

Bouncers: Violence and Governance in the Night-time Economy

Dick Hobbs, Philip Hadfield, Stuart Lister and Simon Winlow

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In Brisbane, hardly a week goes by without yet another story of violence and sometimes death in the 'night-time economy'. Sometimes, as with the death of well-known former cricketer David Hookes, the incident involves a high-profile individual, and allegations and counter-allegations fill the media for weeks. At other times, the matter is no more than a minor rumble, filling a few centimetres of column space on the back pages of the daily paper. Each fresh incident moves 'bouncers' from the shadows of late-night pubs and clubs into a sudden glare of publicity. Meanwhile, mindful of the alcohol-fuelled violence apparently endemic in Brisbane's 'liminal economies', politicians experiment with forms of regulation that arguably make the job of the bouncer even more difficult, and increase rather than reduce the risk of (potential fatal) violence.

To my knowledge, there is as yet no study of the denizens of the liminal economy in Australian urban spaces that is remotely comparable to that conducted by Hobbs, Hadfield, Lister and Winlow in the United Kingdom. Perhaps because our urban spaces are less dense, and for that reason seemingly less fraught with danger, we accept the rhythms (and the ructions) of the liminal economy as normal. Nonetheless, deaths at a cab rank ... perhaps in a queue populated in part by patrons evicted from night clubs or bars ... a death outside a nightclub of an obviously (and excessively) inebriated patron and the miscellaneous emergency room calls and minor injuries of the night-time economy remain 'normal'. On any given day, the local media is likely to carry at least one story: 'Sad farewell for Valley bash victim'¹ is fairly typical. Occasionally, as in the David Hookes saga, the figure of the bouncer moves out of the shadows of pubs and clubs and on to the front page of the daily news, looking a little strained and wholly ill at ease in suit and tie.

Bouncers is a remarkable work, not least because it can be read on many different levels. At an elemental but undeniably pleasurable level, it can be understood as a 'rattling good read', perhaps a little lacking in story line but more than making up for that minor lack in its excitement, its panoply of fascinating characters and its ability to provide a window into an unfamiliar world, one with the unmistakable frisson of danger and the scent of fear. More seriously and disturbingly, it delineates the limits of governance. The rhythms of the night-time economy, as described by the researchers, are simultaneously intensely regulated and beyond governance. Licensing laws (not only for pubs and clubs, but also for taxis, entertainment venues and

¹ Jasmine Lill, Cameron Atfield and Renee Viellaris, 'Sad farewell for Valley bash victim', *Courier-Mail*, 7 December, p 5 is typical.

legitimate brothels) proliferate, and at least on paper are voluminous and highly technical — a model for the regulatory state.

Bouncers highlights what many of us have long believed to be the case, that the gap between the ostensible regulation of the bureaucratic/administrative state and ‘the current regulatory context, which favours compliance, dialogue, and partnership, rather than “conflict” between police, local authorities and “the trade” (p 253) is immense. In the gap we find the world of the bouncer, one in which ‘the police enforce the law, but the bouncer operates according to a highly ambiguous cocktail of law, occupational codes, and personal discretion that is underpinned by an interpretation of what is good and what is bad for business’ (p 15)

While today the scene in a middle-sized Australian city such as Brisbane, even in ‘clubbing districts’ such as the Valley, is a pale shadow of what the authors describe as ‘a carnivalesque world’ (p 22) in which ‘the alcohol-fuelled night-time economy also provides an ideal environment for those who regard fighting as an expressive hobby’ (p 39), the factors driving development in the Valley are not dissimilar to those described in Manchester. With its heady mix of live music venues, essentially all-night gay and straight ‘clubbing’ and increasingly upmarket residential complexes and restaurants, the concluding passage in the author’s historiography of Manchester night-life could have been written about Brisbane: ‘Since the mid-1980s, this previously marginal commercial leisure market has become central to the economic fortunes of the post-industrial city. Thus, despite being closely associated with a motley crew of unruly, even criminal attendants and the miscreant allure of licit and illicit intoxicants, the undeniably “vibrant” night-time economy has assumed a key role in the political economy of contemporary Manchester and many similar projects of urban governance across Britain.’ (pp 107–09)

As the foregoing suggests, *Bouncers* is a fascinating work that can be read and understood on many levels. Part social historiography of one of Britain’s more interesting and complex cities, part ‘case study’ of the world of bouncers, part ethnographic examination of the role of bouncers as ‘gate keepers’ to the night-time economy and representatives of a ‘model of informal commercial policing that has body type, demeanour, local knowledge, and gendered and class-specific habitus at its very foundation’ (p 119), it has much to commend it to socio-legal scholarship. For lawyers, it is altogether too easy to forget that regulatory regimes are targeted, not random; that formal and informal policing patrols the borders of much of the lawyer’s work. *Bouncers* locates the targets of these regulatory regimes: the denizens of gay clubs and bars, the punters, the licit and illicit trading networks that circle pubs and clubs, above all the bouncers. The stories it tells, of the business of bouncing, of the bouncers themselves and of the limits of ‘official regulation’ — the gap between the law on the books and the law on the streets, between police powers and the social practice of policing — made this reviewer want to read more sociology and less law!

As a finely honed study of formal and informal regulation and of a world in which the potential for violence is always present and integral to the role of the bouncer, this work has a great deal to commend it — not merely to

sociologists and criminologists, but also to lawyers, to bureaucrats and even to law students and their teachers — indeed, to anyone likely to encounter the carnivalesque world of excess and danger that is the night-time economy.

— SANDRA BERNS