed as a part of the broad changes in lifestyles, cultural patterns, and organization of leisure which occurred, to a greater or lesser extent, in all societies studied." (29)

- "In terms of its cultural meanings, there is a ... wide variation in the uses of alcohol. Alcohol can be consumed as a sacrament, as a thirst quencher, as a symbol of collective homage (a toast), as a fortifier, as a sedative, as a sign of sophistication." (28)

These quotations illustrate three different types of descriptions of the cultural position of alcohol in society. The first describes the *normative* aspect of reputability versus disreputability of alcohol as a commodity. In the second the analysis refers, although with hesitation, to the changing *functions* of alcohol. And the third alludes to the growing diversity of things that what drinking *means* to people.

The semiotic turn that reached alcohol research in the 1980s reformulated cultural explanations in terms of meaning and understandability. It involved a more precise understanding of culture than the earlier normative and functional theoretical frameworks. A major problem remains, however, and it is a not unimportant one in studies of alcohol and drugs: that of theorising intoxication in terms of "meaning". This problem is embedded in a wider theoretical issue concerning the understandability of human behaviour and experience.

In this article I am proposing a partial solution by looking at some examples from recent cultural studies on youth, drugs and alcohol. The solution will be *not a theory* of intoxication but *an analytics of intoxication*, in the same sense that Foucault meant his work to be interpreted not as a theory but as an analytics of power. Intoxication is neither a cultural construction nor a biological or bodily state but a proto-semiotic social fact, and therefore its representations in speech and cultural products can articulate many kinds of experienced realities or life-worlds.

### IS "CULTURE" A RESIDUAL CATEGORY?

We find descriptions similar to those quoted above abundantly in recent studies on recreational drug use among young people, and they are common in the recent come-back of debates on drinking patterns and harm-reductionist alternatives to availability policies. Historical changes and comparisons - usually between national societies - tend to be formulated in terms of one or several of these concepts, to produce what usually is called cultural explanations of drug and alcohol use.

What is the purpose of these references to cultural factors and are they necessary?

One reason for cultural explanations is that the variations in the blend of alcohol problems depend in a complex way on drinking patterns, conceptions about drinking, level of overall consumption and many social factors other than those directly related to drinking. The word "culture" in this context refers to the fact that these traditions are collective and not individual. Furthermore, it implies that the differences in problem profiles cannot be causally *explained*. Historical changes in drinking and drug use are even more difficult to explain in causal terms, but might still be made more *understandable* by reference to norms, functions and meanings

Is culture, then, a residual category or a fall-back concept that actually amounts to little more than admitting that drinking and drug use are really too complex phenomena to be scientifically explained? I think not; but we do need to explicate what is meant by this

term and in what way it implies a social theory. Obviously, alcohol as well as other intoxicants work on the human body and have "natural effects" on the mind, but these effects are not sufficient accounts for variations between national societies and historical periods. 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. In order to replace such a "disgusting brew" of dualistic arguments with a more coherent view, let us first take a look at norms and functions, and then go on to the wider theory of meaning.

### *Norms*

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

The norm-theoretical concept of ambivalence as an explanation of alcohol problems falsely presumes drinking to be a one-dimensional phenomenon. Drinking at the dinner-table of an Italian peasant family is in them treated as the same thing as drinking at an American cocktail party, or having beer in a Finnish urban pub. The first is just more controlled by norms than the latter two. (< See also Room 1976)

The socio-culturalist theory has also been criticized (<Schmidt 1977) for the political argument that is often buried in it. Restricted availability and other controls, so the norm-theory argues, are counterproductive since they create forbidden fruit -effects, which are especially deleterious for young persons' drinking and therefore nurture the embedded ambivalence of these alcohol cultures in the long term. The cure prescribed has been more liberal availability and - as a likely consequence - increased consumption (<Room 1976). This argument was frequently used in the Nordic countries against the "civilisation policy" of the monopolies in the 1950s (<Sulkunen 2000).

The origin of sociological norm-theory is, as Habermas (<1987, 199-282) has argued, in a theory of social order rather than understandability of human action. The individual is thereby seen as a desiring and pleasure-seeking animal, and the function of the normative order is to bring the individual under social control. Norms therefore refer to a limited aspect of cultural definitions of a behaviour: that of collective approval or disapproval.

Norm-theory as a cultural explanation of intoxication leaves open both the origin of the desire and the origin of the need to control it. Alcohol and even more drugs are often the object of moral panics. Severe limitations of individual choice in their use are sometimes tolerated because they are felt to be a threat to the social order. On the other hand, societies are very different in their propensity to grant freedoms to their members for many reasons that may be quite unrelated to drugs and alcohol. Norm-theory is a weak instrument to provide historically specific accounts of why alcohol and drugs are laden with so strong moral concerns in some societies and less so in others.

### *Functions*

One explanation is often sought in the societal or individual needs that alcohol or drugs satisfy. Functionalism is an obvious theoretical tradition that could have influenced alcohol studies in the search for links between patterns of alcohol use and its control. Perhaps the focus of alcohol research on drinking problems has contributed to the relative neglect of the positive functions of drinking.

Four early functionalist orientations in this area have existed but been weak until now. First, anthropological functionalism has analysed alcohol and drug use in the ritual systems of small, often non-Western societies. Secondly, cross-cultural studies have been used to test universal theories of the functions of intoxication. The third tradition studies the function of alcohol in small groups and the social contacts between people. A fourth type of theoretical considerations on the functions of alcohol in modern societies have appeared now and then in the alcohol and drug literature.

Ethnographic studies of alcohol are relevant because they reveal a great variation in the way alcohol or drugs are used in different cultural contexts (<Heath 1975; <SOU 1974:90; MacAndrew and Edgerton <1969; Washburne 1961). The use of alcohol or its effects can not be seen as universal, grounded in "human nature" or in the properties of alcohol itself. have argued that drunken comportment is learned behaviour, which is hardly attributable to the properties of alcohol itself. This research has been criticised on the one hand for a fallacy of "problem deflation" (<Room 1984). Another criticism has been that the anthropological tradition is

committed to a "disintegration hypotheses", which assigns alcohol and drug problems among indigenous people to low degree of social integration and control caused by contact with and submission to European populations (< Brady 1992). Ethnographic research has in any case had an important influence on cultural constructivism.

Cross-cultural studies of intoxication have directly opposite intentions. Psychodynamic research on the dimensions of psychological motivations to drink appears to be still relevant today, although the early cross-cultural methodology may not be (< e.g. Child et al 1965). In view of some current functional theories, Donald Horton's (1943) much debated (< Washburne 1961; < Field 1962; < Bacon et al. 1965 and < 1974; < McClelland et al. 1972; < Mäkelä 1979) dissertation, is worth a note. He suggested on the basis of a statistical analysis of the Human Area Files that the function of alcohol is the reduction of anxiety and fear (< Horton 1943). Apart from the problems of using anthropological comparisons for evidence, the theoretical problem in this approach is the assumption supra-cultural generality of the psychological functions of intoxication.

The third type of functional explanations refers to effects of drinking on social relationships in small groups and face-to face interaction. The classic study of these effects was done by Bruun (< 1959), who in fifteen controlled observational settings recorded behavioral changes in small drinking groups with respect to aggression, group cohesion and stability, and role differentiation. Although the functional language was not used in the dissertation itself, its results can be and have been interpreted in a functionalist frame (Bruun 1963). More recently, theoretical arguments of the role of drinking in sociability have been elaborated by Juha Partanen (< 1991, 221-235). The implications of this kind of functionalism for research strategy emphasise the study of the effects of drinking in limited social situations.

An influential example of the fourth variety of functional explanations of alcohol use was the analysis of alcohol and its functions in modern society by Selden Bacon (1945 and 1962). Following the Durkheimian tradition he characterized modern society as complex and its social relationships as specialized, stratified, interdependent, and individualistic. In complex modern society integration, depressing certain inhibitions, anxieties, aggressions and tensions, and relaxation are the most important functions of drinking. But alcohol also has dysfunctions in complex societies. It reduces the capacity for sharp discrimination, causation, accurate responses, timing, co-operation, and the acceptance of responsibilities. Excessive use of alcohol can also isolate the individual from social participation in many ways, and therefore the power of alcohol to deteriorate personality is enhanced in complex society. (< Bacon 1962, 79, 85)

It is more difficult to see in Bacon's approach than the other functionalist orientations, what kind of research strategies it would imply. It is also more difficult than in the other cases to show a living tradition of empirical research here. Nevertheless, functional arguments repeatedly appear in discussions of the social value of alcohol, and they are popular in connecting youth and drug use with late modernity.

In my own dissertation (Sulkunen 1983) I was struggling with functional explanations, attaching the "need" for alcohol to the theory of political economy and calling it "use value" rather than function. The intention was to emphasise the combination of both supply and demand in determining to what uses different alcoholic beverages would be put.

All of the approaches described here as functional can be called - vaguely - cultural explanations of alcohol use in the sense that they attempt to understand the psychological or social reasons for drinking referring to some need or want that it satisfies in its cultural contexts. Despite the differences, all of them base their explanations on the exigencies of a system of action, be it the personality system, the small group or the society at large.

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

Anthony Giddens stressed in his *Central Problems in Social Theory* (1979) that the trend in human sciences during the twentieth century has been towards seeing the language of science as part of the same world of meanings as the language of lay discourse. This applies to normative and functional explanations of intentional and meaningful behaviour such as consumption, including drinking and intoxication. All theoretical approaches outlined above appear also in lay discourses of drinking and intoxication, sometimes as fragmented and casual accounts, at other times as more systematic and organised discursive formations.

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 prohibiting intoxication and non-marital sex (< 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 sub-culture that opposes the dull, vulgar and alcohol-centred "mainstream". Their most important value expressed in an Internet-survey was "freedom".

The self-understanding of recreational drug-users is further constructed on several kinds of functional arguments. The drugs' effects on social relationships, relaxation and disinhibition are used as functional explanations of their use (< Seppälä 1999). Many participants are employed in the IT-industry doing high-quality brain-work and argue that the intellectual stress and fatigue are well served by raving and drugging during the week-end. Even the Baconian argument about cosmopolitan culture and the drugs' function as social lubricants are referred to (< Seppälä and Salasuo 2000).

Selden Bacon's functional analysis about the complexity and individualism of modern society suggests itself in several studies on drinking and drugs, influenced by the sociological literature on late modernity (Bauman, Beck, Giddens, Ziehe, Fornäs). In Bente Træn's and Arid Hovland's analysis (< 1999) of young urban Norwegians and their "self-actualization" or "impression-management" in public drinking places this is the theoretical background of their Goffmanian interpretation. Similar suggestions of macro-structural functionalism influence Philip 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 new conscientiousness - *den nya skötsamheten* - appears also in Margareta Norell's and Claes Törnqvist's (1995) study of Swedish students: individuality and self-control are not conformity and conventionalism but experimentation and style consciousness. Paradoxically, Allan Sande (< 2000) identifies similar functions of constructing individuality and interpersonal interaction patterns in what would appear to be a quite traditional, even pre-modern rite of passage involving 17 days of continuous drinking by teenagers after graduation.

Norell and Törnqvist also develop a psychodynamic functionalism that resembles the early theory by Donald Horton. They interpret that intoxication alleviates anxiety and fear at the face of uncertainty. However, in each of the three groups they studied - middle-class students, workers and avantgarde 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.

The functional perspective in these examples is ancillary to other theoretical starting-points. Overall, the semiotic turn of the 1980s distanced quite radically at least Nordic cultural studies on alcohol and drugs from traditional norm-theoretical and functionalist foundations.

## MEANING

### *Homology and habitus*

Among several critiques of the functional and norm-theoretical arguments two central points were introduced by the semiotic turn of the early 1980s. The first was the "systems"-approach that is common to all of them. For example, a small-group functionalist would look for effects of alcohol on group behaviour, to conclude that these effects are the reason why alcohol use in small groups or perhaps in society at large. A psychodynamic cross-culturalist would try to establish that alcohol use is prevalent in societies which measure high on anxiety scales, to conclude that reduction of anxiety in the personality system is the reason why alcohol is used. A Baconian macro-functionalist might determine that certain effects of alcohol are beneficial in modern society and that is the reason why alcohol is used in it and drinking norms are permissive.

The problem is that these are *the systems' reasons*; the people's own reasons might be different. This was one methodological argument that made Pierre Bourdieu's work important in cultural studies (< e.g. 1980, 51-70). Functionalist (as well as normative) explanations, so he argued, are embedded in a mechanistic view of the relations between human beings and their environment. Their behaviour is seen as if it was determined by external living conditions and the socio-psychological environment. The concept of culture becomes here marginal and only protects the argument from bad fits: in Western culture it is alcohol that serves this or that function, in others it may be something else...

The second difficulty about functional interpretations of cultural practices is that the symbolic order has a certain permanence and continuity. Living conditions may change rapidly but the cultural matrix that structure the symbolic meaning systems may persist for a long time after. We are not always able to understand people's drinking patterns on the grounds of their present conditions of life, because these practices are the remnant of an earlier period.

The old notion of "habitus" was re-introduced by Bourdieu (< 1979, 195) to the sociological vernacular both to avoid the excessively systemic bias of functional and norm-theoretical explanations and to account for permanence and change. 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. Habitus is simultaneous presence of agency and structure as well as adaptation to external conditions and meaningful reflexion of them in everything people do (< Sulkunen 1982). The habitus is a "generating principle" or "modus operandi" that "makes sense" of life without being mechanically determined to fulfil a social function or an individual "need", or to form an "algebraic pattern". Habitus contains an inertia that survives, often through several generations, the sometimes rapid transformation

of its material basis. This point was important in Bourdieu's interpretation of the cultural practices of Algerian peasants. Their pre-capitalist way of life, determined by the agricultural cycle, survives in some of the cultural forms the linear conception of time imposed by the colonial transformation of the economy.

Similar dualities characterise the tradition of the British "culturalists" (Raymond Williams, Richard Hoggart, E.P. Thompson and more recently Paul Willis, Steward Hall, Dick Hebdidge, Angela McRobbie), which in Nordic cultural studies on youth has been even more important than Bourdieu's work. 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 members of the community to understand each other, to act together and to share each others' experiences. The meanings of (sub)cultural practices might not be obvious to the agents themselves until they are re-interpreted to them from an outsider's point of view by researchers.

Both Bourdieu's work and the Birmingham school combine the principle of agency with the Durkheimian idea that meaning or understandability - culture - is based on structured collective experience. For Bourdieu, stylistic patterns of consumption reflect class position but there is room for distinction and play. Distinction games require resources - cultural, social and economic capital - and their accumulation guarantee the reproduction of social hierarchies.

For the Birmingham approach the central category of interpretation is that of homology rather than identity (a term so often associated with that school). Their studies of working class youth "sub-cultures" emphasize the non-identity of the youngsters' cultural practices with their living conditions or their parent culture. Paul Willis (1978), for example, did not "explain" motorbike boys' practices as adjustment to their condition as working class lads. Instead he provided a sense of understanding what the roaring rock and fast driving mean and how they are indirectly, through the mediation of meaningful feelings, linked to the "serious" reality of life. The cultural practices of these groups articulate the life-view of the working class man: command of technology, feeling of power over nature, and masculinity. The cultural patterns are homologues of but not identical with the various aspects of living conditions and the larger way of life. The contrary is usually true: the essential and most meaningful condensations of the culture of a collectivity are often absurd inversions of what could be functional to its way of life. Willis (1977) did not try to explain the working class boys' resistance to school discipline as a causal consequence of their relatively unprivileged lives, but not as an attempt to change the legitimate order either. It was an unconscious homological articulation - in a form that to most observers would seem absurd and certainly unrecognizable - of the destination of these people: the shop-floor life.

Both Bourdieu's work and the studies by Willis, Hebdidge and McRobbie have influenced Nordic alcohol studies, especially drinking and drug practices among youth. Our *Urban Pub* (1997), originally published in 1985, related the chatting, dart games, music and dancing as well as drinking to the life patterns and masculine values of a new generation of suburban working-class dwellers. The theoretical emphasis of the book was on coherence: the working class habitus integrates different aspects of the life styles: taste in dietary patterns, housing, style of fashion, aesthetic preferences into a consistent whole. The same meaning structures that appear in clothing should be found in dietary patterns and artistic taste. Then why not in drinking behaviour.

The homology principle is an important interpretative framework also in Lalander's *Anden i flaskan* (<1998), in the analysis of working youth's skötsamhet in Mamö by Norell and Törnqvist (<1995), and in several studies on young sub-cultures in the Nordic countries.

### *Coveted functionalism*

Bourdieu's work and the Birmingham approach have been criticized for a coveted functionalism. Both are macro-sociological reproduction theories, diagnosing the cultural mechanisms whereby social class structures are stabilised and survive even under strong ideological pressures stressing equality and social mobility as in France in the 1970s (e.g. DiMaggio et al. ). In the Birmingham tradition "culture" is defined as "a whole way of life", and (sub)cultural practices are interpreted as parts of this whole, adjusted to that which determines the way of life (of the working class) in question, that is, by the material conditions of living: work, leisure and reproduction. (<Lähteenmaa 2000; Puuronen )

Another issue has been the assumed coherence of "a way of life", particularly in the context of the urban new middle class and the rapid social change it had experienced in the prosperous years in the latter half of the twentieth century especially in the Nordic countries. In the life-course of just one - "wet" - generation, the level of education, the technology of everyday life and the structures of social relationships changed more than in several centuries before, resulting in a fragmentation and a new kind of arbitrariness in life-style choices. The sociological Zeitdiagnose of the late/post-modernity literature was partly a reaction to this (<Featherstone 1995). Michel Maffesoli's idea about modern tribalism (<1994) or Zygmunt Bauman's notion of nomadism (<1994) have been popular references. In my study of middle class bars (<1992) these notions led me to an uneasiness concerning the homology

principle or the idea of habitus. New middle class leads a very individualistic life, where schizophrenic adherence to contradictory ideals facilitate quick shifts from one self-identity to another. Ideals of self-control were combined with hedonism, modern cosmopolitanism with traditionalism, and tribal cohesion with the "hygienic drive" of the individual self. The mixture was fragmented indeed, and the habitus displayed in the bars was quite far from the unity that we had earlier observed (< Sulkunen et al 1997) in the working-class milieu.

The homology between middle-class drinking practices and their "whole way of life" was complicated because the social and economic situation was new in the late 1980s when we conducted our interviews. The middle class was experiencing an unforeseen prosperity, and in the Nordic countries also the alcohol policy situation was changing quickly. The studies of young middle-class adults in Sweden by Norell and Törnqvist (< 1995) and by Lalander (< 1998) as well as the bar study by Træn and Hovland (1999) in Oslo, all conducted in the 1990s reveal much more coherence: the "new skötsamhet" of young Swedish middle-class adults and the "constructed naturalness" of Norwegian middle-class club patrons indicate a romantic desire for "authentic" experience of the self, but this desire is simultaneous with the ideal of self-discipline while hostile towards the paternalism of public control policy. Pauliina Seppälä's (< 1999) and Mikko Salasuo's ( ) studies paint similar pictures of middle-class recreational drug users in Finland. In all these cases the modality of competence dominates the self-image of the subjects, in distinction with the inferior conventionalism of the "mainstream" culture.

### *Images or realities?*

In social theory, the cultural study of images and "emic" understandings is often contrasted with the "structural" study of reality as such. According to Marc Augé (< 1978:139) in French anthropological theories, institutional realities tend to be seen from the point of view of what they mean while English speaking anthropologists usually ask what functions they serve. The same contrast between functions and meanings has been made the other way by Steward Hall (< 1980), who has argued that British culturalism has been much less committed to functions than French structuralism.

In the light of cultural studies of drinking and drug use, this theoretical opposition no longer seems relevant. The rejection of the early mechanistic functional explanations and theories of drinking at the introduction of the semiotic turn did not imply that the objective conditions of life or institutional realities became irrelevant. On the contrary, drinking cultures and cultural representations of alcohol and drugs have been used as a two-way window between society and people's understandings of drinking practices. Media studies are good examples because they became popular at that time and some were done even on alcohol. Karen Trocki and Andrew Thompson (< 1993) showed how the representations of drinking in American films of the late 1980s reflect the changing but still traditional differences in male and female sexuality. Robin Room's (< 1991) analysis of the role of alcohol in male-female relationships in American films is set in the context of changing institution of marriage in American society. Our study of alcohol in Finnish films (< Falk and Sulkunen 1982) explicated the cultural condition of men in a traditional rural society suddenly become urban. The recent Nordic youth studies referred to above are no less detached from the hard facts of life of young new middle class adults. The presumed fragmentation and lack of coherence which might render the principle of homology or the concept of habitus inapplicable is probably a mistake; but it is a mistake in the sociological Zeitdiagnoses, not a mistake inherent in the cultural theory which centres on the notions of meaning and understandability.

## **THE MEANINGS OF "MEANING"**

### *Meaning and subjectivity*

The more difficult theoretical issues lie elsewhere, in the theory of meaning itself. The background of the semiotic turn in English-speaking social science was in the analytic philosophy of language, where language became to be seen not as a descriptive medium but as a constitutive element of social reality (< Giddens 1979). In the French context, the Saussurean constructivism in language theory had much the same implications: human beings understand reality by using language which is not a natural medium but a social construction. Its structure both reflects collective experience and influences it. The in the American scene the turn was landmarked by Peter Berger's and Thomas Luckmann's *The Social Construction of Reality* (< 1966), combining influences both from the American tradition of Symbolic Interactionism and from German Phenomenology.

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", Antti Eskola (< 1982) quoted from R. Harré and P.F. Secord. This subjectivity is often associated with an epistemological relativism: because people's practices are meaningful, their interpretations also are meaningful and depend on the "point of view" of the person who is interpreting; thus science can aim at truth only within the limits of the subjective perspective which is necessary to assign a meaning to an event or a practice.

In this question, however, different variants of the turn parted ways. Structuralism stressed the unconscious objectivity of meaning structures. Our analysis of the mythical male fantasies in the drinking scenes of Finnish films adhered to the structuralist tradition. 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 (and women) of the male condition in the social situation of the time. 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. In a commentary I wrote in 1983: "To me such talk [of subjective voluntary meanings] is meaningless... culture is not possible outside collectivity... Scientific cultural study of drinking behaviour treats people as if they were not in fact human individuals but representatives of a collectivity. This is why a cultural study of alcohol prefers 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 the researcher. Often even a group discussion may produce this effect, but even more valuable sources are advertisements, films, popular literature and all sorts of utterances associated with rituals."

For the structuralist perspective, the frequently made objection that commercial films, tv-programmes, advertising or popular literature only produce and reproduce stereotypic images of drinking rather than help to understand "reality", is irrelevant and off the point. Commercial culture should be regarded as valuable documentation of our culture in advanced media societies, just like folklore, mythology and oral history have always been the preferred data for ethnographers in less advanced societies. Besides, the degree in which the various cultural documents are collective representations can be measured by the number of spectators and the cultural milieus where they are popular can easily be identified.

The challenges to the structuralist view came from two directions. First, in media studies the reception analysis school (Morley 1986; < Palmer 1988) argued that the meaning of media messages is not in the text but produced by the consumers in the viewing or reading context. People are not stereotypes, nor is their meaning-production bound by conventional collective understandings. Viewers create meanings often quite independently of the content, structure and ideology of the messages and the only way to know what uses people make of media messages is to ask them, rather than to analyse the messages out of the reception context. Stanley Fish (< 1980) argued that messages are empty surfaces onto which viewers project meanings from their own life-world.

The second challenge to structuralist study of culture and language came from the "pragmatic revolution" in the understanding of language and meaning (< Levinson 1983; < Sperber and Wilson 1986). The argument is that language - and culture in general - is not a system; it is interaction, and therefore contextual and creative. Conversation Analysis developed this approach to language into systematic study of the mechanisms in which meaning is created in human interaction independently of the notion of language as a system.

These arguments had implications in alcohol studies in Finland but not much elsewhere. Ilkka Arminen's (< 1988) dissertation on AA used the perspective of Conversation Analysis, and Jukka Törrönen's (199 ) thesis used reception technique, showing the interviewees media messages and analysing the responses.

### *An overcharged concept of "meaning"*

Asking people is important, but the problem is not thereby avoided. In reception studies the researcher will, after all, face a "text" and make interpretations of it. The difference is that the text is not the same one as that which the viewers interpret: it is the text of interpretation by the viewers. The same is true of CA: it produces interpretations of verbal and non-verbal interaction sequences, which are in a sense treated as "texts".

The question is not, therefore, whether cultural studies should be interpreting texts or their reception, but which texts are the object of study and in which framework. 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.

Which interpretation is the right one, then? Is there a way to establish an objective meaning in the textual representations of reality? Or are cultural studies condemned to the witty instability of meanings and interpretations produced by the interviewees or found in the media? In that case, what is the contribution of research to the everyday understandings?

Bruno Latour has argued that even natural science does not produce pure "objective" knowledge of nature in the sense that only depends 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 1987; 1993).

Interpretations of drinking or drug experiences and everyday accounts of them by cultural sociologists are also translations - incomplete, partial and endless - that depend on a number of sociological determinants of knowledge. The cornerstone of the semiotic turn in sociology has been that the linguistic worlds of research and of the researched persons are thought to be overlapping but not identical, so that translations between them can be made and are relevant. An interpretative sociology must take seriously the immediate experience of everyday life but also contribute something to it from its own resources of knowledge. Issues of validity do arise, like in any translation, but rather than go into them, let us now turn to a question closer to the topic of this paper: What are drinking and drug use or their textual representations translations of?

## **INTOXICATION AS A SIGNIFIER**

### *Too much intoxication, or too little*

There are more and less interesting answers to this question. The less interesting translations fall under two types: first, those that "read" drug use and drinking metonymically, as referring to intoxication; and secondly those who read them without any reference to intoxication at all. The latter category of translations appears frequently in the recent literature on recreational drug use: it is believed both by users themselves and by researchers to be a sign of cultural competence and distinction, similar to any other consumer behaviour and good taste.

The first, metonymic translation of substance use as a sign of intoxication is frequent particularly in policy discourse. The Nordic alcohol policy has for most of the twentieth century been directed to change the "Finnish/Swedish/Norwegian way to drink". The monopolies have introduced new beverages, recommended wine instead of vodka etc. (Sulkunen et al 2000). They have presented the alternatives as *mild* alcohol; in other words, as means of intoxication - only of a less potent kind, advised to be used maybe more often but small doses rather than larger doses but less frequently.

Some of the functional explanations of alcohol use referred to above have been applied in the second uninteresting translation strategy. Drinking or drug use may be looked at as if intoxication had almost no role in them, as factors of sociability or as symbols of cultural competences such as knowledge about the substances, their effects, uses and availability; or a will and ability to be different from the "masses" or from the "mainstream" culture. The categorisation of different drugs (stimulants, hallucinogenes etc.) seems to be an important element of the recreational drug culture, just as it was, for example, an important element in the groups of middle-class drinkers whenever they down-played (they did not always) the role of intoxication in their sub-culture (Sulkunen 1992).

### *Transgression*

The more interesting translation strategy takes intoxication itself - or its representations - for signifiers of something else. This has been the case in most of the studies since the semiotic turn that have been mentioned above. The notions of habitus, homology and micro- or sub-culture already refer to translations of drinking practices into the language of the wider lived reality; or, vice versa, looks at them as translations of that wider reality into practices and discourses of intoxication. Intoxication is a relevant element of drinking or drug use, even if it is well controlled and only present as a latent possibility.

Intoxication is a sticky surface onto which complicated meanings can be projected and where they can be understood even beyond words or other discourses. It is one of the areas of human experience where culture and nature overlap and form a relationship of tension. Getting drunk is transgressing the boundaries of cultured normality while it also is usually ritualised and sanctioned. And while it may be well-structured social behaviour, 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 (but 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 risk (and 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 man is alone but his reflexion is seen in a large mirror. 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 refound 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).

The advertisement repeats the tension between wild masculinity and orderly femininity that has appeared in studies of Finnish drinking images for about twenty years. It appears in films (Falk and Sulkunen 1983), in the urban pubs (Sulkunen et al 1997) and even in middle-class milieus (Sulkunen 1992).

Such symbolic tensions often develop in situations where status distinctions become shaky and confused. We develop symbolic devices to restore clarity by exaggerating the features of status identity. Recent studies show that the status of youth as non-adults is becoming 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 students in the study by Norell and Törnqvist and the middle-class groups in Lalander's study 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. Their preferred drink is wine, which is associated with Southern Europe and their cultural traditions and freedom, contrasted with the Nordic control system - also an old tradition but not qualifying as a tradition of culture. Distance and irony characterise their cultured relationship with others in public places, whereas "the others" take dancing seriously, they have no distance to themselves, to other persons or to the institution of dancing (Lalander 1998, 199-213).

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 personal, and their women may get drunk and become easy prey for sexual contacts. "They" are not cultivated, they have no experience of life outside Sweden, in Lévi-Straussian terms they belong to the "raw" nature. In my own middle-class study the same features appeared important. My interviewees were older than those of Norell and Törnqvist or Lalander and that might explain that the regressive images of "others" were more predominant. Proselytism, intimacy, physical contact and untidyness were images associated with the "cap-heads" that you find in urban pubs; in

contrast to the clubs and bars where they meet in the middle of the city (Sulkunen 1992).

The two-directional gravitation from nature to culture and back is not unique to middle-class images of intoxication. The working-class groups in our Urban Pub, in Norell and Törnqvist's study, in Alasuutari's analysis 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". National differences may be greater, however: the Finnish male-centred image of leaving culture and women behind on a drinking excursion in a forest probably is less strong in other cultures, although 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. The theoretical achievement, parallel to other areas of sociological research, has been a richer and more useful understanding of culture as something that must and can be taken seriously in everyday talk and cultural products. Earlier norm-theoretical and functional understandings of culture have not completely lost their role. 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. But the semiotic approach is necessary to understand what the norms are about and how they are related to the meanings of behaviours they regulate. Also functional relationships are important: meanings and interpretations of meanings should not be seen in isolation from or as added components to objects, behaviours, feelings or the "objective conditions" of life.

The continuing use of normative and functional explanations of drug and alcohol use is not a problem as long as we know what we are doing and keep in mind their logic and limits.

The key idea that was new in the cultural studies in social science has been that human life is meaningful, and that meanings produced and understood by people are part of the same world of understandability as that of science. The possibility of honest communication without technical instruments between researchers and the people we are studying became important. Depending on the particular theoretical traditions - hermeneutic, semiotic, interactionist - views may differ on the preconditions and the purpose of this communication, as well as on the resources with which sociologists may intervene in the flow of meaning-production. The common emphasis has been that sociology is an interpretative activity, itself an element in a web of incomplete, partial and unending translations, and subject to the same sociology of knowledge as all other knowledges.

The Nordic research of drinking and drug practices, especially of young people, has produced a wealth of studies of increasingly high quality and sophistication. Some gaps remain. In Finland still very little research has been done on drinking by youth and young adults. The new recreational drug use obviously needs more attention in all Nordic countries. And the possibilities of comparison are under-utilised, even on the basis of existing studies. In particular, a more systematic comparison of middle-class and working-class drinking and drug use among youth would be useful. The uniqueness of the Finnish male fantasy of withdrawing to wild nature away from civilization and women could be tested.

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. A full-fledged theory of intoxication, must reach beyond discourse, but this is a task that may have to wait until the next great turn in general social theory.

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