

Chapter Title: A new kind of drunkenness: the gin craze

Book Title: The politics of alcohol

Book Subtitle: A history of the drink question in England

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Published by: Manchester University Press. (2009)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt155jcw5.6>

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A new kind of drunkenness: the gin craze

If therefore it be thought proper to suppress this vice, the legislature must once more take the matter into their hands; and to this, perhaps, they will be the more inclined, when it comes to their knowledge, that a new kind of drunkenness, unknown to our ancestors, is lately sprung up amongst us, and which, if not put a stop to, will infallibly destroy a great part of the inferior people. (Henry Fielding)

The use of other liquors is not as bad; because the drinking of spirituous liquors is a kind of instantaneous drunkenness, where a man hath no time to recollect or think, whether he has had enough or not. (Josiah Tucker)

So far, we have seen that the changing dynamics of public debates over alcohol have been driven by social, political and economic factors. While hopped beer and port both represented technological developments, their impact was mediated by the wider social contexts which gave those material changes political significance. So far culture, not drink per se, has moulded the drink question. The 'gin craze' represents a change of emphasis in this regard. As we shall see, the feverish public debate on gin was shot through with anxieties over class, the economy, national identity and the protection of moral norms; similarly, the popularisation of gin was the result of political decisions which were framed by cultural and economic concerns. Nevertheless, gin was also a qualitatively new kind of intoxicant: it was not the first distilled spirit to be drunk in England, but it was the first to gain widespread popularity. In most cases, the social history of alcohol is a story of how culturally constant materials (e.g. wine or beer) change their meaning according to social context; the story of the gin craze, however, shows that sometimes new technologies and new commodities reverse that relationship so that culture *reacts* to new materials, rather than only acting upon them.

At the start of the eighteenth century gin stood for modernity, free trade and economic security. By 1750 gin stood for urban decay, social disintegration and economic collapse. At the start of the century its production and retail was actively encouraged by the state. Forty years later

Parliament would be searching for something – anything – that could quell consumption, everything else having failed spectacularly. Writers who once championed the distillers' cause would have long since thrown their weight behind legislative suppression. In fifty years, enthusiasm descended into panic and prohibition. In the process, gin exposed fundamental contradictions at the heart of the new market economy of which London was the crucible.

The spirit of the times

Gin was the result of a technological revolution. The production of alcoholic drinks has always required technology, but that technology has conventionally been geared towards harnessing more or less effectively the natural process of fermentation. Distillation was a technological paradigm shift because instead of simply manipulating a natural occurrence it involves a process that otherwise would simply not occur. Left alone, alcoholic liquids will not distil themselves.

The history of distillation is obscure. It was probably introduced to Europe by Islamic chemists; the word 'alcohol' is itself Arabic. It goes without saying, then, that distillation was not first used for the mass production of intoxicating drinks; it took a European sensibility to exploit that particular potential. Once introduced to the West, the change of use came fairly quickly. References to *uisge beatha* (the Gaelic for *aqua vitae*, from which we get the word 'whisky') start to appear in British historical records from the fifteenth century. As early as 1584, the Lord Deputy of Ireland passed a decree restricting access to whisky among the Irish peasantry, claiming that it 'sets the Irish mad and breeds many mischiefs'.¹ However, whisky consumption remained localised in parts of Scotland and Ireland. In England, spirit-drinking only began to take hold in the seventeenth century when brandy began to enter the market. Because brandy was primarily imported from France, it soon became embroiled in the same system of trading sanctions which had reduced the levels of wine importation at the end of the seventeenth century. Like wine, brandy was an alchemical luxury that turned English pounds into French francs.

It was the 'Glorious Revolution' – the accession of William of Orange to the throne of England in 1688 – that triggered the development of an indigenous distilling industry. Within a few years of taking the throne, William III set about popularising Dutch 'geneva' – a name soon shortened, 'by frequent use and the laconic spirit of the nation', to *gin*.² There were a number of reasons for this. For a start, gin had none of the popish connotations that adhered to brandy and the social symbolism of drinks, as we have seen, mattered enormously in early modern England. The production

of a native distilled spirit was a gesture of cultural status. However, there were good economic reasons for developing the trade in gin as well. Being made from corn rather than grapes, it could be produced using British raw materials to supply a British market. Even more than port, gin represented a cultural and an economic bulwark against Catholic France. Within a year of William's coronation, Parliament banned the import of all foreign brandy, aqua vitae, and other spirits. This ban was only lifted five years later – and even then the ban on French imports was retained. In 1690 the monopoly of the London Guild of Distillers was rescinded. This meant that whereas the trade had previously been tightly restricted by the guild system, now anybody who wished to do so could set up shop as a producer or retailer of gin. Most importantly – and in complete contrast to the wine and beer trades – there was no requirement for a licence of any kind. While the internal market was protected against French imports, free trade was encouraged to stimulate competition and consumption. Here was a new economic dispensation: no guilds, no protected interests, no licensing. Gin was a commodity nurtured in that ideal modern marketplace in which supply is left to find a natural level with demand.

That competition stimulates, rather than simply meeting, demand became apparent soon enough. In 1700 consumption of gin stood at less than half a gallon per person annually – although this may have been affected by a temporary ban put on domestic distillation in 1699 following concerns over corn prices. By 1720 it was nearer to 1.3 gallons.³ The increased consumption that followed liberalisation benefited the powerful landowning interests because they got to sell off the surplus grain that was the result of newly improved farming techniques; distillers and retailers were happy at the development of an obviously popular new market; and Parliament was happy because, thanks to incremental increases in duties, gin helped to fill coffers which were depleted by the ongoing wars with France.⁴

Nevertheless, not everyone saw the trade in gin as an unalloyed good. By the 1720s magistrates and preachers were starting to call for controls to be placed on the trade, to such an extent that in 1726 Daniel Defoe thought it necessary to defend distillers against such demands. In his *Brief Case of the Distillers*, Defoe established a free-trade defence of the distilling industry. Legal and moral responsibility, he claimed, had nothing to do with the working of the market. 'As for the excesses and intemperance of the people,' Defoe wrote, 'the distillers are not concern'd in it at all, their business is to prepare a spirit wholesome and good.' He concluded that if 'the people will destroy themselves by their own excess ... 'tis the magistrates' business to help that, not the distillers'.⁵ For Defoe, the poor had become tired of 'tedious and dull' ale and distillers were simply providing

a commodity which the State had no right to suppress.⁶ Any responsibility for drunkenness lay with the consumer, not the producer.

Defoe's complacency would be short-lived. Over the course of the 1720s the ever more visible social effects of gin consumption on the streets of London led to increasing levels of alarm among even the distillers' closest allies. Indeed, just three years after penning his defence of the distillers Defoe complained that 'now so far are the common people infatuated with *Geneva*, that half the work is not done as formerly' and threw his weight behind direct government intervention.⁷ The change in tone was quite a turnaround, even by Defoe's standards.

By 1729 just under five million gallons of spirits were being drunk in England per year.⁸ While accurate per capita figures are almost impossible to extrapolate from existing statistics, levels of consumption were high by any measure. Patrick Dillon has estimated gin consumption in London in the early 1720s as being around a pint a week for every man, woman and child in the city, Roy Porter worked it out as twice that amount at the peak of the gin craze in the early 1740s.⁹ Such figures are thumbnail sketches at best. Nevertheless, it is clear that by the late 1720s this new and potent type of drink, virtually unknown just thirty years earlier, was being drunk in considerable quantity by large numbers of people. Parliament's response was to introduce licensing. In 1729 legislation was introduced imposing a £20 licence on all gin retailers. In addition a two-shilling excise duty was placed on every gallon of compound spirits.

The 1729 Act produced a small drop in consumption the year it was passed, but twelve months later consumption was back at pre-1729 levels.¹⁰ To get around the law on compound spirits, distillers produced raw spirits which became known, sardonically, as 'Parliamentary Brandy'. Parliamentary Brandy did nothing to reduce drunkenness, but much to reduce tax revenues. In 1733, in recognition that the measures introduced in 1729 had 'not answered the good purposes thereby intended', the Act was repealed. This volte-face angered many who saw it as a dereliction of parliamentary duty. As levels of drunkenness continued to rise a small but well-organised group of campaigners led by Thomas Wilson, the Bishop of Sodor and Man, the physician Stephen Hales and Sir Joseph Jekyll, MP for Reigate, began to lobby for a radical and previously untried strategy: gin legislation which was 'in its nature a prohibition'.¹¹

The path to prohibition

The year 1736 saw an explosion (in one case, literally) of printed material on the subject of gin as medical tracts, sermons, political broadsides, satirical plays and popular poems flew off the presses. Heated debates

took place in Parliament and demonstrations took place in the streets. The occasion for all this activity was an Act, which was passed successfully, placing such high duties on the production and sale of gin as to effectively ban its consumption by law. The 1736 Gin Act imposed a £50 annual licence on anyone wanting sell gin in quantities of less than two gallons. In addition it imposed a duty of 20 shillings per gallon on spirits – ten times the amount put on the same quantity in 1729. The aim was de facto prohibition on the grounds, in the words of the Act itself, that gin-drinking had become:

very common especially amongst the people of lower and inferior rank, the constant and excessive use whereof tends greatly to the destruction of the healths, rendering them unfit for useful labour and business, debauching their morals, and inciting them to all manner of vices.

What is more, the consequences of this were ‘not confined to the present generation but extend to future ages, and tend to the devastation and ruin of this kingdom’.

This charge sheet expresses precisely the concerns of the time: that gin led to vice among the lower classes, that it made them unfit workers, and that it threatened future prosperity through its impact on unborn children. In order to understand how the 1736 Gin Act came about we need to understand how this message of economic collapse gained currency, and how the destruction of a successful indigenous industry was made palatable in an age when the self-definition of England so often hinged on its role as a trading nation.

To successfully achieve legislative intervention of this kind, the prohibitionists had to win an argument about the social effects of vice and the role of the State in managing those effects. It wasn't as simple as arguing that because gin had negative social effects it should be outlawed. Vice, as Bernard Mandeville had argued some years earlier, was not necessarily a bad thing for mercantile economies because the consumption that vice stimulated created jobs and developed the economy. Mandeville's notorious poem ‘The Fable of the Bees’ had made a persuasive case for the social value of vice as a source of wealth creation and distribution. ‘The worst of all the multitude’, Mandeville wrote, ‘did something for the common good.’¹²

The 1724 edition of the ‘Fable of the Bees’ included a lengthy explanation of this seemingly perverse statement, and Mandeville used gin to illustrate his point. Gin, he stated, was a drink ‘that charms the unactive, the desperate and crazy [and] makes the starving sot behold his rags and nakedness with stupid indolence’.¹³ However, Mandeville's purpose was not to condemn gin but to show that even this most diabolical commodity had a role to play in promoting the common good. Gin may turn

people into ‘brutes and savages’, Mandeville claimed, but it also created jobs: toolmakers, corn-reapers, maltsters, carriage-drivers and so forth. The money spent on gin fed the exchequer ‘prodigiously’. For every hopeless sot, there were countless moderate drinkers for whom gin provided relief from grinding poverty or physical pain; for every bar-room brawler fired up on gin there was a soldier on whose Dutch courage the security of England depended. Most importantly, even if the majority of gin-sellers were rank toppers only a small number had to become rich through the trade to have a disproportionately beneficial social impact. A man made rich through gin, Mandeville concluded, could well ‘be as industrious in spreading loyalty, and the reformation of manners throughout every cranny of the wide populous town, as once he was in filling it with spirits’. Thus a gin-seller could become a model of ‘shining and illustrious ... virtue!’¹⁴

Mandeville’s irony aside, his remarks provide an example of the extent to which, by the 1720s, gin had become the focus of reflections on the moral economy of the market. Mandeville’s proposition was that the social benefits of accumulated wealth had the potential to override the social evils necessary to that accumulation in the first place. It was a proposition which went to the heart of the capitalist project and which raised fundamental questions about the role of the modern state.

Because gin was both new and more or less unregulated, it exposed these kinds of issues in stark terms. It also presented a kind of legislative tabula rasa, being unencumbered by either centuries of tradition or the muddle of laws which covered the licensing of both wine and beer. Basic principles could be addressed, and the exponential increase in consumption drove calls for drastic action. Both Thomas Wilson and Stephen Hales produced lengthy tracts in support of prohibition.¹⁵ Wilson warned that England faced the threat of a ‘*drunken ungovernable* set of people’ both ‘intoxicated and enervated by the fatal love of a *slow* but *sure* poison’.¹⁶ The ineffectuality of the 1729 Act in reducing the levels of consumption was, for Wilson, proof of the necessity ‘to make a law, that shall amount to a PROHIBITION’.¹⁷ Because gin was new, because it wasn’t anchored in centuries of tradition, prohibition was a conceivable course of action.

The disease of drunkenness

Both Wilson and Hales built many of their arguments around the language of disease. As we shall see in Chapter 4, this had been quite common among anti-drink writers since the late seventeenth century. Hales’s insistence that there ‘is no one so far gone in the disease of *drunkenness* ... but there is room for a cure’ based on ‘diligent and fervent prayer’

is indistinguishable from many earlier writings on the same subject.¹⁸ However, this convention was given an explicitly political slant in Hales's *Friendly Admonition* through the argument that because it was 'extremely difficult, for the unhappy habitual *dram-drinkers* to extricate themselves from this prevailing vice; so much more it becomes the duty of the governors of the nations, to withhold from them so irresistible a temptation'.¹⁹ Earlier anti-drink writers had called for the suppression of drinking places on the grounds that they posed a risk to social order, and they had also called for drinkers themselves to guard against falling into destructive habits. Hales, however, was the first to explicitly argue that the 'disease of drunkenness' legitimised State intervention in the otherwise free agency of the individual. This argument – that the slavery of compulsive habit justified coercive restrictions on individual freedom by the State – would become the cornerstone of prohibitionist thinking in the nineteenth century. Hales's use of this argument gives an early illustration of how the concept of compulsion undermined ideas of individual sovereignty precisely as they were becoming the philosophical engine of modernity itself.

Another of Hales and Wilson's innovations was to apply the language of disease to society. In their work drunkenness was not simply a disease that afflicted individuals, instead it was a condition afflicting the whole of society – an 'infection [that] 'daily spreads' throughout the entire nation.'²⁰ Nowhere is this more evident than in their repeated descriptions of the effects of spirituous liquors on the unborn child. Hales and Wilson filled their pages with dire images of diseased offspring 'scorched up by [these] *fiery* and pernicious *liquors*'.²¹ In later editions of his study, Hales introduced statistics from the bills of mortality which appeared to show a dramatic fall in christenings after 1724 coupled with an increase in burials. Clear evidence, so he claimed, that gin was decimating the population.

The image of the diseased child became a staple of eighteenth-century anti-gin literature. Writers complained of a '*pigmy* generation', a 'parcel of poor diminutive creatures' born to gin-soaked parents.²² Wilson, anticipating later claims about inherited alcoholism, warned that countless children were being born with a 'love of strong liquors'.²³ Daniel Defoe warned that 'in less than an age, we may expect a fine spindle-shank'd generation';²⁴ Henry Fielding asked how those 'wretched' children 'conceived in *gin*' could become 'our future sailors, and our future grenadiers'.²⁵ This vision of economic and military decline was conjured up in typically dramatic terms by Hales in his *Friendly Admonition*. 'What must be the end thereof,' he asked 'but the *final ruin* of this *great and trading nation*.'²⁶

As Jessica Warner has pointed out, here was the 'political arithmetic' that powered the drive for prohibition.²⁷ Gin could be condemned on all sorts of moral grounds, but the argument could not be clinched so

long as a pragmatic case for the economic value of the gin trade could be put forward effectively. The prospect of streets crowded with half-mad starvelings, and of a nation defended by enfeebled armed forces, trumped even the most optimistic visions of distillers boosting the money supply by turning the annual corn harvest into a sea of lucrative spirits. What is more, the focus on damage to children concentrated otherwise less concerned minds on what was often presented as the truly diabolical aspect of gin: the fact that it was popular with women.

The gin craze gendered the alcohol debate in entirely new ways. Gin was popular with women for numerous reasons: not only were there large numbers of unattached women with disposable income in the capital (an effect of the expanding market in domestic service), but gin bypassed the rigorous gender exclusions of the alehouse and the tavern. The popular soubriquets 'Mother Gin' and 'Madam Geneva' reflected the novel gender balance among gin drinkers. To the likes of Hales and Wilson, this was the worst of all worlds. It was awful enough that the '*softer* and more *delicate* part of the creation', as Wilson coyly put it, drank.²⁸ That they should abandon their sacred, not to mention economically crucial, role as the mothers of the nation's labourers was simply horrifying. Indeed, whereas Hales identified compulsive drinking as the ethical justification for legislation, Wilson made the case based on the threat to future generations. '*Distilled spirituous liquors are the greatest enemies to fertility,*' he insisted, adding that 'for this reason, if there were no other, the *legislature* will think it worth their most serious consideration, how to put a stop to an *evil* that directly tends to the *decreasing* as well as *weakening* of the *breed* of the nation.'²⁹

While it is a term that needs to be used with caution, the gin craze can be described as exhibiting aspects of moral panic. This is especially so in that the activities of a specific social group (in this case the urban poor, and especially poor urban women) were identified in the mass media, such as it was, as the source of a moral threat.³⁰ It is certainly the case that tales of infanticide, neglect, abuse and abandonment on the part of drunken mothers and nurses, fed a media market hungry for spectacle and scandal.³¹ The truth or otherwise of such stories mattered little; what mattered was that they bolstered the drive for prohibition by using the image of the drunken mother to depict gin as both morally and economically ruinous.

The trial of the spirits

The anti-gin campaigners did not have a monopoly on the debate, however, and there were plenty of people willing to attack the social snobbery that they saw as driving anti-gin agitation. When one anonymous author,

who foresaw a nation 'destitute of both labourers and soldiers' and terrorised by 'desperadoes', insisted that 'the *gin-trade* must be destroy'd', an irate respondent demanded to know why gin was singled out when 'the public peace is as often broke by alehouse-sots and wine-drinkers as any other'.³² Anti-gin campaigning was unmistakably class-specific and popular satirists pointedly exposed the hypocrisy which underpinned much of its literature. As the character in one satirical play observed, the disastrous effect of gin drinking on mothers was the shared opinion 'of some eminent doctors'. But, he asked:

I wonder how the d - - l they should understand the constitutions of poor men and their wives, and how they beget and breed up children; it cannot be by their practice ... for they'll be hanged before they attend to a poor woman, in the utmost extremity, to see what she brings forth.³³

Popular authors depicted the 1736 Act as an elitist attack on lower-class culture. Drunkenness was endemic in Georgian England and it was patently absurd to try and suggest it was only the poor who had an aversion to sobriety. Daniel Defoe claimed drunkenness was a 'national vice' among the English of all classes (one which he claimed dated back to 'the Restoration ... or within a very few years after').³⁴ The punch-drunk antics of the upper classes were hardly a well-kept secret; indeed, William Hogarth's most popular print in his own lifetime was 'A Midnight Modern Conversation' (1733): a scene of alcohol-fuelled pandemonium among a group of wealthy young bucks which Jenny Uglow has convincingly argued was perceived at the time as a scene of 'lusty English freedom'.³⁵ Few people in Georgian England were sober in the sense that we would understand the term today and the kind of freedom implicit in the act of getting drunk chimed with a certain model of individualistic liberty which underpinned that notion of Englishness illustrated in many of Hogarth's works. Anyone arguing for the effective prohibition of gin had to answer the charge that unless they called for the prohibition of all alcoholic drinks (an idea which would have been simply unthinkable), then they were engaged in a form of hypocrisy.³⁶

Anti-gin campaigners responded by arguing that spirits produced a new, 'instantaneous' kind of drunkenness'.³⁷ But why this craze for gin-soaked excess had caught on was a question that was shot through with class anxieties. In the 1750s, it became commonplace to claim that the fashionable excesses of social elites trickled down to the poor.³⁸ In 1736, Thomas Wilson saw things the other way around. He feared that 'the vice is grown *epidemical*, since it has got not only amongst *mechanics*, and the *lowest kind of people*, but amongst persons of the highest *genius*'.³⁹ For Wilson, drunkenness was a kind of hideous miasma arising from the swamp of urban poverty, not Defoe's more universal and oddly democratic 'national

vice'. Consequently, it was to the enlightened self-interest of the elite legislature that Wilson appealed, claiming that because direct appeals to the poor 'will not have the desired effect' it was on 'behalf of *these persons* ... and of their unhappy *offspring*, we presume to address our selves to the legislature, and to implore the powerful assistance of that, against the spreading infection'.⁴⁰

Wilson's appeal to government was not mere elitism, however. By speaking to the legislature as the guardian of public morals he tapped into a key political question of the time: at what point is sumptuary legislation justified? When does government have both the right and responsibility to intervene in the consumption of otherwise freely available commodities by its subjects?

Protecting the public good

In effect, the campaign for prohibition forced the question of where the proper limits of government lay in relation to consumption. Debating the 1736 Act, Lord Hervey noted that 'every legislature has claimed and practised the right of withholding those pleasures which the people have appeared to use to excess'.⁴¹ This was a thorny problem given that, even as a leading anti-gin campaigner acknowledged, 'mankind, in a *trading nation* especially, live upon the *vices* and *extravagancies* of one another'. However, the same writer continued by insisting that if a trade 'directly strikes at the well-being of the *community*, so as in a very short time either greatly to wound it, or to bring it nothing, that *art, trade* or *manufacture* ... ought to be prohibited'.⁴²

This worked as an abstract principle, but it left the legislature in the position of having to decide how to define the extent to which the harms caused by a particular trade outweighed the benefits. If it was indeed a '*universal concession*, that a *public good* ought *always* to be preferred to a *private one*',⁴³ then lawmakers were left with what would become the classic liberal problem of identifying who, exactly, occupied the social position from which benefit and harm could be accurately judged. Furthermore, the problem for any legislature addressing this question was not simply deciding whether an activity produces more harm than good, but whether the measures required to curtail a particular activity would themselves produce harms that outweigh any intended benefits.

The 1736 Act was, in many ways, a test case for these kinds of political questions. The Middlesex Justices, whose doom-laden reports on levels of gin consumption in London had played a pivotal role in creating the impression of an epidemic of drunkenness, argued that prohibition would restore '*religion, sobriety* and *industry*' to the people.⁴⁴ The social harms

identified by anti-gin campaigners were the same as had been identified by Puritan preachers a century earlier, and as would be outlined by teetotalers and prohibitionists a century later: that intoxication undermined religious piety, reason and the desire to work. Put differently, it set up a series of alternative goods to those on which the social order relied: it replaced the desire to seek out religious consolation with the desire for the consolations of the bottle; it replaced the cultivation of reason with willing cultivation of the irrational; and it provided a pleasure for which the pleasure of labour was no match. One of the fundamental political problems posed by intoxication is that it has always had the capacity to undercut ideological efforts to make things which are socially necessary (such as work and self-discipline) appear inherently pleasurable: which is why, as many frustrated temperance zealots of nineteenth-century England would later discover, attempts to curb drinking by positing the sober life as fundamentally more enjoyable are often doomed to failure.

The effects of the 1736 Gin Act were a salutary lesson for those who felt that the practical difficulties of prohibition were surmountable. They were not. Only a tiny handful of £50 licences were taken out while the vast majority of gin-sellers simply continued to ply their trade regardless. Most sellers weren't conventional licensed retailers anyway. Gin had always been sold by chandlers, grocers and street-hawkers and they were in no position to either buy licences or give up their most lucrative trade. Reflecting on the effects of the 1736 Act, one commentator observed that:

Even from the beginning, this law was so far from effecting a prohibition, that it really heightened, and spread the evil; for one distiller's-shop was shut up, ten places were open for the sale of drams, they were cried about the streets, publicly vended in markets, people sat with them by the road-side; and tho' they might not be so frequent as they were in chandlers-shops, yet they were as common at the green-stalls as potatoes.⁴⁵

The disastrous impacts of the 1736 Act were compounded when in 1737, in an attempt to help enforce the regulations, the government hit upon the idea of providing a £5 reward for information leading to the conviction of illegal gin-sellers. Soon an army of the zealous, the acquisitive and the vindictive were providing information to the authorities, often on the most questionable grounds.⁴⁶ To make things worse, attacks on informers became a serious social problem, as did attacks on constables arresting popular retailers. In response an Act was passed allowing for anyone gathering in numbers of five or more for the purpose of rescuing offenders to be transported to America for up to seven years. The consumption of gin continued to increase, while the quality of the product declined as unscrupulous merchants adulterated their product safe in the knowledge

that no one was in a position to complain when they did. Far from restoring religion, sobriety and industry, the 1736 Gin Act bred violence, corruption and a widespread contempt for the law. In the end, the '*soberizing Act* ... furnish'd more tempters to the excessive use of spirituous liquors, than ever were to be met with in [the] streets before'.⁴⁷

Prohibition also provided the opportunity for Robert Walpole's political opponents to exploit legislation widely perceived as an attack on individual liberty. Jessica Warner has argued that because the 1736 Act 'pursued an agenda of blatant social control, it had the unintended consequence of transforming an unthinking indulgence into a conscious act of political protest against an already unpopular government'.⁴⁸ Soon after the Act was passed in 1736, Jacobites exploded a bomb in Westminster Hall containing the text of five Acts of Parliament, one of which was the Gin Act. Such gestures were a testament to how easily a perceived attack on the rights of the poor could be turned to political advantage by oppositional groups keen to 'embrace the opportunities of heightening the murmurs that ... necessarily arise, from depriving the commonalty of a darling attachment'.⁴⁹ Prohibition was a disaster. It did nothing to reduce levels of gin drinking, and when the 1736 Gin Act was repealed in 1743 it had been effectively a dead letter for quite some time.

After prohibition

The 1743 Gin Act reduced the annual licence fee from a prohibitive £50 a year to an eminently affordable 20 shillings a year, but with the proviso that only people already keeping 'taverns, victualling-houses, inns, coffee-houses, or ale-houses' could take out a spirit licence. The aim was to encourage legitimate retailers to become licensed and to ensure that those with licences were already experienced traders.⁵⁰ By making gin a legitimate commodity once again, the 1743 Act 'stripped gin of its symbolic value among London's proletariat'.⁵¹ The amount of gin being drunk did fall significantly in the following years, and it has been argued that 1743 marked the beginning of end of the gin craze as far as consumption is concerned.⁵²

However, the gin craze was always as much about discourse as consumption and 1743 certainly did not mark the end of the public debates. Indeed the perception remained that gin-drinking was as bad as ever. In 1750, Thomas Wilson revived his campaign for anti-gin legislation and encouraged a number of prominent public figures to lend their support. Henry Fielding, for example, was persuaded by Wilson to join the campaign for gin legislation after they met in December 1750.⁵³ In 1751, Fielding published a study of street crime in London which blamed gin-drinking

for much of the problem. In its description of diseased offspring and the imminent demise of the labouring (and soldiering) classes, Fielding's essay echoed the anti-gin propaganda that had preceded it. However, it differed in its claim that lower-class crime was largely caused by a desire to emulate the lifestyles of the wealthy. 'Bad habits,' Fielding wrote, 'are as infectious by example, as the plague itself by contact.'⁵⁴ He argued that luxury among the wealthy led to crime among the poor for two reasons: firstly by creating a desire for commodities which only crime would finance, and secondly by promoting the idea that wastefulness and indulgence were social virtues. So long as the aristocracy indulged themselves in expensive drinks, Fielding wrote, the poor would imitate them by indulging in cheaper alternatives. Habits which were regrettably effete among the rich became positively dangerous when taken up by an imitative lower class. Vice was never a good thing, Fielding insisted, but when it 'descends downward to the tradesman, the mechanic, and the labourer, it is certain to engender many political mischiefs'.⁵⁵ For Fielding the failure of the civil authorities to 'stem the tide of luxury would destroy the free state, and thus individual liberty, and reduce the nation to slavery'.⁵⁶

The campaign of 1750–51 drew interventions from an array of public figures, such as the economist Josiah Tucker and the physician David Hartley.⁵⁷ However, by far the most significant event was the publication of William Hogarth's twin engravings 'Gin Lane' and 'Beer Street' in 1751. In Hogarth's own words, 'Gin Lane' and 'Beer Street' were designed to juxtapose the 'dreadful consequences of gin drinking' with the 'thriving industry and jollity' of beer.⁵⁸ 'Gin Lane' rendered into startling visual form all the anxieties thrown up by lower-class gin consumption: child neglect, sexual licence, religious impiety, urban decay, poverty, idleness, sloth and brutality. In doing so, it neatly illustrated the extent to which anxieties over gin consumption were at the same time anxieties over urbanisation and the rise of a potentially lawless mass society. Indeed, while 'Gin Lane' is ostensibly about the effects of mass drunkenness on urban society it is also perhaps the first piece of art which uses intoxication as a way of describing the urban experience itself: a technique which would become commonplace among modernist painters and writers a century later.

In 'Gin Lane', Hogarth also implied a connection between alcohol and poverty which his peers rarely expressed: the idea that – in the words of one of Hogarth's few contemporaries to make the same point – 'Poverty may not only be the effect, but the cause of dram-drinking'.⁵⁹ How much we can read this into 'Gin Lane' is a matter for some debate. Charles Dickens certainly thought this was Hogarth's intention, observing in 1848 that 'Gin Lane' 'powerfully indicate[s] some of the more prominent causes

of intoxication among the neglected orders of society, as any of its effects'.⁶⁰ Some recent scholars have gone further, arguing that to Hogarth's intended audience 'it would have been most evident that not gin drinking per se but the oppression of the governing class as a *cause* of gin drinking was the real subject of the prints'.⁶¹ One reason that Hogarth's prints remain so ambiguous today, however, is precisely because it was by no means clear who Hogarth would have defined as the 'governing class' of his time – or whether his definition would have chimed with that of the people to whom 'Gin Lane' was addressed.

The end of the craze

The public pressure exerted over the issue of gin in 1750–51 led to the passing of the last great Gin Act of the period. The 1751 Act was designed not to reinforce gin's outlaw status, but instead to drag it into the orbit of respectability.⁶² It achieved this by adding a further 20 shillings to the annual licence, and only allowing licences to be granted to publicans who worked out of establishments rented for at least £10 a year and who donated to the church and the poor. It made small debts for spirits non-recoverable in law, thus undermining the credit economy of many backstreet sellers, and it banned spirits sales from prisons and workhouses (a measure which, by the fact it was needed at all, says much about the ubiquity of alcohol in eighteenth-century England). It broke the potentially corrupt relationship between licensing magistrates and the alcohol trade by barring brewers, inn-keepers or distillers from acting as justices in matters relative to the sale of gin. It also increased duties on spirits, though not by a spectacular amount.

The 1751 Act was seen by many subsequent historians as finally bringing the gin craze to an end. In the years following, commentators observed that the common people had become 'more sober, decent, healthy, and industrious',⁶³ and that they did not see 'the hundredth part of the poor wretches drunk in the streets' as used to be commonplace.⁶⁴ However, this was due in large part to a run of poor harvests and a subsequent ban being placed on domestic distillation in 1757. Jessica Warner has shown that while gin consumption diminished between 1743 and 1750, it rose to significantly high levels by 1759.⁶⁵ Indeed, while concerns over gin-drinking receded after 1751, neither the legislation on drink nor public debates on licensing went away.

By gentrifying gin the 1751 Act sought to defuse the political threat which had become attached to its consumption, but its historical impact is almost certainly more to do with the nature of the campaign that led to its implementation than the effects of the Act itself. After 1751 the urban

poor did not disappear and neither did gin consumption enter a period of terminal decline; the latter, however, ceased to signify the former in the way it had previously. Understood as a combination of extraordinarily high levels of consumption, repeated attempts at legislation, bouts of widespread public disorder and a fevered public debate carried out in newspapers, pamphlets, plays, sermons and political broadsides, the gin craze certainly petered out after 1751. To this extent, the historical importance of the 1751 Act lies in the way it helped to redefine the cultural significance of gin. In the long run, however, the most significant legacy of the 1751 Act was not its impact on gin consumption; it was the fact that the campaign leading up to the Act produced the single most memorable image not only of the gin craze, but perhaps of eighteenth-century London itself. 'Gin Lane' would go on to become a touchstone image of early modern England, and it would give a depiction of drunkenness an extraordinary prominence in the shared cultural imaginary. When people claim that the English have always liked to get drunk, it is often this image which hovers in the background, providing such assertions with a commonsense historical legitimacy. It should be remembered, however, that 'Gin Lane' is not a documentary image: it was a political statement which reflected not only Hogarth's innovative desire to draw classical imagery into the ambit of popular art, but also the accumulated rhetoric of anti-gin campaigning that had been developed in the preceding decades. This is not to say the gin craze as represented by Hogarth was a mere fiction, but rather to say that the gin craze tells us as much about attitudes to, and the politics of, drink as it does about what people at the time actually did.

Notes

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- 13 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 14 *Ibid.*, p. 92.
- 15 Wilson, *Distilled Spirituous Liquors* and S. Hales, *A Friendly Admonition to the Drinkers of Gin, Brandy and other Distilled Spirituous Liquors* (London: SPCK, 1751 [originally published in 1734]).
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- 20 *Ibid.*, p. vi.
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