THE GIN EPIDEMIC: MUCH ADO ABOUT WHAT?

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Abstract — While there is no doubt that the era of the ‘gin epidemic’ was associated with poverty and social unrest, the surge in gin drinking was localized to London and was a concomitant, not the cause, of these problems. The two main underlying social problems were widespread overcrowding and poverty. The former was related to an unprecedented migration of people from the country to London. The latter stemmed from an economic ideology called ‘poverty theory’, whose basic premise was that, by keeping the ‘inferior order’ in poverty, English goods would be competitive and would remain that way since workers would be completely dependent on their employers. Widespread overcrowding and poverty led to societal unrest which manifested itself in increased drunkenness when cheap gin became available after Parliament did away with former distilling monopolies that had kept prices high. Reformers ignored the social causes of this unrest and, instead, focused on gin drinking by the poor which they feared was endangering England’s wealth and security by enfeebling its labour force, and reducing its manpower by decreasing its population. Part of this hostility was also related to gin itself. While drunkenness was often spoken of affectionately when it was induced by beer, England’s national drink, gin was considered a foreign drink, and therefore less acceptable. These concerns were voiced less often after the passage of the Tippling Act of 1751, which resulted in an increase in gin prices and decreased consumption. However, the second half of the century was also a period in which England’s military victory over the French gave it new wealth and power, which dispelled upper-class fears about an enfeebled and dissolve working class. It was also an era when new public health measures, such as mass inoculation against smallpox, and a decrease in the marrying age, led to a population increase that dispelled reformist fears about manpower shortages. The conclusion is that, while the lower cost of gin sparked the ‘gin epidemic’, the social unrest associated with this unprecedented surge in gin consumption was exacerbated, rather than caused, by the increase in drinking.

INTRODUCTION

Any history of the ‘evils’ of alcohol will inevitably mention the ‘gin epidemic’, which allegedly besotted England, between 1720 and 1751, and will probably rely on George’s (1925/1966) frequently republished graphic account for documenting that history (e.g. Coffey, 1966). However, the ‘gin epidemic’ did not occur in a vacuum. This article discusses the nature of the ‘epidemic’, and its social and economic background. A consideration of the gin epidemic in its context, offers a different interpretation of its causes and impact than that suggested by the standard histories of that period such as M. Dorothy George’s (1925/1966).

THE GIN EPIDEMIC

Distillation was common throughout Europe by the Middle Ages, but was fairly uncommon in England, compared to beer and ale production, because a domestic monopoly kept prices very high. In 1689, Parliament banned imports of French wines and spirits and at the same time cancelled the domestic monopoly. Subsequently, anyone who could pay the required duties could set up a distillery business. Distillers became not only producers, but also sellers. The cost of gin fell below the cost of beer and ale (see Spring and Buss, 1977) and gin drinking became the favourite alcoholic beverage among the ‘inferior class’.

British statistical abstracts put the annual consumption of gin in England and Wales in 1700 at about 1.23 million gallons. By 1714, consumption was up to almost 2 million gallons per year. By 1735, it was 6.4 million gallons, and by 1751, 7.05 million gallons. In terms of population, per capita consumption increased by up to eightfold from between 1 and 2 pints in 1700 to between 8 and 9 pints, about a gallon per person in 1751 (Mitchell and Deane, 1962). Beer consumption for the same period remained relatively constant at 3 million gallons a year.

George, one of the most influential historians of the early 20th century, blamed the increase in gin consumption for much of the social unrest that also increased during this period (e.g. George, 1925/1966; Coffey, 1966). The most commonly cited support for this argument was that after the passage of the Tippling Act of 1751, which George called a ‘turning point in the social history of London’ (George, 1925/1966, p. 49), social unrest declined. The Tippling Act prohibited distillers from selling gin at retail, and levied severe penalties for non-compliance, such as imprisonment, whipping and even deportation for repeat offenders. As a result, gin prices rose, gin consumption steadily declined back to 2 million gallons [beer consumption, however, steadily increased to about 4 million gallons a year (Mitchell and Deane, 1962)], and social unrest did decline. However, in this article, I argue that the social unrest prior to and after the Tippling Act was the result of, and was fuelled and exacerbated by, excessive gin drinking, rather than having been its cause.

THE ‘INFERIOR SORT OF PEOPLE’

At the beginning of the 18th century, English society was divided into two basic classes. One, composed of gentlemen, employers and literary figures, was known as the ‘genteel’ class; the other, described by the Middlesex Grand Jury as ‘the meaner, though useful Part of the Nation’, (Anonymous, 1736b), consisted of ‘Day-labourers, men and women Servants, and common Soldiers’. These manual or menial labourers, were also variously called the ‘inferior sort of
people’, the ‘inferior rank’, the ‘lower sort’, or the ‘lower orders’ (Eboranus, 1736; Wilson, 1736; Mige, 1748; Fielding, 1751). Though inferior in social status, labourers were the backbone of the nation’s prosperity. To maintain that prosperity, ‘reasonable creatures’, the Middlesex Grand Jury’s term for its own ‘genteele class’, strongly endorsed what has come to be known as ‘poverty theory’. The basic premise of this theory was that the genteele class comprised England’s consumers and the ‘inferior class’ its producers. The wages of the latter of necessity had to be kept low to keep exports competitive and commodities beyond the income of its members, so that they would be forced to work steadily to survive. The corollary to this idea was that the more children these people produced, the greater would be the competition for jobs and the lower the wages that would have to be paid to do them. This in turn meant higher profits and a greater dependence on the part of workers (Marshall, 1956; Gilmour, 1992). This theory was buttressed by an underlying belief that God himself had ordained that the ‘inferior class’ had been put on earth to serve the genteel class and the existing social order was a reflection of His will. The clergy supported this assumption with statements to the effect that ‘there can be no society without Government, and no Government without Sub-ordination, or Submission of Inferiors to Superiors.’ (Quoted by Malcolmson, 1981, p. 15.) Poverty theory took a new direction in Thomas Malthus’ (1789) Essay on Population, which contended that while a larger population meant a larger working force, the poor had to be kept in abject poverty to avoid a food crisis that would endanger the welfare of their betters.

DRUNKENNESS

Whereas the gin-related drunkenness in 18th century England has typically been associated with the poor, drunkenness itself was commonplace among all social classes. However, the attitudes of the genteel towards their own drunkenness and those of the ‘inferior people’ reflected class distinctions. For the middle and upper classes — the only ones to record their perspective — their own drunkenness was simply amusing. In his Midnight Modern Conversation, for example, William Hogarth depicted drunkenness among well-to-do revellers in a humorous light; the whole scene triangulates on an exuberant drinker in the back of the room who is raising his glass in a toast to all his fellow topers, a tribute, rather than a denunciation of drunken conviviality (Shesgreen, 1973). When Hogarth turned to drinking among the poor, as he did in Gin Lane, his attitude was completely different (Abel, 2001).

Gin drinking among the ‘inferior class’ in the second quarter of the 18th century was attacked as an unprecedented problem not because drunkenness was more commonplace, or because of benevolent concern that it was impairing the health of the poor as individuals, but because of its perceived dangers to the Nation’s welfare and economy. When a critic of cheap gin said that ‘it cannot be suppos’d that labouring people can spend their money in both beer and gin’, he wasn’t condemning drunkenness per se, he was merely pointing out that the money being spent was going to the gin makers and sellers instead of their counterparts in the beer industry. In the long run, he warned, the cheaper price for gin would lead to more drunkenness, which was a concern, he said, because their premature deaths would ‘deprive the landowners of a workforce which in turn would result in higher wages, (and) the demand for barley would also be reduced’ (Holden, 1736, p. 9). ‘To all this’ (i.e. the decrease in beer consumption and increased labour costs), our social critic added, was the added effect gin drinking had upon ‘the consumption of tobacco, no inconsiderable branch of his Majesty’s revenue, and to which the populace do not a little contribute. An honest man may smock [sic] a pipe or two of tobacco, with a pint or two of good beer, a whole evening, but is so suddenly demolish’d by the force of tyrant gin, that he has scarcely time to puff out half a dozen wiffs’ (p. 13).

IDLENESSE

When the London Grand Jury met at the Old Bailey in 1735 to present to the Lord Mayor ‘such publack Nusances as disturb and annoy the Inhabitants of the City’, among its main complaints was that gin was robbing the ‘lower kind of people’ of their will and power ‘to labor for an honest livelihood, which is a principal Reason of the great Increase of the Poor’ (pp. 2–3). The reason the ‘lower kind’ had no will to labour on behalf of those making this complaint, however, was not because gin enfeebled them, but because they were unwilling to work at hazardous jobs for long hours and low pay. Adam Smith, for instance, noted that, even the most fit carpenters in London did not remain so for more than 8 years, and at the height of their earning capacity, hardly earned enough to buy a newspaper (Jarrett, 1974). In an unusually candid comment, one of the genteel class, an Arthur Young, admitted that ‘nobody but an idiot would expect them to work at such a rate, unless it was their only way of earning their living’ (Jarrett, 1974, p. 98). To keep their employees dependent, employers were especially reluctant for them to form and join unions referred to as ‘combinations’, because of the expectation that unionizing would lead to demands for higher wages. Such grievances and concerns were typically couched in terms of the national interest. Employers specifically blamed pub owners for providing a place for workmen to meet and use and for encouraging ‘these journeymen in their unlawful combinations for raising their wages, and lessening their hours’ (Galton, 1896).

These social confrontations became more acute at the beginning of the 18th century as a result of the Enclosure Acts, which expropriated what previously little countryside had been held in common and used by any who cared to do so, and converted it into privately held fields by large landowners. Dispossessed of what little land they had been able to use and faced with extremely hard and oftentimes crippling farm labour that even the strongest couldn’t cope with for more than a few years (Jarrett, 1974), people left their rural homes for cities, especially London. Once they arrived, many were often no better off since there was low demand in the cities and towns for unskilled labourers. Nevertheless, as more and more people migrated to London, serious overcrowding and unemployment occurred, especially for the unskilled, and wages were kept low, because the newcomers would work for less. Left with nothing to do, or unwilling to work for almost nothing, the ‘inferior sort of people’ who had some money repaired to their pubs which had become the centres of working class
life in every community (Spring and Buss, 1977); the rest coalesced into an unruly mob.

CRIME

Not only was gin drinking accused of contributing to idleness, it was also said to be responsible for an increase in crime. ‘Most of the Murders and Robberies lately committed’, said the London Grand Jury (Anonymous, 1736a), ‘have been laid and concentrated at Gin Shops’. It explained that ‘being fired with these Hot Spirits, they are prepared to execute the most bold and daring Attempts’ (p. 4). In 1751, despairing of the vices of the ‘lower order of people’, Henry Fielding, a London Magistrate, author of Tom Jones and other popular books of the era, published an Enquiry into the Causes of the Late Increase of Robbers explaining that there were two main causes of crime in England. The first was that the ‘lower order’ was no longer frugal and hardworking because of its wish for ‘luxury’: and this envy drove them to crime to achieve their goal. The second cause was drunkenness on the part of the ‘inferior order’.

While the crime rate did increase during the second quarter of the 18th century, it had been steadily increasing since the previous century (Beattie, 1986) and would be expected to increase with an increase in population and overcrowding. When those factors are taken into account, the crime rate remained relatively stable during the first half of the 18th century during the height of the gin epidemic (Beattie, 1986) and actually rose during the second half of the century, after the epidemic ended (Langford, 1989). Although the ‘inferior class’ was at least as much under siege, ‘criminality, like poverty, is never at an acceptable level from the perspective of propertied classes’ (Langford, 1989, p. 155). Most capital crimes were offences against property (Gilmour, 1992). London and Middlesex were considered the most lawless parts of the country, but fewer than 100 murders occurred there from 1749 to 1771 compared to 4000 in Rome, a city a quarter the size of London (Gilmour, 1992). While crime was a perennial concern, the perception that the gin epidemic was responsible for an increase in crime was due more to its changing character and to the way in which the literate and semi-literate public was made aware of it through the growing influence of the popular press, rather than to any real increase in its incidence (Langford, 1989).

To a large degree, the social unrest of the mob, which the genteel class equated with ‘lawlessness’, was due to sharply rising food costs throughout the 18th century. Labouring families spent as much as 50% and sometimes as much as 80% on essential foodstuffs, especially bread or grain. While they could barely make ends meet in good years, when prices shot up in times of poor harvests, families faced starvation. Rioting often occurred, and desperate people turned to robbery and other crimes for money (Malcolmson, 1981), or to gin because it provided calories at a lower cost (Spring and Buss, 1977), although it lacked associated nutrients.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Another of the constant concerns of the upper class was that gin drinking was undermining national security. ‘The Nation (if obliged to enter into a war) will want strong and lusty soldiers, the Merchant sailors, and the Husbandman Labourers’ warned the London Grand Jury (Anonymous, 1736a), in arguing that if ‘the lower class’ continued to besot itself with gin, England would not have the manpower to win a war. Speaking on behalf of the upper class, Sir Robert Walpole and Sir Joseph Jekyll (1736) likewise denounced gin not only for contributing to ‘idleness’ and crime, but also for debilitating its collective manpower and, thereby, for undermining the ability of the Nation to defend itself.

ASSESSMENT

The decreased price for gin and increased consumption in England, especially London, during the first half of the 18th century, occurred in the context of increased overcrowding and widespread poverty. The ‘epidemic’, however, was mainly confined to London, because gin was the preferred drink of the sedentary trades, such as weavers, which were situated in the cities. In the countryside, work was too strenuous for farmers to cope with constant hangovers and they continued to drink the traditional, and slower-acting, beer and ale (Watney, 1976). Despite the stressful overcrowding and poverty in London, European contemporaries visiting the city invariably wrote that the poor were better off there, than they were on the Continent, where there was no gin epidemic (Marshall, 1956). The reason there was a ‘gin epidemic’ in London and not Paris, is that in London, prices for gin were lower than for beer and ale, whereas in Paris, they were higher than for wine, France’s national drink. Wine consumption in Paris was about 40 gallons (155 litres) per person (Brennan, 1989). If gin contained 40% alcohol and wine, 10%, England’s 0.4 gallons at the height of the gin epidemic was about 10 times lower than France’s 4 gallons per person. France’s upper class did not approve of the level of consumption of its lower class, but did not become as strident in its outrage as its English counterpart until the next century, when its own national alcoholic drink was challenged by distilled spirits, which were of foreign origin.

Levels of consumption that are tolerated in different societies reflect underlying attitudes about public drinking as much as attitudes toward types of alcoholic beverages. Whereas France prided itself on its wine and its quality (Brennan, 1989), England prided itself on its beer and ale (Abel, 2001). In France, wine was called ‘boissons hygiénique’, the ‘healthy drink’, to distinguish it from distilled drinks (Brennan, 1989), whereas in England, Hogarth describes beer as the ‘happy produce of our Isle’ to distinguish it from gin (Shesgreen, 1973).

In both cities, the common denominator of price influenced consumption among the lower classes, because they were the most responsive to price (Abel, 1998). In England, there was a dramatic upsurge in consumption of gin in the first half of the 18th century, due to the abolition of distilling monopolies; in France, there was a corresponding surge in distilled spirits consumption the following century as a result of a phylloxera epidemic that destroyed the country’s vineyards and caused an increase in wine prices. In neither country, however, was drunkenness itself considered a vice until much later (Watney, 1976). As in England, French elites did not begin to criticize
lower-class drinking until social unrest in that country coincided with the upsurge in consumption of distilled spirits, which became a metaphor for an irrational proletariat (Brennan, 1989). Thus, one of the issues 18th century London and 19th century Paris had in common in their condemnation of drinking, was that the lower classes were drinking as much as they did.

Poverty was pervasive in 18th century Europe, regardless of whether people drank or did not drink gin, and poverty is strongly related to crime (Abel, 1980). Drunkenness undoubtedly contributed to poverty, and hence crime, but both were also the result of poverty. Gin undoubtedly played a part in London’s crime rates, but crime rates increased even more after gin drinking decreased. The same could be said of death rates due to drunkenness which increased from 17 in 1725 to 69 in 1735, but fell after 1736, even though drinking increased (Clark, 1988). Gin drinking therefore could not have been the main factor influencing the crime rate.

Poverty has always been the ever constant handmaiden of crime and poor health, regardless of whether people use alcohol or any other drugs (Abel, 1980; Abel and Hannigan, 1995). For the upper classes, which drank mainly beer and wine, gin, the preferred drink of the ‘inferior order’ because of its lower cost, was singled out as responsible for the social problems of the time. The prevailing opinion of the upper class was that, if members of the latter aspired to better themselves, they had but to give up their gin drinking and they would develop greater thrift and thereby improve their living conditions.

If the ‘gin epidemic’ were not the main reason behind the social unrest in London during the first half of the 18th century, how then are we to account for the decrease in upper class concerns about social conditions and unrest following the newly imposed restrictions on its sale and decreased gin consumption after the Tippling Act of 1751?

While the post hoc, propter hoc argument attributes the changes to the end of the gin spree, this is only a partial explanation, and a minor one at that. Of much greater importance was the Seven Years War occurring between 1756 and 1763, which resulted in the creation of a standing army of about 200 000 men. A constant concern of the upper class during the ‘Gin epidemic’ was that, if the ‘labouring poor’ continued to besot itself with gin, England would have lacked the manpower to win a war. The soldiers who fought and brought victory to England in the Seven Years War, however, were none other than the ‘inferior sort of people’ whose stamina and commitment so concerned the grand jurors. The immediate effect of mobilization was the removal of a large proportion of the unemployed from the streets thereby reducing the size of the mob, and ostensibly, its most disapproved element. The long-term legacy was that England’s overwhelming triumph over the French put an end to its obsession over a weakened manpower. England’s victory proved that the ‘inferior’ people had not been too feeble to defend the country. Not only were they fit enough to do so, these stalwarts were responsible for England’s new wealth and power as England extended its influence around the globe (Langford, 1989). The Falklands Islands crisis of 1770 and the rebellion of the American colonies shortly thereafter kept England on a war footing that continued to keep men off the streets (about a quarter of a million English soldiers were in the armed forces during the rebellion) and resulted in less drinking at home. Even the forfeiture of its American colonies was regarded as only a minor setback for England after the speedy recovery of other overseas trade.

Several other changes during this period also silenced concerns about a diminishing manpower. One was the popularization of inoculation against smallpox. Although available as early as 1721, procedures for mass inoculations were not devised until the mid-1760s (Langford, 1989). This markedly improved health and reduced the death rate. Another was an increase in real wages, which resulted in a lowering of the average marriage age of women from under 26 to under 24 (Lee and Schofield, 1981), sparking an increase in birth rate. Although wages declined again, the lowered age for marrying continued after wages fell and the increased population spurt remained in place despite the hardship.

While a number of other historians have begun to question the dire portrayal of the gin epidemic (e.g. Clark, 1988; Warner, 1994), scepticism of the exaggerated claims was voiced even during the period itself. In one of the most thorough (and modern-sounding allowing for changes in language) of these critiques, an anonymous writer who identified himself only as T.S. (1736) took each of the accusations made earlier against gin and answered them point by point. This was not an apology for gin, but rather a wake-up call to the gentry that the country’s social problems were much more deeply rooted and endemic than simply due to cheap gin. Intoxication, he said, was commonplace throughout the world, but it was not so much gin as low wages and unemployment that kept the poor in their perpetual condition. Gin, he said, was being unfairly singled out for inciting people to disturb the peace, when in fact drunkenness of any kind had the same effect. The public peace was ‘as often broke by alehouse-sots and wine-drinkers, as any other’. Nor was the crime rate any higher than before gin’s popularity. Excessive drinking was also not the reason more highwaymen were terrorizing travellers. Taking a jab at upper class snobbery, he noted that these highwaymen were not drawn from the inferior classes but ‘ought more properly to be ranked among the wine drinkers’ (i.e. the upper classes who could afford such drinks).

Regarding the health of the nation’s workers and their future children, an issue discussed previously at length (Abel, 2001), he expressed skepticism over all the unsupported claims of the nation being weakened by gin. In a kind of ‘put up or shut up’ challenge, he proposed that those making negative health claims about gin, not drunkenness, ‘give some gin to those at his own table and see what happened. I believe they would be found like other men in all respects, and would soon detect the falsity of your worship’s suppositions’ (pp. 18–19).

A final reason for the hostility toward gin was nascent nationalism. Gin was a foreign drink, created in Holland, whereas beer was considered England’s national and domestic drink, hence the 18th century caricatures of John Bull with an ale-pot in his hand and barley-corns in his hat (Mathias, 1959). This national pride in beer also accounts in part for William Hogarth’s portrayal of the socially respectable Beer Street and its socially despicable companion piece, Gin Lane (Abel, 2001). Once the menace of gin was overcome, reformers found a new foreign import to rail against — tea — and levelled virtually the same charges at it as they had previously directed at gin: Thus, Cobbett (1800/1926) wrote that tea drinking is
‘a destroyer of health, an enfeebler of the frame, an engenderer of effeminacy and laziness, a debaucher of youth and a maker of misery for old age’.

GENERAL CONCLUSIONS AND COMMENTS

There is little doubt that the period of the gin epidemic was a disturbing if not frightening time for a great many people when they encountered lawless and drunken mobs whenever they ventured into the streets. The explanation for these conditions, however, was not simply gin mania. While gin consumption was at an all-time high, drunkenness was ‘business as usual’. The combination of displacement, poverty, unemployment, and the vast chasm between the ‘superior’ and ‘inferior’ classes created an unstable social environment. Faced with no hope for betterment, people turned to whatever resources they had available within their means to escape. The conclusion is that the ‘gin epidemic’ was a social problem centred in London and its environs. While the upper classes attributed the social unrest of that era to excessive gin drinking on the part of the labouring poor, the unrest had more to do with the labouring poor’s response to the appalling living conditions and the endemic poverty associated with the upper class’s economic policies of the period, than with excessive drinking.

While reformers pointed to excessive gin drinking as the cause of social unrest, poverty and overcrowding laid the foundation for the era’s social problems, and the low cost of gin offered an escape from those realities. Reformers were blind to the economic ideology that produced those conditions, because they were part of the social class that created that ideology. They were also inclined to blame gin because it was not only the preferred drink of the ‘inferior class of people’, but also a ‘foreign’ drink and therefore they could avoid self-recrimination, because they could dismiss problems associated with gin drinking as not of their own making.

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