

***Violent Night: Urban Leisure and Contemporary Culture*, S Winlow and S Hall, Berg, Oxford, 2006**

Criminologists continue to wrestle with major questions about the causes and patterns of urban violence, and the relationship that these have to forms of leisure and different youth cultures. Typically, analyses oscillate between individualistic and deterministic viewpoints so that causation and the social meanings of violence for various participants — including perpetrators, victims and onlookers — are still barely understood. Even when addressing the local social context of aggression and violence or its ‘lived experience’, accounts often omit consideration of major social divisions and transformation.

These weaknesses have been addressed by a new shift to urban ethnographies that stress the value of an insider understanding at the same time as they explore the tension between individual agency and structural disadvantage. In this vein, this book reports on a local study of violence and seeks to locate this data in a wider discussion of significant historical and economic change as it expands on the important contributions of British researchers to research on crime and night-time economies (Hobbs et al 2003; Monaghan 2002; Winlow 2001).

The starting point for the discussion of urban violence and leisure by Simon Winlow and Steve Hall in *Violent Night* is a broad explanation of the recent history and significance of neo-liberal ideas and related social trends. The latter comprise the shift from productive capitalism to restructured ‘post-Fordist’ economies with a decline of heavy industry and manufacturing and the celebrated rise of new industries founded in consumption and leisure. In the United Kingdom, the 1980s was a critical decade for radical moves to a neo-liberal economy and an associated decline of the old welfare state, trade unions and traditional patterns of working class consciousness.

As the authors discuss, in the ensuing decades, depressed cities that were once the hubs of industrial capitalism dotted the British landscape. These cities then became more and more reliant on the promise of economic revival from one-dimensional night-time economies centred on excessive youth drinking. Intoxicated night-time leisure on a grand scale generated a radically altered social milieu, with resulting debate and division about apparent increases in levels of social disorder and assaultive crime. In particular, local city authorities and planners have become attracted by this means of urban revival in locations where few other mechanisms for economic and cultural stimulation are available, and where images of cosmopolitan dining, arts precincts and theatre districts remain remote from the reality of stagnant inner cities. The youth and drinking option is often adopted regardless of the obvious social and crime problems that can result from the major liberalisation of liquor regulation and lax control of venues.

This means that the social and political context of drinking drives and exacerbates problems of violence, and ambivalence about violence is now evident in official denials that drinking violence has recently increased within ‘a complex double bind between the essentially contradictory imperatives of economic development via the expansion of hedonistic opportunities and the preservation of an image of safety and order that enhances the attractiveness of the “brand name” of city centres’ (94-95).

The state had an ambivalent historical response to violence and formerly harnessed working class male aggression for its own ends. Disorder and bloodshed are now the chief nuisance outcomes of the promotion of the same mass leisure and drinking that revives depressed urban centres and puts more tax dollars in the public coffers.

This broader view of night-time crime is complemented by the author's insights from a year of observations and interviews with forty-three young working class males and females in North-East England. This group mostly lived with their parents, survived on unrewarding jobs in the new service economy, and all of them were heavily engaged in the pursuit of nocturnal leisure in city pubs and nightclubs. Winlow and Hall draw additional information from a smaller number of interviews with police officers at the coalface of the mostly reactive responses to night-time disorder. Theoretically, the authors of this book have no time for ethereal discussions of free and fluid identities unrelated to social context and prevailing economic processes. For Winlow and Hall, the information from interviews indicates that current forms of socialising in night-time leisure signal a key shift in the actual nature of contemporary youth identity. This is not a positive shift in a liberated urban playground free of traditional social ties, but a more bleak social landscape of fragmented neo-liberal identities.

Neo-liberalism has meant a decline in traditional patterns of identity founded on class lines, changing conditions of work and education that serve to divide, alienate and atomise people in competition with each other. Winlow and Hall argue that young people are locked into insecure jobs and often pointless further education, and have little in the way of a coherent life plan to match their growing egoism. There is merely a preoccupation with personal pleasure and money, amoral attitudes that characterise their social vision and shallow and instrumental personal relationships dominating social interaction. Night-time consumption means a fine-tuned but very conformist adoption of drink products and fashion styles that are marketed to youth in a homogenised culture of late hours and intoxication. Against a backdrop of brief flirtation with a sense of liminal transcendence of social restrictions in circuit drinking, there is indifference to the risks of excessive drunkenness including random public violence aimed at both men and women. The majority of the interviewees in this study have had direct experience of violence as perpetrators, victims or both.

This book dismisses the broad use of celebratory accounts of youth subcultures as embodying resistance and the rejection of dominant social values. It stresses a sharp difference between contemporary drinking violence and previous forms of popular protest:

[T]he night-time economy promotes a rather impoverished and paradoxically conformist form of transgression that results in inebriation, disappointment, disorder and a rather dismal background static of petty violence rather than liberation and satisfaction ... our findings indicate that this specific form of transgression is not in the main 'carnavalesque' and it most definitely has no connection with 'narratives of dissent' or the potentially subversive symbolism that made that Saturnalian rituals of the past a window in the wall of the oppressive norm, through which we could see the dangerous politics that until quite recently bubbled through the popular culture of the lower orders (8-9).

Romantic accounts that look for the seeds of positive social transformation in youth violence and each moment of popular disorder are clearly absurd. And, as argued in this work, it may well be the case that interpersonal violence historically declined with the inculcation of restraint and self-discipline, but is now on the rise again in the specific instance of night-time economies. Yet it also seems that this book may all too quickly slot all interpersonal violence in the night-time economy together as a meaningless social phenomenon. This is quite surprising from authors insisting on the renewed importance of

social class. Furthermore, violence as collective social protest has not disappeared altogether in the contemporary world (Tilly 2003).

Violent Night discounts a whole range of explanations of violence including theories of subcultures, socialisation, labelling and social resistance. In so doing, it may leave some readers with a sense of mystery about the ongoing causes of this aggression. Similarly the insistence that this violence has little to do with dominant forms of masculinity seems to be contradicted by interview data with perpetrators that emphasise the shoring up of male respect in conflicts. Nevertheless, these matters do not undermine the important overall argument that the promotion of the night-time economy in current neo-liberal conditions is highly and obviously conducive to violence. A cluster of British researchers have produced excellent accounts of crime, public violence and nocturnal leisure in the last decade. This book is another major example of this output and its readers are offered a very lucid and important discussion of neo-liberalism and new and destructive patterns in youth leisure and night-time economies.

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References

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