The Shape of Things to Come: Bottles, Glasses and Contrasting Beer Cultures in Belgium and the United States

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Bud's bowtie can and Stella's chalice[1]

'This can is incomparable.' In the spring of 2013, on billboards across America, there appeared an advertisement announcing as noteworthy news from the greatest brewery in the United States the arrival of a revolutionary and long-awaited new product: the 'Bowtie Can' for Budweiser beer. What is novel and noteworthy about this new product has nothing whatsoever to do with the quality or flavour of the actual beer involved, which is nothing more nor less than the Budweiser beer of a now long-standing recipe. Rather, it is the can itself, the new container in which the beer will now be offered.

This 'Bowtie Can' is indeed both novel and noteworthy in several ways, especially according to the press releases from Anheuser-Busch, the proximate parent company that produces Budweiser. Pat McGauley, the company's 'vice president of innovation', does not spare hyperbole in discussing it: 'This can is incomparable, like nothing you've ever seen before.... The world's most iconic beer brand deserves the world's most unique and innovative can. I think we have it here' (Vanderborg 2013). What makes this can so different from others is that it pinches in toward the middle at an angle of ten degrees – hence the 'bowtie' name – and that, in order to achieve this form, the can requires a far more complex manufacturing process (involving sixteen steps), as well as twice as much aluminium as is required for the conventionally shaped can. Nonetheless, the new packaging is economically advantageous to Budweiser, as the bowtie cans are priced like the old cans but contain 0.7 ounces less beer.

While most, if not all, of the major breweries that sell beer in the United States regularly make all manner of claims regarding their respect for and place in time-honoured tradition, at the end of the day the main thrust of their marketing routinely touts not tradition but novelty. Indeed, over the past several decades, the American beer market has been dominated by two key strategies: 1) the introduction of novel kinds of beers, first offered by one of the breweries but soon after imitated by their competitors; 2) the introduction of novel or eye-catching forms of packaging. Among the former, the most notable was the first such new style of beer, the category of 'light' beers, which first

gained mass popularity in the early 1970s; among the latter, the Bowtie Can is but one of a number that have appeared with considerable frequency over the years.

'It's a chalice, not a glass'

There is perhaps some touch of irony in the fact that Anheuser-Busch, a beer company that has for so long been thought of by so many as producer of the quintessential American brew, has been since 2008 a subsidiary of an even larger brewing and beverage conglomerate, AB InBev, which is in large measure a Belgian (and Brazilian) corporation, based in the ancient brewing centre of Leuven and most closely identified with the brand Stella Artois, which is itself still produced in that Flemish city. That under AB InBev Anheuser-Busch continues to market its American products such as Budweiser in a manner consistent with established American marketing strategies is in no way surprising. For those who are at least somewhat familiar with Belgian beer culture, it is perhaps also not surprising that AB InBev's marketing strategy in the United States for its flagship beer, Stella Artois, draws in good measure on one of the most striking aspects of modern Belgian beer culture, namely, the prominent role given to glasses which are more or less specific in form to each beer and which bear the brand's logo. Indeed, though many beers sold in the United States – both foreign and domestic – have over the years offered special glasses festooned with the brand's logo, the offerings have been on a limited basis, and to my knowledge no other brewery has ever made the glass itself the focus of the advertising in the US in the way that Stella has in the years since AB InBev became a major player in the American market, with billboards and television spots featuring the elegant tulip glass with its long stem, accompanied in some cases by the comment: 'It's a chalice, not a glass'.

Yet, while it is certainly true that the offering of a distinctively shaped and decorated beer glass for a specific brand of beer is something very much normal in Belgium and very much out of the ordinary in the States, AB InBev's prominent use of the Stella 'chalice' in its American advertising is itself not very Belgian at all, but rather a sort of new twist on a long-standing marketing strategy in the US. Specifically, we note that these chalice advertisements put the primary focus not on the beer itself but rather on the material object most closely related to the serving of the beer, giving the Belgian-style glass a role played for other beer brands in the States by the bottle or the can. Of course, the elegant Stella 'chalice' is a decidedly Belgian object and it can thus bear several semiotic functions at once in AB InBev's American advertising: it becomes iconic for the Belgian origin of the beer and generally for the quality of the beer as an import from Europe; the elegance of the glass itself further strengthens the idea that Stella beer is a luxury item to be appreciated by sophisticated consumers willing to pay its higher price; indeed, this drinking vessel is so special that it is no mere 'glass' but a 'chalice' and by extension its use takes on an almost sacral air; and last but certainly not least, the Stella glass finds its own especially novel and noteworthy place not alongside but well above the usual American beer bottles and cans.

What we see in the marketing of Stella in the United States may seem a trivial adaptation and introduction of a minor element of Belgian beer culture, the specially formed and branded drinking glass, into the context of the American beer market. But it is this writer's belief that the contrast between the 'fancy' Belgian beer glass and the American bottle and can is not in the least trivial; rather, it is a contrast that reifies the enormous differences between the beer cultures of the two countries, two beer cultures which represent extreme opposites along a continuum of modern Western beer cultures. The initial focus of this paper is on the contrasting material aspects of these beer cultures, but ultimately we argue that the seemingly superficial differences in the material aspect are in fact reflections of fundamental differences at several other levels, to wit, the aesthetics of beer, attitudes toward alcohol consumption in general and attitudes to beer in particular with regard to its relationship to culinary culture. Finally, we consider these deep differences in connection with certain socio-historical developments in the early twentieth century.

Belgian and American beer cultures: a study in contrasts

General trends in the brewing industry. The modern American and Belgian beer industries are not only now intimately connected at the corporate level as a result of the purchase of Anheuser-Busch by InBev, but they also resemble each other in some general ways. Through the same movement that brought these mega-breweries together, there have been many large and small corporate mergers and brewery buy-outs leading to the current situation in which the overwhelming majority of beer production and sales in both countries has come under the control of less than a handful of giant beer and beverage concerns. Each of these large-scale brewers offers to the public a range of different beers and beer styles, many of which continue more or less faithfully the products of the formerly independent businesses which the survivors have absorbed.

While the process of concentration of the industry started earlier and has proceeded further in the US than in Belgium, the current state of affairs in Belgium – allowing for the considerable difference in overall scale – has developed in an analogous way, especially with respect to the production of the most popular and, in a sense, basic beer style, pilsner, where concentration has been greatest. Independent brewers of other speciality beers have been better able to survive in Belgium and – as in the US, where microbreweries have flourished in recent decades – there has been considerable growth in the sector of these craft (as opposed to 'industrial') breweries who make styles of ales and lagers that appeal to small but passionate audiences.

The American bar and the Belgian café. As globalization also involves the brewing industry, it is inevitable that similarities as well as direct connections between the American and Belgian businesses develop. But while such convergence is already important and seems to be the vanguard of continued and far-reaching international homogenization, the fact remains that in many important respects, the beer cultures of the two countries are very different, and these deep differences are reflected in aspects

of the material attributes of the basic venues where beer is habitually consumed, the American bar and the Belgian café.

In both countries, the basic kind of drinking establishment or, for simplicity's sake 'tavern', is by no means monolithic.[2] Indeed, even if one categorizes and sub-categorizes kinds of drinking establishments, there still is a considerable amount of variation within those categories involving any number of geographic and demographic parameters. In addition, one occasionally finds taverns in Belgium which consciously imitate kinds of American bars and increasingly there are upscale American bars that consciously imitate Belgian cafés, at least with regard to certain features. There is, moreover, a tendency in both countries for many older taverns that formerly served little or no food to make such offerings an important part of their business; newer taverns increasingly tend to open as mixed tavern/restaurant gastro-pubs, and in many localities the pure drinking establishment is disfavoured or outlawed by governments.

Be that as it may, anyone who has had occasion to visit many drinking establishments in the two countries will recognize that there are certain norms for both and that in many instances they stand in contrast to one another. Among the most notable differences are the following:

The size and prominence of the counter or bar (in the narrow sense) at which patrons can stand or be seated on a stool or raised chair and which forms both a serving space and a physical barrier between the patrons' space and the workspace of the bartender: in the typical American tavern, the bar is especially long and prominent and serves as the primary location for patrons to be stationed. In the typical Belgian tavern, the bar is significantly smaller and often not the primary location for patrons.

Given the differences in degree of prominence of the bar counter, Belgian cafés provide relatively more space at tables with chairs than their American counterparts. In older and more traditional cafés, the tables are usually like tables suited for dining, with both tables and chairs made of wood and resembling simple home furnishings. In American taverns, tables are very often of special design for the bar setting, raised up high and accompanied by stools or high chairs of the same sort as those set along bar counters.

Size and composition of beverage displays: on the wall behind the bar counter, thus facing out toward the patrons' space at the bar and beyond, both Belgian and American taverns typically have on prominent display many of their beverage offerings. The difference here lies in scale: in American bars, even small ones, there are multiple shelves bearing scores of bottles of distilled spirits, liquors, fortified wines, etc., whereas in the typical café, the number of such bottles on display is vastly smaller and, in old-fashioned, small cafés, there may be just a handful of bottles of the most commonly requested strong drinks. Conversely, in a café there is necessarily shelf-space devoted to the storage and display of the many branded beer glasses which are habitually used, while in American bars, such displays are non-existent outside the context of newer upscale bars featuring imported and domestic speciality beers.

Prominence/intrusiveness of electronic entertainment: an immediately striking difference between American bars and Belgian cafés resides in their use of televisions. In the US, almost all bars have televisions, and nowadays most have multiple high-definition screens arranged on the walls throughout the public space, including high up on the wall behind the bar counter, so that patrons seated at the bar are given, if not forced to have, direct views of one or more of the screens. It is, moreover, routine and clearly expected by the public that television will be on throughout a bar's opening hours. When sporting events of interest to the clientele are broadcast (and in the US there are a great many televised sporting events), it is expected that those events will be shown, but when no sporting events are on, the televisions are set to any sort of programming, providing a constant source of noise. When music is being played, televisions always remain on with the sound turned down. It is also exceedingly common in US bars for television audio and especially jukebox music to be played at very high volume, often rendering conversation among groups difficult or impossible.

The majority of Belgian cafés these days also have television sets but typically there is but one and it is used sparingly, to show, for example, a match of the local football team or some sporting or news event that is of national or international significance. A television in a café being left on throughout the day is something that I have never encountered in my many years of fieldwork. With regard to the use of music, there are certainly cafés that have jukeboxes but there are also many where the music is, in effect, programmed by the café owner or bartender to his or her own tastes and to those of the regular guests. Though music can at times be loud in certain kinds of cafés (e.g. student cafés) and at certain times of day (e.g. late evening), it is not normally at such a volume as to drown out group conversation.

Lighting and advertising: the two must be mentioned together because in the US, bars are intentionally dimly lit in the main public spaces, with brighter lighting limited to areas where it is needed for recreational games, such as billiards or darts; consequently, a significant portion of the lighting is provided by bright electronic advertising (neon or otherwise) which calls attention to products on sale in the establishment. In such spaces, reading or writing is rendered impossible. By contrast, traditional Belgian cafés are fairly well lit, and reading is quite possible and regularly carried out by patrons; in those cafés which are dimly lit, there are often at least some spaces where focussed lamps provide good light. Though electronic advertising is present, it stands out less and shares its role with old-fashioned metal signs and paper posters.

All these points of contrast can be considered elements in creating the overall ambience of the drinking establishments of interest here and as such they should also be seen in relation to the broader physical context provided by the architecture and building materials of the spaces housing these establishments. Older buildings with interesting layouts and brick walls, fireplaces or stoves, wooden timbers, wainscots, etc., are appreciated in both countries as forming cosy settings for drinking, but such considerations lie outside our primary focus.

What is relevant here are the overall effects of the environmental elements of the archetypical American bar and Belgian café. In the former, we have a public institution that is more overtly and intensely commercial, in which a common experience is demanded through the inescapable television or loud music and the dim lighting; in a way, the prominence of the bar and the display of bottles and television screens on the wall behind it form a sort of pre-Vatican II-style altar, the focus of attention for those in attendance. And yet one is also pushed by these same environmental attributes in the direction of easily being alone or in the minimal group of two, unseen, unheard, unnoticed by others, if one so wishes. In the café, without the incessant interference of television or loud music, the public space is more easily shared, though the orientation toward tables allows for considerable private or small group escape. In a sense, though the archetypical café is absolutely a public space, it has an air of domesticity to it, a sort of shared living room, where people gather to talk or play cards or to sit alone with a newspaper or book, but with the added advantage of having beer on draught.

Of course, we are talking here of archetypical, if not idealized, forms of the bar and café, but while there are all kinds of drinking establishments in both countries and a great deal of overlap across the divide, the two kinds of national taverns do tend to differ strongly as described above: the archetypes are well represented in both lands.

Drinks and drinking vessels

Within the ambient framework of the tavern, one drinks but again, while there is much overlap of what is consumed in US bars and Belgian cafés, there are very different tendencies and preferences. Of particular interest here, however, is the relationship between the beverages themselves and the vessels out of which they are consumed. With specific regard to beer, the vessels themselves constitute a striking difference in the material aspects of beer culture in the two lands and they have, moreover, played an especially important role in the formation of those cultures.

Although an enormous quantity of beer is consumed each year in the United States, the amount of the total of ethyl alcohol from beer consumed per capita by Americans breaks down roughly to half, with the remaining half being split approximately to one third from wine and two thirds from distilled spirits. For the year 2005, the figures were approximately 53% from beer, 16% from wine, and 31% from distilled spirits; for Belgium that year the percentages were roughly 56% from beer, 36% from wine and a mere 6% from spirits.[3] In other words, Americans drink a very considerable amount of distilled spirits, as one could guess from the prominence of the bottle displays in bars, whereas Belgians drink relatively little strong liquor.

The importance of distilled spirits in American drinking habits is reflected not only by the altar-like display of their bottles in bars but also by the creative energy put into the development of spirit-based mixed drinks and additionally by the variety of glasses designed specifically for the serving of these cocktails: cocktails are designed not only

to taste good but also to look good, with the visual aesthetics not being required but in general much appreciated.

In stark contrast to the variety of forms and the elegance of particular cocktail glass types is the extreme lack of variety of American beer glasses and the utter simplicity of commonly used forms. In most bars these days, there are two basic beer glasses in regular use. The 'shaker glass' (used in preparing shaken cocktails), which holds a pint of liquid, is the most common glass used for draught beers but then it is also put into service for soft drinks from the bar fountain and additionally for serving some voluminous cocktails, such as Bloody Marys. Another, smaller glass in the form of a straight cylinder is available – usually given only on request – for patrons who are drinking bottled or canned beer. Also reasonably common is the 'stein', with a heavy base and a handle on the side, which depending on size may be used either for draught beers or offered alongside bottled or canned beers.

Perhaps what is most striking to a first-time Belgian visitor to a US bar – aside from the ubiquitous and constant use of the television – is the fact that an extremely high percentage of the patrons drink their beer not out of a glass at all but rather out of a bottle or can. There are two observations to make in this regard. First, this common use of a bottle or can as the drinking vessel in a bar is only possible for the obvious reason that American consumers, including those visiting taverns, drink considerably more packaged beer than they do draught beer. Indeed, in 1960 total packaged sales had already exceeded 80% of total beer sales and by 1988 packaged sales had reached 88% of the total compared a paltry 12% for draught beer (Stack 2010) and in the specific context of on-premise beer sales, draught beer accounted for only 38% of total sales in 2001.[4] While in the intervening years the overall consumption of draught beer may well have risen on account of increased sales of microbrew and imported beers, mainstream domestic American beers surely continue to be strongly preferred as packaged items, even in bars. Second, extremely high percentages of overall packaged sales in the States reflect a weaker attachment of beer consumption to tavern life and a concomitant greater association with other activities – Americans drink much of their beer at sporting events, at cookouts, at the beach and, of course, at home, all places where draught beer is less commonly or not at all available.

American and Belgian patterns of beer consumption differ in degree but the order of difference is sufficiently great as to bespeak a difference of basic attitude. For example, the overall percentage of draught beer consumed in Belgium through the 1990s on to 2001 remained roughly steady around 40% while the overall amount of beer consumed at home was also about 40%, leaving approximately 60% to on-premise consumption.[5] American on-premise beer sales comprise only some 25% of the total. In short, Belgians drink much more of their beer in taverns than Americans and, of the beer they drink there, a significantly greater amount is draught beer.

But it is not only draught beer that Belgians drink in their cafés: they also consume prodigious amounts of bottled beer on premise as well as at home. It is all but incon-

ceivable, however, that a Belgian in a café would drink his beer straight from the bottle, as his American counterpart typically does. Indeed, an integral part of Belgian beer culture is the aesthetic relationship between beer varieties and their associated forms of glassware, associations that go back in time at least to the early twentieth century and in some cases before that. In addition now, as a marketing tool used by breweries but very much in harmony with the public's aesthetic expectations, the vast majority of Belgian brewers provide distinctive branded glasses for their products, something that has no full parallel elsewhere in the beer world.

Tastes great vs. less filling: an historical account

How did Americans come to care so little about glassware for beer and even prefer to drink straight from the bottle or can, while Belgians have taken an older tradition of matching beer styles to glass shapes and developed it further into a central aesthetic expression? Somewhat counter-intuitively, the answers to both of these questions crucially involve the effects of temperance movements in the early twentieth century. Space limitations require that this discussion be brief, but we can highlight the central points.

At the time when the Volstead Act, by which the manufacture and sale of all alcoholic beverages was prohibited, went into effect in 1920, there existed in the United States a robust and varied brewing industry, driven largely by the efforts and tastes of northern European and especially German immigrants. Though Prohibition was by no means successful in halting the consumption of alcohol in the US, it had an enormous and lasting impact on the drinking culture of the country. One important effect that arose from a number of logistical considerations was an increase in the popularity of distilled spirits, and, given that the available spirits were often of decidedly poor quality, the already existing but relatively minor practice of making mixed drinks blossomed into the cocktail culture that remains popular to this day. The same logistical considerations that made distilled spirits more easily available rendered beer a less practical commodity. And again, of the beer that was available in the years of Prohibition, much was of poor quality.[6]

When Prohibition was finally repealed in 1933, it took but little time until beer was again produced on a significant scale, but the thirteen-year interruption altered the nature of the brewing industry fundamentally. First, many smaller local and regional breweries simply vanished, leaving only a small number of the biggest pre-Prohibition breweries in a position to take up the business again. Second, the hiatus in the public's enjoyment of beer, together with the concentration of brewing in a far smaller number of more nationally oriented brewing companies reduced drastically the range of beer styles and beer quality on offer: the American beer market became utterly dominated by beers which were all of the same style – American pale lager – and barely distinguishable from one another in taste. This concentration of beer production also disfavoured the sale of draught beer; with the major breweries shipping beer long-distance to points all over the country, bottled and ultimately canned beer was favoured by the producers and marketed heavily to consumers. In addition, from the bar owner's standpoint, draught

beer entails more work than packaged beer. There also arises a sort of downward spiral: the less draught beer is sold, the less fresh it is and the less consumers will want to buy it. Finally, from the large producers' standpoint, who – given the minimal differentiation of actual products – increasingly relied on marketing gimmicks to drive sales, draught beer, served in an anonymous glass, was far less attractive than bottled or canned beer that is conveyed to the consumer in its own small-scale advertisement.[7] And the more beer came to be drunk straight from the bottle and can, the beer glass became even more marginalized and uninteresting.

There was also a strong temperance movement in Belgium in the decades before the First World War, and in just the same year of 1920 that National Prohibition came into effect in the US, the Belgian temperance law (*Wet Vandervelde*) was enacted. But in Belgium the prohibition of alcoholic beverages was only partial and intended specifically to curb the consumption of distilled spirits among the lower economic strata of society: the sale of distilled spirits on premise was forbidden, as was the sale of distilled spirits in quantities less than two litres.

As demonstrated by American Prohibition, if people want to drink, they will find a way to do so. And if they are prevented from enjoying one form of alcohol, they will be inclined to enjoy other forms a little more, as demonstrated both by the disastrous Icelandic temperance law (prohibiting beer and resulting in the massive abuse of distilled spirits) and the Belgian *Wet Vandervelde*. Clearly, this law was successful in curbing consumption of distilled spirits, given the low quantities consumed by Belgians even today, decades after the final repeal of the prohibition of the on-premise sale of spirits in 1983. But this law ironically had a very positive influence on Belgium's beer culture, for in removing spirits from the mix, the alcohol-related creative energies of the country became more purely focussed on beer. It is surely for this reason that so many local styles of beers have survived in the country and why, through the twentieth century and on to today, Belgian brewers produce such a remarkable variety of beer styles, including many strong beers that offered a way to, in a sense, circumvent the sobering effects of the *Wet Vandervelde*.

And to return to the question of bottles and glasses, we find that in contrast to the logistical and market forces that led to the relative marginalization of draught beer and beer glassware in the US, Belgian brewers, faced with their own problem of marketing their products to a public that was very attached to draught beers, as well as to bottle-fermented beers, chose the simpler and infinitely more elegant solution of making the glass the bearer of their advertising.

One final comment: perhaps the saddest effect of Prohibition on American beer culture was that it led to beer being almost totally divorced from one of its basic functions, namely, as a food. This divorce is most clearly seen in the striving of the mainstream American brewing industry to minimize flavour and especially to reduce caloric content of their products. But in Belgium, beer continues on to this day with its full range of functions: refreshment, social lubricant, intoxicant, and food.

Notes

1. Research for this project has involved the usual extensive reading but additionally more than thirty years of the most pleasant field work imaginable. Many thanks to Tamás Bősze, Paul Stuyven, Tie Vanbeselaere, William Gisgand, Kurt Zarris and Amy Dahlstrom.
2. Here I use 'tavern' as an overarching term (cf. Clinard 1962: 271) alongside 'bar' as the term denoting the basic kind of public drinking establishment in the US and 'café' as its Belgian analogue. My definition of 'tavern' follows that of Clinard 1962 but differs in detail. We take as basic characteristics of the tavern: a) the sale of alcoholic beverages is the central feature of the business, even if food is served and represents an important source of revenue; b) the establishment is not a private club but offers open and public access, admitting in principle anyone of the appropriate age; c) the primary space of the establishment is an open space, so that patrons are in some sense drinking together; d) the establishment has one or more functionaries (bartenders, waiters, etc.) who interact with the patrons; e) as Clinard (p. 271) says, 'it has a physical structure and a set of norms. Patrons are served at a bar, tables, or booths, in specially decorated surroundings, with entertainment or recreational facilities like cards, darts, and shuffleboard available… Certain norms are also well established, including certain hours of drinking and appropriate drinking behavior.'
3. These figures are based on those from the World Health Organization, as cited in the Wikipedia article 'List of countries by alcohol consumption' (accessed 17 Jan. 2013).
4. SABMiller online publication of beer sales statistics from 2003: <http://www.sabmiller.com/files/presentations/2003/000503/may03_ontradeofftrade_slides.pdf> [accessed May 2013].
5. See 'European Beer Statistics' with statistics gathered from a wide variety of brewing industry sources <http://www.europeanbeerguide.net/eustats.htm>.
6. For an overview, see Okrent 2010.
7. On the history of marketing in the American beer industry, see Van Munching 1979.

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