

AN OASIS OF BEER IN THE DESERT OF THE REAL?

Chris Land

Anglia Ruskin University

Vegas Brews: Craft Beer and the Birth of a Local Scene

By Michael Ian Borer (New York University Press, 2019)

Whilst the impact of the COVID pandemic on bars and breweries remains unclear, the growth of craft beer in recent years has been phenomenal. From a handful of micro-breweries in the 1980s, craft beer has exploded, creating new styles of beer and nurturing a cultural desire for the authentic and local, distinguished from the seas of ‘golden suds’ pumped out by industrial beer factories. Today the Brewers Association estimate ‘craft’ accounts for a quarter of the beer market by value, and employs over 150,000 people, in the US alone.

In *Vegas Brews*, Borer draws upon four years of ethnographic research, conducted between 2010 and 2014, to analyze how a ‘craft’ beer scene became established in Las Vegas, a place that would appear upon first glance to be a rather inhospitable environment for anything trading on authenticity. Jean Baudrillard famously characterized Vegas as ‘the desert of the real,’ a characterization that Borer rejects, whilst recognizing how it shapes external perceptions of his home city. His research combines full participant observation with multiple interviews with scene participants, particularly the ‘aesthetic entrepreneurs’ who established and consolidated

craft beer in Vegas, opening breweries and bars, hosting bottle-shares, or organizing craft-beer festivals and food-and-beer pairings at high-end restaurants. This list gives an indication of the range of activities Borer studied, but it is the depth of his own participation in the scene that really gives this book its flavor. He attended Cicerone certified beer appreciation classes, participated in bottle-shares, travelled across the US to beer festivals, and even brewed his own beer at home, risking domestic peace with exploding bottles and a pervasive smell of malt and hops in his living room.

This depth of engagement is the real strength of *Vegas Brews*: its attention to the lived realities of his city, the embodied practices of *tasting* as an on-going interaction with the scene's 'consecrated object', and the work involved in *doing* and *performing* scene. Methodologically this sets Borer apart from those doing what he calls 'drive-by scholarship' (p.49): spending a few days on Las Vegas' famous 'Strip', amongst the gamblers, partygoers and prostitutes, and judging of the whole city on that basis. In contrast, Borer lives in Vegas and attends to the quotidian social relationships, dispersed across the city, and lived through repeat interactions, embedded in the rhythms of everyday life. This attention to the specificities of place allows Borer to tell a different story of Las Vegas than those we are used to hearing, but also a novel tale of urban change. He contrasts the scene in Vegas with the dominant 'hipster' narrative of the creative city, where artists and craft-brewers act as agents of gentrification, colonizing old city-centers, driving up rents, and displacing the working class and ethnic minorities who had built a home there. Vegas' more suburban scene appears much more diverse than other accounts of craft beer scenes (p.68 and chapter 4). In a city dominated by the 'power elite' of the Strip, large casinos, and a pay-to-play commercial culture, 'craft' emerges as an attempt to establish a human-scale community and industry, anchored in the concrete realities of the Nevada desert,

with its distinctive flora, fauna, and nuclear test sites, and in the everyday practices of those who work, play, love and live in the city. In that respect, the book is as much about how we understand place and belonging, as it is about beer.

This attention to the distinctiveness of Las Vegas does not mean that Borer treats the scene like a bubble. One of the main contributions of this book is to deepen our understanding of the idea of *localism* by situating the local within a wider *trans-local* grand scene (the focus of chapter 3). Borer balances the distinctive and local nature of the scene with its position in a wider network of local scenes that collectively constitute the *grand* scene. A ‘local scene cannot depend upon its local breweries alone for its vitality’ (p.120) because it needs a wider range of beers than local breweries can provide but also because the trans-local network of meaning and value to valorize its own existence. The willingness of distributors and brewers to supply Vegas is itself an acknowledgement that the Vegas scene has arrived and is on the craft beer map alongside, if not equal to, established beer-meccas like Denver. Borer’s development of the trans-local in his analysis helps us to think through the paradoxes and limitations of positioning analysis within more established dualisms of local/global or cosmopolitan/provincial.

Perhaps the greatest contribution of Borer’s book, however, is his ambition to replace a sociology of *taste* with an embodied sociology of *tasting*. Positioning his analysis against Bourdieu’s conception of taste as distinction, Borer writes that, ‘Taste isn’t merely a disembodied and decontextualized marker of difference or social status... taste is performed together, and *tasting* is the binding activity’ (p.68-9). There are plenty of examples of status in the book, of course. Borer recognizes that drinking any craft beer ‘fits squarely into the luxury category’ (p.161) and chapter 4 examines the status hierarchies both within the scene, and between members and outsiders. His point here is rather that the material practices and

interaction rituals of *tasting* enable a form of social cohesion around a ritualized engagement with the scene's 'consecrated object': craft beer (p.217). This attention to the materiality of tasting and object interaction is threaded throughout the text, with beautifully written depictions of practices like sipping, chinking glasses, sharing from glasses, savoring aromas, mouthfeel, and even intoxication. With these, Borer captures both the symbolic and embodied aspects of social interaction around a 'core object' (p.216). For example, when describing his first sip of a class of Hop Ride IPA, Borer describes how:

The grapefruit-like hops penetrate my nose. The almost white frothy head sticks to the hair above my upper lip, a small drip trickles down my beard. I use my forearms to wipe it away while I savor the pleasant bite of the bitter after taste. (p.82)

This evocative, sensual engagement with the core object of the craft beer scene is something that would only have been possible with a fully immersive, embodied approach to the research topic, and something that can be neglected in more symbolically oriented approaches to drinking studies. Without suggesting that Borer is inattentive to status hierarchies however, I was left wondering whether this emphasis on the micro-interactions had missed some of the broader social, political, and economic implications of the craft beer scene. When he writes about the distractions caused to his appreciation of a rare beer release by those around him who are smoking, gambling, drinking Bud-Lite or worse, 'nursing... a glass of red wine with floating ice cubes' (p.104), Borer is both acknowledging and reproducing the inside-outside distinctions that demarcate a scene grounded in *taste*. Despite chapter four's focus on status, the intersection of belonging and other social divisions is given short shrift. A closer attention to class, professional, and racial divisions might have offered more sociological cleavage in Borer's analysis, or at least

enabled us to understand why Vegas appears so much more inclusive than craft beer scenes in other cities and countries.

This is particularly pertinent in light of Borer's otherwise wonderful depiction of the paradoxical combination of re-enchantment and magic associated with the consecration of craft beer as an object of desire, and the labor of producing, or co-producing that object. Chapter 6 attends to the performance of production to educate consumers about how beer is made, the different styles and ingredients etc. For craft beer drinkers, the ability to meet and form relationships with brewers, who in turn share their knowledge and passion for beer, is central to their relationship with the object of desire. I understood this as a reversal of the Marxist idea of commodity fetishism, in which the object is separated from the social relations of its production and set free as if it were an autonomous agent in the marketplace, carrying its values as almost mystical, intrinsic qualities divorced from its producer. Craft beer, rather, appears to be de-fetishized, as its value is established through reference to a relationship with producers that is performed through interactions within the scene, on brewery tours, or in tap-rooms where the bar is separated from the brewery only by a glass wall. This reinsertion of commodities into their social relations of production and consumption reenchants and de-fetishizes, but could potentially fetishize the producer and *their* performance of being an authentic craft brewer.

Whilst these movements are delightfully captured in Borer's detailed descriptions of the scene, I was left wondering if everyone can *do* and *perform* the scene equally. I was reminded of Richard Ocejo's (2017) ethnographic study of a New York whole-animal butchery, trading on the artisanal craftsmanship of its workers and unconventional, specialist cuts of meat. Ocejo reports that the Mexican butchers were the quickest, and most effective, craftsmen in the shop when it came to cutting and preparing meat. Having honed their skills in mass-production, meat-

packing plants, their skills were unsurpassed. What they lacked, however, was the required persona to sell high-cost, high-quality meat to the bourgeoisie of New York. Despite being inferior craftsmen, the middle-class, white workers were the ones who could better perform the symbolic, communicative labor of educating customers in service-interactions. Borer's assertion that the Las Vegas craft beer scene 'is a diverse mix of races, ethnicities, genders, and occupations' (p.68) suggests a very different situation, in a very different city, but I would have liked a clearer analysis of why that is the case, or whether there is still a sense in which the performative work required to do *aesthetic* labor and entrepreneurship in the scene reproduced hidden inequalities in participation.

Overall, this is a commendable text that will be indispensable to anyone researching urban redevelopment, consumption, brewing or the role of community and scene in cultural production and innovation. It should also be on every ethnographic research methods reading list. I will be using this with my own PhD students for years to come, both as an inspiration to, and an exemplar of, ethnographic research, and as a study in analyzing the material and symbolic aspects of social interactions in tandem.

REFERENCES

Ocejo, Richard. 2017. *Masters of Craft: Old Jobs in the New Urban Economy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTOR

Chris Land is Professor of Work and Organization at Anglia Ruskin University. His research is focused on the sociology of work, with a particular interest in the post-digital imaginaries of neo-craft industries. He has written about work-life balance in an ethical fashion business, gender inequality in craft brewing, digital labor on Facebook, and the challenges of making work more democratic. He is currently researching the role of material objects in social organization, through the lens of commodity fetishism.