

PUB-Topos

**Art Research, the Public House and the Dialectics of Knowledge,
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Abstract

This paper invites critical reflection on the “public house,” (pub) as an already existing alternative space of knowledge production, and on “pub knowledge” as that which is informally and unquantifiably produced in the pub and, furthermore, remains unquantified within the confines of the pub. If U-Topos encourages thinking “the not-yet visible and the not-yet valuable,” then PUB-Topos in oblique comparison encourages thinking “the dialectically visible and the relationally invaluable.”

We identify the notion of night-time idea exchange - half-remembered and not infrequently fuelled by alcohol - that later issues moments of clarity previously absent in a body of research, as part of a Western tradition of knowledge-making as a dialectical process. However a growing dominance of measurement-culture has, wilfully or otherwise, threatened the dialectic process and relegated the role of the public house and pub knowledge. We advocate a reconsideration of this shift.

Set within the pub and taking the form of a Socratic dialogue between two art researchers, our account gathers anecdotes, reflections and works of fiction in order to construct a notion of “pub knowledge”, and to show that the now-denigrated space-time of the pub was historically regarded as an environment of invention and creation. We cite the English diarist Samuel Pepys for a sense of the public significance of the pub. We present microbiologist Francois Jacob’s (1988) contention of “good science” - as “impressions [that] give way to wonder” (306) stemming from the relational working of the conscious, progressive, future-forward reasoning of “day science” with the self-questioning, hesitant and stumbling intuition of “night science” in a “workshop of the possible”- as a significant contribution to the theorisation of dialectical efficiency standards. We similarly locate a construction of knowledge production between sobriety and drunkenness in Herodotus’s account of the role of alcohol in the decision making processes of Persian leaders (440 BC), whereby counsellors make decisions by exercising two states of mind: one sober, the other drunk. Both texts resist the utopian promise of one state of mind over the other by placing value in thinking knowledge-production as a cross-contaminating dialectics.

Following this theoretical framing, we examine pub knowledge and its critical potential within a terrain that increasingly computes day science with sobriety=quantity=knowledge. Through this ideological lens of knowledge as quantified, we see the pub re-positioned as an oppositional site, for it 1) produces

and shelters “pub knowledge” and 2) calls into question the methodological protocols of knowledge acquisition. At the same time, informed by Jacques Rancière’s (1981) analysis of the nineteenth-century French proletarian history of nights snatched from the normal round of work and repose, of “nights of studying, nights of boozing” (viii), we observe that from the perspective of dialectical knowledge, the pub has become a refuge not only for night/intoxicated knowledge, but for dialectical knowledge itself.

Finally, we ask: Might pub knowledge be appropriated in order to enrich the sober academic environment? If so what risks does its formalisation pose to the pub’s potential as a site of resistance to the ideology of knowledge as measurable?

Keywords: *art research, public house, night science, drunkenness, sobriety*

Key references

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