Comparative research strategies and changes in drinking cultures

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Introduction

"[T]he inclination of sociologists to adduce data from various countries, and even cultures, as mutually comparable, (...) appears rather grandiose in view of the difficulties of interpreting such data."

Bruun & Hauge 1963, 16

The rich tradition of cross-cultural alcohol research provides a good platform for reflexion on contemporary challenges to comparative research (see Arminen & Alapuro 2004, 11–12). This richness is partly due to the fact that cross-cultural studies show a considerable variety concerning research strategies. In addition there are alcohol-specific reasons to take a closer look at comparative research practices.

From a European perspective the situation we face might be outlined as follows. For decades northern European countries have been longing for “European” or “continental” drinking habits. What they have got, however, is a level of consumption that comes close to or even exceeds the present levels of, e.g., Italy or France. On the other hand, in recent years British or Spanish youth have become known for their disorderly and destructive – some would say: northern – drinking habits. Consequently, along "cultural globalisation" we are left with an image of converging drinking cultures: levels of drinking are becoming more alike, beverage preferences are less diverse, and even the uses of alcohol – e.g., for heavy intoxication or with meals – are, according to survey studies, more similar (see e.g. Simpura et al. 2002).

Thus a general convergence hypothesis is not far-fetched, but one might also ask whether it is formalistic and superficial in character. In the end, the adoption of new cultural habits is seldom a question of simple transformational operations. What looks similar is not necessarily similar in a deeper sense.

In the following we reflect upon these questions from the point of view of comparative research strategies, our focus being on research dealing with drinking cultures and habits in Europe. We start by pointing at some popular concepts, also used in research, which seem to be in need of radical reformulation. Such reformulations, in turn, need valid comparative research strategies. Secondly we draw on developments within comparative sociology that have taken place particularly during the two last decades. Thirdly, we point out that two basic
dimensions are of special interest in clarifying strategic alternatives in comparative research. One concerns ontological aspects of the object of study, while the other pertains to epistemological issues. Building on these ideas we present four different types of comparative research. Finally we make a comment on the intricate questions of cultural diffusion and homogenisation. For example, how can we conclude that similar-looking phenomena – in terms of quantified knowledge or observed actual behaviour – represent similar realities. This is actually one of the main challenges posed to traditional comparative sociology, which has been highly concentrated on finding uniform developmental trends and operational models in different societies. Along the escalating economic and cultural globalisation comparative sociology has in fact highlighted the importance of comparing social and local peculiarities among all alleged uniformity or homogenisation

**Contested categories**

The most recent large-scale study analysing European drinking culture is the European Comparative Alcohol Study (ECAS) covering the countries belonging to EU-15 plus Norway. One important result of the study was that it found evidence of "homogenisation" in drinking patterns during the postwar period throughout Europe. This was true regarding, for example, aggregate consumption levels, beverage preferences, and probably also heavy drinking (Leifman 2002; see also Simpura et al. 2002). As such, these results demonstrate that drinking cultures on the European ground are in a state of flux. This also implies that since the 1960s and 1970s the standard concepts and images of different European drinking have become diluted, inappropriate or even invalid. By these concepts or images we refer primarily to three familiar distinctions.

1. The most popular and specific distinction builds on the traditionally dominant beverage type consumed in each country or culture. According to this typology, countries are classified into wine, beer or spirits cultures. Typically, these cultures have been related to Southern, Central and Northern Europe, respectively. It is true that an overwhelming share of alcoholic beverages consumed in the Mediterranean "wine countries" still consists of wine. However, the volume of wine consumed in these countries has diminished drastically: compared to the 1970s only half of the amount of wine is presently consumed in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain (World Drink Trends, 2005). This implies that old meanings and contexts of wine drinking disappear, while new meanings and contexts enter the stage. "Beer countries", in turn, consume much more wine than before. And finally, "spirits countries" are already buried as this category, according to the changing reality, is generally transformed into the hybrid category of "former spirits countries". To be valid the term "former spirits countries" should be replaced by "present beer countries" or "present beer and wine countries", as beer for example in Finland, and beer and wine in the case of Sweden, have become the dominant beverages.
The “homogenisation” of or at least instability in European drinking practices has left its footprints in the ECAS study, which applies three hybrid categories, i.e. "traditionally beer-drinking countries", "traditionally wine-drinking countries" and "former spirits-drinking countries" (Leifman 2002, 55). Such a categorisation suggests that actual wine-, beer- and spirits-drinking countries do not exist anymore, while at the same time it seems too intricate, or too early, to replace old images altogether with more adequate ones. What is clear, however, is that the distinguishing and explanatory power of the three hybrid concepts is much weaker than the original concepts used to be.

(2) The second distinction is that between wet and dry drinking cultures. Although the main focus is put on the level of aggregate consumption, this typology often signifies a broader cultural image, covering drinking habits in general. Wet drinking cultures, typically represented by the Mediterranean countries, are characterized by a weak temperance tradition, a high volume of consumption, a low proportion of abstainers, frequent and fairly extensive drinking, a high level of problems related to permanent extensive drinking, and a low level of alcohol poisoning (Room & Mitchell 1972). Dry drinking cultures, standing for Nordic and Anglophone countries, show the opposite features. Moreover, the wet versus dry distinction implicitly assumes huge differences concerning the system of social controls on drinking (Room & Mäkelä 2000).

In today's Europe the division into wet and dry cultures is utterly problematic, because differences in the primary criteria – i.e., volume consumed and abstention in the population – no longer separate cultures which are supposed to vary. For example: in the last few years aggregate alcohol consumption of previously low consuming Ireland and Finland have exceeded previously high consuming France (World Drink Trends 2005; Karlsson & Österberg 2006). As a result the distinction used by the ECAS study, separating Mediterranean high consumption countries, Central European medium consumption countries and Northern high consumption countries (Leifman 2002), is currently invalid.

(3) The third popular classification pays attention to different uses of alcoholic beverages in particular cultures. Uses refer both to material characteristics of the beverages and to cultural features of drinking contexts. In some cultures alcoholic beverages have for centuries been an organic part of the daily nutrition, i.e. wine or beer has been an important ingredient of the intake of calories. In other cultures alcoholic beverages – be it spirits, wine or beer – have come to be associated with intoxication. The basic explanation for this division between nutrient and intoxicant should be sought in the different roles that the beverages have played in a given country or region. For example, beverages may be used as a part of peoples' daily making of living and daily intake of food. Or they may be used as a rare luxury good to be consumed mainly at seasonal feasts and celebrations, and nowadays during weekends rather than in weekdays in connection with daily meals.
However, during recent decades also the validity of this typology has weakened. As a result of urbanisation, a radically changed family structure and other social factors connected with the "modern way of life", the agrarian-nutritional role of wine consumption in the Mediterranean countries has diminished considerably. Side by side with this, the increasing beer consumption among Spanish and Italian youth, and numerous reports from e.g. the United Kingdom and the Netherlands indicate that binge drinking has proliferated in party culture and public behaviour also in a variety of unexpected cultures. In Nordic cultures, on the other hand, daily use of alcohol with or without meals has increased considerably in the last decades. Still, it should be emphasised, there are remarkable differences between Nordic and Mediterranean countries regarding both regularity of drinking and the extent of intoxication-oriented drinking.

No doubt, then, some kind of convergence is taking place considering important and conspicuous aspects of drinking culture, and as a consequence images and concept have got blurred. However, without research evidence it would be over-hasty to proclaim that this convergence is making countries and cultures similar in a more profound sense. As such, neither changes in aggregate levels of consumption nor changes in beverage preferences do ascertain that national or regional drinking practices are becoming more “alike” (while changes in the different uses may be a more serious case). Instead of postulating growing cultural similarities it is tempting to ask whether the convergent trends may be taken as a sign indicating that the cultural position of drinking is undergoing transformations in large parts of Europe. This question can be answered only by a comparative research design. Luckily, social alcohol research can build on a vivid tradition of comparative studies. In the next chapters we will derive inspiration from this tradition as well as from comparative sociology in general, in order to outline a model for different comparative research strategies.

Recent transformations within comparative social research

Comparative social research strategies are often divided into two principal branches depending on their knowledge interest and focus. One strategy is occupied with seeking uniformities, while the other one is stressing uniqueness (Sztompka 1988). In the postwar period up until the 1980s comparative research in Europe was dominated by the search for similarities. This is frequently explained by referring to the coincidence between the rise of comparative research and the rapid formation of new states after World War II (Allardt 1990, 186). In those decades there was a strong belief in the possibility of creating universal knowledge, to be applied in a rational planning process aiming to strengthen the nation-state and improve the welfare of citizens. Using Piotr Sztompka's words:

The rationale of traditional comparative method was to seek uniformities in the sea of differences; to show that certain regularities hold in other societies as well, or that they hold for other categories of people, or that they extend to other social characteristics.
This was inspired by a naturalistic methodological creed; an attempt to imitate the logic of experiment (Sztompka 1988, 214).

For example, in Finland the mainstream of comparative social research was linked to the erection of the Finnish welfare scheme. Nordic comparisons using social indicators were particularly popular. In these studies the role of the state as the guarantor of welfare was taken for granted, and it was assumed that, by and large, citizens share the same opinion about the principal arrangements of welfare schemes. Among important values and standards used in the comparisons one should mention high public expenditures, the universalism of coverage, the programmatic reduction of socio-economic inequality, and a high degree of unification of the Scandinavian welfare schemes (Allardt 1990, 190). Significantly, comparisons were made primarily between fairly similar cases, i.e. the Scandinavian countries, or by using Scandinavian-like welfare measures in comparisons including also non-Scandinavian countries (e.g. Hungary in Alestalo et al. 1987, and Poland in Alestalo et al. 1994).

It is interesting to note that Erik Allardt, one of the protagonists of Finnish and Nordic comparative social research, is quite self-critical towards this way of imputing "one's own national goals on other nations" and probably assuming that Scandinavian "forms of social insurance and entitlements are somehow superior to other solutions" (Allardt 1990, 187-188).

From the 1980s onwards the strategy of seeking uniformities has been put into question (Sztompka 1988). Several explanations have been suggested to this. First, the globalisation of economy and culture weakened the influence of nation-states and national borders, and tended to equalize the world and intensify its features as some kind of "single-network" (Tilly 1984, 211). Second, not only did local cultures diversify but they also sought for identities clearly distinct from the assumed image of national unity and coherence. As a result of this centrifugal dynamics integrated cultures and administrative bodies at the national level were contested and challenged, and even split up. In these circumstances researchers underscored that one should seek "uniqueness among uniformities, rather than uniformity among variety" (Sztompka 1988, 215).

This emerging shift of the objective of comparative research also paved the way for new modes of doing comparisons and outlining its objects. Wide-ranging macro-comparisons, including analyses of structural change, were criticized for being tied to the state's apron strings (Tilly 1992), that is, state and society were equalized and supposed to proceed along certain stages of a common process of modernization. Moreover, macro-comparisons were called into question, because they were often built on the assumption that there exists "a regular society constituting of a pure social structure and coherent norms and habits" (Allardt 2001, 58).

Subsequently, the focus of international comparisons was switched from the study of large processes and macro-structures more towards the study of everyday life and mundane
practices, from building causal research designs to formulating the research objects as cultural phenomena (Alapuro 2004, 56). Correspondingly, emphasis was increasingly put on the importance of historical information and qualitative methods (e.g. Allardt 1990, 188). Now the use of only a few cases became a reputable strategy. Actors and their interpretations were rehabilitated as a necessary complement to structural entities. Cultural mechanisms and conditional path-dependent chains of events were to be studied in historical context and concrete terms (Alapuro 2004).

**Different comparative approaches**

What remained, however, were the complex problems that are embedded in any kind of comparative research. Some of these problems are recurrently treated in the literature. Frequently mentioned themes are, e.g.,

- should the study seek uniformities among variety or uniqueness among uniformities,
- should it focus on universalities or particularities,
- should it analyse most similar or most different cases,
- how should one define the limits of the social territory or system to be studied,
- what might be a suitable number of cases in a specific comparative research design?


To catch the essence of the variety of comparative strategies, we have chosen to structure them along two principal dimensions related, first, to the nature of the phenomena studied and, second, to the nature of the propositions to be generated by the study. Our classification retells and, hopefully, improves the basic comparative approaches presented by Charles Tilly in his most inspiring book *Big Structures, Large Processes, Huge Comparisons* (1984).

The first dimension concerns the *ontology of the object studied*, i.e. the constitution of the reality of the object. Here we have two alternatives. First, the object – e.g. drinking to get drunk, wine consumption, etc. – may be regarded as belonging to one single, common reality. This implies that when we are talking about, say, binge drinking in southern Europe and in northern Europe, we assume that we are talking about the same phenomenon; i.e., that the structure, meaning and operational dynamics of binge drinking are more or less similar in different cultures. We call this the assumption of a *single ontology* of the object studied.

Second, the object of study may be considered to belong to different realities, where drinking practices resembling each other actually may carry very different meanings. For example, we may assume that the Spanish youth phenomenon called *botellón* (literally: big bottle, signifying drinking leading to drunkenness; Rodriguez-Martos 2006) differs markedly from British (Measham & Brain 2005) or Finnish (Partanen 1992) expressions of binge drinking,
although in each case large amounts of alcohol are consumed with the aim to become really drunk. This being the case, we are dealing with the assumption of a *multiple ontology* of the object studied: drinking to get drunk, wine consumption etc. carry different meanings and follow different dynamics in different cultures.

In Tilly's account this is called "multiplicity of forms". According to him,”the statement emerging from a comparison can range from single (all instances of a phenomenon have common properties) to multiple (many forms of the phenomenon exists)” (Tilly 1984, 81). Hence, by this single or multiple presences Tilly seems to refer to the ontological commitments of the respective research strategies. In other words, does the researcher assume that the reality is ultimately single or multiple by nature?

Evidently, a single ontology implies that different expressions of drinking (amount, frequency, abstinence, etc.) can be more or less "directly" compared, regardless of the culture in which they take place. Assuming a multiple ontology, on the other hand, means that comparisons should identify and respect peculiarities belonging to each of the culture-specific realities compared.

To sum up, the ontology of drinking issues is associated with what is sometimes called the cultural position of drinking (Room & Mäkelä 2000; see Mäkelä 1983).

The second dimension concerns *epistemological aspects of the object studied*. The aim of this dimension is to structure the knowledge interest inherent in the respective comparative research strategies. Again we split up the dimension into two basic alternatives. On the one hand, a comparative study may seek *generalising, or even universal knowledge*. For example, binge drinking may be analysed in various European countries in order to identify general rules or regularities in binging, which deal with the link between the debut age of drinking and later phases in the drinking career, or to the relationship between upbringing and binge drinking.

On the other hand, a comparative study may seek particularising and *unique knowledge*. In that case the researcher is interested in going deeper into some special characteristics of the binge drinking phenomenon, such as national or local or gender-specific idiosyncrasies. The task is, then, to expose these traits by contrasting, for example, Swedish or Stockholmian female drinking habits towards Italian or Roman female drinking habits.

In our opinion Tilly's attempt to cover these epistemological aspects is somewhat inaccurate. This goes particularly for his title of this dimension, "share of all instances". However, his definition of the dimension sounds usable: "the statement resulting from a comparison can range from a single instance (…) to all instances of the phenomenon" (Tilly 1984, 81). For the sake of clarity, we would prefer to understand this dimension as an axis describing the epistemological universality or particularity of knowledge. This being the case, we may
simply assume that when the researcher seeks *generalising knowledge*, such knowledge is supposed to hold for all the relationships or dynamics of the cases of the phenomenon studied. Correspondingly, when the aim is to generate *unique knowledge*, such knowledge is valid only in the particular case at hand.

These two principal dimensions and their two respective alternatives can be ordered into a grid including four different types of comparative research (Figure 1). While the distinction between the strategies is analytical in character, there is no ranking order between the types. In practice, a single comparative study often applies several strategies, although one strategy may be given primary emphasis.

**Figure 1.** Types of comparative research according to (1) the ontology of the object studied and (2) the nature of knowledge to be generated.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ONTOLOGY</th>
<th>EPISTEMOLOGY</th>
<th>ASSUMING A SINGLE ONTOLOGY OF THE OBJECT STUDIED: research phenomena to be compared belong to the same reality and meaning-structure adhering to a common operational logics</th>
<th>ASSUMING A MULTIPLE ONTOLOGY OF THE OBJECT STUDIED: research phenomena to be compared belong to different realities and meaning-structures, and adhere to operational logics peculiar to each phenomenon</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SEEKING GENERALISING KNOWLEDGE OF THE OBJECT STUDIED: propositions are valid for all phenomena to be compared</td>
<td>(1) UNIVERSALISING COMPARISONS</td>
<td>(2) VARIATION-FINDING COMPARISONS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEEKING UNIQUE KNOWLEDGE OF THE OBJECT STUDIED: each proposition is valid only for individual cases</td>
<td>(3) ENCOMPASSING COMPARISONS</td>
<td>(4) INDIVIDUALISING COMPARISONS</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Universalising comparisons (1)

According to Tilly (1984, 82) a pure universalising comparison identifies common properties among all instances of a phenomenon. The assumption here is that, regardless of culture or context, “every instance of a phenomenon follows essentially the same rule” or "the same principle" (ibid.). Thus one needs to have a theory that is based on a single ontology and makes valid comparisons of every instance possible. According to Tilly, specialised in history, one traditional form of doing universalising comparisons has been the building of theories that identify “natural histories” concerning “individual careers, family lives, communities of a certain type, social movements, revolutions and civilizations” (ibid., 97).

Overall, the ultimate aim in universalising comparisons is to find, establish or modify general propositions, a kind of universal laws, which work in every entity to be compared.

There is a strong and influential tradition of seeking universal regularities in comparative alcohol research. Actually, some of the most outstanding works may be characterized as belonging to the categories of "universalising comparisons". Kettil Bruun and collaborators’ study Alcohol Policy in Public Health Perspective (1975) is a good example of this tradition. By comparing countries the authors argued that "the total consumption of alcohol seems to be distributed in a population in a manner that is fairly stable from country to country" (Bruun et al. 1975, 44). From this "certain invariance in the distribution pattern" (ibid., 34) followed an other regularity, that is, "an increase in the per capita consumption of a country should generally speaking be taken to indicate an increasing prevalence of heavy users and of alcohol-related mortality" (ibid., 44-45). Building on this notion governments in general, who aimed at reducing the number of such users, were recommended to stick to these regularities and lower aggregate consumption of alcoholic beverages by restricting their availability (ibid., 45, 90). This way of reasoning is further developed in the prominent "follow-ups" of Bruun et al's classic work (Edwards et al. 1994; Babor et al. 2003).

Another familiar example of universalising comparisons would be the attempt to establish a relationship between the age of the onset of drinking and subsequent drinking patterns or problems within a population. A third example would be the so called stepping stone theory, signifying the supposed natural succession of substance use from one substance to another following a regular developmental pattern. While in all these examples attention is drawn to important societal dynamics, one problem in universalising comparisons – and in policy recommendations based on these comparisons – is their tendency to become abstract and ahistorical. Culture and history are done away, so to say, from this approach.
Variation-finding comparisons (2)

Variation-finding comparisons examine variation in the character or intensity of a phenomenon which is assumed to have more than one form, regularity or meaning (Tilly 1984, 82). In this case we recognise that the entities to be compared may belong to quite different realities and, thus, carry different meanings depending on cultural context. Particularly if there is a large number of cases to be compared and quantitative methods are applied, it is a challenging and intricate task to take into account this basic recognition of the existence of multiple realities. No wonder that much time is spent in comparative projects on pondering how to translate questionnaires from one language to another in order to secure that the questions, first, will be understood and, second, correspond to cultural idiosyncrasies as well as possible. Moreover, when eventually reporting results based primarily on numbers, it is no less challenging to try to keep in mind the initial recognition of the multiplicity of realities that exist in the cases studied.

Consequently, variation-finding comparisons are surrounded by various problems. To cite Tilly: “There is the abuse of Great Blender, in which we take numerical observations on a hundred-odd national states, made comparable by the magic fact of appearing in parallel columns of a statistical handbook, and run multiple regressions or factor analyses in order to discern the dimensions [under study]” (ibid., 116). In other words, in variation-finding comparisons the conceptual space for comparisons is easily constructed by technical solutions to problems that are theoretical, cultural, historical or situational in character. However, given that the problems are solved satisfactorily, it is possible to make valid comparisons about variations between the entities.

Large-scale comparative studies such as The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs (ESPAD) may exemplify variation-finding comparisons (Hibell et al. 2004). Rather than finding general regularities (as in universal comparisons), this project focuses on wide and interesting variations found in alcohol and drug use, as well as in attitudes towards that use in 35 European countries. This also implies that the main task of the ESPAD study is not to provide a detailed analysis of the relationship and dynamics between Europe, which forms the overarching structure of the study, and its elements, i.e. the participating nation-states. That kind of relationship, however, would be of primary interest in the third type of comparative strategies, i.e. encompassing comparisons.

Encompassing comparisons (3)

One important prerequisite in encompassing comparisons is that the researcher from the very start “must have both a mental map of the whole system and a theory of its operation” (Tilly 1984, 125). This conceptual or mental map serves as an instrument when defining the interdependences between the elements of the system to be compared. The elements are cast
in a single ontology, so to say. The scope of the conceptual map may vary, covering "systems" such as a country (and its elements, i.e. regions or cities), a set of countries (e.g. Scandinavia or Europe) or a set of continents (the world-system). The map forms the point of departure for comparisons, but it may be revised and specified as the study proceeds.

Stein Rokkan's (1975) account of Europe is a very ambitious attempt to apply an encompassing strategy. He established specific interdependences between different regions in Europe according to dimensions such as North and South, East and West, and centre vs. periphery (all dimensions are familiar also within alcohol research). Rokkan assumed that studying Europe, by using such a comparative strategy would eventually reveal the systemic interdependences in the world as a whole (Tilly 1984, 130–135; see also Mjøset 2000).

In several Nordic comparative alcohol studies it is assumed that the Nordic societies follow distinctive operational dynamics and, thus, constitute a relatively independent, single societal system. Once you have got the conceptual map of the Nordic countries “right”, you may proceed by seeking for unique features in the individual countries belonging to the Nordic community (e.g. Sulkunen et al. 2000). In this case, Norwegian and Swedish peculiarities are contrasted, but expressly within the framework of a distinctive Nordic operational system.

*Individualising comparisons (4)*

The strategy of individualising comparisons builds on comparing contrasting cases, sometimes even representing binary oppositions. This strategy is appropriate only when studying a few cases at a time. As Mattei Dogan (2002, 70) states: "Binary comparison permits a kind of detailed confrontation that is almost impossible when the analysis encompasses too many cases". Binary oppositions are particularly useful when focussing on both original and general social and cultural phenomena. The purest, and extreme, example would be to treat "each case as unique, taking up one instance at a time, and minimizing its common properties with other instances" (Tilly 1984, 81).

The probably most famous example of an individualising comparison in sociological literature is Max Weber's study on *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism (1904–1905)*, in which he made wide comparisons of religious systems in the West and Far East. In that study he used the Far East expressly as a mirror or contrast "to get the West right" (Tilly 1984, 88).

In alcohol research the individualising strategy is used, for example, by Eeva Pyörälä (1995) when comparing drinking cultures among young adults in Finland and Spain. Referring to George Marcus and Dick Cushman's (1982) definition she notes that the idea of comparative contrast is that "a country's own culture and a culture foreign to it are put into a cross-cultural juxtaposition through which a new and surprising insight into both of these cultures can be given" (Pyörälä 1995, 218).
In this strategy we acknowledge that cultural behaviours belong to different realities, implying that "direct" comparisons are impossible. Moreover, the propositions to be made aim at grasping the individual and unique dynamics characterising actions and events to be studied. This approach would suggest, first, that a specific theory is applied for every single entity to be studied (country-, region-, gender-specific phenomena) and, second, that the knowledge produced about this entity is grounded on cultural and historical features peculiar to the phenomenon in question.

**Concluding remarks**

In a separate study it is fully possible to apply only one of the four types of comparative research strategies outlined above. Often, however, comparative studies create different combinations of the four strategies. This might actually be a prerequisite in order to cross expose different aspects and levels of the phenomenon under study.

One such complex phenomenon is related to the aforementioned fascinating debates on whether the ongoing European or even global trends in drinking habits are converging or not, or to what extent they are converging – or even more precisely: what aspects are converging and what aspects are not. A quick look at numbers describing changes in consumption at population level, as well as in beverage preferences, speak strongly in favour of a considerable homogenisation in drinking. To some extent this also seems to be true for drinking situations, both in the case of drinking being part of meals and when drinking is focussed explicitly on intoxication.

The convergence hypothesis is strongly backed up by popular sociological theory. In fact, some of the most influential social theorists of our time – Zeitgeist theoreticians such as Anthony Giddens, Ulrich Beck, Zygmunt Bauman, Scott Lash, John Urry, etc. – put tremendous emphasis on the globalising features of contemporary cultural change: despite the differences in their accounts, they share the view of what is pictured as a new radical freedom, which releases individuals from obliging and ascriptive historical traditions, and turns us into masters of our personal life-history, free to choose individually.

Some writers are highly critical of this approach. Two Norwegian scholars, Olve Krange and Tormod Øia (2006), have recently devoted a whole book to oppose this, in their view, all too simple description of contemporary society. Traditional empirical sociologists as they are, they point to the fact that it is a long way to go from the potential possibility of free choice being "out there", to making actual use of the possibilities, to change actual behaviour and mould actual everyday routines.
In the same vein, we would prefer to be quite cautious when interpreting the so called diffusion of binge drinking patterns from the North of Europe to Southern parts of the continent, or the diffusion of wine-drinking patterns from the South to the North. This cautiousness should consider that global trends are working on several levels and in several contexts. Institutions still think, culture still works, and in doing this these strong powers of modern society condition, direct or even rule out the extensive market of potential individual choice. Probably backed up by the confidence of powerful Norwegian traditionalism Krange and Øia go as far as to claim that "[m]odern identities are hardly either particularly liquid [cf. Bauman's "liquid modernity"] or particularly reflexive [cf. Lash's "reflexive modernity"]". In their capacity as empirical researchers of youngsters' life, they want to stress that traditional, collective values as well as conventional social safety seem to be highly esteemed virtues in this day and age.

The point is that only with the help of a better understanding and utilisation of different comparative research strategies, we may acquire more knowledge about in what sense national, regional, local or gender-specific cultures are getting more alike or remaining different. Binge drinking in different societies may be lumped together as if they belonged to the same ontological and epistemological reality. Still it is most likely that different levels and aspects – such as the history, the social contexts and the actual individual expressions – of binge drinking are remarkably different in, for example, Spain, Great Britain and Finland.

This is in a nutshell the challenge and spice of comparative research. We started by a citation from the earlier days of comparative alcohol research (Bruun & Hauge 1963). Let's conclude with a more recent statement, also reflecting the complexities of comparisons:

[AA's] international diffusion is evidence that the globalization of ways of thinking and being has reached a new level – that a system of thought and a program of action developed in middle-class North America in the 1930s can be adapted and made relevant, while still maintaining its core features, in cultural environments as diverse as the slums of Mexico City, the factory towns of Poland, and the agricultural villages of Switzerland" (Mäkelä et al. 1996, 252).

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