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Salute e Società

Youth and Alcohol:
Consumption, Abuse
and Policies
An interdisciplinary
Critical Review

edited by

Franco Prina
Enrico Tempesta



FrancoAngeli

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EDITORIAL

Giuseppe De Rita*

Every once in a while it is good to retrace one's experiences, albeit remote in time, as is for me the long period in which I was President of the Permanent Observatory on Youth and Alcohol: distance, as our ancient forebears used to say, helps to put in focus problems that we are often unaware of when we are immersed in them up to our necks and hold responsibilities thereon.

In this reflection, the question I ask myself is the following: how effective and long-lasting is the self-regulation philosophy that we laid down as the essential grounds for our joint research efforts and group discussions? This philosophy was already questioned at the time, but the two subsequent decades witnessed a dual and mirrored tendency to tear it to pieces: on the one hand the tendency of the collective culture to surrender to a certain degree of licentiousness in lifestyles, consumption habits, drinking; on the other hand, the tendency of the political culture to enhance the forced regulation of ensuing behaviours, also through the use of every possible legislative instrument.

We all remember, especially we who established the Observatory, how strongly we confided in the self-regulation of behaviours that were dangerously close to deviance during the '80s and '90s. The very phenomenon of drug-addiction, which was then highly anxiety-provoking for families and communities alike, was tackled in an *ad hoc* National Conference (in Venice, under the Craxi Government) with the political assumption of favouring self-regulation as a weapon to be used to save hundreds of youths a year from a heroin overdose. And even if drug consumption has increased since then, it should also be acknowledged that it is better controlled now than in the past, also because there has been a switchover to different substances whose consumption is apparently more "compatible" with being individually regulated in everyday life.

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We confided even more on the self-regulation of alcohol consumption. Wine consumption had long been unregulated among the elderly and it was thought that young people would be more watchful; the tendency to consume hard liquor was spontaneously dropping; a body-fitness fad (diet and fitness) was taking root whose natural consequence was to reduce alcohol consumption; and, in addition, there was a growing tendency to “drink well”, giving preference to quality wines, often of high-end brands, expressing an increasingly sophisticated oenogastronomic culture. Therefore, there were all the necessary conditions to imagine that self-regulation was not only a desirable, but also a viable, perspective. Varying lifestyles were in synergy with a new and more articulate drinking culture; and this synergy induced us to look with indulgence more than suspicion at those who, both in Italy and abroad, proposed an almost repressive stand on alcohol consumption.

I did not personally follow how things developed during the last decade as I was addressing other issues and problems. But if I look back at the approach to alcohol, especially among the young, I must say that the most vivid impression I get is that of a progressive corrosion of the primacy of self-regulation. A licentious tendency has taken root in young people’s behaviour, and not only in Italy, especially with respect to drug addiction and perhaps even more to alcohol consumption (both indoors and outdoors), with their entire personal experience hinging upon the more or less prolonged excitement of self-oblivion (the so-called “high”) that was previously sought through drug-addiction. This makes everything more ambiguous and in part uncontrollable: both in setting the boundary between normal behaviour and a “high”, and between a high from alcohol and the consumption of different types of substances. This creates a dangerously sticky situation which is very far from “cooling down” to the point of enabling its understanding, interpretation and confrontation.

It is easy to understand how such a situation might increase social anxiety and alarm and drive policy-makers to promote initiatives that disregard the perspective of self-regulation and to tend to put in place a more or less compulsory external regulation. Emphasis is placed on the issue of lifestyles with the aim of underscoring that, in order for these to be positive and healthy, they must eliminate any temptation to become dependent on tobacco smoking, alcohol, drugs, and even food, if it is consumed above the risk threshold of some of the body’s organs. And, with a view to acting “quickly and well”, a flurry of social and legal controls were adopted: in the case of smoking, the results are there for everyone to see, making anybody daring to “stick to the bad habit” feel guilty; but also for alcoholic beverages the tendency is clear-cut: from the tables with alcohol thresholds hanging on the walls of pubs, to the increasingly widespread use of breathalyzers, and the ban to sell alcohol in specific places or in given timeframes; while, strangely enough, it is

impossible to find repressive instruments for the use of drugs (perhaps it's only a question of deviance and not the violation of orderly and wholesome lifestyles).

What will become of us, old and loyal supporters of self-regulation, in the face of the winning options of either licentiousness or hard-fisted repression? My answer – and not as the founder and first President of the Observatory – is that now we have more responsibilities and a wider scope of action than in the past. The two above-mentioned options do not have much of a future, in terms of raising young people's awareness: the former because it merely condescends to self-oblivion; the latter because it tries to be “minimally comprehensive”, envisaging behaviours that are highly subjective and therefore tend to conquer back more or less commendable spaces of liberty.

To go on working along the cultural and political lines of self-regulation is therefore a necessary task to be performed increasingly well, unless we want to be excluded from the debate. And I'm happy that the Observatory is performing its task ever better, as can be easily seen on reviewing the enormous amount of material accumulated during the past few years and running down the table of contents of the complex monographic publications contained in its pages.

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INTRODUCTION

Franco Prina and Enrico Tempesta*

In the course of the life of every cultural institution, sooner or later there comes inevitably a time when it becomes essential to stop and take stock of one's activities, to assess the work done, to reflect on the "meaning" of one's commitment and define the direction to be followed in the future. Twenty years after its foundation, the time has also come for the Permanent Observatory for the Young and Alcohol to do the same. This is an anniversary that members of the Scientific Laboratory wish to celebrate with an undertaking of introspection and in-depth analysis, to which this special edition of the magazine bears witness. The choice made by «Salute e Società» is not a random one. Our intention was to emphasise the cultural position assumed by this Observatory, which has always placed research and in-depth analysis of the relationship between the young and alcohol (observing drinking habits, the meanings attributed to the consumption of alcohol, and alcohol-related consequences and problems) within the framework of a reflection on our society's cultural models regarding health and wellbeing, socialisation practices, the manners in which the problem is perceived socially that result in its changing definitions, as well as provisions and political consequences.

When the Observatory was founded there was no debate on this subject in the mass-media. The lack of epidemiological data was astonishing and the entire public debate was founded on local and marginal impressions and assessments. The debate was restricted to medical disciplines, with frequent clashes to achieve supremacy in this field between gastroenterologists and psychiatrists and, later, addiction specialists. After the period that saw treatment of the physical consequence of addiction (cirrhosis) or relegation to mental asylums, questioned by the 1978 psychiatric reform,

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addiction experts gained importance after an initially timid and increasingly strong juxtaposition of alcohol dependence and other forms of addiction.

Many things have changed since then. There has been the promulgation of an *ad hoc* law defining a series of rules addressed at regulating the consumption and sale of alcohol, at creating centres for the cure and treatment of alcoholics and at emphasising the role played by prevention in alcohol abuse. But, above all, in these years there has been a greater awareness of alcohol-related problems in public opinion, in particular of the risk of alcohol abuse among the young.

However, in the current debate, strongly conflicting ideological positions are expressed, far from an objective and realistic approach to the relationship between individuals and alcohol, to the change and enunciation of consumption modalities and importance attributed to these. On one hand there are those who tend to emphasise the problems, using alarmist rhetoric, considering alcohol, always and in all circumstances, a toxic element for individual and collective health and consequently, pressing for the adoption of increasingly strict controls over the sale of alcoholic drinks and prohibitions to restrict consumption opportunities. On the other, there is a large section of Italian society that continues to consider alcohol, especially wine, as a fundamental element for the quality of their lives, tending at times to underestimate and/or minimise the potential risk, especially regarding certain contexts and some individual characteristics of consumers.

The effort made by the Observatory has always been to avoid this sterile juxtaposition, attempting to provide a realistic and thus not simplistic interpretation, but rather a critical one of “planet alcohol,” by relying on scientific contributions from various disciplines and supporting efforts made to better integrate them. In other words, supporting the profound reasons for interdisciplinary cooperation, since we are convinced that such a highly complex phenomenon can only be understood by integrating knowledge, approaches and different research methodologies.

The disciplines in which the authors are specialised (sociology, anthropology, psychology, philosophy, economics, internal medicine, psychiatry, epidemiology, hygiene and preventive medicine) bears witness to this effort, as do the papers in this monograph, dedicated to the relationship the young have with alcohol in Italy.

The opening editorial by the Observatory’s founder Giuseppe De Rita and a paper that can be considered the Observatory’s “Manifesto” (*The Identity of the OPGA: in favour of a social alcoholology*) which concludes this edition, represent the cultural platform and the “ideal” agenda within which the various papers are set. The papers follow a four-stage programme, one consequent to and integrated with the others.

The first stage consists of papers by Carla Collicelli, Lorena Charrier and Franco Cavallo, Franca Beccaria, and the research paper by Daniele Rossi. They firstly provide us with a vast overview of the significance of the presence of alcoholic drinks in the history of Italy, as well as cultural consumption models. Secondly, they allow one to reflect upon the state of research on alcohol (and more specifically the relationship between the young and alcohol) with reference both to studies of a quantitative nature as well as studies and research on quality. The comparison of the results, and a critical assessment of the methodologies used, the questions posed, the data collected and published, prove the significant complexity of descriptions addressing quantity in consumption trends and abuse among the young. All this to the extent that it seems currently legitimate to state that it has been impossible to establish certainties on this subject. Research on quality, on the contrary, shows a significant “understanding” of relations between the young and alcohol in all their nuances and of the evolution (and continuity) that characterise them over time. Finally, as an element of knowledge of the size of the significant presence of alcoholic drinks in Italy, there is a paper by Rossi dedicated to the “economies” of alcohol (in terms of revenue and correlated costs at all levels).

The second stage addresses the nodal issue of the regulation of alcohol in Italian society. First there is a social-juridical paper by Franco Prina analysing the rules and policies characterising past and present relations between the “state” and “the alcohol issue.” Secondly, an essay by Michele Contel, who, from a philosophical and public ethics standpoint, reflects on the possibility and opportunity of having a theoretical and practical approach to the public debate on controversial subjects, such as the one addressed here, capable of promoting self-regulation.

The third stage concerns, on one hand, the possibility of providing the young with the means to establish a non-problematic relationship with alcohol, maturing an awareness of the risks linked to irresponsible behaviour and abuse. On the other hand, it addresses the scenario of resources available for those, among the younger generations, who are already experiencing addiction. On the first subject, we present a paper that is a general analysis (by Maria Antonia Modolo) encouraging us to address what is known as “prevention” in a manner radically different to the more widespread approach, orienting oneself to work on promoting a sense of confidence and wellbeing in the young. Here we find examples of possible effective preventive forms of interventions with contributions in the “Experiences” section by Antonio Mosti, Sara Rolando and Paola Carbon together with their assistants. On the subject of care for the fortunately few young people who develop forms of alcoholism, we have a paper by Maurizio Fea, who addresses the problems that social and health services (also those for addictions) experience in effectively answering the needs of the weak in the world of the young, of those who

suffer from a vulnerability that is precisely manifested in alcohol abuse, faced with which, more often than not, that adult world seems impotent.

The fourth stage proposes on one hand the international dimension of research on alcohol consumption, and on the other the powerful need to pursue the path of interdisciplinary cooperation, as a condition for continuing to seriously reflect on this subject. Thus the contribution by Robin Room, one of the world's greatest scholars of alcoholism, which provides stimulating thoughts on how consumption models tend to become globalised, effectively going beyond the classical distinction between "dry" and "wet" cultures. In commenting on Room's paper, Amedeo Cottino and Angelo Romano propose stimuli for the debate on persistence and change, emphasising, from a sociological and ethno-anthropological viewpoint, how in the Mediterranean drinking model there are still protective factors that result in restricting alcohol-related damage. Finally, the round table (organised by Franco Prina, with contributions from Cottino, Trentini, Faggiano and Orlandi), dedicated to the role played by the various disciplines and to the problems as well as the potentialities of a commitment to ensure dialogue and greater cooperation than currently exists within a framework of real interdisciplinary cooperation.

In these past twenty years the Observatory has worked by scientifically and independently, addressing the various subjects analysed in this publication. The continuous publication of the *Quaderni dell'Osservatorio*, open to a variety of subjects and approaches, bears faithful witness to this.

For the Observatory, the choice made in favour of a "social alcoholology" is an extremely important cultural and political challenge. It is, however, the only choice we believe that allows us to provide a contribution characterised by scientific rigour regarding an epistemologically complex reality in a context in which exploitation is easily found around every corner.

The Observatory's mission remains that of helping Italian society to be aware of and understand the meaning and the role played by alcohol in the lives of individuals, as well as the nature of various alcohol-related problems. It must also press everyone to address these issues, calling all the players involved to assume responsibility, with no a priori preclusions and overcoming the many ideological barriers that characterise the public debate in this and in many other fields.

This is the objective we intend to continue striving for. Hence the hope that the studies and reflections published here will encourage a serious debate between those who make political decisions, the producers and owners of economic interests, members of the world of scientific research, educators in schools and in the field as well as health and social-care services.

THEORY

Italian Lifestyles and Drinking Cultures

Carla Collicelli*

Lifestyles, particularly when it comes to food and beverage consumption, evolve in line with social change in its broadest manifestations. Unsurprisingly, therefore, in recent years Italy has witnessed contradictory trends in this specific field. On the one hand, awareness of and the focus on the importance of a healthy diet and of avoiding excesses are growing. On the other, consumption of unhealthy food, drinks, over-the-counter drugs and psychoactive drugs, is on the rise, primarily in conjunction with the spread of a culture which embraces free time and socializing.

Key-words: alcohol, consumptions, tradition, new lifestyles, risks, binge drinking.

From a consumption standpoint, in this day and age Italian society can be categorized as a veritably “omnivorous” society and one that is always on the lookout for new experiences. Evidence shows that there has been a remarkable shift in the scope and variety of consumption types. These include food and beverage consumption and there is a plethora of options and approaches that span from luxury and top-of-the-range commodities to low-cost goods.

At the same time, modern, industrial societies, including Italy’s, also lead to increasing social fragmentation and isolation. In this context, young people, and generally anyone going through a delicate transitional phase, crisis or growth period, are extremely vulnerable social categories. As such, they are particularly susceptible to – and exposed to – behavioral changes, on both an individual and group level, to transgressions driven by risk-seeking impulses or as a means of protest and to reckless experimenting in all fields (bullying, vandalism, aggression), including substance abuse (from getting high to getting drunk). In the most extreme

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cases, this behavior is often a symptom of varying levels of malaise and maladjustment, which are both a cause and effect in this scenario.

Most recently, in what would appear to run counter to the above trends, there has been a growing focus on and awareness of healthy lifestyles and an increased awareness of the risks of an unhealthy diet and of taking harmful substances. Meanwhile, strong regional differences, a socio-anthropological characteristic of Italian culture, continue to prevail; they are affected on a purely superficial level by the influence of globalization and internationalization, including international migration.

1. Food Over the Years

When it comes to food, Italy's development bears unique characteristics (Degli Esposti, 2004); here, more than anywhere else, local traditions are still thriving, despite advances in manufacturing and national as well as international distribution. This specific model stems from and is entrenched in the country's staunch gastronomic culture. The latter revolves around both local and national traditions and dates back to the Roman Empire, having survived the Middle Ages and beyond. Indeed, throughout Italy's history, a cultural and structural model based on broad-scale territorial diffusion, hand in hand with the steadfast development of regional and urban autonomy, have led to a unique safeguarding of the country's gastronomic heritage, which has been passed on through the generations.

Italy's gastronomic culture, however, is not merely the by-product of a closed-off approach to national and local traditions. If anything, quite the opposite is true. In fact, the distinguishing factor in the creation of the Italian gastronomic style is without a doubt geographic location. Its position in the middle of a crossroads of exchanges and in constant transit, right at the center of the Mediterranean Sea, has enabled a constant exchange between different cultures to take place. For example, during the High Middle Ages, there was interpenetration between Roman and German lifestyles. The same occurred with Arab cuisine in the 7th and 8th centuries. These two significant influences have brought a considerable number of additions to Italy's gastronomy. The main ones are milk, meat and butter from northern Europe and spices, from the Arab world. These elements have fostered a propensity for mixing and integrating not only cultures, but also different foods. This is not always the case in other countries; for instance, in France there is a tendency toward isolation and the preservation of national foods.

Substantial changes to Italian eating habits began to take place during the Renaissance with the birth of the bourgeoisie, the new social class comprising craftsmen, shopkeepers and merchants. The next impacting

element was the creation of the working class during the Industrial Revolution. In both cases, particularly from the 18th century onwards, the new social order, along with the innovative options offered by new manufacturing technologies, led to an unprecedented supply potential. This, in turn, was linked to a new focus on food commodity prices and consumption on the part of the emerging social classes, in line with the appreciation of delicacies that was characteristic of the dominant classes from previous eras. Chiefly as a result of these dynamics, over the last two centuries developments in gastronomy have been shaped by changes in societal patterns, and can thus be traced back to the then prevalent lifestyle, driven by the distinction between the different social classes.

This was also a time of demographic growth, of the exodus from rural areas and therefore urbanization, which also gave rise to large poverty pockets in both the countryside and cities. Indeed, between the 1800s and the early 1900s, the Italian population was mainly composed of farmers (over 60% of the population), a predominantly poor populace. Small-scale, privileged groups were the only exception. Farmers displayed very specific gastronomic behavior: a leveling out of eating behavior, a lack of variety and, consequently, insufficient consumption of certain foods essential to a healthy diet. This social stratum, in order to survive despite its social and economic constraints, was forced to enhance production, focusing on the few available commodities and, above all, on simple and filling, rather than healthy and varied, commodities and foodstuffs.

Most of the population lived on a limited diet (bread, cornmeal, beans and few vegetables, mainly limited to onions and cabbage), more often than not insufficient in terms of calorie intake. Meat consumption was a rare phenomenon, and rice and pasta were only eaten in certain small areas of the country. Wine, too, was limited to urban consumption, whereas in the countryside it was predominantly found in inns which were truly the only social establishment around. Wine consumption rose over time, especially towards the end of the 1800s, primarily as a result of falling prices.

Cities fared better, relatively speaking, with regards to eating habits, especially the small, well-off minority. Though restricted in numbers, this class had significant social and economic clout, and clearly favored rare, extraordinary and delectable foods and a rich and varied diet.

Throughout the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century, there was a widespread scarcity in food supply and eating habits underwent further changes due to several factors. These included innovations brought about by food preservation, large-scale distribution and the automation of manufacturing. The most meaningful invention among these was that of tinned cans which, in Italy and across Europe, represented a veritable turning point. Tin cans were particularly valuable during World War I owing to the ease of storage and transportation they afforded, providing food variety even in the trenches.