

Review

Hobbs, D, Hadfield, P, Lister, S & Winlow, S (2003)

***Bouncers: Violence and Governance in the Night-time Economy,*
Oxford University Press, Oxford**

Speakers at the recent high-profile New South Wales Alcohol Summit stressed the pernicious social outcomes of excessive drinking. Social researchers participating in this event presented important data regarding serious effects on matters of social order, violence and health. But taxes from the lucrative business in alcohol, and its pivotal position in efforts to boost tourist and leisure spending and to promote cosmopolitan images of Sydney, are powerful shields from criticism. This new British book suggests the depth and complexity of the historical, economic and political processes behind contemporary arguments about the availability of drink and its many effects on urban life. And the real strength of this work is to move beyond the many correlation studies in this area with the intention to explore the different 'political and economic forces that shaped the night-time economy' (p 3).

It is the result of a strong British interest in the wider links between this economy and crime that has not yet been matched by locals. Its focus also moves beyond the research partnerships that are fundamentally resigned to liberal regulation of urban drinking environments and are left searching for some success in situational responses. Full critiques of the local economic growth and the city and state rivalries that have emerged around the promotion of leisure spending are mostly unwelcome across the globe. Nevertheless, these authors have not been too timid in saying what they believe to be the case with drinking and urban crime especially in the heralded recent revival of North English towns and cities. They look past the congratulatory rhetoric of the current crop of 'city boosters' with a rich and critical historical and social analysis.

Discussion of the historical pattern of regulation and deregulation is an important part of this. In an earlier period of urban industrialism (the 19th and early 20th century) drinking symbolised working class leisure. Bourgeois anxieties about it shaped a frequently rigid state response, with restricted trading hours and close monitoring of the numbers of types of licensed premises. Aspects of this pattern of control in a capitalist society directed towards industrial production have shifted dramatically in contemporary post-industrial settings. The most devastating effects of a decline in traditional industry appear to have been overcome by a revival of former industrial centres through urban regeneration and the expanding leisure industries. In these circumstances, local authorities eschew strict regulation of business and adopt a more liberal approach and offer financial inducements to investors. Within neo-liberal governance the focus is facilitating private economic growth and there is a new clout to local economic interests in the competition between urban locations that are struggling to expand.

But the spectacular growth of the night-time economy of cities like Manchester in the 1980s and 1990s (with a new range of youth pubs, dance bars and 'superclubs' all running on wider trading hours) had alcohol and its marketing at its core. This is even despite the new significance of illicit drugs in music venues, as 'the reality is that the night-time economy is largely an unregulated zone of quasi-liminality awash on a sea of alcohol' (p 28). Its settings are characterised by different rules of social comportment, with aggressive sexuality, drunkenness, illicit drug use and loud and abusive behaviour all commonplace forms of social transgression. These developments have placed an enormous pressure on public police resources, rapidly expanded demand for private security and created many new criminal opportunities. Readers are given disturbing interview accounts of 'door wars' between flourishing criminal networks competing to control premises and infiltration into bouncing work, with evidence of protection rackets, violent intimidation and extortion that have licensed venues as their focal point. This world is a deregulated 'frontier' economy with an open criminality and deployment of violence for commercial interests. The general link between crime, disorder and deregulation and its description is the most compelling theme of this book.

Although they do invite reflection on the local parallels, specific details of regulatory provisions and debates may hold less interest for local readers. Perhaps reflecting its multi-authored origins and the ambitious swings between history, ethnography and policy analysis, parts of this book produce a fragmented reading. Some ethnographic passages about the shadow worlds of night leisure and bouncing have too much editorializing and the contexts are unexplained. Perhaps British University ethics committees now also insist on absurdities about overly hidden identities and disguised research sites whenever they see a proposal for an ethnographic study of crime or deviance. In any case, there is not much detail here about methods (sampling, recruiting and the questions asked) and the occasional use of first names at the bottom of quotes just left me puzzled.

The title of this book suggests a focus on bouncers, yet overall this seemed less developed than the underlying account of crime and the night-time economy. 'Bouncer' is a term that some doorstaff and security officers have come to resent as pejorative. Its use here is a first sign of where these authors stand in discussions about professionalisation, violence and private policing. They note the complexity of bouncers as opposed to their stereotyping as boneheads. Hostility and violence to customers is not an overriding characteristic and good bouncers are people who gather detailed information about settings and are highly skilled at reading social contexts and the intricate signs of threat. Usually, these skills are applied to block conflicts. Violence, or the threat to use it, must be measured and regulated. But this occupation gives its recruits a particular extended form of discretionary physical power and in licensed venues the corporeal control over patrons is highly localised but amplified. So despite some emphasis on the value of communication and efforts to draw a new image in some venues, the 'ability to utilize physical force of varying degrees remains sovereign' (p 138). Most are large males valued by private employers for their potential for force or professed fighting skill:

Violence in the night-time economy is a tool of incorporation, and the various tactics and strategies that are put into play by doorstaff all have violence, either its potential as suggested by body shape, demeanour, and verbal style, or its actuality, at its root (p 161).

Furthermore, tentative state efforts to regulate doorstaff are very weak. Compulsory training courses are inadequate and licensing checks have failed to weed out or block those with criminal histories — even some of a very serious nature. This situation appears to be lagging behind reforms in Australian states but the problems are nevertheless familiar.

Doorwork is discussed and analysed with ideas about gender and class in hand. The stress on communication skills in niche venues has created a new but marginal place for women in this form of work. Male doorstaff are generally reluctant to use force in their own dealings with disorderly women. These details left me wanting more about the role of women bouncers in serious physical scraps with female patrons. Locals would recognise the idealised notion of 'women as good talkers' here. But it is uncanny how often the contemporary use of female bouncers has produced a new sexual division of labour in which the enthusiastic surveillance and control of girls and young women is now the unquestioned responsibility of women on the door of mixed venues.

There is more discussion about the gendered identities of doormen: male bouncers epitomise an aggressive working class masculine identity and bouncing is a form of 'class work'. These sections of the book are intriguing but the relationship between the subject and the new sociological and criminological interest in masculinities is not developed. There are certainly less empirical insights here than in the account by Winlow (2001) and other publications from researchers directly or indirectly related to the project that produced this book. I would have welcomed an analysis of the dynamics of interpersonal violence that could give us a critical angle on the worn paradigm of brittle working class and black male honour that prevails in general explanations of the vast phenomenon of male on male violence in industrialised nations. In particular, how is this violence measured and controlled? What are the many influences on this and how are they practically balanced? A fully detailed account of bouncing violence and masculine identities could say more about the particular men drawn to this form of work and their subjectivity. Even in the short life-history account of one nostalgic older doorman the characterisation was not extended.

Discussion of the masculinity of bouncers could lead into further analysis of the gendered forms of the occupational order of different segments of police, and the wider implications of violence for the power relations between different men. This work mentions the pressures of crime in the night-time economy that are put on public police with their restricted resources. It also suggests that there are only 'tenuous' links between the private and public segments with limited cooperation in response to drug-dealing and a general failure to report assaults in drinking locations. Nevertheless, it is the partial professionalisation of public policing in recent decades that has run in tandem with a downward shedding of much visceral 'dirty work' and elements of an overtly physical and aggressive masculinity to private police. A general indifference in relation to assaults from both public and private police that has filtered through into the state response to public violence between men reflects aspects of the masculinity of these forms of work.

At a more personal level, I got an ongoing sense of déjà vu when reading about the ambivalence of officials to this research, difficulties from gatekeepers with their own political scripts, and the ethical quandaries of ethnographers seeing violence, crime and abuses of power. It is impressive that the dark world of night-time leisure is described here without either scapegoating or romanticising its human participants. The empirically visible does not override other levels of analysis. This work is sympathetic in tone but very intellectual critical and with this balance it is an important contribution to contemporary crime research.

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References

Winlow, S (2001) *Badfellas: Crime, Tradition and New Masculinities*, Oxford, Berg.