

Reviews

Bar Wars, contesting the night in contemporary British cities,
Phil Hadfield, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2006

Binge drinking by specific groups of people, mainly those under the age of 25 and the disorder associated with alcohol consumption is a hot topic globally. In New Zealand¹ a sample of recent headlines reads: 'More young people dying from alcohol since age lowered'; 'Police back raising age to buy liquor'; '10-year-olds on drugs, booze'; 'Police target alcohol related crime'. So how does *Bar Wars* contribute to these debates about social control, alcohol and disorder?

Bar Wars is a comprehensive discussion of the issues surrounding the struggles for control of the night time economy. It is divided into three parts. This makes an enormous amount of, at times, complex and diverse material easier to digest and understand. Part one focuses on an historical view of the development of the night time street and the idea that this night time street is dangerous, risky, criminal and inhabited by those lacking in moral standards. A main theme here is that certain places, mainly those where the working classes gathered, were considered disreputable and in need of control. What is examined in this part of the book is the notion of social control in relation to particular groups of people. Hadfield's comments about 'Rave' culture have resonance with club culture research (Measham et al 2000; Hutton 2006; Collin 1997). Once parts of 'rave' culture become fuelled by alcohol and cocaine they also became firmly embedded in the commercialised high street. Social control over once marginalised groups of people was established and they were welcomed enthusiastically as night time consumers. The contradiction in the suppression of 'rave' culture and the embracing of licensed premises is illuminated in Hadfield's discussion, with branded bar chains seen as taking a stranglehold on the night time economy.

A reference to the 'liberal opinion forming elite' (p51) in the context of longer opening hours (being seen as reducing violence and disorder), highlights the problem of legislators being removed from those they are trying to regulate. Hadfield asserts that these ideas are not properly grounded in research. The reasons *why* people drink are often linked to risk taking and violence (see, e.g., Hunt & Laidler 2001; Graham & Wells 2003). So no amount of legislation will stop excessive consumption and disorder. But is the most that can be hoped for a reduction in harms? The author explores this issue on pages 125–126.

Part two concentrates on how control of large numbers of people who are usually consuming alcohol is managed by those on the 'frontline'; bar staff, DJs, bouncers and managers all have a role to play in maintaining order in such spaces. DJs in particular are the 'eyes and ears' of the establishment. Adhering to strict music policies and strongly discouraged from playing the 'wrong' music, DJs control the mood and atmosphere of the

¹ In New Zealand the legal drinking age was lowered from 20 to 18 in 1999. As a result of concern about binge drinking a Bill was introduced more recently to raise the legal drinking age back up to 20. This Bill was defeated in November 2006.

crowd which is carefully managed to be good but not too rowdy. Social control teeters on a knife edge with complex interrelated factors that produce 'safe' environments. *Bar Wars* also highlights that some drinking establishments are seen as more 'risky' than others, namely the chain brands that litter the high street, replacing, in large part, the 'local' where social control was much more informal and behaviour more easily regulated and controlled.

Bar Wars also focuses in part two on the struggle for 'control' of the night time street. Police officers are seen to lower their arrest standards when confronted with thousands of 'disorderly' people. Some police officers' statements showed an understanding of the tolerance that needs to be fostered to police effectively such groups of people, although they also acknowledged that this was frustrating for them. The contemporary night time street is very much a contested public space with competing groups of people demanding the right to use it.

Part three provides a fascinating insight into the policy, rule-making side of the night time economy, something that has not been the focus of previous research and academic discussion. Hadfield's 'insider' knowledge (as a professional witness) gives richness and depth to the discussions in chapters seven and eight regarding the processes of licensing trials. These chapters open a window on to a specific type of legal process that uses adversarial methods, and also how in this particular situation the system is stacked against objectors to new licensing applications.

Hadfield highlights a paradox: that government focuses on binge drinking and associated disorder by groups of (usually young) people, but then appears to turn a blind eye to huge increases in the numbers of licensed premises catering for particular groups of (usually young) people. *Bar Wars* thus examines the tensions between urban regeneration and the selling of cities on the basis of their nightlife as chic modern places to be, and the reality of increasing numbers of branded bar spaces full of youthful consumers engaging in binge drinking and risky behaviour. It also highlights that the *Licensing Act* 2003 was a poorly researched piece of legislation that ignored key issues on extending opening hours which international research concludes increases the problems associated with alcohol consumption and disorder (Plant & Plant 2005). Hadfield leaves the reader to ponder why key contributors have not been taken to task for their part in the development of binge drinking culture in Britain and why the granting of new licences appears to have continued unchecked.

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