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How Alcohol Consumption Serves the Interests of the Capitalist State

Part I: An Exploration of the Placating Effects of Alcohol and its Role in the Cultural Ideological State Apparatus

It is evident that alcohol consumption constitutes a significant part of American culture. This can be seen through its prevalence in many different aspects of the lifestyle of most U.S. citizens. For one thing, there are places that are either solely or almost solely designated for drinking alcohol, such as bars, nightclubs, wineries, breweries, taverns, pubs, and other drinking establishments. Many Americans frequent these sites of alcohol consumption, which is supported by the fact that “in 2017, the sales of U.S. drinking places amounted to approximately 24.01 billion U.S. dollars” (Statista). Alcohol also plays a role in transitional, festive, and religious rituals in the United States. Some examples include the religious tradition of Christians drinking red wine for their first communion and the cultural tradition of going on a “21 run,” in which people go to bars and drink alcohol once they turn 21, the legal drinking age in the U.S. Alcohol can even be an indicator of social status, as some types of alcohol are quite expensive and being able to afford to drink them can be a symbol of status or power, much like owning expensive cars or other costly commodities. With all these ways in which alcohol consumption permeates American society, it is no surprise that people who drink alcohol make up the majority of the United States population (“Alcohol Facts”). The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism states on their website that in the U.S., “According to the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health, 86.3 percent of people ages 18 or older reported that they drank alcohol at some point in their lifetime; 70.0 percent reported that they drank in the past year” (“Alcohol Facts”). This high percentage of alcohol use raises many questions about how society is affected when so many people drink alcohol. In a capitalist society like the one in place in the United States, wage labor, a relationship between a worker and an employer in which the worker sells their labor for wages, is a very widespread form of work arrangement and is what drives the economy (Marx 22). If the majority of laborers are consumers of alcohol, exactly how does alcohol consumption affect the quality of the work that is done by laborers, and if it does affect the quality of their work, does this then help or hinder the interests of the capitalist state? In this essay, I will argue that contrary to what scholars have asserted in the past, widespread alcohol consumption is actually beneficial to the system of capitalism and supports the interests of the capitalist state because of its placating and taming effects on the consumer. I will use an essay written by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses” to argue that alcohol functions as a part of the cultural ideological state apparatus (ISA) and thus it insidiously perpetrates the interests of the capitalist state. I argue this by examining three cases throughout history in the United States: the colonization of the United States and the use of alcohol to control Native Americans from the 1500s-1700s, the enslavement of African Americans in the 1800s and the use of alcohol to placate them, and the top three professions that have the highest rates of alcohol abuse. I will then discuss the period during Prohibition in the United States and use it as an example of what happens when alcohol is taken away from people in order to further my point. Lastly, I attempt to explain why the dominant discourse on alcohol as a hindrance to the capitalist state gets some things wrong. I will not be exploring the economic effects of alcohol consumption on the capitalist state, although it is true that there are important economic impacts of alcohol consumption, such as the fact that alcohol taxes generated nearly ten billion dollars of revenue for the government in 2019 alone (Duffin). I will also not be going very in depth into any solutions, nor will I be taking a hard stance on the moral questions this topic may raise. Rather, my aim is simply to raise awareness and perhaps drive readers to think more critically about the complex and multifaceted phenomenon of alcohol consumption.

In order to set up the lens in which I am viewing this issue, I will now discuss a paper that guides my assertion that alcohol consumption benefits the capitalist state. In his essay, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes towards and Investigation” (1970), French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser makes the argument that the capitalist state works to protect ruling-class economic interests. Althusser writes, “The State is a ‘machine’ of repression, which enables the ruling classes . . . to ensure their domination over the working class, thus enabling the former to subject the latter to the process of surplus-value extortion (i.e. to capitalist exploitation)” (Althusser 137). In other words, Althusser asserts that the capitalist state is everything which works to keep the dominant groups in their position of power over the subordinate groups, like the working class. Althusser goes on to explain that the capitalist state does this in two ways, through Repressive States Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological States Apparatuses (ISAs). RSAs include the government, the police, the military, and other organizations that function through overt control. RSAs secure ruling-class domination through explicit force and violence. ISAs, on the other hand, include family, education, religion, media, culture, and other social and political networks. ISAs use ideology, as opposed to force, to secure ruling-class domination. Other scholars confirm this interpretation, like Marxist Nathaniel Mills in his review of Althusser’s essay. Mills writes, “One of many scandalous insights of the essay is Althusser's designation of the diverse spheres of modern social life as, like the courts or army, ‘state apparatuses’: going to school, practicing a religion, having a family, or consuming culture ensure one's subjugation to capitalism. But how? If RSAs function through force, ISAs compel by ideology” (Mills). In short, Althusser says that in a capitalist society, within the most intimate spheres of life lurks a multitude of phenomena which are motivated to advance the interests of the state. One of the ISAs that Althusser mentions is the cultural ISA. Although he does not go very in depth about specifics of the cultural ISA, he does list “literature, the Arts, sports, etc.” as some examples (Althusser 143). Given that I have established that alcohol is an essential part of American culture, I believe that it functions as part of the cultural ISA, even though Althusser did not explicitly list it with his other examples. Like sports, alcohol serves to placate and distract consumers to keep them complacent while they are exploited by the capitalist state. Throughout the rest of this paper, when I talk about the placating effects of alcohol and how it benefits the capitalist state, I am referring to the fact that alcohol serves as part of the cultural ISA to insidiously uphold the ruling class’s interests. [[1]](#footnote-1)

In this essay, I bring up the fact that the capitalist state exploits the working class. Therefore, it is necessary to explain what exactly it means to be exploited. I will use the paper “Five Faces of Oppression” (1990), by political theorist and feminist Iris Young, as a framework to explain what exploitation is. Young proposes that exploitation is one of the five main categories of oppression. At the beginning of her paper, she explains an important concept of oppression. She writes,

“oppression. . . refers to systemic constraints on groups that are not necessarily the result of the intentions of a tyrant. Oppression in this sense is structural, rather than the result of a few people’s choices or policies. Its causes are embedded in unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols . . . in short, the normal processes of everyday life . . . oppressions are systematically reproduced in major economic, political, and cultural institutions” (Young 39).

This sentiment is remarkably close to what Althusser writes about ISAs regarding how the capitalist state exploits people in ways that the people can be completely unaware of. As I explained earlier, the capitalist state does this using ideology, as opposed to just through violence or force. According to Young, exploitation, one of the facets of oppression, enacts “a structural relation between social groups” (Young 46). She writes, “The central insight expressed in the concept of exploitation, then, is that this oppression occurs through a steady process of the transfer of the results of this labor of one social group to benefit another” (Young 46). Applying this to my argument, the capitalist state, which includes the ruling class, would be the social group that is being benefitted by the results of the labor of the working class. Young goes on to say, “The injustice of exploitation consists in social processes that bring about a transfer of energies from one group to another to produce unequal distributions, and in the way in which social institutions enable a few to accumulate while they constrain many more” (Young 49). In other words, the dominant social group ensures that they create a false scarcity of whatever is being produced, so that they can control laborers and the working class. Alcohol then serves the capitalist state to help keep laborers placated and thus less aware of their own exploitation. This, then, is what I mean when I say that the capitalist state exploits laborers and the working class more broadly.

The first example of alcohol historically being used to placate people that I will examine is the case of the Europeans, who used alcohol as an instrument of social control over the Native Americans in the 16th through 18th centuries when colonizing the United States. The English, French, Spanish, and Dutch were all known to take part in this practice. Specifically, the Europeans would give alcohol to Native Americans to coerce them and to take advantage of them so that they could get better trade deals for commodities, or just maintain power over the Native Americans in general. The Europeans found that by giving the Native Americans alcohol, they were able to better avoid conflicts and keep them placated both through the inebriating effects of alcohol and through the seemingly kind gesture of gifting the alcohol. In their paper, “The Perfect Colonizer: Understanding Alcoholism and its Treatments in Native America through Humanistic Inquiry” (2015), scholars Kevin McPherson and Peter Wakefield write,

“It wasn’t until contact with white colonizers that Native Americans encountered distilled beverages in large quantities. Early traders traversing the lands during the 1700s and 1800s started to garner demand for alcohol by using it as a trading commodity for land, resources, and sexual favors . . . Records have also appeared depicting traders and colonial citizens using free alcohol to provide an advantage in trade negotiations . . . Even more shocking is the use of alcohol by early settlers to gain advantages over these indigenous people. Here, alcohol takes on an insidious form – being used as an agent of manipulation” (McPherson 174).

Clearly, the Europeans used alcohol as a means of control in order to influence Native Americans for their own agenda. Although it is true that some Native Americans made and consumed alcoholic beverages before contact with the Europeans, this was quite rare and only a handful of tribes did this. The Tohono O’Odham people, who discovered how to make a fermented cactus or corn beverage, was one such group of Native Americans who did consume alcohol (Frank 347). However, it was for ritualistic reasons and so was only consumed on special occasions and in small quantities. It “did not involve excessive drunkenness, but controlled and supervised use often in highly ritualized occasions” (Frank 347). Also, the alcohol they drank had an incredibly low alcohol content in comparison to what was introduced by the Europeans. Therefore, the European introduction of alcohol was fundamentally different because the motive behind offering it to the Native Americans was to gain the upper hand in their relationship. It would also come to alter the history of Native Americans in the United States, as many Native Americans would eventually develop a dependency on alcohol that can be seen by the fact that alcohol abuse among Native Americans is and has been one of the highest among any ethnic group (“Alcohol Abuse”). The American Addiction Centers website says that, “Many experts propose that the brutality and loss experienced by Native Americans after Europeans colonized the United States led to this historical trauma. The loss of population, land, and culture caused unresolved grief to be transmitted across generations of Native Americans, likely leading to the development of negative coping mechanisms such as drinking” (“Alcohol Abuse”). This coping mechanism of drinking was only made possible through the introduction of normalized alcohol consumption by the Europeans, as opposed to just the ritualized alcohol consumption that Native Americans already practiced. The Europeans thus used alcohol explicitly for social control as well as for placation, which ultimately caused immense harm to the Native Americans.

It is necessary to explain how the use of alcohol to control Native Americans is comparable to the use of alcohol to maintain control and exploit the working and middle class by the capitalist state. Although the colonization of the United States predated capitalism, it did in fact lead to the rise of capitalism, which allowed for the institution of the capitalist state to come into being. In his paper, “Colonialism and the Rise of Capitalism,” professor of anthropology J.M. Blaut writes, “colonialism led to the rise of capitalism . . . Colonial enterprise was from the outset a matter of capital accumulation . . . The goal of all European individuals and groups involved in the colonial process (clergy apart) was to make money” (Blaut 280-281). As Blaut begins to touch on, the main objects of the colonialization of the United States were to make money through gold and silver mining, gain resources through implementing agriculture and planting crops on the land, and to assert dominate over other countries and groups of people. One way that they asserted dominance was by exploiting the Native Americans and forcing them into slavery. They bought and sold slaves like commodities, and having more slaves was a sign of more power. This shows the intimate connection between slavery and capitalism. Later in this paper, I will explain in more detail the relationship between the institution of slavery and capitalism. In short, the takeaway is that slavery led to capitalism today and the ways in which workers are exploited by the capitalist state stems from the ways slaveowners treated their slaves. Since the practices of the capitalist society of the United States were largely influenced by slavery, the ways in which alcohol was used to placate and control the Native Americans parallels how the capitalist state uses it to placate and control people and by extension, society. However, the use of alcohol to placate the Native Americans is just one example of how alcohol consumption benefits the capitalist state and thus the upper class.

Another example in which alcohol has historically been used for placation and taming purposes is the case of white slaveowners in the 1800s encouraging their African slaves to consume alcohol. During holidays, slaveowners would give their slaves alcohol and then forcefully urge the slaves to drink in order to maintain social control. Former slave Frederick Douglass wrote about this phenomenon in his book, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855). He recounts his time as a slave in Maryland, writing,

“[Giving slaves alcohol] appears to have no other object than to disgust slaves with their temporary freedom, and to make them as glad to return to their work, as they were to leave it. By plunging them into the exhausting depths of drunkenness and dissipation, this effect is almost certain to follow. I have known slaveholders resort to cunning tricks, with a view of getting their slaves deplorably drunk . . . We were induced to drink, I among the rest, and when the holidays were over, we all staggered up from our filth and wallowing, took a long breath, and went away to our various fields of work; feeling, upon the whole, rather glad to go from that which our masters artfully deceived us into the belief was freedom, back again to the arms of slavery . . . It was about as well to be a slave to master, as to be a slave to rum and whisky” (Douglass).

As Douglass describes, it was in the best interest of the slaveowners to keep their slaves drunk during holidays because it kept the slaves in their role as forced laborers. The slaveowners used alcohol to distract the slaves from their dreams of freedom, thus making it so that slaves would wrongfully think their bondage was better than freedom. This served as an attempt to placate the slaves and keep them from rioting or trying to escape. In his paper, “Historical Overview of Alcohol in the African American Community” (1995), scholar Kenneth Christmon confirms that this occurred, writing,

“slave owners believed that, by keeping the Africans intoxicated, especially during their free time, enslaved Africans would not have the opportunity to think about their plight and plan a rebel . . . On holidays, enslaved Africans were able to drink and slave owners would encourage drunkenness. Whites believed drunkenness would prevent Africans from thinking about their plight or doing anything that might lead to freedom” (Christmon 327).

In other words, the slaveowners were able to keep the slaves from realizing the injustice of their situation and thus rebel. It is true that not all slaves were able to be placated through alcohol, and many slave rebellions did still occur despite the slaveowners’ best efforts to use alcohol to keep rebellions from happening. However, alcohol did still serve to placate and control a significant number of slaves, as Douglass and Christmon attest to. This historical instance in which alcohol was used to tame slave laborers for the benefit of the slaveowners is mirrored in the way alcohol today placates wage laborers under capitalism for the benefit of the ruling class. It is true that today, wage laborers in the United States are not forced into working in the same way that slaves were, but rather enter into a voluntary contract for wages.[[2]](#footnote-2) However, the institution of slavery is not so different from the institution of capitalism today.

Upon initial thought, it may seem that the link between slaveowners controlling their slaves through alcohol and the capitalist state controlling U.S. citizens through alcohol is tenuous. After all, Black slaves were forced into working for white plantation owners, while laborers today supposedly voluntarily enter work contracts. Also, slaves were not given any compensation for their work, while most workers in capitalism today are given wages. However, it is important to realize that the system of capitalism has its roots in slavery. Matthew Desmond, a professor of sociology at Princeton University, writes about this in his *New York Times* article, titled, “In order to understand the brutality of American capitalism, you have to start on the plantation.” Desmond recounts how slavery, which was abolished only 155 years ago, is “the birthplace of America’s low-road approach to capitalism.” He goes on to say,

“When Americans declare that “we live in a capitalist society” . . . what they’re often defending is our nation’s peculiarly brutal economy. ‘Low-road capitalism,’ the University of Wisconsin-Madison sociologist Joel Rogers has called it. In a capitalist society that goes low, wages are depressed as businesses compete over the price, not the quality, of goods; so-called unskilled workers are typically incentivized through punishments, not promotions; inequality reigns and poverty spreads.”

As Desmond points out, many aspects of modern-day capitalism are inherently brutal. The relationship between cruelty and capitalism in the United States started with the institution of slavery. In the workplace today, workers are subject to constant supervision and surveillance. They are drug tested, tracked with apps, and monitored through software on their computers, to name just a few ways. Employers do this to make sure that workers are being productive at all times. Modern technology can make this level of surveillance a reality. However, Desmond writes that this phenomenon started on plantations.

“The technology that accompanies this workplace supervision can make it feel futuristic. But it’s only the technology that’s new. The core impulse behind that technology pervaded plantations, which sought innermost control over the bodies of their enslaved work force. The cotton plantation was America’s first big business, and the nation’s first corporate Big Brother was the overseer. And behind every cold calculation, every rational fine-tuning of the system, violence lurked. Plantation owners used a combination of incentives and punishments to squeeze as much as possible out of enslaved workers . . . To the historian Edward Baptist, before the Civil War, Americans ‘lived in an economy whose bottom gear was torture’” (Desmond).

In other words, the intent to control the bodies of laborers is not unique to slavery, it is also ingrained in capitalism. Both these institutions seek to get as much work out of laborers as physically possible. As I mentioned earlier in this paper, while colonialism contributed to the implementation of capitalism in the U.S., the treatment of workers under capitalism originated with the institution of slavery. The use of alcohol to placate Black slaves in the 1800s is thus another historical example of how alcohol consumption benefits the capitalist state. The fact that capitalism is so rooted in slavery shows how the current use of alcohol to placate laborers is an echo of the ways slaveowners used alcohol to placate slaves.

In both the cases of the Native Americans and Black slaves, there is a power imbalance between the oppressor and the oppressed that is more overt than that of the capitalist state and the average wage laborer. It is thus necessary to examine an example in which the people who are consuming alcohol are in a less compromising position and are choosing to drink fully of their own free will. I will now use a modern example, which is an investigation of the top three professions with the highest rates of alcohol abuse. Alcohol abuse encompasses both binge drinking, which is defined as “a pattern of drinking that brings blood alcohol concentration levels to 0.08 g/dL” (typically four or five alcoholic beverages in one two-hour period), and heavy drinking, which is defined as “binge drinking on five or more days in the past month” (“Alcohol Facts”). The professions with the highest rates of alcohol abuse are miners and other manual laborers such as construction workers, doctors and healthcare professionals more broadly, and lawyers (“Professions”). I will first address the connection between doctors and lawyers and alcohol abuse. These two career fields have one significant thing in common, which is that they are extremely stressful jobs that are very taxing on the people who work in them. For both doctors and lawyers, people’s livelihoods are often at risk. Many patients rely on doctors to save their lives and similarly, many people rely on lawyers to reduce their sentences in the courthouse or sometimes even to get them off death row. Although it is true that not all doctors and lawyers are working on cases with such high stakes, lower risk cases can still be extremely stressful for them. Even if people’s lives are not directly threatened, the actions of the doctors and lawyers can still greatly impact the courses of people’s lives. Because these jobs are so stressful, doctors and lawyers often turn to drinking to help them to relax and unwind. A study of doctors in Finland found that “Alcohol consumption among doctors seems to be higher than that of the general population in Finland, and heavy drinking seems to be associated with stress and burnout” (Juntunen 951). Although this study is not based on doctors in the United States, the reasoning for why doctors in Finland drink heavily can be applied to doctors in the U.S. Doctors everywhere have very high levels of stress, which leads to them using drinking as a coping mechanism. The Addiction Center website confirms the fact that doctors and lawyers both turn to alcohol due to the great amount of stress their jobs bring, writing,

“High stress, long hours and high expectations make lawyers prime candidates for alcohol abuse. In fact, the American Bar Association estimates that one in five lawyers has an alcohol problem . . . Like lawyers, doctors have high stress jobs that involve long hours and high expectations. As added pressure, they’re directly responsible for the lives and health of all their patients. Studies have found that one in ten doctors have problems with drugs or alcohol” (Juergens).

Clearly, alcohol abuse is a big problem for very demanding jobs such as these, jobs where other people’s lives depend on the performance of the workers. Miners and other manual laborers such as construction workers, however, have even higher rates of alcohol abuse than doctors and lawyers. According to the Addiction Center website, which references a study by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), “According to SAMHSA’s study, 17.5 percent of miners reported heavy alcohol use during the past month; this was the highest percentage of alcohol abuse among all industries studied. Most miners work long, irregular hours and the work is physically demanding, isolated and dangerous” (Juergens). Like doctors and lawyers, miners have extremely stressful jobs, although their stress comes from a different source. Mining and working on construction sites are extremely perilous jobs in which the laborer’s own life is at stake. Again, alcohol can serve as a way to decompress after an extremely taxing day on the job. For the workers in all three of these professions, the destressing effect of the alcohol also serves to placate them. Without having alcohol to help unwind, many people in these careers would not be able to endure the extremely difficult requirements of their jobs. They thus use alcohol to calm themselves and to manage their stress. This, of course, is in the interest of the capitalist state. If these workers were to have no access to alcohol, they would not be able to placate themselves and thus would likely not be able to continue working under the amount of pressure that they do. The capitalist state wants people to work as hard as they can in order to squeeze as much labor out of them as possible. This present-day example therefore shows how the capitalist state is able to further exploit workers when these workers choose to consume alcohol, as drinking contributes to keeping them from rioting, quitting their overly draining jobs, or demanding better treatment and conditions.

While the three examples outlined above show that when people drink alcohol, it has placating effects and thus serves the interests of the capitalist state, it is also useful to also look at an example of the inverse and examine what happens when people don’t drink alcohol. Prohibition, a nationwide ban on the manufacture and sale of all alcohol, was instated in the U.S. in 1920. The outcome of this measure is crucial to investigate for the sake of my argument. On one hand, if the prohibition of alcohol had little or no effect on society, this would indicate that perhaps alcohol has no placating effect after all. On the other hand, if the prohibition of alcohol resulted in civil unrest, then this would indicate that alcohol indeed has a placating effect on society as a whole, and that alcohol is likely a taming agent that prevents people from rioting or revolting against the unjust conditions that exploit them for the benefit of the capitalist state. In his paper, “The Costs of Prohibition” (2016), Bryon Adinoff, M.D., writes, “unintended outcomes of alcohol prohibition included the flourishing of criminal enterprises (i.e., the Mafia) with the attendant increase in violent crime, corruption of large segments of law-enforcement agencies, unregulated access of alcohol to minors, and economic consequences” (Adinoff 621). Crime thus flourished more than ever under Prohibition. Contrary to what temperance advocates hoped for, the amount of crime significantly increased, rather than decreased, after the ban on alcohol was passed. This is supported by journalist Michael Lerner in his book *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City* (2007). Lerner writes, “The ban created vibrant new markets for illegal alcohol, spawned corruption and crime, fostered an exhilarating culture of speakeasies and nightclubs, and exposed the nation’s deep prejudices” (Lerner). Again, the enactment of Prohibition only resulted in an increase in societal turmoil. These relatively recent sources are affirmed by primary sources, as the subject of crime during Prohibition was written about in much the same manner during the time it was occurring. In his book, *The Rise and Fall of Prohibition: The Human Side of What the Eighteenth Amendment and the Volstead Act Have Done to the United States* (1923), author Charles Hanson Towne wrote,

“In Rochester, New York, crimes of violence in 1921 numbered 607, as against 488 in 1917. In the latter year there were 323 arrests for burglary, while in 1921 there were no less than 502 . . . Sing Sing prison deported no less than sixty prisoners to Auburn in May, 1922, because of overcrowding . . . Figures do not lie . . . the fact remains that passionate crimes continue, murders of unprecedented cruelty are committed all the time, and a heaven on earth is, I fear, remote from us” (Towne 161-162).

Clearly, civil unrest erupted once alcohol was no longer widely available to the public. This then demonstrates that when access to alcohol is taken away, the placating effects it has on society dissipate. In the case of Prohibition, what resulted from the ban on alcohol was a period of thirteen years of increased crime and general civil unrest. This, in conjunction with the three previous examples, shows that a society in which the majority of people consume alcohol is a society in which the people are less aware of their exploitation.

It is important to acknowledge that Prohibition also caused a booming market for bootleggers, and illegal sale and consumption of alcohol did occur. This raises the question of how it can be asserted that the lack of alcohol during Prohibition caused the civil unrest, given that there was still alcohol consumption, albeit illegal consumption. However, the majority of Americans adhered to Prohibition laws and thus the increase in crime cannot be attributed solely to bootlegging or to alcohol-related crime. In his essay, “Did Prohibition Really Work? Alcohol Prohibition as a Public Health Innovation” (2006), Jack S. Blocker Jr., PhD, writes, “Although organized crime flourished under its sway, Prohibition was not responsible for its appearance . . . Drinking habits underwent a drastic change during the Prohibition Era” (Blocker 233). He continues this point later in his essay, writing,

“once Prohibition became the law of the land, many citizens decided to obey it . . . Death rates from cirrhosis and alcoholism, alcoholic psychosis hospital admissions, and drunkenness all declined steeply during the latter years of the 1910s, when both the cultural and the legal climate were increasingly inhospitable to drink, and in the early years after National Prohibition went into effect” (Blocker 237).

Since the majority of people obeyed prohibition laws, then illegal consumption of alcohol cannot be the sole reason for crime and illegal drinking would only marginally contribute to the rise in riots, violence, and other similar phenomena. Thus, it can be concluded that the increase in crime occurred because the lack of alcohol meant fewer people were under the placating effects of drinking and as a result, my assertion that alcohol consumption benefits the capitalist state holds. Based on the example of Prohibition, it can be seen that without alcohol, society becomes much more disorderly and chaotic.

It is worth looking into the existing scholarly discourse on the connections between alcohol and the capitalist state. The current consensus is that drinking alcohol leads to decreased productivity in the workplace, which as a result goes against the interests of the capitalist state. Scholars Klaus Mäkelä and Matti Viikari take this stance in their essay, “Notes on Alcohol and the State.” They write,

“From the standpoint of the over-all functioning of the social formation, the effects of the use of alcohol can be divided into two categories . . . On the one hand, alcohol is liable to disturb social order and public security, that is, to threaten the stability of social relationships. On the other hand, alcohol is liable to endanger the reproduction of labour and the economy of the society . . . heavy drinking directly reduces capacity to work: a drunk’s lathe tool slips, a severe hangover causes a worker to stay away from work. Second, prolonged drinking permanently damages working capacity. Alcoholization is liable to weaken efficiency, and maladies caused by drinking shorten life span” (Mäkelä 173).

Mäkelä and Viikari make a few points here. The first is that alcohol consumption disturbs the social order. Based on the example of Prohibition I previously laid out, it is evident that a lack of alcohol is what actually disturbs the social order. When alcohol was banned, it caused an immense upheaval in society that led to an increase in crime. Therefore, Mäkelä and Viikari’s first point does not have very much merit. Their next point is that alcohol can endanger the reproduction of labor. Mäkelä and Viikari say that “a drunk” would not be able to do their job correctly. However, most people who drink do not day drink on the job. Rather, they drink after their shift is over to unwind after a long day (“Day Drinking”). As for hangovers, although these may affect work performance, nearly 20 percent of alcoholics are classified as functioning or high-functioning, meaning that they can maintain their jobs and relationships without showing signs of alcoholism, according to the National Institutes of Health (“Researchers”). Other, more recent studies indicate functioning alcoholics make up anywhere from 32 to 90 percent of alcoholics (“High Functioning”). Meanwhile, only 9 percent of alcoholics are classified as chronic severe alcoholics, or people who are severely addicted and dependent on alcohol (“Researchers”). Therefore, even if drinking causes hangovers, many alcoholics are still able to function normally and work at their jobs with no difficulties. Mäkelä and Viikari also mention that prolonged drinking may cause adverse health effects that will negatively influence a worker’s performance. However, these impacts will only occur after many years of continuous alcohol consumption. By the time people start developing health problems, they will likely be already retired, or past the point where the capitalist state would find them useful. I do think that Mäkelä and Viikari are partially correct in that alcohol consumption may stunt productivity. However, they do not consider some important points, which I elaborated above. They also leave out a key element of alcohol consumption, which is the placating effect it has on those who drink it. I believe this placating effect outweighs the small decrease in productivity that alcohol may cause because without the placation effect, productivity would decrease even further due to people more lucidly realizing the direness of their situations and rioting, rebelling, or otherwise looking for alternatives to capitalism.

Through examining the cases of the Native Americans, the slaves, the professions with the highest rates of alcohol abuse, and Prohibition, it is clear that in the United States, alcohol is and has been historically used to placate populations to serve the interests of the capitalist state. While I do not know what, if anything, can or should be done about this phenomenon, I do think it is important to acknowledge that the topic of alcohol consumption is a complicated one and that continuing this discourse is crucial. As Althusser so poignantly expressed in his paper, the capitalist state influences the population in ways that are not always obvious. Whether the working class is conscious of it or not, the ruling class will always be actively trying to exploit people’s labor and squeeze as much use out of them as possible. As I have argued, alcohol is only one small part of the American cultural ISA that benefits the capitalist state.

Part II: An Exploration of the Connections Between Alcohol, Violence, and Oppression

In Part I of this paper, I argued that widespread alcohol consumption serves the interests of capitalist state because of the placating effect on consumers, an effect which keeps the working class from realizing their exploitation. I will now continue the argument that alcohol consumption serves the interests of the capitalist state as a cultural ISA. However, I will focus on another rationale, which is that alcohol consumption contributes to violence towards minority groups. In general, alcohol is linked to violence by consumers because “it create[s] “selective disinhibition” (the undermining of self-control as a result of drug or alcohol use, or in particular social settings) around violence, promote[s] social bonding among perpetrators, and provide[s] a coping mechanism for them in the aftermath of atrocity” (Westermann). Although this violence could be targeted at any person or group, there are many significant instances of alcohol-fueled violence that disproportionately target minority groups. One example is the 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, in which drunk members of the U.S. army gruesomely butchered 133 Cheyenne Indians (Fowler 365). A more recent example is how there was a wide availability of alcohol to American soldiers during the Vietnam War, which led to many atrocious acts of violence towards Vietnamese civilians in the 1950s-1970s (Butler 346). Drinking alcohol, then, acts as a catalyst for racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise bigoted people, to commit violence. These acts of violence serve to uphold institutions like racism and sexism in society, institutions that benefit the capitalist state. In this part of my paper, I will examine a significant example of alcohol-fueled violence towards a marginalized group. Specifically, I will look at the role of alcohol in the Holocaust to show how the institution of racism was upheld through alcohol-fueled violence. Lastly, I will explain how racism, sexism, and similar institutions benefit capitalism and the capitalist state, and thus how alcohol benefits the capitalist state by extension.

It is necessary to first have a discussion of violence. In particular, I will explore what violence towards marginalized people and minority groups looks like. In Part I of this essay, I used Young’s paper, “Five Faces of Oppression,” to explain exploitation. I will now turn to her section on violence, which is also one of the five categories of oppression that Young identifies. She writes,

“Members of some groups live with the knowledge that they must fear random, unprovoked attacks on their persons or property, which have no motive but to damage, humiliate, or destroy the person. In American society women, Blacks, Asians, Arabs, gay men, and lesbians live under such threats of violence, and in at least some regions Jews, Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, and other Spanish-speaking Americans must fear such violence as well . . . Violence is systemic because it is directed at members of a group simply because they are members of that group . . . An important aspect of random, systematic violence is its irrationality” (Young 56-57).

In this section, Young makes it clear that violence has an intimate connection with oppressing minority groups. Whereas people who are not part of a marginalized group in society do not live in fear of being the victim of violence, marginalized people who are systemically oppressed do. They are subject to oppression that is manifested in many ways, and violence is just one such way. Young also later points out the intersection of cultural imperialism with violence. She writes about how people in dominant cultures often perceive minorities as a challenge to their place in society, which can lead irrational violence. Thus, violence towards marginalized groups is systemic and stems from a place of intolerance and fear of other cultures. This is supported by Primo Levi’s book, *The Drowned and the Saved*, in Chapter 5, “Useless Violence.” Levi, who was a Jewish Holocaust survivor, writes about the time period he lived through, saying, “Hitler’s era was characterized by a widespread violence that was useless, an end in itself, designed solely to create pain; sometimes for a purpose but always redundant and always disproportionate to that purpose” (Levi). Here, Levi echoes Young’s sentiment that violence towards minorities can be irrational, purposeless, or as Levi puts it, “useless.” It is true that this violence is useless in the sense that it supposedly serves no purpose to the perpetrators. As Levi explains in the chapter, the Nazis could have accomplished their goal of exterminating the Jews with much less violence, like by simply killing them “in their beds rather than insert their agony into the collective agony of the train” (Levi 7). However, although this sort of violence might be useless in the sense that the end goal could be achieved in a less extreme way, there is still a consequence of useless violence towards minorities that is significant. This kind of violence upholds the institutions of racism, sexism, and bigotry, which in turn benefit the capitalist state. I will discuss the connection between these institutions and the capitalist state in more detail later, but it is first crucial to understand the link between bigoted violence towards minority groups and alcohol consumption.

Alcohol consumption is something that can act as a catalyst for systemic violence towards minority groups. For example, alcohol has been historically involved in atrocities where a dominant group commits violence towards a minority group on a mass scale. Another example is that alcohol has been linked to domestic violence where male perpetrators get more aggressive when drunk. In his essay, “Stone-Cold Killers or Drunk with Murder? Alcohol and Atrocity during the Holocaust,” Professor of History Edward Westermann writes,

“Several studies from the field of criminology have highlighted the close relationship between violent crime—particularly murder—and substance abuse. One study from 1956 found that in the United States, alcohol was a factor in more than 60 percent of criminal homicides . . . A study focused on the Udmurt Republic in western Russia found that 84 percent of those convicted of homicide between 1989 and 1991 had been intoxicated at the time of the crime. The study also identified a clear connection between alcohol, sexual violence, and murder” (Westermann).

Clearly, alcohol consumption can instigate many types of violence, whether that is on a massive scale affecting large groups, or just between individuals. There are various ways that alcohol is linked to violence as well. Drinking can cause the perpetrator to have impaired judgment, which can result in violent actions. In their paper, “Violence Beyond Reason: Prohibition of Alcohol and the Decline of Lynching in the US South,” Professors Hoyt Bleakley and Emily Owens support this, writing, “A large literature in public health and economics has demonstrated that alcohol consumption increases both impulsivity and aggression, contributing to a wide range of socially undesirable outcomes” (Bleakley 2). Alcohol consumption can also lead to comradery between multiple perpetrators, who use alcohol to socially bond over committing acts of violence. One example of this is the fact that white southerners in the 19th and 20th centuries often drank together before lynching Black southerners or committing other acts of and racial violence. Bleakley and Owens write, “The drop in lynching in the years immediately following prohibition is consistent with a direct effect of alcohol consumption on propensity of white southerners to engage in violence towards black southerners” (Bleakley 15). In other words, after alcohol was outlawed in 1920 because of Prohibition, drinking habits greatly decreased, as I discussed in Part I of this paper. Lynching also decreased right after Prohibition was instated, suggesting that alcohol played a factor in the violence. Alcohol can also serve to placate a perpetrator after they have already carried out an act of violence. In Part I of this paper, I wrote about the placation effect of drinking in relation to calming people down after a hard day at work, but drinking can also serve to placate people who feel they need to calm down after being violent. These are only a few of the connections between violence and alcohol. Alcohol fueled violence disproportionately affects minorities because many of the people that commit acts of violence are already racist, sexist, homophobic, or otherwise bigots, as I discussed in the previous paragraph. Alcohol, then, acts as a catalyst for them to commit violent acts towards marginalized peoples who they already harbor hate towards. Therefore, alcohol-fueled violence upholds institutions such as racism and sexism in society by contributing to the oppression of minority groups and marginalized peoples.

Now that I have established the connections between alcohol, violence, and oppression, I will turn to my first example of alcohol-fueled violence. Although I have already provided many examples, such as the Sand Creek Massacre and the many instances of drunken white southerners lynching Black southerners, it is useful to go more in depth about a specific case. I have thus chosen to examine the role of alcohol in the Holocaust. The Holocaust is widely considered to be one of the most horrific atrocities in human history. The ways in which violence were inflicted on the Jewish community and on other minority communities was unprecedented. Jean Améry, a Holocaust survivor, writes about his experience being tortured in his book, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and Its Realities*. He says, “At the first blow . . . [the] trust in the world breaks down. The other person, *opposite* whom I exist physically in the world and *with* whom I can exist only as long as he does not touch my skin surface as border, forces his own corporeality on me with the first blow. He is on me and thereby destroys me” (Améry 28). He goes on to talk about the consequences of torture on the psyche and how the tortured person will always remain tortured. Pain is the entire reality of the tortured; “the tortured person is only a body, and nothing else besides that” (Améry 33). In other words, victims are afforded no escape, no relief, no way out. They are reduced to just their own bodies, and the pain that their bodies can feel. Many people are already aware of the torture that the prisoners of concentration camps were subject to during the Holocaust, but it is not a well-known fact that alcohol was prevalent among perpetrators of torture and violence in these camps. The Reich Leader of the SS and Chief of the German Police, Heinrich Himmler, was known to be a distributor of alcohol among the SS:

“Despite Himmler's admonition against the abuse of alcohol, he supported the distribution of special alcohol rations for SS and police forces in the East for the purpose of promoting social bonding . . . Not coincidentally, these get-togethers often took place in the wake of mass executions—a fact reflected in Himmler's comment that such “celebrations” helped to prevent these “difficult duties” from “harming the mind and character” of the participants. In fact, these fellowship evenings were intended specifically to help “wipe away” (*verwischen*) the effects of daily duties associated with mass murder. Despite Himmler's intent, in reality such fellowship evenings, and the ready availability of alcohol, often resulted in binge drinking and additional acts of atrocity by those under the influence” (Westermann).

Alcohol thus functioned both as a way to placate and calm those that spent their days torturing and killing innocent people, and as an instigator of even more violence. The binge drinking episodes also served to bond members of the SS, as Westermann points out. These episodes would lead to many more instances of violence, such as when drunken police officers guarding the Warsaw Ghetto would repeatedly go to into the ghetto and gruesomely murder Jews (Westermann). The Holocaust is just one example that highlights how alcohol-fueled violence upholds the institution of racism. The violence that the Germans inflicted on the Jews reflected more than one kind of racism as well. In their paper, “The Uniqueness of the Holocaust,” Professors Avishai Margalit and Gabriel Motzkin write about two different kinds of racism. They say that one kind asserts that some races of humans are inferior to other races. This is what most people generally think of when racism is brought up. The other kind sees each race as different species, and some as not even human. They write,

“This kind of racism asserts that Jews are not merely an inferior race, but a different animal altogether, and that therefore they should be treated in the way that one treats other animals. Nazi biologism confounded these two kinds of racism in a particularly virulent fashion, for the lesson that the Nazis imbibed from the theory of evolution was that the boundaries of genus and species are not fixed, that humans may well be on the way to becoming something else” (Margalit 71).

Clearly, the alcohol-fueled violence inflicted on the Jews upheld the institution of racism in more ways than one. Although the Holocaust took place in Germany under a dictatorship, and not under a capitalist state, the example still shows how racism is supported by alcohol-fueled violence. Thus, my point still stands that alcohol benefits the capitalist state, because racism benefits the capitalist state.

It is now necessary to explain how exactly upholding institutions like racism and sexism actually benefit the capitalist state. American sociologist, Immanuel Wallerstein, lays this out in the book he co-wrote with French philosopher Étienne Balibar, *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*. In chapter 2, “The Ideological Tensions of Capitalism: Universalism versus Racism and Sexism,” he talks about how the capitalist state includes the capitalist world economy, which commodifies everything in order to have an endless accumulation of capital. Since the capitalist system is constantly expanding, it needs as much labor power as possible, at as low a cost as possible. Institutions like racism and sexism are able to lower labor costs. Wallerstein writes, “It is precisely because racism is anti-universalistic in doctrine that it helps to maintain capitalism as a system. It allows a far lower reward to a major segment of the work force than could ever be justified on the basis of merit” (Balibar 34). This logic he applies to sexism as well. Basically, these institutions are able to justify inequality, because if minority groups are seen as inferior to the dominant group in society, companies can get away with paying them less and treating them worse. In today’s capitalist society in the United States, racism continues to persist. Adam Serwer points this out in his article, “The Cruelty Is the Point,” where he talks about cruelty and racism under the Trump administration. Serwer writes, “Somewhere on the wide spectrum between adolescent teasing and the smiling white men in the lynching photographs are the Trump supporters whose community is built by rejoicing in the anguish of those they see as unlike them, who have found in their shared cruelty an answer to the loneliness and atomization of modern life” (Serwer). In other words, cruelty towards minority groups is so engrained into capitalism and so accepted in U.S. society that it helped President Trump to get elected.

I have now established that alcohol is a cultural ISA and does indeed serve the interests of the capitalist state. While Part I of this paper focused on the placating effects of alcohol, Part II focused on the role of alcohol in violence towards minorities. This violence is a way of oppressing already marginalized people and a way of continuing to uphold racism, sexism, and similar institutions. Supporting these institutions only benefits the capitalist state, since capitalism needs labor power to thrive. These institutions justify oppression so that labor power costs can be driven down, and the economy can continue to grow and expand.

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numbers/#:~:text=Day Drinks: Consumption and Context,in the daytime every week.&text=Indeed, 10 percent of women,of men said the same.

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1. I would like to acknowledge that Marxist feminist scholar Silvia Federici wrote about similar ideas in her book, *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle* (2012), which impacted my argument. She specifically wrote about how traditional marriage between men and women benefits the capitalist state because men who are treated badly at work can then take out their frustrations on their wives when they get home from work. Although this concept is not directly related to my argument, the way in which she frames her argument did influence how I wrote this paper about alcohol consumption benefitting the capitalist state. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is true that slaves and human trafficking still exists illegally in the United States today, but for the purposes of this paper I am referring here to the average employee who is voluntarily working for wages and not to modern day slaves. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)