

# PuBtopos

**Art Research, The Public House and the Dialectics of Sober and Drunken Knowledge, Transvaluation Symposium in Göteborg 21-22 May 2015.**

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## **Abstract**

This paper invites critical reflection on the English public house as a distinctive and significant site of knowledge production, and on 'pub knowledge' as that which is informally and unquantifiably produced in the pub. Night-time idea exchange – half-remembered and not infrequently fuelled by alcohol – that later issue moments of clarity and connection previously absent in a line of enquiry, is part of a longstanding Western tradition that understands knowledge-making as a dialectical process of 'drunken' and 'sober' thought. Yet dominant indicator-driven research cultures have neglected this dialectic, reining in the methodological protocols of what counts as knowledge, as well as the spatial and temporal conditions of its production. Should artists be in need of a critical vantage point on the aesthetics of sobriety, or in search of a space for collective and expansive, if not nonproblematic making and thinking, 'the local' may well be worth the trip.

**Keywords:** art research, public house, poetics of value, night science, sobriety

## **PuBtopos**

Hearsay has it that there was once a head of the School of Art at Kingston University who ran the BA degree programme out of a pub next to the college – staff meetings, appraisals, tutorials, the lot. When he retired the pub – the Swan it was called – closed down. Only the premises then got leased by the university, painted white and turned into an exhibition and seminar space. It is now called the Centre for Useless Splendour.

*Apparently, if you were at the Royal College of Art in the 1960s and 70s it was pretty routine to have your tutorials in the pub.*

I can well believe it. I have a colleague who studied art at Goldsmiths in the late 1950s. He told me that one of his tutors, who he remembers only as Adrian, stopped teaching a few weeks before the end of term, telling the students that if they wanted end-of-term feedback they would have to come and meet him in his local, the Ship Inn, where he could be found any day of the week at lunchtime. This friend, his name is John Dickerson, and another student took the tutor up on the offer, but on enquiring from the department secretary where he lived, were directed to the village of Mousehole in Cornwall. So these students hitchhiked there – it's about 300 miles from Lon-



The Oddfellows Arms, Beverley, Yorkshire. Photo David Wright.



The Jolly Taxpayer, Portsmouth.

don, found the Ship Inn, and at lunchtime, sure enough, in walked Adrian. Apparently the tutorial went pretty well, and other people in the pub, fishermen and other locals, cheerfully chipped in with an opinion on the portfolios.

*That's mad. But I think we need to get a better hold of what constitutes a pub if we are going to take something from these anecdotes. Pedagogically, but also in terms of suppositions about knowledge, who has it, and how it comes about.*

Are there 'pub features' and is there 'pub thinking'? Is there such a place as 'the pub' or are there just pubs, lots of them, so spread across history, territories, regions, neighbourhoods that they have little in common in terms of architectural style, social function, clientele, business model and so on? In which case, how is it possible to talk about 'pub features'?

*Of course we can talk about pub features. They are all around us. Here we are on these worn benches with pints of ale. There is the bar with its stained wood and charity box, and the barmaid behind pulling on the hand pumps, each labelled up with the badge of the brewer. Up there at the back are the spirits perched on optics. The windows are lead-lined and give us a break from the cold. This place is situated on a street corner, with a sign swinging in the wind and on which is a picture of a cat and a leg of mutton. Are these not pub features?*

What if it is none of those things that holds the pub together?

*Bricks, mortar, steel beams – these hold the put together.*

No no. That is not it. To get at 'pub features', we'd do better to think about how we end up in one.

*As in when at the end of the day you pile out of the studio, or the seminar, there is often a number of pubs nearby and you just make do with one of them? As we are now?*

One of the euphemisms for the pub in England, used to be, and for many still is, 'the local'. In this sense there is something provisional about the pub – you make do with the one that happens to be nearby – and this prevents expectations of what happens there – of the 'making and thinking' that takes place - becoming too precious. The provisionality sort of rubs off on the thoughts, and this affords them a kind of freedom, because there is less prescription about what they should be about and how they should connect.

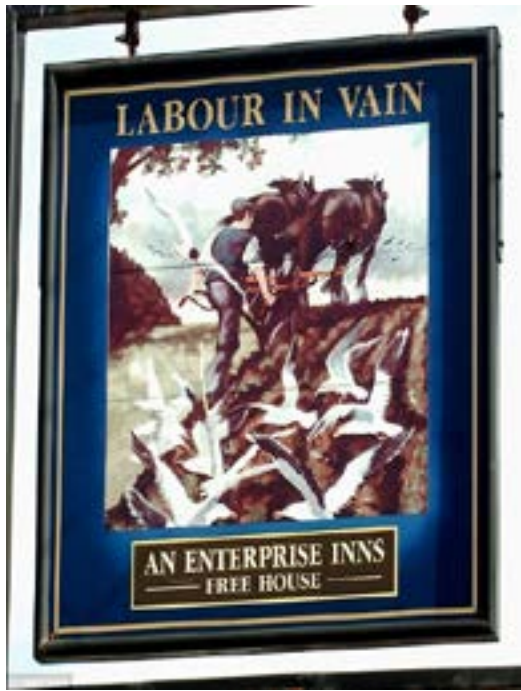
*Yeah, all that definitely affects what ends up getting said. Architecture, open-plan rooms and background noise, low lighting, the fact that there are various conversations happening at the same time, these also have their effect. They reduce the intensity of the conversation, diffuse tension. I find the pub conducive to aporetic conversations - ones that tack back and forth rather than following a direct route. The music shapes things too. But if we are asking the question of "How do we end up here?" We can also take that from a historical vantage point. The pub as public house, as egalitarian site within a classist society.*

I don't know if pubs are particularly egalitarian. The art school pub culture made many people, particularly female staff and students, very uncomfortable. There was an unspoken assumption that the environment was more relaxed, or neutral territory, but this couldn't have been further from the truth. As Germaine Greer once noted: "women don't nip down the local" (1970: 142). But it wasn't only that the space was gendered, it was also that you were invited, yet not as an equal, so you couldn't say "No" without being disrespectful. Under these conditions the last thing you'd want to do is to let down your guard and have a drink, yet this is what you had to do if you were to get on with your tutor or your boss. But besides that specific problem, there are pubs I wouldn't go to. For instance those ones where everyone goes quiet and stares when you enter. There can also be a whole pecking order among regulars, which gets asserted through how good you are at the pub quiz, or darts, or pool, or your ability to quip.

*OK, I agree we'll need to come back to the issue of egalitarianism and the pub, or lack thereof, but they are, historically, a midway points for travel – for rest, and historically quite literally. We "end up here" because pub signs are traditionally images rather than text – to be easily located as a destination for the literate and illiterate alike. We – I mean you and me, end up here as we conceive of here through associating the pub with the bawdy, debauched alehouses of drunk and idle wasters in the writings of Shakespeare and Charles Dickens, as the meeting place of literary and artistic greats and would-be-legends, as well as a site of political commiseration and intrigue. J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis would meet with their Inklings literary group at The Eagle and Child in Oxford. Charles Dickens, Voltaire, Thackeray, Pope, Conan Doyle, Mark Twain, WB Yeats, and Oscar Wilde were all known to have frequented the Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese in London. The Wine House in London was renamed The French House in 1910, as it was used as Charles de Gaulle's base of operations during WWII; this pub was also known as a favourite watering-hole of Lucian Freud, Sylvia Plath, and Dylan Thomas.*

I know what you mean. All those layers, once you register them, can be quite seductive. We get another sense of the pub and its potential from the seventeenth century English diarist, Samuel Pepys. He names no fewer than 149 London taverns and alehouses in the neighbourhoods he visits and drinks with a circle of acquaintances. The naming of pubs serves to frame a narrative about his transactions and the political events in which he is immersed. Here's one. On 2nd February 1659 he describes how he has a drink at the Exchequer at Charing Cross, before meeting with a Mr Calthrop, a grocer, with whom he takes a boat ride to the Bridge Tavern where he has a quart of wine. He describes his journey:

In our way we talked with our waterman, White, who told us how the watermen had lately been abused by some that had a desire to get in to be watermen to the State, and had lately presented an address of nine or ten thousand hands to stand by this Parliament, when it was only told them that it was to a petition against hackney coaches



Labour in Vain, Stourbridge, Staffordshire.



Ye Olde Fighting Cocks, St Albans, Hertfordshire.

(1893: n.p.)

There is a sense in which Pepys's public life in London is one long pub crawl that stretched from Westminster to Hackney and beyond. It is at the tavern the alehouse and the inn that he shares anecdotes, discusses theatre, gambles, negotiates favours, writes business letters, discusses politics, listens to music. He reports, how he "[played] the fool with the lass of the house at the door of the chamber", how he drank with a Mr. Wotton in an alehouse "while he told me a great many stories of comedies that he had formerly seen acted, and the names of the principal actors, and gave me a very good account of it", how one Sunday he left church to sit in the Rose Tavern 'till sermon done". The taverns and alehouses function in his diary as nodes that spatialize within the city grid his acquisition of information and his reflection on it, just as they space out his commentary on the pages of the diary. One of the effects of this is that the tavern and the discussion that takes place there is the start and end point of thought.

But there is another point. The conversations Pepys reports, as you heard in the example of the waterman, frequently have to do with the 'res publica'. So we get from Pepys quite a clear idea about what was public about the pub, at least in the way that it functions for Pepys, namely that it is a site of production of publicness. His diary is a kind of public art, if you will, both the sense that it takes place in an open house (even if the room might have been a quiet and secluded one at the back of the house) but in that, in significant stretches, it takes matters of public concern as its subject.

*Pepys's account sounds incredibly sober.*

How do you mean?

*His entries are dated and full of specific details, such as the proper names of establishments and descriptions and street names of locations. He writes in full sentences and offers critical commentary. The fact that Pepys' is a diary – that it's a record – also seems to align his writing as sober.*



The Green Man, Brackley, Northamptonshire.



I Am the Only Running Footman, London.

I'm not sure Pepys is all that sober, when he is taken as a whole. He regularly reports of going to bed drunk, of being sick during the night and of his sore head the next day. But you are onto something. He is pretty disapproving of some people being drunk, the clergy for example, or of his friends being drunk at the wrong time. Maybe sobriety is a matter of degree, and the requirement to be sober is a matter of who is under consideration, and of the time and place.

*Yes, when Pepys is disapproving of drunkenness, reports on his drunkenness as per the level to which his head hurts, this is from the vantage point of sober thinking. It is thinking that thinks through measurement standards deemed as external to the thinking subject – such as time and place. But let's narrow this notion of the pub down a bit. Is your concern that, if we are to speak about 'pub features' and the potential of the pub, we can't separate that discussion from one on the consumption of alcohol, and the whole of its attendant culture of drunkenness – dissipation, indulgence, licentiousness, uncouth behaviour?*

Or the longer-term consequences of inefficiency and the impact of this on the economy and national prowess. Of course, in contemporary discourse, formally the space-time of the pub is valued. The governmental task of overseeing of pubs has, since 2001, been placed under the Department of Culture, Media and Sport. And the Brewers Association has produced a tourist guide to pub etiquette called *Passport to the Pub* (Fox, 1996). So...

*So it doesn't matter if international visitors are wasters, they're the competition.*

I'm afraid not.

*So what we are noticing is that informally and tacitly the pub is denigrated as the domain of the idle, drunk and incoherent. Industrious people gather in Starbucks and work at their laptops between meetings. Thus the pub is constituted as the antithesis of the productive and efficient, of the daytime spaces of the consulting room, the conference hall, design studio, the high street coffee shop, where a caffeine-primed creative class convene.*





The Wrestlers. Hatfield, Hertfordshire.  
Photo: Bill Martin.



The Strugglers Inn, Westgate, Lincoln.

Is this to suggest that the pub is a place where the artist might want to spend a bit more time?

*As a tactic, it would seem to position the artist, particularly the artist in the pub, as motivated by something other than utility, and at a moment when utility is a dominant legitimation of social investment.*

But at the same time, this way of 'being in the world', as it were, harks back to an eighteenth century conceptualisation of the artist-as-aristocrat: leisurely, carefree, nonchalant, and whose lifestyle sharply contrasted with the sweating labourer or the bustling merchant. It should not be overlooked that, if there is a critique of sobriety in this staging of artistic practice, it takes as its prototype a figure whose lifestyle is soaked in privilege.

*The pub can also be a space of despair. Getting drunk in the gin palace would numb the Victorian working classes to the banality of their routine lives.*

Not just the Victorians. There are some great scenes in the film *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* set in Nottingham pubs in the 1950s. Yes, that's what drunkenness is. It's Albert Finney swaying at the top of the stairs after drinking 10 pints - "the factory floor makes you thirsty" he has explained - his head lolling from side to side as he stares into nothingness, before he falls headlong down the whole flight, somersaulting as he tumbles, and then, once he comes to rest, grinning with inane satisfaction.

*I was going to say, regulations are integral to what the pub is. After all, a pint is a measure. That is why we can't think the pub without thinking drunkenness, or at least the threat of drunkenness that is there in the background and which can, with hellish consequences, take over.*

Yeah, pub talk sits within that tension. But the point you made just now about time and place seems important too. It has reminded me of a tale from Herodotus, a Greek historian, about the practices of the Persian councils at Susa. Writing around 430 BC, he reports how the Persians



The Golden Fleece, London. Photo: Mark Wheeler.



The Saracens Head, Bath. Photo: Wikicommons.

would deliberate on important matters while drunk and at night, would make decisions and then, the next morning put the decision to the master of the house where it had been made. If it was approved they would act on it. If not they'd drop it. Alternatively, they would make a decision while sober, and then reconsider it while drunk (1996).

*The first policy makes a lot of sense. In a hierarchy, members of the group who were worried about speaking out of turn, or making fools of themselves would lose their inhibitions. So you could end up with a more democratic forum.*

And more speaking of the truth. The Greeks had a developed sense of this, - it was known as 'parrhesia', and it had to do not just with freedom of speech but with an obligation, to speak the truth for the common good - to be frank, even at one's personal cost.

*Your imagination can also run free when you're not held back by the need to be reasonable, so you could come up with more bold and ridiculous ideas.*

The imagination is one thing, but I was thinking that without the need to be reasonable there is also an altogether wider sense of what an argument can be in a pub situation and, for that matter, on how best to resolve it.....

*Man. I can imagine some lively symposia that worked with that model. But for me the key thing about the imagination is that free association takes place more readily under certain circumstances than in others, that and the recognition that free association can be productive. Freed from the demands of sticking to the thread, and the need to come to conclusions, the mind opens up, is more playful, and can end up making connections that might otherwise have been missed.*

Play is big in drunkenness. But is this to suggest that the conversation unfolds without a goal? Pub for pub's sake, as it were?

*That sounds promising. Another pint?*



The Quiet Woman, Earl Sterndale, Buxton.



The Bucket of Blood, Hayle, Cornwall.

So where were we? No, Herodotus doesn't have anything to say about that about 'pub for pub's sake'. The impression he leaves is simply that decision making becomes much more fun and more worthwhile. The Persians compare rather favourably with the Greeks in their cultural practices, so his tale reads as an implicit critique of his own culture, which is implicitly more sober.

*The sequencing of night and the following morning is a recurring detail in these narratives. There is a time of losing oneself, of expansion without regard for the consequences, followed by a time for winnowing.*

Exactly. Francois Jacob, the Nobel Prize winning microbiologist makes much of this relationship in his autobiography. He distinguishes between night science and day science. Crucially, the answer to one of his science problems comes to him not in the laboratory where he is conducting his experiments, but in the darkened, flickering cinema. Towards the end of his book he gives this little summary:

Day science employs reasoning that meshes like gears. One admires its majestic arrangements as that of a da Vinci painting or a Bach fugue. One walks about it as in a French formal garden. Night science, on the other hand, wanders blindly. It hesitates, stumbles, falls back, wakes with a start. Doubting everything it feels its way, questions itself, constantly pulls itself together. It is a sort of workshop of the possible where are elaborated what will become the building materials of science (1988: 296).

*What I'm hearing in these accounts is that day and night, sobriety and drunkenness, work together, but the measurement tendency that has become dominant in research cultures - the need for performance indicators, quantitative data pertaining to impact - all these prioritise the value of the former in each pairing.*

It's not just a tendency though, but a culture – a world view that decries that which cannot be quantified by human agency, and that aligns itself with sobriety.



*Yes it can be pretty self-righteous. And at the centre of our analysis of sobriety is a kind of vigilance. We've talked about efficiency but we should also note that, in the case of the institution, that which must be handled efficiently is knowledge. This is because it is a resource, that the alert institution will draw on when in competition with other institutions. But these thoughts bring me back to something you asked earlier. You asked whether the artist hanging out in the pub might function as a 'critique of sobriety'. I'm assuming you are talking about research cultures and I'd like to respond to that question, and consider whether pub knowledge and pub features might enrich the 'sober' academic environment, both on the level of form (institution) and content (research).*

Are you advocating that the dialectic be restored, and that what we have come to call 'pub thinking' and 'pub knowledge' be brought into the academy to loosen up research a bit?

*Possibly, but is it that straightforward? I'm wondering what might happen to the shape and quality of thought when it is functionalised?*

Why worry? We have already established that the dialectic of sobriety and drunkenness is orientated towards an enhanced efficiency in terms of publicness and the democratic. Do we not have a tried and tested model for how the institution might function?

*The problem I'm anticipating has to do with measurement culture. Once measurement precedes thinking, so that thinking 'knows', as it were, that it is going to get measured and that it exists to be measured, there is a risk that the culture of measurement will determine what gets thought. Earlier we established that thinking is a dialectical process between sobriety and drunkenness, or to extend the metaphor, between day and night science. However, the perspective of measurement culture on thinking is that the only form of thinking that matters, that is valuable, that should be visible, that is, is thinking that is measurable. So much so that drunkenness is not thinking. Indeed, drunken non-thought is pitted against sober thought. So, if we accept that good thinking involves a dialectic between sobriety and drunkenness, then the destruction of the dialectic is a destruction of good thinking.*

So sobriety is drunken! How then might we break from the subordination of thinking to measurement culture? And what part might the pub play in this?

*Well, I'm not entirely sure – and you know, if I had a straightforward answer, I'd be pretty suspicious of what I had to say. But I do think it starts with undoing the association between sobriety and thinking – to which our examples of productive pub thought have given the lie – as well as between measurement culture and sober thinking. Through the unhinging of these relationships, we can start to reclaim thinking as a dialectic between sobriety and drunkenness.*

*Jacques Rancière's book *Nights of Labor* may speak to the problem of decoupling measurement culture and sober thinking. He provides examples of figures who have challenged the way thinking ordinarily maps onto time and place, i.e. its sobriety. According to Rancière, the thinking and actions of the 19th century French proletariat transgress the normative culture of day dedicated to work and night dedicated to rest or family or religion – in other words, activities that promote efficient day labour. We are told, for example, that Charles "wanted to use poetry to flee the worker's condition: this time not in the solitude of a room where the vitality of the angel is worn out but in the sewer of a population that has gone back to animality." (1981: 134). People were able to organise and mobilise a revolution by*

*snatch[ing] from the normal round of work and repose. A harmless and imperceptible interruption of the normal round, one might say, in which our characters prepare and dream and already live the impossible: the suspension of the ancestral hier-*



The Case Is Altered, Pinner, Middlesex.



The Smugglers Inn, Herne, Kent. Photo: David Anstiss.

*archy subordinating those dedicated to manual labor to those who have been given the privilege of thinking. Nights of studying, nights of boozing (1981: viii)*

The first thing that strikes me about those passages is that the night is at once a space-time of study and drink. In other words from the perspective of dialectical knowledge, the pub might be a refuge not only for night/intoxicated knowledge, but for dialectical knowledge itself.

*That's true. But, in relation to our discussion of measurement culture, the point is that by disregarding the allocation of activities to their respective times of night and day – they challenge the partitions upon which measurement culture depends, thereby calling into question their 'sobriety'. It is not insignificantly in part due to the transgressive dreaming and doings of people who use the time of night in a manner that is not prescribed by the factory, the pulpit, or surrounding culture norms and often with very specifically different intents and purposes, that bit by bit, in a non-linear not easily historicised manner, leads to a change in the political and social conditions of the French working class. This change is far from simple. But as, I said, Rancière's proletariat are able to shift their conditions not by inserting night activities into the day, but by choosing to work at night. In order to reframe the space-time of their 'occupation,' the workers had to invalidate the most common partition of time: the partition according to which workers would work during the day and sleep during the night. It was the conquest of the night for doing something else than sleeping. That basic overturning involved a whole reconfiguration of the partition of experience. It involved a process of dis-identification, another relation to speech, visibility and so on.*

History tells us that their thinking went largely unregulated.

*And what they achieved warns us against being in a rush to alter that state of affairs. I mean, the last thing we want is the colonisation of pub knowledge by the institution.*

*Let's not be naive though. As we've already touched on, the pub is only operative in this way to*



The Hung, Drawn and Quartered,  
London.



Robin Hood and Little John, Hertfordshire.  
Photo: Gregory Williams.

*the extent that its existence as an institution is regulated. In this regard, we should note the Alehouse Act of 1552 “For Keepers of Alehouses and Tipplinghouses to be bound by Recognisance.” That was the first act passed and enforced by the government in which it claims the right to deem whether a pub can or cannot exist. Previously you have pubs existing and proprietors establishing them without such a regulation – with the passage of this act, their existence is decided by a government. Whereas the pub existed previously on its own terms, now it exists by “permission” of the government. The “common alehouse” is henceforth regulated by the crown. Not only that, the act makes it such that the pub’s very existence is subject to whether justices think the common selling of ale and beer is “meet and convenient” – justices who are also empowered with this act to take bonds and sureties from alehousekeepers. This is all to say that while we have identified that there is a level of unmeasured activity and thinking in the pub, even within the pub there is a limit – a limit, as evinced by the Alehouse Act of 1552 and subsequent policies, that is permitted and regulated by the state through measurement culture.*

I can’t help but think that signals to our own situation here. We’d be having a conversation that might be very different if we weren’t thinking things through within the conditions of the Transvaluation conference.

*Speaking of, have we hit all the marks?*

I hope so. One for the road? By the way, which do you think it is – the pub I mean – culture, media or sport?

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