



## Alcoholic assemblages: Exploring fluid subjects in the night-time economy



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### ABSTRACT

Developing the notion of assemblage, this paper seeks to extend our understanding of *drunkenness* by exploring young people's drinking practices in the night-time economy of Copenhagen, Denmark. The main argument is that drunkenness is an embodied and social practice which, in relation to a multiplicity of actors and forces particular to the place of drinking, increases and/or decreases the drunken body's capacities to affect and be affected. Accordingly, Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *assemblage* will be mobilized to cast light on how drunkenness emerges as the product of unpredictable yet patterned encounters between discourses, bodies (human and nonhuman), spaces, different drinks and consumption practices. In the analysis, which draws on qualitative empirical data from extensive fieldwork in a mainstream nightclub in Copenhagen, Denmark, it is shown how the drinking subjects' capacity to initiate and sustain a number of – *social, musical and sexual* – relationships are altered by the consumption of alcohol in relation to the specific assemblage in which this consumption is enacted.

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### Introduction

In this article, I argue that drunkenness is not just about drinking. Instead, I propose to conceptualize drunkenness as a practice in which a body's capacities to act are continually reformed in assemblages of alcohol, space, other people and more. This understanding of drunkenness is unfolded theoretically and examined empirically in an analysis of young people's drinking practices in the night-time economy (NTE) of Copenhagen, Denmark. Most existing social science research on recreational alcohol consumption and drunkenness in the night-time economy is underpinned by theoretical frameworks highlighting either a set of *broader* – urban, social, political and economic – *forces* conditioning drinking in the NTE (of the UK) (e.g. Chatterton and Hollands, 2002, 2003; Hadfield, 2006; Hayward and Hobbs, 2007; Hobbs et al., 2000, 2005), or the varying socio-cultural *meanings* of intoxication (e.g. Hunt et al., 2014; Measham, 2004; Measham and Brain, 2005; Sulkunen, 2002; Szmigin et al., 2008). These studies – along with the large body of anthropological work on alcohol consumption (e.g. Douglas, 1987; Gusfield, 1987; Heath, 2000; Hunt and Satterlee, 1986; Sherratt, 1995; Wilson, 2005) – have generated important insights into youthful (binge-) drinking (in the NTE) on which the article draws. However, as Jayne et al. argue (2008,

2010), the embodied, sensorial and affective dimensions of drinking and how these facets incite and impact drinking practices and drunken subjectivities remain underdeveloped areas of research. Recently, a range of scholars have begun investigating alcohol and drunkenness on the basis of epistemologies and methodologies more capable of illuminating these bodily, material and emotional aspects of drinking, which, I claim, are essential for a full understanding of the contexts, practices and subjects of drinking in the NTE (Bøhling, 2014; Demant, 2013; Duff, 2012; Hubbard, 2005; Jayne et al., 2008, 2010, 2012; Latham and McCormack, 2004; Leyshon, 2008; Tan, 2013a, 2013b; Tutenges, 2013).

Building on this emerging body of work, I suggest understanding drunkenness as an *embodied practice* which (constantly) evolves *in relation* to a specific drinking context to transform the drinking subject's emotional, psychical, physical, social and sexual capacities and action potentials. To make these points, the concept of *assemblage* and other ideas from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1977, 1998) are mobilized. The paper thus also feeds on and contributes to the growing field of drug (and to a lesser degree alcohol) research applying Deleuzo-Guattarian terminology to become attentive to a broader range of elements active in consumption events, and more sensitive to the unstable yet repetitive practices and interactions through which intoxicated geographies and subjectivities are continually (re-)formed (e.g. Duff, 2007, 2014a, 2014b; Fitzgerald, 1998; Keane, 2005; Malins, 2004a, 2004b). Moreover, in a bid to move beyond the dichoto-

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mous problematic-unproblematic understanding of (heavy) alcohol consumption permeating both policy and practice (Measham, 2004), the article proposes to investigate drunkenness through the lens of an ‘immanent ethics’ in which alcohol is assumed to potentially (and simultaneously) have both positive and negative effects depending on the situation. Accordingly, two related questions are explored:

- (1) How is drunkenness produced (and continually reproduced) by interactions between a broad range of elements of the nightclub-assemblage under study?
- (2) In what ways does the process of becoming drunk increase and/or decrease the drinking subjects’ (social, musical and sexual) capacity to act (in relation to the specific assemblage)?

In the course of answering these questions the two main arguments are elaborated: First, I assert that drunkenness – and the bodily and social transformations associated with intoxication – do not stem solely from the consumption of alcohol, but emerges in alcoholic assemblages comprised of a variety of human and nonhuman, material and immaterial actors and forces. Second, it is claimed that alcohol has ambiguous and unpredictable effects contingent on the particular assemblage of consumption.

The article has two main parts. First, after the introduction, the notion of assemblage is fleshed out with special attention to how it can be used to conceptualize drinking contexts, practices and subjects. It is argued that the concept of assemblage provides a suitable ontological and epistemological framework to account for the many – not least the often understudied aesthetic, embodied, nonhuman and affective – dimensions shaping drinking practices. The second main part of the paper is the analysis, which draws on qualitative ethnographic data from my research on the use of alcohol and other drugs (AOD) in bars and clubs in Copenhagen, Denmark. In the analysis, different components of the nightclub-assemblage and their dynamic interactions are traced while the ambiguous emotional, bodily, social and sexual transformations interweaved with the process of becoming drunk are discussed.

### Theoretical framework: alcoholic assemblages

According to Deleuze and Guattari, the purpose of the concept of assemblage (and concepts in general) is to experiment with ways to illuminate ‘the circumstances in which things happen’ and to express ‘an event rather than an essence’ (Deleuze, 1995, p. 25). More specifically, the term designates an ‘amorphous collection of juxtaposed pieces that can be joined together in an infinite number of ways’ (Deleuze and Guattari, 1998, p. 476). We may think of an assemblage then, as (a concept inquiring into the workings of) a *dynamic* socio-spatial arrangement (for example a city or a nightclub) characterized by a *co-functioning* across differences and distances of heterogeneous elements (for more extensive discussions of the concept in relation to recent geographical and social theoretical scholarship see Anderson et al., 2012; Anderson and McFarlane, 2011; Dewsbury, 2011; Duff, 2014b; Marcus and Saka, 2006). In light of this, the figure of the assemblage may seem like an unusual choice for a paper exploring the inherently *subjective* phenomenon of drunkenness. However, as will be argued in the following sections, the concept, which Deleuze advances as ‘the minimum real unit’ of analysis (Deleuze and Parnet, 2002, p. 51), engenders an ontological and epistemological framework suited to make sense of drinking *settings*, *subjects* and *practices*.

Researchers have drawn upon the notion of assemblage and other Deleuzo-Guattarian ideas since the late 1990’s to enable investigations more sensitive to the chaotic and complex nature of

AOD use events, contexts, bodies and practices (e.g. Duff, 2007, 2014a, 2014b; Farrugia, 2014; Fitzgerald, 1998; Fox, 2002; Fraser et al., 2014; Keane, 2005; Malins, 2004a, 2004b; MacLean and Moore, 2014; McLeod, 2014; Oksanen, 2013; Shaw, 2014). A key argument running through most of this work, is that ‘assemblage thinking’ breathes life into the objects under study by stressing how for example psychoactive substances, users and contexts, are *processual* phenomena continually mutating in ongoing and contingent interactions with each other and an array of other actors and forces (e.g. Duff, 2014a). This accent on the *dynamic* and unpredictable nature of AOD assemblages is essential for the present paper’s conceptualization of drunkenness as a phenomenon (and experience) always in flux. It implies an ontological move which – by taking seriously the *temporal* aspects of drinking and drug use events – replaces notions of being, actuality and fixity with ideas of becoming, virtuality and process. As a consequence, the paper understands drunkenness not as a state of being but as a continuous mode of corporeal, affective and subjective *expansion* and *contraction* which, in relation to particular assemblages, (continually) increases and/or decreases the drunken subject’s capacity to act in, feel and affect its surroundings.

This, however, does not mean that drunken subjects can become anything they choose, and that drinking practices in the night-time economy are not structured politically, socially, spatially and economically (e.g. Chatterton and Hollands, 2003; Hadfield, 2006; Hobbs et al., 2000). Rather, the assemblage, as Deleuze and Guattari note (1998, p. 88, emphasis in original) ‘has both *territorial sides* ... which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of deterritorialization*, which carry it away’. In other words, the above-mentioned analytical attunement to drunkenness as a lively process of becoming has to be balanced by a focus on how *patterns* are enacted within nightlife assemblages and intoxicated subjectivities. Accordingly, I argue that the political and ethical implications of drinking should be interrogated by tracing the kinds of becomings particular assemblages open up or foreclose and the actors and forces orchestrating these possible forms of (drunken) subjectivity and sociality. The organization of assemblages is induced not least by the range of human, social and technological *practices* which literally and repeatedly produce (nightlife) assemblages and drunken subjects (Fraser et al., 2014; Race, 2011a). While the notion of practice in this way injects a measure of stability and predictability in assemblages, it should not be confused with ideas of fixity and immutability. Instead, the proposition that the world is *always in the making* – that assemblages are constantly being assembled – instills a latent potential for ‘could be otherwise’ and a fundamental non-linear model of causality at the heart of the concept. Put differently, assemblages (and drunkenness) can be said to emerge from *ongoing* and *open-ended* (inter)actions of humans, alcohol, space, discourses and music.

Following this line of thought, (AOD use) assemblages are defined less by a set of pre-established qualities and more by continuous *encounters* between a range of – biological, psychological, material, immaterial and socio-economic – elements. In the literature on alcohol and other drugs, scholars have built upon this idea to underscore how AOD use must be seen as practices comprised of much more than just the substance or the user. For example, as Malins notes (2004a, p. 89): ‘Within each drug assemblage, the body connects up not only to the drug (its texture, its smell, its taste, its appearance, its speed) but also to other bodies and machines – people, substances, knowledges, institutions’ (see also Duff, 2008, 2012). Correspondingly, as the analysis will go on to demonstrate, the agency involved in drinking in the night-time economy cannot be attributed to any single element, but should be understood as a combinatory effort continually produced *in-between* the many different parts (some of them assemblages themselves) of the nightclub assemblage. What’s more, the

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