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From Stag Party Tourism to Alcohol Cultures: An Interview with Thomas Thurnell-Read

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ABSTRACT

In 2022 Alix Boirot, a social anthropologist with expertise in masculinities, party tourism, and addiction, conducted a lengthy interview with Thomas Thurnell Read, Senior Lecturer at Loughborough University and an internationally recognized scholar specializing in sociological approaches to alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness. Thurnell Read's influential contributions include editing the book *Drinking Dilemmas: Space, Culture and Identity* (2015) and his founding role in the British Sociological Association's Alcohol Study Group.

The interview takes both a biographical and thematic approach. It provides the reader with a comprehensive insight into Thurnell Read's academic journey, tracing his research trajectory from stag party tourism to a broader exploration of alcohol culture. An integral aspect of his work is his exploration of masculinities, which has played a pivotal role in shaping his studies of alcohol consumption. His nuanced approach to understanding the complexities of masculinities and alcohol consumption is a notable highlight, contributing significantly to a broader understanding of these multifaceted phenomena, free from moral bias.

The interview also explores the ethical considerations of researching people who are partying and may be under the influence of alcohol or other psychoactive substances. Thomas shares his insights into navigating these complexities while maintaining objectivity and sensitivity in the research process. The dialogue offers valuable insights into the multiple dimensions of alcohol-related research, highlighting the complexities of sociological approaches to alcohol, the evolving craft beer scene, and the critical role of pubs in fostering social connections in the UK. Their engaging conversation provides a rich source of knowledge for those interested in alcohol culture, gender studies, and the multifaceted dynamics of celebratory practices in modern societies.

1. This interview has been slightly edited for clarity.—Ed.

From Stag Party Tourism to Alcohol Cultures: An Interview with Thomas Thurnell-Read

Alix Boirot and Thomas Thurnell-Read

Alix Boirot (AB): Tom, thank you for accepting this interview. It is meant for issue no. 5 of the *Journal of Festive Studies*, which will include a thematic section on party tourism, understood as travel for which the main motivation is partying.¹ You are a leading scholar of sociological approaches to the study of alcohol, drinking, and drunkenness. You are also the editor of *Drinking Dilemmas: Space, Culture and Identity* (2015) and a founding member of the British Sociological Association's Alcohol Study Group. I very much appreciate your comprehensive approach to the subject, which is too often polluted by overbearing moral judgments. It was therefore essential for me to be able to include your words and thoughts in this issue. Especially because your first research was about stag parties, the British going to Poland for stag parties, and now you are at another point of the chain, since you are more interested in the production of alcohol via the study of brewers and distillers. But we are still in the commercial, organized, and professionalized kind of festivities that are part of urban and globalized modernity.

During this interview, we will take a biographical approach to identify how you got into these academic interests—first stag parties and then alcohol more generally—but also a thematic one, concerning how you situate this question of party tourism in relation to your current research.

One aspect that particularly interested me in your work is the question of masculinity. If I'm not mistaken, this angle led you to the study of alcohol consumption, which has become your favorite field of research. Is that right?

Thomas Thurnell-Read (TTR): That's right. As an undergraduate student I had enrolled in a module called "the social construction of masculinity." And at the same time we had a qualitative research methods training module, and as part of that had to undertake a mini project of ethnographic fieldwork. Putting those two things together at that time—this is as a second-year undergraduate—I studied a local fire station and looked at how masculinity was performed by firefighters through their work. I guess because it was a small-scale project, I did a lot of looking closely at how they speak and behave, and particularly how men in their daily interactions work with each other to sustain an idea of masculinity and manhood.

Several years later, when it came to doctoral-level study, I developed another interest, in tourism, after traveling around eastern Europe as a young backpacker and going to cities like Prague and Krakow. I was aware of this phenomenon of stag tourists on the streets of those cities and I think that was the inspiration. I was seeing these groups of men together, sharing that space a little bit like the fire station, a particular sort of closely bonded group, which gave me the initial idea. I thought, well, has this been studied, is it possible to make a study of this? And that's the starting point, I think.

Moving forward from that, the literature that underpinned my doctoral thesis was really a nice mix of 50 percent toward a sociology of tourism and 50 percent toward a sociology of masculinity. And in part I was trying to join those two fields together. Until that point, I felt that a lot of tourism studies were dealing very generically with the concept of tourists. A lot of it was framed in

2. John Urry, *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies* (London: Sage, 1990).

3. R. W. Connell, *Masculinities* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

4. Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

5. Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell theorized hegemonic masculinity in her 1995 book, *Masculinities*. Connell presented masculinity as plural and relational. In other words, hegemonic masculinity is not a fixed, invariant personality type, and can only be considered in relation to other types of masculinity. It is the most valued way of being a man, the one against which all men must position themselves. In her book, Connell identified different types of masculinity: complicit, subordinate, and marginalized. Complicit masculinities support hegemonic masculinities—without being able to conform to them—because they enjoy the benefits of patriarchy. Subordinate masculinities form a counter-model to hegemonic configurations of masculinity, and their members are dominated. Homosexual men are today's typical representatives. Finally, marginalized masculinities articulate the different power relations of race, class, and gender. In effect, they represent the masculinities of social groups dominated for reasons other than sexual, notably ethnic and/or economic. All these forms of masculinities are reconfigured over time, are diverse, and vary according to social and cultural contexts.

relation to theorists like John Urry talking about the tourist gaze, and it felt like quite a narrow conception of tourism as very gentle, middle-class people going and looking at a nice building or a work of art. It was all about looking at nice things while you're on holiday.² And of course, putting that next to the reality of people going abroad to drink and dance and party and cut loose in a very embodied experience, very sensory experience. Although I wanted to engage with the tourism literature, I felt there wasn't so much in the classical sociological perspectives on tourism which I could necessarily use and relate to the topic of the stag tourist in eastern Europe. At the same time, there was the beginning of a turn towards space, embodiment, the sensory, atmospheres, and affect, and I think that's something I've run with to this day. I've always been drawn to that literature that looks more at the lived experiences of tourist practice.

In terms of the masculinity stuff, then I think that was something where the thesis allowed me to explore that literature in more detail. Certainly, as I said, the focus on male bonding rituals and then Raewyn Connell's concept of hegemonic masculinity informed what I did with that research and was vital to that project.³ It was a case of making an argument that this phenomenon is deeply gendered; that the enactment of masculinity is central to understanding that phenomenon. It's part of the motivations, it's part of the common-sense explanation and that's certainly something I found during the data collection, speaking to these tourists. If you were probing them, asking them, Why are you doing this? What does this mean to you, this weekend away, drinking lots of alcohol with your friends? What does it mean? There was a very clear signal that it was expected, it was part of the script of what a man at that certain age should be doing. It was, in a way, what also led me back into this ritualistic side of it and drawing on Victor Turner and others' ideas of rites of passage and things like this, that through this sort of symbolically very rich activity a change of status was being marked from being a younger single man to a married man.⁴ The association with shifting responsibilities that come with that played into what we'd call a social function of the stag party.

Coming from that I began to see that what looks very disordered is actually very rule-bound. There is a script to follow in how men behave together, but particularly the stag weekend. It's a very structured, highly anticipated planned event, even though at the moment it feels very spontaneous and very disordered. I wanted to move beyond a frame that just sees it as something that is unorganized and destructive, to seeing it instead as possibly something that is tightening bonds and asserting a certain status within the group. So, in that sense, it might actually be quite *constructive* as a practice. I think that was the central tension in that project that I dealt with, as a PhD student, and when I was writing up the thesis in terms of publications following that, the focus was how to bring those two things together. On the one side, the very chaotic, disorganized, transgressive elements of the stag weekend and, on the other hand, the socially rule-bound, anticipated, scripted behavior. But I think that's where some of the tensions and some of the intrigue lay for me.

AB: About masculinity: you had this idea that the fulfillment of hegemonic ideals of masculinity, per Connell, may involve a certain level of flexibility in embodied performance.⁵ Can you elaborate a little?

TTR: The concept of hegemonic masculinity has been around for decades now and, periodically,

Connell offered a reformulation of it, a defense of the concept; and typically a response to, I would suggest, some of it being applied more freely or inaccurately. And one of the things that is interesting about the debates about hegemonic masculinity is, yes it's hierarchical, but it was never intended, as a concept, to perfectly reify specific men or groups of men in that hierarchy. In my work, I was studying men who are behaving in a certain way in this liminal, disinhibited space. The stag tour weekend is a particular time and place in which they can express this sort of unbounded embodiment of masculinity. And I was thinking that flexibility came into it too. They're not necessarily like this all the time. And this is one of the virtues of a participant observation approach—that it was possible to speak to them and try to understand that the appeal of that weekend was forty-eight hours where there's nothing to do but drink and joke and play. Indeed, it was quite infantilizing, in the sense that you were meant to be losing control of yourself. You are meant to not take anything seriously. It's meant to be a sort of trivial time; playfulness dominates everything that you do, from the moment of getting on the plane from the UK to arriving in the city and every element in between. In terms of embodiment, this is interesting and I think it is the point when I began to identify alcohol as something I wanted to continue researching, because the embodied nature of it, this very sensory nature of alcohol consumption, just struck me as so fascinating.

Still to this day, when I write about alcohol, or speak about alcohol, I remain struck by what I think of as its sort of transformative quality. People often drink with the intention of becoming something that they want to be; being more sociable, being less inhibited, being more able to partake in that kind of masculine male bonding ritual. And the embodied side of things was very important in the fieldwork—it hit you in the face because you saw people not just consuming alcohol but vomiting, and urinating.

My fieldwork was periodic so I made many trips to Poland, a week or two at a time, and then I was back in the UK. On one of those return visits home, speaking to my supervisor, he said "there's a lot of mess in your notes isn't there?" Indeed, the field notes I made during these observations were full of descriptions of how much people were consuming and putting into their bodies. There was a lot of detail about nudity, injuries to the body – drunk men were drunkenly falling over tables and bars and collapsing in the street and just absolutely making a mess of themselves. I think this was the start of this analytical thread of saying: well, a lot of the literature on masculinity is all about this hegemonic, stoic, in control, very bounded, very controlled kind of manhood. And I didn't see that. It was a celebration of transgression, a bodily transgression. And I think that really relates to how modern manhood is quite flexible and knowing when and where to be tough and strong and independent and stoical and when not to be. And, on the stag tour, one of the men in the group who would drink lots but not let it have any effect on him, showing how tough he was by drinking the most, wasn't actually particularly celebrated by the group. Because the aim was to transgress, the aim was to lose control. And the guy standing quietly in the corner showing how tough he is by drinking ten pints and drinking vodka shots and not losing control one bit, was actually seen as the one who was deviant in a way because they weren't following the stag script.

In the years after the PhD, I began to look at real ale drinkers, beer drinkers in the UK, and changing practices amongst beer consumers. When I started that research ten or twelve years ago, we were still looking at a very clear stereotype of a middle-aged or older man with

a large beer belly, old unfashionable clothes, sitting in the pub drinking pints of ale and writing the flavor in his little bookkeeping a list of all the beers that he had tried—a kind of geeky older masculinity. When I started that research I felt an obvious connection: I'd spent the last few years researching younger men and their consumption, what role alcohol played for them and their masculinity, and their identity; and now I was moving on to older men and that was for me an interesting continuation. I think around that time I published a paper that was trying to put these two ideals side by side, and I called the paper "yobs and snobs" because you have the image of a young man drinking too much alcohol and losing control and becoming violent and becoming disordered. And then you have the image of the older man, the real ale drinker in the pub, whose masculinity may be questioned because he's lost the shape of his body, he's got the beer belly, this is a kind of centuries-old cultural trope of the older man having let go of his physical embodiment. So yeah, I think the embodied masculinity side of things was one of the strands that I carried on after the stag tourism research.

AB: You already answered a bit but I was wondering: Why did you work on stag tourism rather than stag nights at home?

TTR: Well, when I received funding for my PhD, originally, the topic was going to be "gap year tourism." I'm not sure how it is in France, but in the UK—perhaps less so now, but in the past—there was this idea of mainly middle-class kids taking one year or more to go and do some volunteering or traveling, and that was kind of bound up with class and age and gender a bit as well. Only, by the time I started the PhD, there were a few people in the UK already studying or writing about gap years and I had drifted away from that topic in a way, but I wanted to keep the tourist elements and saw that, as stag party tourism was happening overseas, that could be a link. It also felt like it was a topical subject, in the sense that these eastern European cities that became known as the stag tour destinations of choice, really did so from 2004. This was when countries like Poland joined the EU and it was when the budget airlines like Ryanair created the new routes between the UK and these eastern European locations. And just as much or even more so than the tourists traveling east, it was people from eastern Europe traveling west too who sustained these new mobilities and connections, not just the tourists. When I was conducting fieldwork, I would sit on the plane as a researcher flying out to my research site and half the plane would be drunk British men going out to the city to get drunk. But also half the plane might be the Polish workers, Polish migrants, who had been working in the UK, who wanted to see family for a while. So it was, I think, "the moment" for this research project. I wanted it to feel topical and feel *current*.

Earlier, I think in the 1990s, Dublin and Amsterdam were destinations that were precursors to the eastern European stag tour destinations, and both those cities had almost their moment when it became a phenomenon that councilors, tourism industry representatives, and residents became frustrated with in terms of the presence of large groups of drunk men on the streets. I carried out the fieldwork in Poland at a time when that was, I would say, the tipping point, from what I could see. In the first few years, it was—I certainly spoke to plenty of local people in the city, in Krakow, who felt that "ohh, to begin with, when it was one or two groups you could kind of laugh along with them and, if needed, you could avoid them, avoid some of the mess." But the summer of my fieldwork, in 2008, I think I counted fourteen or fifteen stag groups on the main Market Square in

6. For example, Andrew King, "A Life Changing Experience? A Situated Analysis of Identity Work in Young People's Accounts of Their Gap Year" (PhD diss., University of Surrey, 2007); and H. Snee, "[Framing the Other: Cosmopolitanism and the Representation of Difference in Overseas Gap Year Narratives](#)," *British Journal of Sociology* 64, no. 1 (2013): 142–62.

Krakov and it was really hitting a point where people were fed up with the noise and the mess, and I think the timing of the project was quite important. It would probably feel very different if I did it today.

Interestingly, this is a project that's always gained a lot of interest from journalists and the media, and I've done quite a lot of interviews over the years about this. The framing that they often started with was: a generation ago, the stag party would be a night in the local pub with your dad, your uncle, and a couple of mates from work. All very subdued, just a few beers. And the journalistic approach would be to kind of almost downplay and trivialize previous stag parties so they could make the phenomenal stag tour seem something really extreme and really over the top. In the actual data, from speaking to stag groups, stag group participants, the movement toward an overseas stag tour was in part driven just by a general accentuation of sort of nightlife amongst a generation of British men who would fuel the growth from the 1980s and 1990s onward of the night-time economy in the UK. If your average night out as a man in your twenties was a bar crawl involving four, five, or six pubs and then a nightclub and quite extreme, then the stag weekend would need to top that, to go above and beyond. The architecture of the night-time economy, with the shots and the music and that, became sort of very heightened. Spending money on a big night out became much more essential to the way young people were engaging with leisure space. As a consequence of that, what do you do when you want an extra-special event that symbolically marks that life occasion of getting married? So for the stag tour, I think "doing something bigger" involved a couple of nights, two or three nights away in an overseas city, particularly one like Krakow, which at the time had the reputation for having excellent nightlife. Because it was a student city it had bars and clubs, it was already there. I mean most of this didn't spring up to cater to British tourists: nightclubs were already there for Polish students and young people. And of course, at the time, the alcohol and food were very cheap for British tourists.

The pound was stronger then. So again to answer your original question: looking back on it now, it feels that it was topical, that it was the right time to do that study. It felt like a new phenomenon. My experience was of having started some preliminary research on the gap year phenomenon and finding some excellent sociologists already studying it, further ahead in that process than me.⁶ But as a PhD student, you want to be as original as possible. I found that no one had really written about stag tourism. There had been some papers in the US about bachelor parties and bachelorette parties. Some of those were really helpful in terms of getting me thinking and framing my project. But there was very little to go on at that point. I think that was the starting point.

AB: My relationship with my field, Lloret de Mar, a festive seaside resort, was complicated at first, but then I learned to like my field and my respondents, which seemed essential to me to be able to carry out research without making value judgments that are often attached to this type of behavior. What was your relationship with the parties you investigated? I know that sometimes it can be complicated to deal with all that mess and drunk people. And for me, as a female investigator, I had to deal with a lot of sexism, for example.

TTR: I think that's a really important question. At the time, because as an undergraduate and as a postgraduate I had taken optional modules relating to ethnography and read all these classic

ethnographic studies and was pretty wrapped up with this idea that good ethnography needs to involve this kind of fairly challenging, arduous fieldwork, I was fairly wrapped up in the idea that you go off to the field and you'll be challenged. In terms of gaining access to groups, as I sort of walked through the process, it was a case of deciding the topic and then figuring out how am I going to do this, how am I going to find these groups? I gained access primarily through a stag tour company who were able to introduce me to their clients, groups that they were hosting in the city. And I was able to meet them very early in their weekend, right at the starting point when they arrived, before they'd been drinking too much and that was the point where I could explain who I was, a doctoral researcher from the UK. Interestingly, I felt, probably in those stages I downplayed some of the focus on masculinity because I'd been reading this in the literature from people studying masculinity: When you say to men, I'm studying masculinity, they can become either defensive, or suddenly know to play up and be a bit on their best behavior. And I didn't want that to be a theme and have that reaction where their behavior would be moderated because of my presence.

In terms of explaining my interest in them, it was a case of saying, well, I just want to understand why groups of British men would come out here for their stag rather than staying in the UK. I think that the tourism element of the project was a little bit easier and more palatable to explain. In that sense, the focus on masculinity did emerge through my interactions with them and particularly through the topic of friendship, because, when I met these groups, one of the first things you'd ask is how do you all know the stag? How do you guys know each other? And you'd get these quite complicated histories: friends from school, friends from university, colleagues from work, family members, and so on. And in a sense, that's probably what was surprising. I found it easier than I anticipated to join the group because at first I thought, this was a group of best friends and I'm going to feel like an outsider. Yet the majority of stag groups are comprised of several smaller peer groups, relating to different elements, different parts of the stag's life. So obviously I'm still an outsider to that, but particularly in the early stages of the stag tour, there's a lot of time spent doing exactly that. Getting to know each other, bonding.

One of the things I also reflected on methodologically was that, as a researcher, I kind of benefited from the hospitality sector, these pubs and bars, and night clubs: it's conducive to socialization, getting to know people, feeling relaxed, having that rapport. It was different when I did the research with the firefighters that I mentioned because they were at work and that was their commitment there. These were working practices, whereas with the stag tour, I think I was able to build some rapport with them because of the sociable setting. Undoubtedly that is the privilege of being how I am, who I was at the time. At the time I was in my mid-twenties, white, British, middle class, male, able-bodied, heterosexual. All those things privileged me in the setting because I could more or less blend in and fit it. Interestingly, in the final stages of the PhD, when I started presenting some of my findings at academic conferences, I often got the kind of tongue-in-cheek comment, people in the questions after the paper saying, "So your next project is going to be hen parties" and things like that. It was not exactly sexism but I remember saying, "well, no" because gender is so central to the social structure of these occasions, it would be, not insurmountable, but it would be very different. It wouldn't make sense for me to go and do a comparative study of hen parties because the dynamic of me as a male joining a group of women would not make sense. It would be problematic in other ways.

7. Thomas Thurnell-Read, "[‘Common-Sense’ Research: Senses, Emotions and Embodiment in Researching Stag Tourism in Eastern Europe.](#)" *Methodological Innovations Online* 6, no. 3 (2011): 39–49.

8. Karen O'Reilly, *The British on the Costa del Sol: Transnational Identities and Local Communities* (London: Routledge, 2000).

9. Hazel Andrews, "[Feeling at Home: Embodying Britishness in a Spanish Charter Tourist Resort.](#)" *Tourist Studies* 5, no. 3 (2005): 247–66, and *The British on Holiday: Charter Tourism, Identity and Consumption* (Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2011).

Thinking back to the thesis, the research involved a lot of reflection on my own sort of masculine embodiment, and I remember buying some nice, new shirts and some clothes to kind of fit in with the group. And that's partly because I knew that, well, if I'm a researcher wearing jeans and T-shirts and they're going to go into a nightclub where there's a dress code, I need to look smart too. Also, in some of the groups the men were in their thirties and older and I felt conspicuously young in a couple of situations. I also felt like dressing the part because of some of the more inconsiderate behavior I saw from stag groups, some of the fairly obnoxious behavior toward local residents. I felt like I wanted to sort of shrink away from the group. It's the classic dilemma of ethnographic field workers—you see things you don't agree with but which fascinate you also. It's not your job to change it, to intervene, is it? In my thesis, though, somewhere in the methodology section, there's a mention of sending lots and lots of emails to my partner at the time, who is my wife now. During fieldwork, writing back to her was an outlet for some of my frustrations and quite a complicated emotional experience because in some senses the fieldwork was lots of fun. It's this space with noise and music and laughter and that was a lot of fun and enjoyable, and at the same time it was quite challenging.

Maybe I have become milder in older age but I wouldn't do the same project now, I just wouldn't want to put myself through all those weekends of going to nightclubs and ... this kind of approach to things would put me off and some of it was quite uncomfortable. I've reflected on that in my methodological writing since as well. On how what should be quite an enjoyable occasion, from the position of a researcher, feels challenging and tiring and emotionally quite conflicted.⁷ This was also expressed by researchers like Karen O'Reilly, who researched British tourists in Spain a few decades ago.⁸ Hazel Andrews, who was my external examiner for my PhD, also studied tourists ethnographically and her work was a really big inspiration for my own. Something I particularly enjoyed in Karen and Hazel's work was their emotional honesty as ethnographers.⁹ And something they both refer to in their writing is, how do you, as a field worker, have a right to feel unhappy that you're going to this tourist destination? Other people are paying a lot of money to go there as tourists, it's a leisure space. And when you tell people that you're gonna spend weeks or months in these desirable locations, sometimes that trivializes the work that you're doing, and all three of us (I know Karen, I know Hazel) and I think all three of us had people joke that our research wasn't serious, that it was "an excuse" to go and spend some time in a nice location. And I think that at least drove me to want to publish that methods paper. When I tried to make an account of it, some of it was fun and exciting and exhilarating, and, even on the same night, parts of it would feel totally overwhelming and conflicting. Like you just didn't wanna do it. You didn't want to be there emotionally. It could be quite challenging to be in those situations.

AB: I understand that. I felt the same way. And there was another problem for me in that type of field: the state of drunkenness of partygoers. It is part of the analysis, but doesn't collecting observations on drunk people raise ethical issues?

TTR: Yes, I mean, I sit now in my office and discuss ethical approval processes with my PhD students and I just think, the processes, rightly so, are much tighter these days. They have become that way in most areas. I'm not sure if it would be possible to do the project in the same way because of the question of the intoxication of participants relating to issues with informed consent. As I mentioned earlier, pragmatically, I ensured I got consent very early in the weekend, as early as possible, and we did quite a lot to ensure the timing was at a point when they weren't

too drunk. And I think in a way I had to push back against the idea that, one beer and you sort of lose control and cannot give informed consent. Would people say I must have had problems recalling everything? How could I remember anything if I'd been drinking? Well, I can have a beer and still remember. And I resorted to the usual ethnographic practice of making ethnographic jottings in a diary, building them up as extensive field notes later on, either later that night or the next morning. That said, I think there were evenings when things became quite hazy. The pace of the events changed and was very quick.

I think something I tried to get across in all my writing about the stag tours was that it's a very emotionally rich sensory, embodied occasion. All the same, methodologically, as a sort of practical consideration, I had to take myself out of that at times. I had in every pocket, in my jacket, trousers, small bits of paper and tiny notebooks, and I had things I could make notes with that I'd transfer into a larger field diary the next day and I'd write these things up. It was the early days in terms of smartphones and things, but I recorded some sounds and I took a few pictures. Although I regret not making the visual and audio elements more prominent in the data collection earlier on, I think my main worry was, these are spaces associated with leisure and playfulness and a heightened atmosphere and if I've got a notebook and a voice recorder out, then it will mark me out as different. I'll be conspicuous, and people will change their behavior.

Doing the fieldwork over the course of the year and spending a lot of time out there, when it came to an end and I finished my fieldwork, I really did need a period of sobriety. I was sick of the smell of beer and vodka and things, and it was quite nice to have a break from all of that. Again, it's enjoyable when it's for leisure. When it's for work and for a PhD, you have various anxieties about whether what you're doing is worthwhile; we might call it imposter syndrome now. At the time, I just doubted whether this was going the right way and whether what I'd done would be taken seriously or not. I think being able to, in a way, have times during the fieldwork when I wasn't in the thick of participation was central to the ethnography. Participant observation is a continuum. My data leant most heavily on the more involved participant end of things, when I was hanging out with the group in the bars and the clubs. But in the wider framing of the phenomenon, I took a lot from the evenings or the daytime I spent just walking around the city or being a distant observer and I referred earlier to counting fourteen stag groups on the square in Krakow on Saturday afternoon in the summer one year.

As my interest in space and embodiment and placement of bodies within space and movement and mobility through space became clearer in the latter stages of fieldwork, even as I carried on with the participant element, I saw more value, a lot more value in being a bit more distant as an observer, and I would walk through the city, I would spend time in some of the bars and clubs and I can remember sitting with a coffee and a notebook and looking around me and off to one side is one stag group, off to another side is another. Every few minutes there was a group passing me on the street in fancy dress or something like this, and actually being slightly removed, being not involved, was insightful. Less so specific individuals and more so just the social and spatial dynamic taking place in the setting. So I spent a lot of time kind of looking at how other people, locals, and other tourists would move away from these groups or sometimes stand at a distance when it's almost theatrical in a way. Some of these groups had these fancy dress costumes and they were almost staging something quite humorous in the way they were behaving as they walked around. You'd see groups move tables away from them or finish their drinks and

10. Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands, "[Theorising Urban Playscapes: Producing, Regulating and Consuming Youthful Nightlife City Spaces](#)," *Urban Studies* 39, no. 1 (2002): 95–116.
11. Thomas Thurnell-Read, "Drink, Drunkenness and Orchestrated Conviviality: Examples from Qualitative Research on British Stag Party Tourism, Beer Festivals and Real Ale Trails," invited paper presented at "Producing and Regulating Parties: A One-Day Workshop" at Dysolab, University of Rouen Normandie, France, November 25, 2022.
12. For example, *Oliver Smith, Contemporary Adulthood and the Night-time Economy* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2014); and Emily Nichols, *Negotiating Femininities in the Neoliberal Night-time Economy: Too Much of a Girl?* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019).

change to a different café to get away from them. But you'd also see people turn around and take pictures and almost become drawn into it. At the time I was reading quite a lot of Erving Goffman and that behavior in a public place—how different actors and different groups of actors in public spaces modify any kind of "game" in their behavior in relation to their interactions with others—I felt that I had quite a lot of fun making notes and observations based on that.

AB: Have you seen a change, a greater institutionalization and recognition of this type of qualitative research – on alcohol for example – in the last ten years?

TTR: Yes, there's been a lot of progress, and shortly after completing the PhD, I was able to get involved at a very early stage with the British Sociological Association Alcohol Study Group that was set up around that time. Some of the early events that they organized were fantastic for me. And one thing that struck me was there were people whose subject of study was alcohol and drinking, but they were outnumbered by people who were studying something else entirely and suddenly realized, wow, alcohol is central to this phenomenon or this group and these people's lives or leisure activities. Being able to meet those kinds of scholars and share our experiences with them was excellent. I was also involved in the start of the Warwick Drinking Studies Network, when I was a PhD at the University of Warwick. I was involved partly in the early days of that and it's now just called the Drinking Studies Network because it's much bigger and has moved beyond just being focused on Warwick. Those two groups, I think, have done a huge amount to bring scholars together, including historians, sociologists, public health scholars, cultural studies, and youth studies. It's very interdisciplinary. I think that a real advance in the past ten years or so has been connecting those people up, building alcohol studies into something that feels very interdisciplinary and very inclusive of qualitative approaches. Public health and epidemiological perspectives on alcohol are still dominated by population levels and statistical analysis, but the space for qualitative, if not ethnographic, research into drinking is improved. It's just more common, at least.

When I started writing about this topic, the literature about the night-time economy mostly sprang from social geography, urban geography, and criminology studies of urban city centers in the eighties and nineties being sort of recreated as playscapes, as Paul Chatterton and Robert Hollands called them.¹⁰ That literature was hugely useful. And one of the things I always liked about it was that it didn't start with the idea that these were deviant people. This was part of the social, economic, and cultural fabric of British society. This was the economic planning of many British cities at that time to deregulate and allow bars and nightclubs to open, to bring people into the city, spend money, have fun, and consume. That was the mantra at the time. I like the fact that those studies looked at regulation and control, but in a broad sense in that they looked at how people control their behavior and also the variety of actors involved in the production and consumption of night-time leisure.

We spend a lot of time focusing on the people drinking. It's also possible to focus on the city center's policing, like club bouncers and things. But I made the point in one paper that there's student drinking, and there are student societies where you have student secretaries who plan the pub crawl.¹¹ You have tour guides like the stag tour company employees, almost entirely young Polish women, who guide these groups of British men around the pubs and bars in the city, and the role they played is so fascinating. I think in recent years there's been a lot of fantastic

13. For example, Sébastien Tutenges, and Sveinung Sandberg, "[Intoxicating Stories: The Characteristics, Contexts and Implications of Drinking Stories among Danish Youth](#)," *International Journal of Drug Policy* 24, no. 6 (2013): 538–44; Eivind Grip Fjær, Willy Pedersen, and Sveinung Sandberg, "[Party on Wheels: Mobile Party Spaces in the Norwegian High School Graduation Celebration](#)," *British Journal of Sociology* 67, no. 2 (2016): 328–47; and Mie Birk Jensen, Maria Dich Herold, Vibeke Asmussen Frank, and Geoffrey Hunt, "[Playing with Gender Borders: Flirting and Alcohol Consumption among Young Adults in Denmark](#)," *Nordic Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 36, no. 4 (2019): 357–72.
14. Thomas Thurnell-Read and Laura Fenton, *Alcohol, Age, Generation and the Life Course* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2022).
15. Thomas Thurnell-Read, "[Did You Ever Hear of Police Being Called to a Beer Festival? Discourses of Merriment, Moderation and 'Civilized' Drinking amongst Real Ale Enthusiasts](#)," *Sociological Review* 65, no. 1 (2017): 83–99.

work from qualitative researchers in the UK¹² and beyond in Scandinavia, Denmark, and Norway as well.¹³ I think that what they've really done is to show the meaning and motivation involved in this kind of drinking, particularly for young people. Again, it is trying to get through to that idea that it's quite socially normative to drink in these sorts of ways, and what from a distance might, as I said originally, have looked like very disorderly behavior, actually kind of has its rules and expectations.

Recently I've been intrigued by ideas of the life course and we've got this edited book out this year about alcohol, age, generation, and the life course.¹⁴ Many of the chapters we brought together for that book try to make sense of how drinking practices change but also how the meaning of drinking changes throughout the life course. I don't think I will, but it would be fascinating to catch up with all these men who were on these stag tours in 2007 and 2008 and to see where they are now. I mean, I became a father at the start of last year and I have a lot less time for alcohol. I don't go to pubs often enough; I don't go to clubs at all anymore. Personally, biographically, I think my research interests have shifted because of that, and I'm more interested in other forms of drinking. But I think it's fascinating to think about how the meaning and the purpose and the function of our alcohol consumption and intoxication might change as we age, and they are different between generations as well. In many countries in the Global North and northern Europe in particular, anyway, it's a steady trend now that young people are drinking less. And I think when this group of young people gets through to marriage and things, is a drunken stag weekend in a foreign city something that they'll want to do? I think it's probably less likely. If the expectation that intoxication is central to your friendships diminishes, then I think the ritual of the stag tour becomes less important. The pressure to confirm to the script I mentioned previously also weakens. But it will be interesting to see how this develops with time.

AB: When I started to look at party tourism, the existing analysis oscillated mainly between studies of risks and the paradigm of transgression. Without ignoring either of these aspects, your research takes a sideways perspective. Do you maintain a dialogue with researchers who are interested in the question of risks, health, etc.? Is it controversial not to focus on health risks when it comes to alcohol study?

TTR: I think dialogue is a good word to use and it's a question of where those dialogues take place. The research I've published in more recent years, particularly the last few years, has involved looking at the role of pubs and drinking spaces in social connection, particularly combating loneliness, and most of this was looking at older people in Britain. In that sense, there's obviously risk in the health implications of drinking, but also some, for many people, very real social benefits of alcohol as a way to connect with other people, a way to find social connections, which are very difficult to come by. And I think there's a real awareness now that loneliness and social isolation are hugely damaging to physical and mental health. I mean, probably the straightforward answer is to say that I don't have as much dialogue as I should about risk. I think the closest I've come to it is a few years ago, when I did research with the real ale drinkers and craft beer drinkers, and I published a paper which was looking at the concept of moderation.¹⁵

The starting point for that was this idea of the number of units of alcohol per week and if you're above a national guideline, you're a problem drinker, if you're beneath that, you're "OK." Healthwise,

16. Henry Yeomans, "[Blurred Visions: Experts, Evidence and the Promotion of Moderate Drinking.](#)"

Sociological Review 61, no. 2 (2013): 58–78.

17. For an excellent example of this, see Gabriel Caluzzi et al., "[No Time for a 'Time Out'? Managing Time around \(Non\) Drinking.](#)"

Sociology 56, no. 1 (2022): 21–37.

my starting point for that paper was that this doesn't really reflect the way the majority of people relate to alcohol, particularly those who see themselves as that kind of connoisseur of beer. They learn about breweries and they travel to beer festivals and breweries to try different beer styles. And through the fieldwork and interviews with those people, what I clearly saw was people who were drinking a lot of alcohol regularly. Drinking lots, but very rarely being drunk. And that was the critical thing: for a lot of them, in their mind, they were "moderate" drinkers. They were sociable, sensible drinkers because they tended to drink in pubs, nice pubs, not the ones known for their disorder or violence or anything like this. They would drink regularly with friends or colleagues. They were polite and sociable. They wouldn't get drunk and vomit and fall over and things like this. And a lot of them used *that* as a foil, as a contrast to what they thought young people or students, whoever, and the way in which "others" are drinking. It was the wrong kind of drinking, involving drinking just to get drunk. You don't care what it is, it can taste horrible and could be the cheapest alcohol, but it's about intoxication, it's about the loss of control. I think that was more of my qualitative approach to this, that the idea of safe or unsafe, acceptable or unacceptable drinking, is framed more in terms of what you're drinking, where you're drinking, who you're with, and how you behave. It is very contextualized. It is not as if people in practice said "ohh if I have one more beer that will take me over my fourteen units for this week, I've become an unsafe drinker." I know others working on that. Henry Yeoman, a criminologist at Leeds University, theorized very well this sort of problematic or changing concept of moderation.¹⁶ As I alluded, I think there's a current generation of young people who just have a very different orientation to risk. The idea of drinking so heavily you black out and break your phone and rip your jeans and vomit on yourself and that being *fun* really doesn't resonate so much now. There has been a generational shift. Not for everyone, but I think many young people for various reasons just don't see that as pleasurable anymore.

AB: So you think it's the end of the era of binge drinking?

TTR: To be honest, I think it will always have some appeal and I think quite a lot of this heavy drinking for young people can be very cathartic and it's a way of releasing tension and finding a kind of pleasure in forgetting what you're meant to be doing or not meant to be doing. A lot of young people feel that pressure of work, university studies, the future, having the best career, being fit, being healthy, be all of these things, and binge drinking can retain the significant appeal of forgetting that, even just for one evening or just for a few hours. But the recent research coming out on this is certainly pointing toward young people having the feeling that they've got less time for it faced with competing demands and pressures, and just not finding that sort of drinking as appealing as a previous generation did.¹⁷

AB: I see. And so now you are studying producers and not consumers, right? What brought you to this turning point?

TTR: I have pursued both subjects in parallel, I think. Most people just focus on one or the other. But it really started after the PhD when I began looking at real ale drinkers. And I was participating in various ways with the organization called the Campaign for Real Ale (CAMRA) who was founded in the early seventies in the UK. They were, they still are, primarily a campaign group aimed at promoting or preserving traditional British cask-conditioned beer. I won't go into the technicalities of what qualifies something as real ale or not. And I was again interested

18. Thomas Thurnell-Read, "[The Embourgeoisement of Beer: Changing Practices of 'Real Ale' Consumption](#)," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 18, no. 4 (2018): 539–57.

19. Thomas Thurnell-Read, "Craft Drinks, Connoisseurship and Intoxication," in *Routledge Handbook of Intoxicants and Intoxication*, ed. Geoffrey Hunt, Tamar Antin, and Vibeke Asmussen Frank (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 113–26.

in that ethnographically speaking; there's this kind of quite a unique group of people who had a particular orientation. I spent time with many people from the organization and what was interesting about that was the fascination of the knowledge amongst some of those people about pubs, beer, and breweries. They knew the history of every pub in the town where they lived. They had tried beers from every single brewery in the region. I have written about this being a very masculine leisure activity, that idea that "oh, it's not just about drinking beer. Now you should own twenty books and follow all sorts of writers online about your expert knowledge of different beer styles and the history of different breweries and all of this. You should have a very informed intellectual opinion about what makes a good or a bad beer."¹⁸

And so, as part of that research, I just fell up on it. I started to go on some brewery tours; I asked some brewers if I could interview them about their work and that's when I found a real interest in the idea of craft and really seeing brewing as craft. And later I interviewed craft gin distillers as a kind of cultural work. The way they don't just try and make a certain type of product, but the way they talk about it, the way they give it a certain name and a style and packaging. I spoke to lots of craft brewers and gin distillers who would go out and do these kinds of Meet the Brewer events where they're meeting the customers, the consumers. I think that was what led me back in a way to looking at the labor involved in creating the alcohol. I think it's more or less a parallel interest, but I keep coming back to it.

I still think it's fascinating how quickly that has developed in the UK, but many countries around the world have this kind of evolving craft scene which has its own particular way of relating to alcohol. I find it very interesting and I try my best to write about that. Most people who end up as craft brewers have been very committed consumers before they start. You don't just suddenly, overnight, decide to open a brewery! Many of the people I spoke to had spent twenty years drinking beer, being that kind of knowledgeable consumer of beer, maybe home brewing and finding their way into their job that way. So that was an interesting angle. I think the blurred boundary between consumer and producer was quite interesting.

AB: So it's related. They are not two clearly separated objects.

TTR: Yeah, I think. Certainly one of the things that the brewers, many of them, were interested in was this idea of a community approach, that the brewery should be the center of the local community. The brewery should be a place that people who want to support a local business will buy their beer from. People are opening up breweries, buying their own pub, or opening their brewery tap or somewhere attached to the brewery where people will gather to drink the beer. And that notion of a community focus being very valuable socially, culturally, and economically has been a central asset to the craft narrative, I think. I have a book chapter out recently about intoxication and connoisseurship.¹⁹ And again it goes back to the idea that some people who drink very heavily don't see a problem in it because they're doing it for the taste of the product. They know a lot about it. At some craft beer festivals it can be difficult to find beers that aren't over 9 or 10 percent alcohol. The trend has become, at the moment anyway, toward very strong imperial stouts and porters and things like this. Very strong triple IPAs and things. But it's all framed as, this is about knowledge and taste. It's not about just drinking strong beer to get drunk.

Looking at big craft beer festivals, it's clear that the focus is on bringing people together and

20. Thomas Thurnell-Read, "Atmosphere and Activism at the Great British Beer Festival," in *Untapped: Exploring the Cultural Dimensions of Craft Beer*, ed. Nathaniel G. Chapman, J. Slade Lellock, and Cameron D. Lippard (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2017), 222–35.

21. See Thomas Thurnell-Read, "Gender and Craft Drinks," *Sociology Compass* 16, no. 9 (2022), e13018.

momentarily creating a space in which everyone comes together. This idea of conviviality or *communitas* is quite interesting. It is certainly the case in the beer festivals I've attended in my sort of private life and as a researcher, that they're fascinating to study if you're interested in events and atmospheres and festivals. In many cases, it's a village hall or an exhibition area or a marquee, or a tent set up at the back of a pub. They're temporary spaces where a particular atmosphere is generated with alcohol, food, with sensory stuff.²⁰ A lot of beer festivals will have bands, and just the noise, the collective atmosphere, is fascinating for our research, I think for anyone interested in festivity. Again, we're back to my interest in all the different actors in those settings who create the atmosphere. A lot of beer festivals are volunteer-led, so it's not people earning money doing it, it's people giving up their weeks or their weekends to come and be a steward or a bartender for a beer festival.

AB: And is masculinity still a part of your research today?

TTR: It is. I mean it's something that's always been there and thereabouts in the background. Craft beer is still very gendered. In recent years, there's been some progress. Craft beer often presented itself as being quite progressive and hip and liberal. In the last couple of years, they were having their "me too moment," really. Not because it's been branded as rebellious and hip and progressive and all these things—craft beer spaces and culture have been as guilty of sexism and racism as more mainstream actors of drinking culture. But there's a bit of a reckoning going on. There are some really good initiatives from writers and activists who are trying to push to make craft beer genuinely more inclusive, which is excellent.²¹

In terms of my current research, it's focusing more on pubs and their quite precarious role in British society. I'm planning some research that looks at pub closures and their impact on loneliness, and I think that the gender element is sort of in the background there. Pub closures particularly affect older men for whom pubs were one of the main places where they could be socially engaged after they retired. They are possibly more vulnerable to social isolation because of that. Once work is gone, for older men, pubs can be a really important place to just feel connected, whether they sit quietly in the corner with a beer, reading the newspaper, doing the crossword, or whether they are talking, meeting old friends, and things like this. Interesting as well, I think pubs are far more diverse than they used to be. There's a shift in many pubs toward food and a broader range of things like being open in the day, much more akin to the café, with coffee and cake and lunches and things. There's a lot of data I'm trying to work with at the moment that looks at how, quite often, it's groups of older women who are doing kind of care and support for each other through pub going, although this often doesn't involve alcohol at all, but connecting up with each other and ensuring that one of their neighbors, if she is an older woman living alone, "we'll take her once a month or once every week." They take her to that pub on the end of the road that does a nice lunch or does good coffee in the daytime. And again, I mean' it's still gender, and it's still relating to sociability. It's a different end, a different side of things. A different approach to it, certainly, but I don't know the way an academic research career unfolds. You try to craft some coherent narrative about why you study things but, partly, I've just picked up each opportunity when I felt it was interesting. So certain themes cut across everything I've worked on, really.

AB: Interestingly, age is very important in your research. The young and then the middle-aged

and then now maybe older people in pubs. Different places and different moments of life...

TTR: Every day, almost every week there's a new challenge for the pub trade, the pub sector. So it feels like the timing is right to look at what's happening in pubs and the pub sector in the UK, and I think it's a struggle. Since I've been doing this research, when I've been interviewed by journalists, there's so much acceptance that the pub is a cornerstone of British culture and British social life, and at the same time, they're closing. For twenty years or more, they've been closing. There is probably a sort of diversification: some traditional pubs close, but there are these kinds of cafés where you can buy alcohol and there's also food, there's much more hybridity and diversity that's customer-driven in a way, and it's all partly underpinned by economics and policy changes as well. But the post-COVID challenges and the cost-of-living crisis, the energy crisis at the moment will rapidly close many more pubs and local communities will suffer. There are so many places in the UK—I can't speak for other countries—so many towns and suburbs in the UK where the pub might be one of the few places where people can just connect for the price of a drink, go in and have a conversation and meet a neighbor, meet a random person from their community they've not spoken to before. There's that sort of social capital that is lost when pubs close. Hopefully, an empirical investigation of the impact of pub closures can help to examine this. So that's where I'm going, the latest directions.

AB: Well, thanks a lot, Thomas.

TTR: It gives me a lot to think about because now, I think about how I really enjoyed some elements of previous research and it's something I want to go back to. That gives me ideas about things to do. Thank you, Alix.

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