Indie Capitalism and Craft Beer Drinkers in Vermont

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Abstract- Using craft beer in Vermont as a nexus, this project is an ethnography of both craft beer brewers, breweries and drinkers in order to come to an understanding of paradoxical synthesis of both anti-corporate sentiments and undeniably capitalistic Drives. Results from fieldwork and interviews show that while breweries firmly see themselves engaged in a revolutionary locality and a level of artistry, some craft beer drinkers have difficulty articulating exactly what they like about craft beer. Craft beer drinkers often defer to the status symbolism craft beer provides, contrasting the craft beer drinker's 'enlightened consumption' against the perceived ignorance and indifference of drinkers of non-craft 'shit beer.' Craft beer drinkers often relate that, while craft beer is typically much more expensive, its ineffable superiority is 'worth it.' This mentality obscures and negotiates class and status distinctions within the craft beer movement. This project concludes by describing how resisting alienation and oppression in one place often recreates them in another, thus reaffirming the centrality of capitalistic ideology in our understanding and interactions within society.
Introduction: Good Intents Misspent

This project, like any worthwhile inquiry, begins with a paradox. This is an ethnography about beer—craft beer—and the people that drink it. It is about how they drink it and why they drink it as situated in Vermont. It is also more than that. This is a project about how movements, which at their onset reject the tenets of capitalist production, are ultimately reintegrated into and diversify the capitalist mode. Craft beer, in essence, can be understood as a reaction, a countermovement, to mass-production, mass-appeal models (Rice, 2016). The vocation of brewing, like all vocations according to Marx, “[has been] stripped of its halo” by the Bourgeoisie and capitalistic models of production characteristic of modernity (Kamenka, 206; 1983). However, relatively recently there has been a trend within brewing, craft-brewing, that seeks to rectify capitalist alienation of labor by way of a remarriage between the producer and the means of production that is inherit in craft brewing. This remarriage implies a smaller scale of production, but this is a worthy compromise for those involved. The producer gains control over production and therefore regains pride in his labor.

The consumer appreciates this communion between producer and product, and likewise gains a sense of pride in their consumption. The spatial arrangement of craft breweries and taprooms (spaces designated for the tasting of craft beer) places the consumer within view of the site of production; the nature of the consumed product is not obfuscated by factory walls, long distances and the alienation of the worker. These are artisan products produced by empowered workers, who exert control over what they produce, how they produce it and how much of it they produce. This can be understood as mitigating the intervention of the contract to a certain extent by eliminating predetermined paths of production—what they produce is entirely informed by their vocational and creative enterprise, their control over the means of production prevents
outside forces from dictating the expression of their vocation. As it is understood by the success of the craft beer industry in Vermont, this control over the craft and independent production is embraced by the consumer, an arrangement that has been described by Bean as “indie-capitalism”, the sort of DIY competitive model elsewhere embodied in satires such as Portlandia and websites like Etsy.com (Bean, 2012). The result is an intimate business model: the producer creates the product he desires, a niche brew, a unique experience, and the consumer appreciates this vision as a break in the monotony of mass-produced, mass-appeal, alienated products (products produced by the alienated worker) that are typically available to him or her. In short, for a time, craft breweries break free from the constraints of mass-production and can experience fulfillment in their labor. However, their struggle to free themselves from constraint, in the end, becomes their very shackles.

It has been observed that biggest flaw in Marx’s analyses was that Marx never anticipated how clever capitalism and capitalist could be, thus his timeline for the collapse of the capitalist system went unrealized (Prychitko, 1991). The niche proliferation that this freedom of production allows for eventually succumbs to commodity fetishism, albeit, in form that has evolved outside of Marx’s purview. While Marx asserted than in order for the capitalist mode to sustain itself, it would have to continually create and exploit new markets (Kamenka, 1983). What Marx didn’t realize was that these new markets could literally built on top of each other by narrowing the range of specification and appeal than an individual product has. What under the mass-produced model was a market for beer is transfigured into a market for IPAs, double IPAs, French-style saisons, Pilsners, gluten-free Hefeweizens etc. Each doesn’t consume a larger market share but constitutes new markets themselves, fragmenting the once generalized market
into a mosaic of options; every iteration of a form by each brewery is a transfigured commodity to be sought after by the ‘enlightened’ consumer.

This where this backlash against the mode becomes fetishized and thus reintegrated into capitalistic discourse. This endless variety, existing at a small scale of production results in a norm of scarcity within the de-alienated industry. To combat a product from being lost in the torrent of variety, breweries brand themselves, adorning packaging with eye-catching logos and artwork in order to maximize their desirability in the eyes of the consumer. This is a trend that coincides with Debord’s notion of the “spectacle” (2012). In fact, most jobs in the craft brewing industry relate to the business side of things than the brewing. Marketing and advertisement are central to insuring the liberated product makes into the consumer’s view. The craft beer drinker charges himself with exploring this variety. As he completes his tour, he adds to his collection, puts notches in the proverbial belt. A level of dedication is intrinsic in this endeavor; the craft beer drinker thus elevates himself through his ritualistic search for new beer by turning his fetishism, by virtue of his enlightened pursuit, into a symbol of greater status.

A class of craft beer drinkers is a created. It is a class is not linked purely economic class, regardless of the fact that craft beer is on average more expensive than its mass-produced counterpart. Its axis of difference is drawn between them, the drinkers of craft beer, and of those who drink mass-produced ‘shit.’ Gusfield observed that sobriety and intemperance has been be used as a means of status differentiation (1986). Bourdieu, likewise argued that taste- precisely what alcohol a person drinks, can be tools of status and class differentiation; sources of cultural capital (1984). In this way, the craft beer drinker reaffirms his own status, part of the enlightened class of consumers, by making deviant those that do not engage in his pursuit. He chastises those that do not drink craft beer and reaffirms his own elevated status in the process, an example of
conspicuous consumption. The craft beer drinker proves his own anti-capitalistic sentiments by
spending money on fetishized craft beer, thus its own patrons reintegrate the innately anti-
capitalist craft brewery into the capitalist mode.

An Ethnography of Craft Brew Culture in Vermont

This study employs an ethnographic method in order to study and gain a well-rounded
understanding of craft beer and craft beer culture in the state of Vermont. A variety of
ethnographic techniques were used to ensure an in-depth and multifaceted look at the culture
being studied. As with any ethnographic study, the techniques employed are used specifically to
allow the unbiased collection of data, the research is conducted without a guiding intent or
assumptions about the subject being studied as some assumptions may preclude a wealth of data
and information. To filter out data without knowing what is and is not significant to the study is
counterproductive to the research. In other words, the techniques of ethnography allow for
inductive research rather than deductive research, creating possibilities rather than eliminating
them. These techniques include simple observations and participant observation at relevant sites
as well as informal conservational interviews with individuals encountered at these sights, after
which field notes were typed and then encrypted to both document data from these field visits
and to protect the individuals interacted with in the field. Field notes were steadily gathered
throughout the course of the study and constituted a significant part of the data collected.

Many different sites were visited in order to gain data about craft beer drinkers in and
outside of the craft brewery. In total seven different craft breweries in the state of Vermont were
visited, some more than once. Owing to the fact that I was underage at the commencement of
this study, a ‘key’ was needed to gain access to breweries and negate any suspicions from the
brewery’s employees, the ‘gatekeepers.’ This key came in the form of Marcus, a university
student whom I’ve known for three years now. Marcus went to the breweries and I was the lame, dry friend who kept him company, a designated driver. The visits to these breweries often lasted about an hour or two. Marcus would order about two beers, sometimes a flight (a set of four 4oz. glasses) and we’d make small talk while I observed the setting and its characters. During these visits I covertly took notes on my smartphone, making it look like I was text messaging. Occasionally Marcus would describe his thoughts and perceptions about the beer and the venue, often acting as a sturdy wall to bounce my observation off of.

The breweries we visited together were in different parts of the state, some in Burlington VT, and others in more rural, off-the-beaten-path areas. Each had their own unique personality and model. These finer details of brewery were often solidified in the conversations Marcus and I had on the drive back. We discussed what we saw on the walls of the taproom, the conversations we eavesdropped from other patrons. On occasion we’d discuss the character of the bartenders and the smells in air. Very rarely did we harangue the beer itself, though, in the case of a truly maverick brew, Marcus would speak of it with delight. At one Burlington brewery in particular, I built a rapport with a bartender over the course of my visits. He recognized me as ‘the kid who came in and never got anything.’ I confessed my intentions, ‘a researcher’ and what I thought I would regret was in fact a saving grace, the bartender spoke at length of why he loved craft beer, why he chose to work and live in Vermont.

On one occasion, Marcus and I were persuaded by one of his friends, B, to go to a “Brew-Ha-Ha,” a festival dedicated to local food and drink on the shore of Lake Champlain. This summit of Vermont craft breweries and Vermont craft beer drinkers proved to be an especially rich site to visit. However, given my handicap, being a minor, all observation was kept to a minimum, interactions with beer drinkers was difficult and kept at a distance due to my own
fears of police presence. However, this distance allowed me to observe the sort of fanfare, reverence and variety that pulsed through this scene.

Other observations included the going-ons of a typical college student, the itinerary of the weekend and a social life provided opportunities rife with data. The college-party at a friend’s house or even a brush in with an acquaintance created a space for research: practices observed, discourses enacted, opinions aired and perceptions expressed. The five-minute visit to a friend-of-a-friend’s house ended up being some of the richest data collected during the course of the study, the minutiae of how they arranged their spaces, their speech and their actions around craft beer had me scrambling to get out and record what I saw and heard in a word processor.

Based on initial coding of early sets of field notes for emergent themes and potential categories for analysis, a formal interview guide was drawn up, then honed based on criticisms presented in an ethnographic workshop. The interview guide had questions that explored four broad categories: thoughts and perceptions about craft versus commercial brewing, good versus bad beer; thoughts and perceptions about where someone could get craft beer; perceptions and thoughts about notions of locality, Vermont, and an emphasis on buying, eating, and drinking ‘local’; drinking history and how the interviewee got into craft beer. The questions on the interview guide were honed over a couple of weeks in order to minimize redundancy and maximize the likelihood of the participant offering rich answers.

For this study, two full-length, formal interviews were conducted. Both interviewees volunteered to participate after a short introduction to the project. The interviews range from approximately 20 minutes to over 50. Interviews were recorded using a smart phone to a .wav file then transcribed as accurately as possible. Before transcribing, I allowed to a 48-hour period to ‘clear my head,’ in order to prevent transcription that recorded ‘what I thought I heard’ than
what was actually said. Nothing would be more detrimental than hastily basing transcriptions off of perceptions and memories from a fresh interview that cohere to what I wanted the participant to say; sometimes it is better to forget where one is in that very moment and experience it as a novel phenomenon.

The participants interviewed were both White males in their early 20s, university students living in Burlington, Vermont and self-proclaimed craft-beer enthusiasts. The first of these interviewees was Josef, a sociology student from Westchester County, New York. An acquaintance of Marcus, I was introduced to Josef during one of the aforementioned visits to a friend-of-a-friend’s house. Josef expressed interest in the study, an undertaking I revealed when I began asking questions about his collection of empty beer bottles. This first interview lasted over fifty minutes and length and provided a wealth of data. The second interview was with Will, a biology student from coastal Massachusetts, whom I’d been acquainted with since beginning my university studies. Will expressed interest when I bumped into him one afternoon. This interview was brief compared to Josef’s, but likewise expressed a different perspective of craft beer culture that was equally relevant to the study.

After transcribing these interviews, the data was again coded for emerging themes and categories. These categories were then cross-analyzed with my coded field notes to create the ‘big picture,’ the analytical framework yielded by inductive research. These emergent themes and observations were likewise weaved into the narrative and Marx-tinged critique of craft-beer culture in Vermont presented in the next section.
Findings and Analysis

The Setting: Craft Breweries

The nature of craft breweries, small scale and local breweries that output limited, boutique style beers situates both the producer and consumer closer to the means of production. This proximity can be both literal and symbolic. From my field notes, the spatial arrangement of two breweries were described as following:

“On walking inside, we were hit with the smell of toasting cereal and hops. The space was large and open. To the left of the entrance was mosaic of old beer cans. To the right was a horseshoe shaped bar top. Two bartenders, one male and one female, were attending six customers. Behind the bar were the brewing facilities, large metal cisterns that towered over us. There was little separation between the barroom and the actual production facility, there was only a low, waist-high wall. The brewing vats panged, a sound that occasionally interrupted the low conversation going on in the bar room.”

And

“Unlike the other taprooms, this was surprisingly humble. There was no seating and they only sold growlers [gallon jugs] and gave away medicine-cup sized samples of beer. The sales floor was small, maybe 20 feet long by 10 feet wide. The bar top was roughly the size of a twin-size bed. It was manned by two young women. Behind them, separated a half-wall, was the spacious brewing facility, which could be observed by a large Plexiglas window.”

A common spatial feature of the breweries visited was situating the production facilities in view of the consumption and purchasing areas. This places the consumer directly next to where their product was made, they know exactly where it came from. In the case of the first brewery describes, the date of production was labeled on the taps so the consumer knew how fresh the product was. In the case of the second, the date was written with sharpie onto the top of the bottle. This documentation of freshness and knowledge of production is integrated into the experience of the craft brewery, forming a level of intimacy between producer and consumer.

The two individuals interviewed reported an appreciation of this intimacy created by craft breweries. Josef stated that when picturing a craft brewery, he
“[Thinks] of something modest…there’s kind of a huge it, well it always smells like hops and like grains. It just reeks in there, you come out smelling like it…you can see the huge casks of beer being prepared.”

Likewise, Will reported a preference for craft breweries, stating:

“I feel like it’s cooler at a brewery, you can see the process of how they make it there, they’re brewing…if you go to a brewery, they know what hops are in it and how it was brewed, more personal, I guess. They know their beer…Breweries are cool though. They’re more personal, you can tell more about the beer, what they put into it. They care a lot about it. It’s more than just beer.”

In situating the consumer close to the means of production and keeping the production small, these craft breweries create a sense of their vocation and appreciation in the consumer. This type of intimacy elevates the product in the mind of the consumer by evoking a sense of a ‘smaller’ operation. As such, both interviewees reported craft breweries as being “modest” and “personal.”

It is worth mentioning that the décor utilized in the spaces of breweries often draws upon ‘local’ imagery and motifs, there is a conscious effort to create and affirm a place sense, whether it is hand-painted maps of where in Vermont ingredients are sourced or historic, sepia photos of Burlington, VT in the early 20th century. This effort is in line with Flack’s argument that craft breweries appeals are largely predicated on the creation and integration of a ‘neo-local’ place identity into their brands; the most successful craft beers are those that are intimately involved with and often limited to the places they’re brewed, or very close to them (1997). This can be viewed in breweries such as Long Trail, Magic Hat, Queen City, and Otter Creek in Vermont; Smuttynose and Henniker in New Hampshire; or Berkshire in Massachusetts.

This sort of small-scale, intimate business model can be viewed a reaction to the kind mass-production, low-quality corporatism that is perceived in domestic, national-scale breweries like Anheuser-Busch. In fact, many craft brewers see themselves as engaged in a revolutionary-act, “[returning] beer to its traditional, artisanal, local roots after decades of industrialization and
mass production” (Rice, 2015:240). While craft-brewers often see themselves as engaged in a revolutionary act, paradoxically, they have a sort of respect for the mass-scale consistency of conglomerate breweries and don’t feel the need for an animosity or antagonism, a feeling that conglomerate breweries do not share (Jones and Harvey, 2017). Craft beer drinkers, however, express a level of contempt and alienation from these mass-produced beers. One bartender encountered during my field visits expressed the sentiment succinctly “They don’t have any personality. They’re sad. They’re just piss.” ‘Piss’ or ‘piss water’ are common ways for describing mass-produced beer. These terms are synonymous with the broader pejorative category of mass-produced beer dubbed “Shit beer,” a comment on the perceived lack of quality craft beer drinkers see in nationally recognized, mass-produced brands. As Josef operationalized the dichotomy “there’s like ‘shit’ beer and then there’s craft beer.” On this topic, Will stated “I feel like big huge breweries just don’t really care, they put out of garbage. [Craft breweries] put a lot of work into it. It’s not just machines pumping out, like, mass-produced shit.” This perceived lack of quality is somewhat ironic considering that Anheuser-Busch touts itself as having the highest quality control in the industry, a quality control and consistency that even craft brewers recognize and appreciate (Jones and Harvey, 2017).

Uncertain Taste, Assured Quality

However, quality isn’t the only factor in craft beer enthusiast’s disdain for ‘mass-produced shit.’ Flavor is also a large component. Referring to the bartender’s notion that more national brands lack personality, the interviewees indicated an absence of enjoyable of flavor as a large reason they disliked mass-produced products. Will indicated that mass-produced beer are “watered-down, tasteless, bland.” Conversely, taste has much to do with what craft beer drinkers liked about craft beers. Josef described the ideal craft beer as:
“Like bitter, I think of like…the word dark isn’t right, but yeah. A bad beer has a single [flavor] profile, while a good beer, in a single sip, can have in the beginning a single taste that holds something different. And also…uh… desirable. You want both. The initial and the pos—after taste has to be good, otherwise it’s useless.”

The taste trajectory Josef described was filled by various adjectives, often relating to type of beer and, characteristically, the geography of production (Flack, 1997). American India Pale Ales (IPA) and especially Vermont IPAs are often described as bitter. However, as one bartender noted, American IPAs are in fact a bastardization of the form. He stated that European IPAs tend to be mellow with only a little hoppy punch and an alcohol content around 5%, while American IPAs have an “in your face” hop flavor and tend to have alcohol levels around 7-9%. Josef described California IPAs as “sandy,” while craft-style pilsners possessed a light, crisp “breadiness” a quality he acknowledged could be found in mass-produced pilsners, but did not have the same palpability their craft counterparts. Will, in contrast, tended not to isolate separate tastes, but focused more on types of beer and the sorts of flavor profiles that were implied by those categories of beer. He frequently mentioned he currently preferred saisons to IPAs because they had subtler profiles than the bold, bitter and hoppy IPAs that earlier mention the bartender stated were saturating the Vermont market.

While the interviewees did demonstrate knowledge about craft beer and could articulate their preferences and perceptions about flavor and taste, these articulations were at times inconsistent and blurry. When I pressed Josef about what he meant by ‘sandy’, an adjective he used specifically to describe Californian craft beers, he couldn’t give me a clear answer. Will told me an amusing story about his own brewing, where he once brewed a beer at the wrong temperature,

“I brewed some objectively shitty beer, but everyone said it was fine. Some asked for more… [The taste] was almost butterscotch. Buttery, kind of thick. It had this like, dairy after taste. I
think it was too hot when it was fermenting. I don’t know, over the summer it was 90 in here, yeast is only good at 70, so it didn’t taste good, but it was fine, people thought it was fine.”

Will admits he brewed the beer wrong. By conventional standard, it was bad. Yet, he reported the people whom he offered it to thought it was fine and didn’t mention the ‘butterscotch’ taste as a negative feature, some asked for seconds. This suggests that taste, the finesse of the craft, is not the predominant factor in the appeal of craft beer, or, as it was in Will’s case, the most infinitesimal form of craft: home brewing. Likewise, my field notes and my interviewees expressed other dimensions by which craft beer and specific craft beers appealed to them as a commodity.

Building Trophy Cases: Variety, Symbolism, and the Extra-Liquid Value in Craft Beer

The interviewees offered statements that fetishized variety in beer, both in style and in marketing. This variety is created by the breweries’ fragmenting markets and recreating submarkets on top of each other, which establishes a norm of rarity and scarcity that is surprisingly capitalistic in its function. Will observed succinctly this process, “craft breweries don’t try to appeal every type of beer drinker, they make what they want to…a lot of beers can be hard to get; you kind of have to know about them to find them.” This pursuit of variety, is central to their enjoyment of craft beer insofar that the craft beer drinker internalizes their own trophy case of what different craft beers they have consumed. This emphasis on variety and novelty, whether taste, brewery or packaging, was especially important to Will. He reported that

“Ever since I turned 21, I’ve been trying to get something new every time (I purchase beer). I try not to repeat, if I get something I like, I’ll get it again, but I try to get something new. I feel like packaging is a big deal, some beers have like crazy labels and stuff that’s like, just crazy. It’s like a candy store, it’s so hard to pick.”

And “Since I turned 21, I can pick out exactly what I want and get something new every time…we’re lucky to have all the good beer we have around here (Vermont), we’re lucky to be
able to try it and talk about it.” He reiterated his preference for novelty, stating “I like new. I’ve been trying some crazy beer lately, like habanero, habanero sculpin [a singular type of beer that is only produced by a craft brewery in NC].” He indicated that at times he prefers going to more craft-oriented bars than breweries, simply because the immediate variety of beers available to him,

“There’s the Beverage Barn, which is cool, they have over 20 different taps (options of beer in kegs). You get a flight of four and chill, drinking good beer…at a bar with good beer, you can try a bunch of different beers, not just from one brewery.”

A woman encountered during my field visits admitted, “After my favorite brewery stopped making their IPA, I made a conscious decision to try new things, I’d go after the most colorful box I saw.” Josef expressed a similar interest in variety, especially the appeal that variation in packaging provided

“Craft beers…they tend to, well, a lot of them have cool logos and cool names, like Lost Nation (VT Beer), I mean, look at this can [he points to his beer], it’s cool as hell” and “Burlington Beer Company (VT Beer) has these cool stark white cans and minimal tribal design, almost like, pagan symbol on the side that’s just an awesome. But not even just the logo, but the packaging itself. Like if it’s a little six cans in a tiny box, I like that.”

The role of packaging in craft beer, how it generates a large amount of its appeal, echoes Debord’s notion of the ‘Spectacle’ and commodity-images. Debord argues that the ‘spectacular’ marketing strategies involved deploying various commodities and images generate “moments of fervent exaltation similar to the ecstasies of convulsions and miracles of the old religious fetishism” (2012; 29). The way in which these products are marketed using attractive ‘cool’ imagery creates what Debord describes as intense “waves of enthusiasm” in the consumer (2012; 11). These elements of ‘coolness’ can be draw upon sign inventories that signify and associate with the beer everything from the local (neighborhood, city, region, state) to the esoteric and religious, e.g. from Otter Creek to The Alchemist (Flack, 1997; Schnell and Reese, 2003; Spitz,
2010) This can be clearly seen in the descriptions the interviewees provided. Variety is emphasized alongside the “shininess” of the packaging. The craft beer drinker thus engages a sort of “Gotta catch em’ all” mentality, developing his craft beer repertoire as if he were hoarding religious idols.

The imperative for variety, to try all varieties, to be surrounded by variety can be understood as a form of commodity fetishism. Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism starts as a miscommunication of religious fetishism between cultures, he toys with the image of New World tribes believing that Spaniards literally worshipped gold because of how much of it they stockpiled for themselves. He questions what these same tribes would think of the Germans, considering how central a commodity like wood was to their economy and culture. Marx polishes his theory to what the fetishized commodity does, or protects, under capitalism: it obscures the relationship between economic agents- producer, product, consumer and owner. It sedates this relationship like an opiate (Kamenka, 1983).

Situating this commodity fetishism in the innately anti-capitalistic occupation of craft brewing is somewhat paradoxical. As the craft brewer is not alienated from his work because he exerts control over the means of production, then a clandestine, duplicitous relationship between economic agents seems baseless, impossible. However, where in Marx’s classical notion of commodity fetishism explained the obfuscation as a means to blur the bourgeoisie’s exploitation of the worker, this instance exemplifies a development in capitalism that Marx did not anticipate: the producer is not exploited by the owner, but rather, the product is exploited by the consumer. The craft beer drinker, though appreciative, perverts the liberated-product by fetishizing it, imposing and engaging a symbolism of it- the beer becomes more than itself.
This can be seen in the earlier mentioned proverbial ‘trophy cases’ that craft beer drinkers build through their pursuit of variety. This trophy case, this craft beer repertoire, can be corporeal or mediated through developments in information technology, employing social media in a way that traverses Baudrillard’s notion of symbolic exchange (2016). Both Will and Josef reported using social media as an auxiliary in their experience of craft beer. Will indicated a use of platforms as Instagram to inform himself about new beers, stating that it allows him to know when breweries release new products and, in effect, mobilizes him to try the new variety wherever they are available. In addition to this Will utilized #brewstagram, an index marker used on Instagram to categorize image posts featuring craft beer and craft beer drinkers. #brewstagram post are shared within the craft beer community, searchable to those interested in the variety of craft beer in this country as well as abroad. As of the date this being written there are over 27,000 posts indexed under #brewstagram, this number steadily grows each day as craft beer drinkers everywhere document and publish their explorations into the variety of craft beer available. The exchange between users in the #brewstagram community constitutes a form a symbolic currency, the digital medium transmutes the beer drinkers’ repertoire into a symbol that can be appreciated or depreciated by other users in the form of ‘likes’ (approval markers) and comments. In effect, the craft beer drinker increases his own symbolic value by registering his experience in the variety of craft beer.

Likewise, Josef indicated a similar use of social media. However, Josef did not use a media platform with a broad range of potential applications and subject matter, but used the highly specified application UnTapped. UnTapped allows users to register what beers they have had and rate them on a scale of 1-5. These posts are only viewable by approved friends, effectively forming a virtual trophy case. Josef summarized,
“Untapped is a social media app that you put on your phone that has a huge database of beers from all over and you enter in a beer you just had, rate it, write down your notes and post it so your friends can see it. But I don’t use it to inform myself.”

Josef admitted the only times he uses social media to inform himself about beer is when he needs to find out the alcohol content of a given product so that it can be then incorporated into the details of his growing repertoire, whose expansion he indicated is largely influenced by a beer’s alcohol content; the more alcoholic the beer, the more likely he is to seek it out. This stands in contrast to the philosophy of some breweries and craft beer drinkers encountered in the field, who indicated *high alcohol content a good craft beer does not make.*

In a similar vein, craft beer drinkers constructed physical trophy cases of their repertoire in their homes. The so called ‘beer wall’ was a feature commonly observed in the field. The beer wall was often constructed in one of two ways: either a section of the packaging of a particular was cut-out and displayed on a wall or empty bottles arranged on a shelf. In either case, the beer wall functions to inform guests about a craft beer drinker’s accomplishment in and exploration of the world of craft beer. One brewery incorporated the form of the beer wall in their spatial arrangement, a prominent feature in view of the patrons was a large wall, about ten feet high and eight feet wide, inlayed with a mosaic of beer cans, some old and some new, some craft and others not. It is worth noting that in the beer walls observed in craft beer drinker’s homes, none incorporated beers that would not be considered craft by some beer drinkers, for example, the Vermont brewery Magic Hat. While the brewery’s beer wall could be viewed as an art installation, the beer drinker’s walls functioned primarily as trophy cases, physically manifesting and reaffirming their status as craft beer drinkers.
Differentiating Status: Enlightened Consumers and “Shit” Beer Drinkers

While craft beer drinkers employed various strategies to create status and symbolic value among themselves, far more interesting and salient within the data is the methods by which they used their status as craft beer drinkers to differentiate themselves from those with other ‘picks of poison.’ In his study of temperance movements in the United States during the 19th century, sociologist Daniel Gusfield observed that the division between sobriety and intemperance is often the site of status contrast and thus the construction of deviant and normative behaviors (1986). Likewise, in keeping with Bourdieu’s conception of taste, a status distinction can be created and subdivided to elevate or depreciate the status of those that preference a particular drink by imposing all sorts’ of secondary meanings and preconceptions onto that preference (1984). Craft beer drinkers were seen to construct their status through their conspicuous consumption of craft beer, consumption that symbolically proves status and prestige. By drinking a product that is made with care, they themselves embody a status as a “caring consumer.” This is constructed in contrast to those who do not care, those who drink the earlier mentioned “mass-produced shit.”

Josef described the ‘shit’ beer drinker as “your typical frat bro, a misogynist, basic ass who is really loud. And usually they’ll brag about how much beer they’ve had even though that beer is like 4% alcohol.” When Josef sees someone drinking a ‘shit’ beer he feels “a tinge of judgment…a tinge of cringe.” Will identified a similar deviance in ‘shit’ beer drinkers, stating “you’re drinking fucking water.” While Josef specifically attached a stereotype to the ‘shit’ beer drinker, both interviewees voiced that drinking mass-produced beers couldn’t be respected as much as drinking craft beer because of the perceived lack of quality and generally lower alcohol content, as if ‘shit’ beer drinkers might as well not drink beer. In contrast, when asked about
what they feel when they see a craft beer drinker they expressed approval and excitement. Will stated that “it gets me pretty pump; it’s good to see people drinking good beer.” Josef expressed a similar sentiment, but with a caveat. Josef acknowledged that one stereotypical craft beer drinker “can be like a total asshole about the fact that they like good beer,” while others are “like my uncle, who is into beer, brews his own stuff and is just like a normal guy.” Josef acknowledges the way some craft beer drinkers can actively use craft beer as a status symbol, to denote an elevated lifestyle and thereby act upon. Yet despite acknowledging this sub group, Josef still conceived craft beer drinkers more positively than their ‘shit’ beer drinking counterparts.

Interestingly enough, both interviewees emphasized choice as being the primary logic of the deviance of ‘shit’ beer drinkers. Will stated that “like you have a choice, you should choose to [drinker craft beer]. I would never choose to drink a Budweiser.” Josef commented on this choice “Why the fuck do you have like a Blue Moon, or something…[when] your friend who has money order a Blue Moon, it’s just like, they have all this awesome shit, like Fredrickson’s and whatever, and you’re just like ‘why?’ Just ‘why?’” Similarly, a bartender encountered in the field contended that “why would someone ever choose to drink shit. I wouldn’t.” While craft beer drinkers hold great respect for other who choose the right path, to explore the variety it offers, search for the rare and the scare, they do not respect those who choose not to, those who have preference for cheap, mass-produced ‘shit.’ Those who prefer the beers that are “cheap and will get you drunk” are making a conscious choice not be a ‘caring consumer,’ they have no respect for beer; they’re not willing to sink $40-65 a week into their pursuit. While drinking mass-produced ‘piss-water’ may be significantly gentler on the wallet, Josef emphasized that craft beer
is “worth it.” Whether it is ‘worth it’ more for the quality of the product or the status that a quality product provides is, at the end of analysis, not definitive.

**You Are What You Drink: Commodity Fetishism and Craft Beer**

So then, what does this all mean? How and why did an industry that, by definition, tries to break out of the constraints and alienation of mass-production get recycled back into capitalistic modes of scarcity economics, of commodity fetishism and of class division? What is clear at the end of this analysis is the craft beer drinkers genuinely do have passion for craft beer. This was never brought it to question. However, what is the source of this passion? How is it reproduced? How is it sustained? How is it wielded?

The data indicates that craft beer drinkers enjoy the more personal product, something that was produce with care, something that was not made for everyone, something that takes risks. The product they enjoy is antithetical to mass-produced beer and perhaps that is what they enjoy about it. Craft breweries are able to produce with a certain level of autonomy given that they have a community of dedicated, open-minded consumers. In short, they’re able to maintain as state of de-alienated production so long as they can keep paying the bills. This is their rabbit’s snare.

In a capitalist society, any entity that entirely refuses the allure of capitalist strategies is doomed to extinction. This is true for both the producer and the consumer. While the strategies employed deviate from Marx’s traditional conception of capitalistic order, they constitute developments within capitalism that allows capitalism to stave off the worker’s revolution. What Marx never anticipated was that capitalism could be such an adaptable, clever ideology that it could render an innately anti-capitalistic movement hopelessly entrenched in capitalism for its own survival. I imagine how Marx would might recoil if he saw craft beer culture. Perhaps it
isn’t the Marxist dream, but to be bewitched by capitalism is better than to cease to exist, whether it is an institution, an individual or a culture.

In the case of the breweries, to supplement their limited production size and independence, they generate niche markets for increasingly specific types of beer and rely heavily on distinctive branding, in addition to generally higher prices. Consumers generally respond well to these ‘survival-strategies’ insofar that they guided their choices as craft beer drinkers. Craft beer drinkers indicated a love for being able to explore an endless variety to the point that avoiding repetition and seeking novelty in their beer choices was imperative. Craft beer drinkers voiced a love for esoteric and eye-catching packaging designs; the stranger, more outlandish and unique the design was, the more likely they were to buy the beer. The higher prices and smaller unit sizes were irrelevant as craft beer drinkers indicated that craft beer, in its difference from mass-produced shit, was well worth it.

However, these elements of the craft beer industry lead to an intense, innovative form of commodity fetishism among craft beer drinkers. The desire for novelty and ‘crazy’ packaging resembles Debord’s notion of the spectacle (2012). The marketing strategies employed by craft breweries generates intense enthusiasm in the consumer. They seek out the variety and attractive imagery as if they were trophies, integrating them into their beer repertoire and building their proverbial trophy case. Craft beer drinkers can manifest these trophy cases physically, as seen in the phenomenon of the beer wall, or virtually, as is seen social media apps that allow craft beer drinkers to index their accomplishments, the beers they have drank, and in some ways transforms their trophy case into a numismatic value for symbolic exchange among other craft beer drinkers (Baudrillard, 2016). In both cases, the trophy case and its display functions to establish the status of the craft beer drinker, it constructs them as well-knowledge, versed in craft beer and as an
individual who truly ‘cares’ about what they drink. A preference becomes an identity; their conspicuous consumption of craft beer allows them to entry and space within this exclusive class of people who appreciate a ‘carefully-made’ product.

However, like any identity, the status of the craft beer drinking class must be constructed in contrast to something else, something less. For craft beer drinkers, this antonym, this antithetical form, this deviant class is the mass-produced beer drinker, especially those who drink with impunity, those who drink ‘shit’ despite their choice not to. As Gusfield observed, by characterizing the inverse identity in a negative light, the normative solidifies their higher status and creates a ground to chastise the perceived deviance (1986). Craft beer drinkers tended to characterize ‘shit’ beer drinkers as ignorant, unappreciative of the glory of craft beer and as making a conscious choice not to appreciate it. This characterization situates the ‘shit’ beer drinker as an uncaring consumer, buying into mass-produced alienated products. In turn, the craft beer drinker creates a self-concept that is the opposite, who, despite engaging in an intense commodity fetishism as they pursue the endless variety of craft beer, sinking significantly more capital into the commodity, possess the satisfaction and status of consuming products that are not sullied by mass-produced, mass-appeal monotony of capitalist production. I think the irony is clear, that their anti-capitalist orientations privilege them to ostracize their ‘shit’ beer drinking counterparts as hopelessly an appendage of the machine. Yet, for their own survival, for their status, for their passion, they themselves are bound up by capitalist chains.

A Somewhat Foregone Conclusion

During the entirety of this research and writing, I’ve search, through inductive reasoning, to find a theoretical frame to explain the phenomena I observed in the field. What existing theory or account is appropriate to describe what has happened here: how a phenomenon that possesses
anti-capitalist beginnings ends hopelessly recycled into the capitalist mode despite its struggle to break free? Foucault’s notion of discursive regimes (frameworks of understanding that undergird social practices) seems to give some account to the impossibility of escaping capitalistic strategies in a capitalist society (2002). The tenets of capitalism delineate all that is possible, all that is impossible, all that one can do and all that cannot be done, within our society. Foucault was keen to observe that even ‘anti’ movements are dependent on the thing they resist for their very existence, as something can only be defined by what it rejects, and more often than not, employ the same methods by which they’ve been oppressed to break free (1980).

In the case of craft beer, this could have been predicted at the onset of this study. The Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci observed early in the 20th century that capitalism has entrenched itself into Western culture, creating an ideology that predates nearly every aspect of social life in such a way that any alternative is either detestable, dismissible or purely unimaginable (Harris, 2015). Given the entrenchment of capitalistic ideology in our cultural mode, craft breweries’ intention to break free from modes of mass-production, to reject the alienation of the worker, is doomed to capitalistic enterprise, in one way or another. It has to in order to survive. There is no conceivable alternative. The capitalism, whether corporate or competitive, is presented as the only real option, whether we perceive it to be or not. This can be said of the breweries, which must make use of capitalistic strategies and innovations in order to maintain their independence, to pay their rent and pay their workers and keep on producing what they wish to produce. But it can also be readily seen in the craft beer drinker, who’s desire to enjoy a craft product leads him to fetishize the commodity of beer even more intensely and gives him an axis on which to reconfigure class struggle, where anti-corporate is the new bourgeoisie and the ‘shit’ beer drinker the lowly rabble upon whose shoulders he may spit.
This study is by no means closed. There is still more to discover and analyze within this diverse and multi-faceted industry and culture. The intricacies and contradictions that define its very nature are something that will continue to fascinate me and beg my attention. However, at this heavily asterisked conclusion, I argue that the initial findings provide a groundwork in which other anti-capitalist movements can be studied.

I would make one final distinction. While craft breweries and craft beer drinkers must inevitably engage the very thing they reject, they do succeed in escaping some elements of it by innovating and riffing on top of it. Likewise, in doing so they create new surfaces through which capitalist ideology may operate and sustain itself. Yet, I argue in these last sentences, despite this hopeless cycle, they have succeeded. Craft breweries do see a remarriage between the worker and the means of production, their production is not dictated by its profitability and the will of the owner of the means of production. They have become somewhat less alienated because of this and this, I believe, is far better than to be completely alienated.
Works Cited


