Course overview

This class is an exercise in seeing the world sociologically, by looking at drink and its role in our culture and society. The history of alcoholic drink is entwined with the history of human society itself. Instead of understanding alcohol as simply good or bad, we use drinking as a window through which we can better understand roles, relationships, social boundaries and cultural change. Social barriers can be lowered, new friendships made, and old relationships reestablished when people get together over a drink. But cultural and political battles about alcohol can also be a way to see social divisions, power struggles and hierarchies. And of course, drinking can be a route to all sorts of bad behavior and social problems too. We look at all of this and more, first in historical and cross-cultural perspective and then focusing on our own contemporary society.

Because drink has such a core place in many Western societies, it has left cultural traces: images, songs, poems, and rituals as well as patterns of behavior that reveal more about us than about alcohol. Beer, mead and other forms of alcohol were both a sign of wealth and prestige, but also in many times and places a food—a major source of calories. But Western cultures (and maybe especially America) has also been deeply conflicted over alcohol. The early Americans’ love of booze was legendary, but changing attitudes about drunkenness tracks right along with status conflicts over shifting relations of class, race, immigration, gender, and new ideas about the importance of the economic over the social world. What does our relationship with drink have to tell us about contemporary society and our own lives? We bring our own sociological perspectives to bear on alcohol advertising, campus drinking, and more.
Class requirements

Our class is seminar-style. This means that it is definitely not a lecture class! Rather, we all take responsibility for bringing our interests and insights to the class every time. Our engagement with each other is what makes this kind of class work. Readings are varied, with a mix of academic, journalistic, and opinion pieces, but all are meant to be engaged with rather than just mined for facts. There are two core books: Janet Chrzan, *Alcohol: Social Drinking in Cultural Context*, and Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants and Intoxicants*. In addition, there is one course pack of selected readings from Thomas M. Wilson's *Drinking Cultures: Alcohol and Identity*. You should get all of these ASAP.

Please note that I do not consider the readings and other materials especially emotionally difficult, but we will consider issues of sexual assault and alcohol toward the end of the semester. If this or other issues are likely to be especially sensitive for you, please let me know in advance. Course requirements are as follows:

**Attendance and participation** (30% of course grade) I expect everyone to attend class and be engaged each week. Because seminars rely on everyone’s preparation and willingness to engage with each other, this is a major component of the course grade. I know that this style of course will require more willingness to talk and think out loud than you may be used to; people sometimes worry that they will say something wrong. Please, everyone, take the attitude that it is much better to be wrong, thoughtful, and engaged than to be right, passive, and silent! Our collective goal is to bring energy and joy to class along with seriousness of purpose. That’s what makes any intellectual work worth it.

**Response blogs and comments** (40%) Everyone will write five short, focused memos for specific class days. There are two forms of memos, engagement memos and exploration memos. We will set the schedule for memos, which will be then posted before class. For days when you do not have a memo due, you must comment on one or more of the memos (comments are counted with the participation grade). Together, the memos and comments provide the basis for much of the discussion in the seminar. More details about how to do the memos and comments are below.

**Final paper** (30%) The final paper provides you a chance to develop and expand the themes, perspectives, and arguments of one or more of your memos into a longer and more substantial critically engaged paper (typically 6–8 pages). One-page proposals will be due (though not graded!) by November 17, and will guide our one-on-one meetings, where we can discuss and finalize the ideas.
Memos and comments

Engagement memos are focused on your thoughts and reactions to the readings. You should aim to: a) Identify what you see as the main arguments or importance of the readings; b) Enter into critical dialogue with these points, bringing in your thoughts and reactions and considering them in the context of others we have seen. It is best to focus on one or two points that you find especially important rather than try to summarize the entire text. Go deep rather than broad! 3) Pose clear questions and issues for discussion that we should expand upon and develop in class. The engagement memos should be strictly 800-1200 words.

Exploration memos are where you take an idea or concept from the text and do some real-world investigation to make sense of it. The research time you put in should be limited (an hour to an hour and a half) and may involve informal interviews with friends and family, observations in public settings, analysis of cultural artifacts, fact-checking key claims, or the like. This will be informal rather than systematic research, but together these efforts will allow us to bring some actual data into our conversations and analysis. Here, your aim is to a) outline what you are trying to find out, b) synthesize your data into a few important points, and illustrate those points with examples, and c) draw some conclusions that speak to the central ideas for the week and hopefully advance our understanding. The memos will be somewhat longer, but should not be much more than 1500 words.

Both forms of the memos are short and focused. They should involve careful thought and clear writing. It may take some time to write these, even though they are short. The most important thing is that you take adequate time to find a “spark”—a key idea that drives your interest—and then translate this into clear, engaged writing. They are akin to very thoughtful and carefully written blog entries. You will have to make a point, and bring in your own point of view. Sometimes this will mean you will have to express a point more strongly than you are sure about! Please note that you are free to agree with points made in a given set of readings, argue with these points, problematize them or show their limitations, or simply extend them to areas that the authors did not.

For days you are not writing an memo, your comments should respond to one or more of the ones posted. These comments will typically be shorter than memos (200-400 words) and I do not expect the same care in writing. Yet these comments should also be engaged and thoughtful. It’s not enough to simply say “good point” or “I like your memo.” Comments can respond to issues raised in the memos, or raise other points of your own. Gentle critiques are fine too, as long as they remain respectful.

Memos should be posted as new threads in the discussion forum of our class Moodle site. You should write in a word processor of your choice, and cut and paste your text into the forum so that you have a backup even if the site goes down. Make
sure that you give your memos a clear, descriptive title and make it clear which form it is (i.e., engagement or exploration). Comments should appear as responses to the memo threads. You may comment on as many of the memos as you like, but you must comment on at least one if you are not writing a memo for a given week. Everyone should print out the memos for a given class day and bring them with you, since we will be collectively responsible for building the discussion.

Memos are due without fail by 6:00pm on Monday evening. You will have until Friday morning of the same week to amend or re-edit the memo if you wish, though please inform me if you choose to do so. Comments must be posted before noon on Tuesday. The goal is then to already have some interaction going before the session starts.

Seminar schedule

Sept. 8  Welcome to the class.

• No readings for this class day!

Sept. 15  The social side of drink.

• Janet Chrzan, “Why Is Drinking Interesting?” (Ch. 1).

• Pete Brown, “You Should Have Seen Us Last Night!” (From Man Walks Into A Pub).


Sept. 22  Social roles and power in the history of drink.

• Garrett Oliver, “A Brief History of Beer” (from Brewmaster’s Table).

• Janet Chrzan, “Alcohol in the Ancient World” (Ch. 2) and “Barbarians and Beerpots” (Ch. 3).

Sept. 29  Cultural signifiers in consumption: booze and not-booze.

• Wolfgang Schivelbusch, “Spices, or the Dawn of the Modern Age,” (Ch. 1), “Coffee and the Protestant Ethic” (Ch. 2), “Chocolate, Catholicism, Ancien Régime (Ch. 3).
Oct. 6   The development of modern drinking.

• Janet Chrzan, “A Short History of American Drinking” (Ch. 4).

• Wolfgang Shivelbusch, “The Industrial Revolution, Beer, and Liquor” (Ch. 5), “Rituals” (Ch. 6), and “Drinking Places” (Ch. 7).

Oct. 13  Seeing roles, meanings, cultures in drink.

• Janet Chrzan, “It’s Happy Hour!: Modern American Drinking” (Ch. 5).

• Timothy M. Hall, “Pivo at the Heart of Europe: Beer-drinking and Modern Czech Identities” and Pauline Garvey, “Drunk and (Dis)Orderly: Norweigian Drinking Parties at Home” (from Wilson [ed.] Drunking Cultures).

• Keith Hayward and Dick Hobbs, “Beyond the Binge in ‘Booze Britain’: Market-Led Liminalization and the Spectacle of Binge Drinking” and pictorial from slate.com on British binge culture.

• Jordan Weissman, “If You Work Hard, You’re More Likely to Drink Hard” (slate.com)

Oct. 20  Seeing politics, power, and social divisions in drink.


Oct. 27  Politics, morality, prohibition.

• Daniel Okrent, selection from Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition.

• Joseph R. Gusfield, selection from Symbolic Crusade: Status Politics and the American Temperance Movement.
Nov. 3  Modern politics of drinking.

1. Morality and politics
   • Radley Balko, “Back Door to Prohibition: The New War on Social Drinking“ (Cato Institute 2003).
   • Pete Brown, “Answering the Neo-Prohibitionists” blog series from January 2010.
   • Amanda Hess, “Year of the Wasted Woman” (slate.com).

2. Taxation and sales
   • Brian Palmer, “Beer Barrel Politics: When Did Alcohol Become So Heavily Taxed?” (slate.com).
   • Reihan Salam, “Alcohol Taxes Should be Tripled” (slate.com).
   • Matthew Yglesias, “Who’s Afraid of Sunday Liquor Sales?” (slate.com).

3. Drinking age
   • KJ Antonia, “Old Enough to Fight” (slate.com).
   • Darshak Sghavi, “Quicker Liquor: Should We Lower the Legal Drinking Age?” (slate.com).
   • Will Saletan, “Should We Lower the Drinking Age” (slate.com).
   • NPR story, “College Presidents Urge Rethink on Drinking Age.”

Nov. 10  Alcohol advertising.

• One-page proposals for final papers accepted this week, must be turned in by next week.

• Janet Chrzan, “Alcohol Advertising” (Ch. 6).

Nov. 17  Campus drinking.
  • *Chronicle of Higher Education*, special issue on campus drinking.
  • Chrzan, “Why do Students Drink?” (Ch. 7).
  • Rachel Schuman, “The Campus Alcohol Problem Nobody Talks About” (slate.com).
  • Robert Gebelhoff, “Alcohol Use, Binge Drinking Continue to Fall Among the Underage” (slate.com).

Nov. 24  Individual consultations
  • Sign up for one-on-one meetings this week.

Dec.  1  Campus drinking and consent
  • Amanda Hess, “How Drunk Is Too Drunk to Have Sex?” (slate.com).
  • Emily Yoffee, “College Women, Stop Getting Drunk” and Jordan G. Teicher, “The ‘Keg Stand Queens’ of College Binge Drinking” (slate.com).
  • University of Minnesota Consent Policy and Aurora Center outline of consent.

Dec.  8  Control through norms or rules?

Dec. 15  Preparations for papers
  • Bring in section draft for discussion, peer consult and concentrated writing time.

Dec. 22  *Papers due, 5:30 pm.*
Exploration memo topics

Below are suggested exploration memo topics and questions. Everyone will do the first, and sign up for two of the rest. We will discuss the coming week’s questions in class each time, and that is a good place to propose alternate ideas. Note that many of these memo ideas require observation. It is imperative that you are completely sober when you do this work.

Sept. 15 The social side of drink. Janet Chrzan has a list of ways that drink can illuminate some key social science concerns like values, norms, attitudes and rules (pp. 5-6). Consider this list and turn your sociological lens not on yourself, but on your family—where you come from.

- What role does drinking have in your family? (And note “my family does not drink” counts!) What values, norms and attitudes does it illuminate in your particular family? You can focus on why, how, when drinking occurs in your family, or on what social functions drinking has for your family (i.e., what does it do?), or on how your family thinks or talks about alcohol, or about those who drink versus those who don’t.

Sept. 22 Social roles and power in the history of drink.

- What do modern students think about the line between “responsible drinking” and loss of control? Talk to people about this and find out. When is drinking “ok” for your peer group and when not? How much is “too much” and how do people define this in practice?

- The relationship between alcoholic beverages and dietary needs has probably changed from agrarian societies to now. How do students (or others) think and talk about alcohol, the body and health? Be specific about which groups you are talking about!

- Study the material culture of modern drinking through observation.

- When and how can you see social roles or distinctions defined through drink?
Sept. 29  Cultural signifiers in consumption: booze and not-booze.

- What goes on in different social spaces for booze and non-booze? Memos might compare coffee houses, bars or taprooms, and other spaces (like restaurants) that are not specifically marked by either alcoholic or non-alcoholic beverages but rather serve both. What can we learn from each of these spaces?

- Do people signal social status through choice of drink (either booze or not-booze)? That is, does drink itself become a cultural signifier, and if so, how?

Oct. 6  The development of modern drinking.

- Show the “temperance thermometers” from Chrzan or Shivelbusch to peers. What do they think of them? What is the value and role of temperance for them? Use this as a chance to reflect on whether attitudes about drink versus sobriety have changed or not, and if so, how.

- Study the modern rituals of drinking (either booze or not-booze). What do these rituals tell us about any of the issues (gender, class, etc) that these readings suggest for an earlier era?

- Study the drinking places (either booze or not-booze). Drinking places have been variously painted as places where civil society happens (people talk news and politics, debate the issues of the day) and places that are profoundly uncivil (drunken, debased). What do you see where you are? How can you tell which kind of place is which?

Oct. 13  Seeing roles, meanings, cultures in drink.

- American drinking rituals are likely less elaborate (and more group-specific) than those in the Czech Republic. Observe and analyze some rituals (booze or not-booze!), and their role in social life. What do rituals do?

- Analyze time use and notions of time and drinking among your peers. How is drinking (booze or not-booze!) organized in the day and week? How do people distinguish between work time and leisure time? If there are differences, what do you attribute these to?

- The dichotomies of alcohol and sobriety come up again this week. Adapt any of the questions about this from earlier weeks to speak to this week’s readings!

- How do people look after each other when drinking? Do women and men have different ways of talking about this?
Oct. 20  Seeing politics, power, and social divisions in drink.

- How segregated are drinking cultures/places? Feel free to look for obvious differences like race and class, but also more subtle differences of culture, politics, lifestyle. Is it uncomfortable to cross these boundaries, and how do people manage that (if any do)?

- How are issues of identity and politics signaled in the Twin Cities? For example, how do people decide what sort of drinking space (booze or not-booze!) are “for them” or not?

Oct. 27  Politics, morality, prohibition

- Do attitudes about drinking or drinking behavior differ by politics or religion?

- Find information on patterns of alcohol consumption in the US. What areas, or types of people, drink more or less? Why?

Nov. 3  Modern politics of drinking.

- Find one central claim about alcohol consumption or the social costs of drinking and fact-check it. (The Pete Brown blogs are a great resource for seeing how this can be done.) You might trace citations back to find and assess how the uses of the factoid accord with the original source’s discussion, or check against other key facts.

- Which states have more or less restrictive laws regarding alcohol sales and why? For example, why do Minnesota and Wisconsin differ in this?

- Analyze the legislative support and opposition to the recent proposals for Sunday sales of alcohol in Minnesota. What does this tell you about the likely reasons for support or opposition? How does this compare with what authors have said about earlier eras?

Nov. 10  Alcohol advertising.

- Choose a category of alcohol advertising (beer, liquor, “alco-pop”) and a medium (print, tv). Closely analyze 3-10 ads, with an eye to an issue you care about (race, gender, social roles, etc). Are there consistent messages? Illustrate!

Nov. 17  Campus drinking.

- Is it a problem? Is MN different? How should youth drinking be policed?
Dec. 1  Campus drinking, sexual assault and consent.

• How drunk is too drunk to give consent? What do students think, and does this square with idea of confirmative consent?

• Do women and men have differing ideas about this, or not?

Dec. 8  Control through norms or rules?

• Is there a gap between perceptions and reality of drinking at the U of M?

• Design a program to control binge drinking at the U of M that takes what you know about our campus culture seriously.