

The accursed share of nightlife - A study of intoxication

Summary

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This thesis is a study of alcohol and drug use among young people in Ringsted between the ages of 16-24 years. The focus is on *intoxication*. I attribute two meanings to the term “intoxication”: it is the action of modifying the ordinary ways of perception, behaviour and communication, and the condition of being so modified. The aim of the study is thus to elucidate some of the essential characteristics of *the act* and *the state* of intoxication.

A leitmotif in my investigations is the phenomenological advice that it is things in themselves that will teach us what they are. I analyse intoxication per se, treating it as a meaningful and valuable phenomenon, and I do my best to avoid the pitfall of explaining alcohol and drug use away by reducing it to bio-chemical determinations, psychological problems, social circumstances, or any other antecedent conditions. The ambition of this study is not to find solutions to the many problems that intoxicants create in our society, but rather to present an in-depth description of intoxication as such.

This focus on intoxication per se makes this study slightly different from much of the existing literature on intoxicants. There is a strong tendency in the existing literature to treat intoxication en passant and focus on the “background” or the “underlying causes” of alcohol and drug use. Intoxication is often treated as a mere symptom or an epiphenomenon of some sort of problem, injustice or pathology. In the social sciences, for instance, many scholars argue that young people intoxicate themselves because they live in a social world that somehow has gone awry. Some scholars put the blame on the process of globalization – it is said that contemporary youth seek states of intoxication because they have been marginalized and are facing bleak prospects in the work force. Other scholars blame post-modernity – it is suggested that youth seek refuge in intoxicants because they are unable to handle the many choices that post-modern life offers them; because they are overwhelmed by the expectations that are imposed upon them by their parents and the educational system; and because they are left alone in a world where tradition and social networks have crumbled. These explanatory models present us with valuable information about the social world that surrounds contemporary youth, but the explanations often rest on a simplistic understanding of intoxication. Intoxication is characterised by what it’s not – it is presented as an absence of problems. Alcohol and drugs are treated as problem solvers that help people to escape from the nuisances of everyday life. This study concludes that youth at large intoxicate themselves because they find it inherently fun and fulfilling. It is suggested that the intake of intoxicants should be visualized, first of all, as a movement towards and not only as a movement away from.

It is argued, furthermore, that the intake of intoxicants can be conceptualised as a ritual. This ritual is generally carried out on Thursday, Friday and Saturday nights, and it usually takes place in commercial locations (bars, discotheques, hash clubs) that earn money on alcohol or drug sales. These locations have considerable influence upon the young. They employ an array of sophisticated sales techniques that incite the young to increase their use of intoxicants. However, the ritual of going out is not only about alcohol and drug consumption. On nights out, the youth destabilize their bodily habits and make a transition into states of intoxication. This transition is made possible by four different factors: communion, intoxicants, music and body techniques. The

youth almost exclusively intoxicate themselves in communion. Without this factor, communion, the act of intoxication is unfeasible. The youth need the companionship of others in order to “get it going” and “have fun”. They resent the ones who consume intoxicants alone – such people are attributed derogative labels such as “alcoholic” or “junky”. Thus, communion may be conceived as a necessary “prerequisite” for the states of intoxication that the youth attain in the ritual of going out. I find it useful to consider the three remaining factors – intoxicants, music and body techniques – as “techniques of intoxication”. Each of these techniques can, by themselves, induce states of intoxication. Thus, the act of intoxication is carried out in communion and by means of intoxicants, music and body techniques. This study demonstrates moreover that the act of intoxication can be divided into three main phases: “the pre-party”, the state of intoxication, and “the after party”.

An urge for transgression is discernable among the youth. This urge tends to be kept down in daily life, but on nights out it is complied with, openly celebrated and exhausted. Three types of transgressions are commonly practiced on nights out. Intoxicated young people have a penchant for wildness, degradation and excess. Such transgressions tend to be viewed with suspicion and dislike in mainstream society. This study demonstrates, however, that the transgressions form a dynamic force in social life. They are – just like norms and rules – a necessary part of human existence. The nightly transgressions prevent stagnation by breaking rules, they ensure stability by affirming the necessity for order, and they make it possible to evaluate the prevailing order of things.

This study proposes that some of the essential characteristics of the state of intoxication can be grasped by means of the following analytical constructs: Fraternization, ethics of the instant, revolt and reflexive immoralism. These constructs summarize and illuminate most of the activities and occurrences taking place in the ritual of going out. The term “fraternization” refers to the intimacy and fellow feelings that arise among intoxicated people; “ethics of the instant” designates the carefree and hedonistic preoccupation with the present moment that generally seizes intoxicated individuals; to “revolt” means to challenge the status quo, not in order to change it, but just “for the hell of it”; and “reflexive immoralism” refers to an ambiguous, normative system prevailing among intoxicated people – it encourages moral disobedience and experimentation.