

ANCIENT & MODERN
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Thought-crimes mainly refer to what we all think about those stupid laws and bossy official directives only designed for your benefit, sir. Romans did not face these but rather what George Orwell in *1984* understood by thought-crime: wholly innocent activities interpreted as threats to state security. The historian Tacitus is full of them.

When one of Rome's best-loved sons, Germanicus, mysteriously died, many suspected the jealous emperor Tiberius was involved. So in AD 28, when a distinguished Roman, Titius Sabinus, started helping out the widow and family, some ambitious public figures saw a chance to prove their loyalty to the emperor by stitching up Sabinus good and proper. One of them, Lucianus Latiaris, started privately sympathising with Sabinus. Sabinus responded in kind, and 'these exchanges of forbidden confidences seemed to cement a close friendship. So Sabinus now sought out Latiaris' company and unburdened his sorrows to this apparently trustworthy friend'.

The schemers now had to find a way to publicise this obvious threat. So they hid three senators in the roof of Sabinus's bedroom. There Latiaris engaged him in their usual conversation, Sabinus unfolded the usual grievances—and they had their man. The reaction in Rome was one of pure terror. 'People avoided all meetings and conversations, shunned friends and strangers... when Sabinus was led away, there was a stampede, and all roads and public places were immediately evacuated. But then people returned to them, alarmed that they had displayed alarm.' Sabinus was never heard of again.

This, for Tacitus, was symptomatic of the world of the emperors, where, in the satirist Juvenal's words, 'men's throats were slit by a whisper'. As Tacitus brilliantly comments, 'Rome of old explored the limits of freedom, but we the depths of slavery, robbed even of the exchange of ideas by informers. We would have lost memory itself as well as our tongues, had it been as easy to forget as it was to remain silent.' Orwell would have understood.

Nowadays it seems to be everybody's democratic duty to subvert the state. But question an airport security official? Down you go, mate.

Drunk and orderly

In the adult world of the pub, under-18s can learn to drink alcohol responsibly

BRENDAN O'NEILL

Why are so many young people so bad at getting drunk? No sooner have they necked a couple of lagers or downed a bottle of sickly alcopop than they start parading through the streets, skirts up or trousers down. There's no dignity to their drunkenness. They get obviously, stupidly drunk. Things have got so bad that this week the British Red Cross — more used to helping out in disaster zones — suggested teaching young people 'alcohol first aid', to give them the 'ability and confidence to cope in a [drinking] crisis'.

The inability of today's yooof to consume booze in an adult fashion is, ironically, a by-product of the authorities' war on underage drinking. New Labour and the Liberal-Conservative coalition have promoted a zero-tolerance attitude towards teenage drinking. They have introduced stiff punishments for any public house that dares to pull a pint for a 15-, 16- or 17-year-old. They have increased the powers of the police to shut down such dastardly institutions and given local councils the right to revoke their licences.

As a consequence, pubs have become no-go zones for those who inhabit the purgatorial zone between childhood and adulthood. And that's a disaster, because it was traditionally in pubs that young people learned how to handle their drink. In the grown-up world of the boozier, teenagers were taught adult skills: how to conduct themselves socially, how to converse with other adults, how to flirt and how to drink in a way that wasn't embarrassing. No amount of alcohol training by the Red Cross can replace that informal education of old.

Now, permanently barred from pubs, underage boozers booze only with each other, in their bedrooms, in parks, in car parks, under bridges, in the shadows of public monuments. Not surprisingly, this has nurtured a generation of drinkers who drink in the most juvenile fashion.

Last week, the consultation period for the Lib-Cons' proposed reforms to the licensing laws — published in July under the title 'Rebalancing the Licensing Act' — comes to a close. One of the key proposals is to punish even more harshly public houses that 'persistently sell alcohol to children'. The Lib-Cons want to increase the power of the police to shut down any pub suspected of serving underage drinkers. At the moment, cops can force pubs to close for 48 hours. The

Lib-Cons want them to make that a week. The government also wants to raise the fine for institutions that sell drink to under-18s from £10,000 to £20,000.

The Lib-Cons are following in the footsteps of New Labour. It was Blair, in 2004, who first gave police the right to close pubs 'on the spot' if they were caught serving alcohol to anyone under 18. Claiming that alcohol overconsumption had become 'the new British disease', Blair saw himself as the cure.

Emboldened by New Labour's new laws, police launched sting operations to catch out pubs serving booze to underagers. Some police forces sent 17-year-olds into public houses to see if they could successfully order a pint (where do they find these young squares willing to do the cops' dirty work?). In a massive eight-week sting operation in late 2004, police forces around the country sent youngsters into 650 alcohol-serving institutions. Fifty-one per cent of these institutions committed the unspeakable crime of providing some form of distilled beverage to an individual who was not 18.

In such a climate, it's no wonder that more and more pubs now keep their doors firmly closed to teenagers. This is bad news. Going to the pub at the age of 15 or 16 was once an important step towards adulthood. When I first started experimenting with booze — just shy of my 16th birthday — it was in Irish pubs in Kilburn or trendy pubs in Camden. Surrounded by grizzled-looking 50-year-old Irishmen or beautiful 25-year-olds sipping fancy Belgian beer, your instinct is to fit in rather than to stand out. I'll never forget when, aged 16, I was in the toilet of a pub called The Hendon in north London, feeling and looking worse for wear. Two men in their twenties looked at me and said: 'He couldn't even drink holy water.' Ouch. That told me far more about the need to grow up than any government minister's warning about binge-drinking could have done.

The landlords who for decades let under-18s into their pubs were breaking the law. But they weren't being immoral. By allowing wide-eyed youngsters to develop their social skills in a serious setting, they provided a useful social, intergenerational service. Today, teens have been forced into teen-drinking ghettos. Drinking on their own, brutally separated from the adult world, they have become childish boozers. It's time to let them back into pubs.