

Loggers, Miners, Cowboys, and Crab Fishermen: Masculine Work Cultures and Binge Consumption

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Note: This paper is a working draft in progress, part of an extended book project, and some references are missing because I am away from my library. It builds upon and incorporates some previous published work (2007, 2006, 2004), as well as feedback and responses to papers presented in various settings over the last five years in the USA, the UK, Belize, Sweden and Finland. I also draw on comparative research undertaken by graduate and undergraduate students in my course "Extreme Masculinities" (GS 701/498) at Indiana University in the fall semester of 2006, all of whom kindly agreed to let me use their material. I began research for this paper while holding a research fellowship at Birkbeck College, University of London, through the ESRC/ARC "Cultures of Consumption" programme directed by Frank Trentmann. Further research and writing has been generously supported by the College of Arts and Sciences and the Dean of Faculties at Indiana University, and a fellowship at the Center for Consumer Science at Göteborg University in Sweden. I thank Persephone Hintlian, Jennifer Eberbach, Sarah Marion, Katherine Metzko, and Devorah Shubowitz who have worked for me as research assistants on this project. I am especially grateful to Anne Pyburn for many hours of discussion and assistance with the core concepts of this paper, and to Sidney Mintz, Susan Hamilton, Russell Bernard, Jessica Smith, Kate Browne, and Virgil Storr for useful feedback.

This paper has a complex intellectual genealogy, with multiple and tangled roots, which all converge on a core of closely related historical and intellectual problems. The earliest inspiration for the project is “Tappers and Trappers” by Robert Murphy and Julian Steward (1956), which I read as a graduate student in Robert Netting’s cultural ecology seminar. Their argument is that very similar forms of social organization developed among completely unrelated indigenous groups in the Americas when they became involved in capitalist-driven extractive economies, using the examples of beaver trappers in Canada and rubber tappers in Amazonia. This process, what Kottak later called ‘converging evolution’ (1980), is based on a causal relationship between the way societies were incorporated into expanding global capitalism, and the way their cultures were transformed, a theme I explored later in my dissertation research in southern Belize beginning in 1979, and in work on household organization (e.g. 1984).

A second theme is my engagement over the last 25 years with Afro-Caribbean Creole culture in Belize. One of the central features of Creole culture is a set of gendered economic relationships and forms of householding which are quite different from those I found among Mayan and Hispanic rural farmers. In fluid networks, men and women do not form stable long-term conjugal households with pooled resources and communal property, especially among the poor. Instead each person lives in a web of debts and obligations, exchanges and expectations, and income is quickly dispersed if it is not turned immediately into property. Men and women talk about the difficulty of saving and investing, the unreliability of mates, and the ‘crab antics’ through which people combine to tear down anyone who threatens to escape the community of poverty. Gender and conjugal roles are embedded in the two complementary cultural models which anthropologists have called ‘reputation’ and ‘respectability’ (Wilson 1973, Austin 1983, Besson 1993, Miller 1994, Olwig 1993)

Folk culture and religious authorities in the Caribbean blame these features of the culture for persistent poverty. If people would just form stable households, marry and settle down, they would

be able to get out of poverty. A good deal of early social science (and indeed a lot of the “culture of poverty” era social science in the USA) took a similar line. I have always argued that the causality should be reversed, that we were in essence ‘blaming the victim’ when in fact unstable households and fluid exchange relationships were an intelligent adaptation to poverty, a means of surviving in a part of the world where capitalism has rarely provided stable jobs or living wages, and the colonial state has failed to provide even the semblance of the institutional support which makes an ‘independent’ household a feasible social unit in wealthy countries.

But Belize has grown and changed and it is no longer an impoverished country; it now has a substantial and secure middle class. Does this mean that gendered forms of economic relationships are also going to change and adapt as well, or are they so deeply embedded in cultural forms that they will persist even though they may be maladaptive?

Another major issue which informs this work is my research on the historical origins of modern consumer culture, in an effort to understand its expansive and inherently unsustainable direction. Historical work on the origins of modern forms of consumption has grown dramatically in scope and quality during the last two decades. Yet almost all of this work has looked either to aristocratic models (Mukerji 1983, McKendrick et al. 1982), or to the rising bourgeoisie (Schama 1988, Campbell 1987) which emulated it (see Tiersten 1993 for critique). The history of consumer culture has also been written in a starkly Eurocentric way, so that all the major developments take place among new groups of consumers in northern Europe, which drives the expansion of mercantile trade in search on new commodities to feed, clothe, drug and amuse them (eg. Walvin 1997, though see Hanley 1997). My historical study of food in Belize convinced me that there is another story to be told about the origins of consumer culture, that there are other forms of consumerism than those pioneered by the European middle classes, which still have an important presence in the world today.

As Miller argues (1994), taking Caribbean culture seriously means asking questions about the self-evident rationality of behaviors like saving for the future, stewardship, caring for families, and belonging to communities, the pillars of the 'bourgeois virtues' which McCloskey has set out to rescue (2007). In this paper I look at some cultures and working situations in which profligacy, bingeing, and dissipation were quite normal forms of consumption, with the goal of understanding the internal rationality of this alternative approach to living in a consumer culture. In the process I hope to also uncover some of the hidden moral assumptions which make the logic of saving, sharing, and planning seem so self-evident and unquestionable.

To do this I start with the history of Belize, but given the very thin historical details of daily life among working men there, I draw on comparative literature on other mobile frontier labor groups, including herders and long-distance sailors, whalers, sealers, oil drillers and fishermen. I do not argue that these are the only historical and economic contexts in which alternative forms of consumer culture emerged. We have ample evidence from the case studies in Day et. al (1999) that there are many other groups of "marginal people who live for the moment," who are not interested in saving for the future. Most of these groups live on what could be termed a hand-to-mouth basis, meaning that they set out each day to find the resources they need to live, as pastoralists, prostitutes, day laborers, gamblers or market traders. When they have a surplus, they consume it or give it away rather than trying to save it or invest to improve their ability to produce.

We can see binge-like weekend alcohol consumption in peasant and industrial settings, and in seasonal celebrations of farming communities. There is a great deal to be learned about the relationship between production and consumption from a broader comparison of this kind, but in this paper I will narrow the focus exclusively to the particular form of consumption which I call *binge economies*, which emerged in the context of the *crew culture* of male work gangs. Men's drinking groups in the Caribbean are often called "crews," and the term was widespread enough to

be adapted by Belich (1996) in his history of New Zealand to refer to the kind of masculine work culture which emerged on work gangs (see also Atkinson 2001).

GANG LABOR

Male gang labor was not the only possible means through which European mercantile powers could plunder the resources of the Atlantic, and later Pacific worlds and transport them back home. In places it proved possible to force or pay indigenous people to gather, process and deliver the desired goods, the fur trade in North America being probably the most sustained and successful example. But in many cases indigenous groups proved unreliable, hostile, or they wanted to bargain and raise prices once they realized how much Europeans wanted their goods (Wolf 1982, Axtell 1992). Gang labor was also the only option in large territories that were thinly occupied, where the indigenes were not interested in exchange, or where indigenous people lacked the skills or technologies for large-scale logging, hunting, fishing, and mining.

The utility of slave labor as an alternative to paid gangs is a complex and contentious issue, and some forms of debt-servitude and indentured labor were in practice not that different from slavery. Gang labor as I define it here was paid and was at least nominally free, while enslaved workers required legal and physical coercion to stay on their jobs, but this was a matter of degree. Gang workers were often in isolated workplaces, on long and indefinite contracts, and could not leave their jobs when they liked. The crucial difference from the standpoint of employers was that gang labor did not require the same degree of coercion and supervision as slaves, and that they performed jobs requiring more skill and self-discipline.

Europeans had already developed a social form for mobilizing skilled labor crews for hazardous work in difficult and isolated environments, during the protracted development of standing armies, navies and merchant fleets. Up to the 16th century, however, most military and

naval forces were seasonal affairs, and most soldiers and sailors belonged to permanent land-bound communities. Even professional mercenaries were often tied to home communities, which they expected to return to when paid off at the end of a war. In the early seventeenth century several European countries began to experiment with professional standing armies and navies, and at the same time opportunities for exploration, conquest and long-distance trade led to the emergence of full-time professional mariners and traders. For the first time (at least since the late Roman empire) large numbers of working men became socially detached from households and settled communities.

A detached workforce of this kind requires a great deal of support, and initially they were ruinously expensive to maintain. The employer of such a gang had to provide all of the services and goods normally provided by households and communities; provision, housing, shelter, medical care, training and social insurance. Many of the required commodities and services were simply not yet available in the underdeveloped market economies of the times (see Rodger 2004). The royal and mercantile establishments which wanted to employ work crews had to build and create the markets, contracting systems, financial instruments, and scheduling methods they needed. They also had to stimulate new systems of production and supply for huge volumes of standardized goods, while regulating quality and enforcing delivery to contract specifications. They bought preserved and packaged food and drink, standardized cloth, and thousands of other items in unprecedented quantities which stimulated rural and urban industries (Rodger 2007:307). Ship construction itself was a massive proto-industrial enterprise, mobilizing a complex division of labor and large amounts of credit, requiring the invention of new systems of labor management, financial accounting, book-keeping and bureaucratic regulation to try to control corruption and theft.

In Britain and other major maritime countries, the outfitting of military, naval and mercantile expeditions was arguably the institutional and economic precursor to later

industrialization. Certainly the manufacture and packaging of the rations of preserved food and alcohol for detached crews of workers were some of the earliest industrial-scale enterprises.

Given the proper material, the detached male work gangs were capable of learning to cook, clothe, house, and care for themselves, but they could not reproduce, and given their high mortality rates they needed a constant resupply of new workers. A densely settled peasantry practicing impartible inheritance produced a steady supply of sons who did not stand to inherit, who would otherwise face a life where they were unlikely to marry. There were also a number of 'internal frontiers' in Europe where capitalist farming expanded at the expense of peasant holdings, and this drove large numbers of small proprietors off the land.

Because there were large and steady markets for livestock, timber, and grain, driven partially by the expansion of military, naval, and mercantile establishments, it became highly profitable to turn smallholdings into grazing land, to enclose and clear common forests, and to push cultivation away from intensive polycultures and complex rotations and into market-oriented grain production. The same political connections which proved useful in securing contracts for supplying government and mercantile concerns also provided the opportunities to expand landholdings.

The fate of those driven off the land was complex, as was the labor history of the growing cities of northern Europe. In some places households and communities adapted and survived, but in others households were fragmented and men and women suffered quite different, though sometimes still connected fates.

A large amount of mobile rural labor in Great Britain, at least, was done by roving gangs of women who harvested crops, mended nets, and gutted and packed sardines and herring. Single women found employment as milkmaids, in numerous crafts and cottage industries, and as domestic servants in villages, towns and cities. Many non-waged urban women engaged in trades from street vending to prostitution (see Mayhew 1861, Beames 1852, Ward 1955). The majority of

these women lived alone, as lodgers, or in groups with other women rather than in conjugal households with men.

Many displaced men found new lives in work gangs, which offered, if nothing else, the security of a steady sequence of meals and freedom from legal harassment. It was easy for a landless man to fall afoul of the law, and even minor infractions or indebtedness could lead to indenture and transportation, both of which meant the most menial and dangerous forms of unpaid gang labor, very close to the status of slaves (McCusker 1997). No doubt many men left intending to return with the cash to start a business or a farm, to marry and support a family, but given high mortality rates, even in the relative safety of the peacetime British merchant marine they were more than 6% per year (Rodger 2004:213), most were never seen again.

What was the advantage of using all-male homosocial gangs, instead of mixed groups of men and women? Contemporary explanations, going back to the time of the ancient Greeks, depend on ethnocentric assumptions about the essential nature of masculinity, the 'softening' or 'weakening' effects of women. Instead, I would argue we should turn the arrow of causality around, and think about the possibility that the forms of masculinity which today we see as a characteristic of the military are a *product* of a particular form of working environment, one which was replicated in the mobile work gangs of mercantile capitalism. Furthermore, this gendered division of labor and the crew culture masculinity it created was the crucial social technology which made the global expansion of European mercantile capitalism possible, because it was a versatile, cheap and effective form of labor.

I have compared eight temporally and geographically distinct cases in which male gangs were the normal labor form.¹ The common qualities of the settings and job requirements include a high degree of physical and social isolation, constant mobility, and physically strenuous and dangerous labor, requiring skill but no formal education. All of the settings had natural hazards,

but it the work itself was hazardous, and caused injury and death through accident, inattention, failure of equipment, poor group coordination, and lack of physical strength or skill.

Up to the 20th century, all of the groups were badly paid by the standards of their time, and pay was irregular, upon completion of a task or delivery rather than on a schedule. Another interesting commonality is that almost all (6) of these occupations had some form of social stigma attached, which presented an obstacle for men who might want to leave the occupation. This was reinforced in almost every case by distinct forms of dress and adornment. Many of these occupations also marked and deformed men's bodies; after years in the saddle Cowboys were unable to walk normally, for example. Sailors and fishermen had their hands and bodies scarred by ropes, and loggers lost fingers and toes.

SUPPORTING THE WORK GANG – THE RATION

For hundreds of years the shipboard diet was based on wheat flour, salted meat and fish, and dried pulses (mostly beans, peas, and lentils) (Oliver 1995). Flour was eaten as a dried ship's biscuit, or it could be boiled as a dumpling or pudding (duff). Everything else was boiled. Southern Europeans added wine, olive oil, and vinegar, while northern Europeans drank beer and used more butter and cheese. The universal accompaniments were sugar, some form of caffeine (usually coffee or cocoa), tobacco, and distilled alcohol (Masefield 1922, Hamilton 1929). Because it was already available as ship's stores, this diet became the basic means of supporting mobile work gangs in many different parts of the world from the mid-sixteenth through the middle of the nineteenth century, when other cheap preserved foods entered the world market.

On naval and merchant ships rations were apportioned according to a rigid daily and weekly schedule to individual 'messes' which did some of the preparation, serving, and cleaning up. While rations were an entitlement, they were also a constant reminder of the sailor's relatively

powerless position in shipboard life. In the British navy men were even prohibited from saving or trading their rations. On some ships a crippled or elderly man was appointed cook, and in other crews the position rotated. Other kinds of work gangs developed different ways of distributing and preparing rations.

The men in smaller early 19th century Belize mahogany gangs received individual weekly rations of 4 lbs salted meat, 7 lbs of flour, 1 lb of sugar, and variable amounts of salt, tobacco and rum a week. Each man had a string with a small metal tag, used to identify his own piece of meat as it cooked in a communal kettle along with boiled dumplings; the broth was shared evenly. Larger gangs designated a cook and pooled their rations (Henderson 1811, Fowler 1879, Gann 1925). Like most workers in gangs in wild areas, they took every opportunity to hunt, fish and gather to add variety to their diet, and they also sold jaguar skins, alligator hides, looted Mayan artifacts and other valuables for extra cash when they could (Wilk 2005).

Norwegian loggers cooked their rations individually, on the communal fire which warmed their tiny bunkhouses. Each man had his own coffeepot and pan, in which he fried salt pork and then made a pancake from flour, water and salt. Australian shearers baked their dough in the embers of a fire to make 'damper.' On large organized drives, Texas cowboys were fed by designated cooks from chuck wagons, but the majority of the time when they were in smaller groups herding and rounding up cattle, they carried and cooked their own salt meat and flour (Slatta 1994). The rule seems to be that the more settled and the larger the gang, the more likely it was to have a designated cook and centralized food preparation. In the late 19th century when work gangs had become professionalized and more disciplined in the timber, oil production and long-distance fishing industries, men demanded and usually received much more diverse and luxurious diets from their employers; by that time refrigeration and food preservation had made it much cheaper to provide a diverse diet in isolated and distant places.

Every form of gang labor I have studied depended not only on rationed staple foods, (what I have termed the world's first industrial diet), but on a steady supply of stimulants and medicines. Caffeine was almost universal, and most gang workers were prodigious consumers of tobacco. Some would refuse to work if tobacco was not provided, and employers could turn this dependence around and refuse to provide tobacco (or alcohol) as a form of labor control if workers were recalcitrant. We know very little about the provision of medicines, though the patent medicines of the time were full of opium, coca, alcohol and other intoxicants, and every archaeological excavation in places where gang workers camped produces huge amounts of patent medicine bottles (Gannon 1998). Given the nature of the rations and the worklife, this is hardly surprising. It probably provided a significant source of profit to employers and merchants for whom the gang workers were a captive market.

As gang labor began to die out towards the end of the 19th century, many employers sought to eliminate rations, or provide pay in lieu of rations and require men to buy their own food on account. This became a matter of labor action, and some gang workers fought to keep their rations as an entitlement and extra, though in other situations they sought to eliminate them and get pay instead so they could provide their own food, presumable to save money.

WORKING CONDITIONS, DEBT AND BONDAGE

Mahogany logging in Belize was fairly typical of the kinds of labor for which work gangs were used. Gangs of fifteen to eighty men spent between nine and ten months a year living in rough camps on riverbanks in the rainforest. They were divided into teams, each of which included a specialist in finding the trees (which were widely scattered in the forest), men who handled and tended the teams of oxen, and the fellers. After trees were located, a rickety platform was built so the cutters could work above the level of the huge buttress roots, up to six meters high. After the

tree was felled, trimmed and cut into shorter lengths, they had to clear, and sometimes build a road to the nearest riverbank, which could be several kilometers away, and then finally haul the logs there on ox carts (Henderson 1811). The work required a great deal of skill with an axe and machete, and a thorough knowledge of the plants and animals of the forest, and still injuries were common, as were snakebites, infections, and tropical disease.

A mahogany camp might have one overseer or boss, and each team had a leader who was paid a higher wage than the others and was responsible for their performance. The men expected to work six days a week, and were not paid cash while working; instead everything was kept on account. The workplace was entirely outside the cash economy; when men wanted tobacco, extra sugar, or clothing, they received it on account (at inflated cost) from a company storekeeper who visited the camps by boat on a regular basis. At the end of the season, logs which had been floated downstream and caught at a 'boom' at the river mouth were squared by hand with axes for shipment. When all the work was finished a 'gang broke' party was held, and the men streamed back to Belize City and the larger towns, where their contracts were paid off. This was the beginning of the annual 'spree,' a six to eight week period when mahogany workers gave money to women and spent their earnings, culminating in the Christmas and New Years' holidays.

Just before Christmas, when their wages had run out, the agents of the mahogany contracting companies (who also owned most of the main merchant houses) would circulate in the community to 'engage' workers by offering advances on the next year's wages, half in cash and half in goods. These advances financed the Christmas spree, but left the worker bound to at least five months of work just to pay off the debt. Over time, as employers added penalties and deductions to the worker's account, debts could accumulate, and harsh labor laws made escape difficult without leaving the colony. The employers and their critics both acknowledged that the way workers spent their money on the Christmas 'saturnalia' was an essential element driving the whole system (Gibbs 1883: 176).

It is very hard to tell how many of the mahogany workers were single men unattached to a household, and how many remained in their mother's household, or formed their own single or multiple conjugal relationships. Formal prostitution was not common; instead men formed temporary and 'visiting' relationships with different women each season, or tried to return to the same woman for a short liaison after each season in a form of relationship widely found in port cities and known as 'sailors' wives (Atkinson 2001:114, Evans 2004, Creighton 1982:61). When men returned from the forest they might find several women contending for their pay and child support, but a substantial number remained unattached and did not acknowledge paternity or parenthood or form a stable household until late in life, if they survived that long.

This completely reverses the polarity we expect in middle class society, where the working world is commoditized and dominated by cash relationships, and domestic life is a moral economy of sentiment and long-term relationships based on implicit contracts and moral logic (the 'haven in a heartless world'). In the world of the mahogany cutters, relationships with women, children and other kin, if they had any, were narrow and commoditized, based on explicit exchange of money for sex and services, since the only thing absent working men could contribute to the domestic economy or the rearing of their children was their income. On the other hand, the only non-commoditized relationships they had were with their workmates. Their workplace, though producing for the cash economy, was cashless and work was coordinated through trust based on intimate knowledge and personal relationships. It is no surprise that working men in gangs often formed intense bonds of comradeship and support with each other, and in comparison found women to be untrustworthy and acquisitive (e.g. Anon. 1866).

CREW CULTURE

Belize mahogany gangs demonstrated most of the qualities of the 'crew cultures' I have studied among other gangs around the world over a three hundred year period. Today, through the lens of over a hundred years of romantic idealization of crew cultures in fiction, many of these qualities have become established as clichés of heroic masculinity. But a careful reading of primary source material shows that there *was* a characteristic form of masculinity in work gangs, and to a large degree it was shared across all occupations which shared this labor form. The common characteristics of the different occupations were recognized by contemporaries. Especially in the early 19th century it was not uncommon for men to move through a number of different kinds of gang labor over the course of a lifetime. Alonzo Sampson, for example, started off as a soldier in the Mexican –American war, and then worked as a gold miner in California, a whaler, a cod-fisherman, and a sailor before ending up in prison, and finally a farm-worker (1867). He remarked on differences in diet and work habits as he moved from job to job, but found the masculine work cultures and the rhythms of work and consumption to be very similar. The Creole men on the Belize mahogany gangs, and the Llaneros herding cattle in the Venezuelan savannahs were not connected to the same labor market, but they would not have found anything alien about each others' masculine work cultures.

Initiation was usually part of an entry into crew culture. Men had to prove themselves in some way, through trial of endurance, undergoing a public humiliation, or accepting some form of punishment (Creighton 1982). This might be as harmless as the practical jokes played on "Johnny Newcombe" by the members of a whaling crew (anon. 1861), having one's new possessions and kit stolen with no recourse, or it could be a near-fatal fight in deadly earnest with a senior member of the group on some sailing ships (Nevens 1846). On the other hand, once past the test, it was common in crew cultures for older men to take new men 'under their wing' and take responsibility for training and protecting them until they were able to 'stand on their own.'

In both cases men readily explained that it was necessary to 'toughen' new recruits and rapidly teach them the skills of the job so the other members of the crew could depend on them, for the consequence of letting one's mates down was not just shame, it could mean injury or death. And learning to survive gang labor was more than a matter of technical proficiency; men had to learn the social codes and cultural practices, the language, dress and customs. This included learning work routines like handling ropes and tools which permanently marked and scarred the body, learning to wear proper attire, wearing ones hair in approved styles, and learning a job related argot, songs, folklore and dances, and specialized profanity.

Emotional restraint and toughness, particularly unwillingness to show fear, was another common quality of crew cultures. This was expressed in a number of ways; men tended to disdain sentimentality and open display of sympathy, empathy, or other emotional connection with another's pain or pleasure. As one sailor put it "I was somewhat stung with remorse, but if I ever said anything about it I was only laughed at..." (B.A. 1864:7) Disdain for physical pain was another form of emotional restraint. Almost every account of crew culture includes some story about men who bore the loss of fingers or limbs without complaint, suffered accidents with laughter, and treated their own injuries, like the logger who removed "an ulcerated tooth out with a horseshoe nail" (Mackay 1978:231) Working through pain, even when the results were fatal, was seen as a requirement of the job. As one astute contemporary observer put it,

"An overstrained sense of manliness is the characteristic of sea-faring men... This often gives the appearance of want of feeling, and even of cruelty. From this, if a man comes within an ace of breaking his neck, and escapes, it is made a joke of; and no notice must be taken of a bruise or a cut; and any expression of pity, or any show of attention, would look sisterly, and unbecoming a man who has to face the rough and tumble of such a life... A thin-skinned man could not live an hour on shipboard. (anon 1871: 163)

Almost every account of crew culture says that pride in being tough was recognized with mutual respect. Men were also proud of their skill and physical strength, and sought opportunities to demonstrate them, often through competition with one another. In an age when physical violence and fighting were treated by many men as a form of recreation, fist fights were not uncommon, even between close friends and mates (Conley 1999, see Canaan 1996). On board ships the watches were sometimes encouraged to compete with each other in the speed of operations and ships raced each other over long distances; whaling crews competed to be first to strike whales and to kill the largest and fill their holds the fastest. Maine logging crews dragged outlandishly huge skids of logs to impress each other, and created many other kinds of competition, some extremely dangerous. Belizean mahogany crews engaged in boat-paddling races up the rivers. Cowboys and Gauchos were well known for their contests and displays of skill on horseback and with the other tools of their trade.

This kind of competition often led men to take the lead in seeking the hardest and most dangerous jobs. On mahogany gangs, being the lead cutter, the last man off the fragile platform at the base of the giant tree when it started to fall, was a position of honor and respect which men coveted despite the danger. On British merchant sailing ships there was competition to take the toughest end positions on the yardarms in furling and reefing sails, high above the deck; "If the second mate is a smart fellow, he will never let any one take either of these posts from him; but if he is wanting either in seamanship, strength, or activity, some better man will get the bunt and earrings from him; which immediately brings him into disrepute." (anon. 1866:15)

Pride in skill and craft often included an almost fetishistic affection towards the tools of the trade. Maine lumbermen were great experts with the axe, and had elaborate rules about touching, sharpening, and storage, as well as beliefs about their supernatural powers (Pike1984). Cowboys, Gauchos and Ilaneros had similar feelings about their horses, sailors and long distance fishermen

deep affection and loyalty to particular ships, and oil roughnecks reverence towards their drilling rigs.

Strong rivalry and competition was matched by close bonds of loyalty and generosity to comrades, and emotional restraint was countered by deep sentimentality in a complex mixture which is not easy to unravel (Phillips 1987). Men in crews often formed close pair bonds, and these couples would risk their lives for each other. Buccaneers recognized a formal custom of *matelotage*, in which a pair of men shared everything equally, and owned community property with rights of survivorship. Klondike miners and California 49ers formed stable working couples, and some sailors, sealers and whalers also formed couples which lasted for years. Whether or not these relationships also involved sexuality, or if homosexuality was common in crew culture, remains controversial though it was rarely tolerated or acknowledged in public (Burg 1983, Rediker 1987, Gilbert 1976).

To different degrees, crew culture created a bond of obligation to help members of one's mates in times of distress; for many crew cultures this extended quite broadly to anyone who could be identified as belonging to the same profession (Stone 1996). Crews often showed tenderness towards the injured and afflicted, and it was not unusual for a lumber outfit or a sailing ship to find a light sinecure job for an old or injured man, or for a group of men to take up a collection to help a man they did not know who was injured or in trouble. Sentimentality and displays of weeping for comrades who died in heroic circumstances were not unusual; and there were other kinds of events which could lead to a sudden suspension of general rules about emotional restraint. Sympathy for mates in trouble could also lead labor actions, where crews refused to work in the name of justice for one of their members (rarely about working conditions, e.g. Behenna 1981).

There are other attitudes which appear often in narratives of crew cultures, but which are not universal in all the cases I have studied. These include disdain for or dislike of money, suspicion

of and hostility towards women, and contempt for men who live outside of crew culture. The degree of casual daily violence in crew culture also appears to have been highly variable.

Some crews seem to have worked under close and constant supervision, with clear ranks divided by differences in pay and privilege. Others were highly egalitarian and functioned without supervision of any kind. With few exceptions, all of the qualities of crew culture made these men into remarkably efficient, self-disciplining workers, who performed jobs which by today's standards were impossibly arduous and dangerous. Given that many men were forced or deceived into joining gangs, or they had no alternatives, crew culture was an effective engine for transforming them into a coordinated, highly skilled and willing workforce. Ostensibly their incentive was the prospect of being 'paid off' at the end of a season, a cattle drive, a voyage, or a shipment.

THE BINGE

"They're never at ease till they've receiv'd their pay, and they're never satisfied till they have spent it..." (Ward 1955 [1703]:255)

The binge is the counterpart to the privation of rations, the release which rationalizes and rewards the hard work of gang labor. Everywhere in crew culture it had very similar qualities. Once paid off, men often engaged in the preliminaries of getting cleaned up, buying new clothes and finery, and eating a luxurious meal. These displays of sudden wealth were often overtly transgressive; in Belize mahogany workers would dress in finery that the local elite found offensive, and eat and drink far 'above their station' in a carnivalesque performance (not unlike the California miners who feasted on French champagne and oysters after making a lucky strike). Then they sought out bars, saloons, rum-shops, and other places where they could drink, find women, and gamble. Often their entertainment led to fighting or brawling, and if large numbers of crewmen

were loose in a single place at once, this could lead the larger riots, battles against civil authorities, and public disorders which were common in 'sailortowns' and frontier settlements around the world (Hugill 1967, Fingard 1982).

Drinking was the centerpiece of the binge, but it was not a solitary occupation. Belize mahogany workers were typical in spending a large part of their wages treating their workmates to food and drink, in a round of gift-exchange that has many of the competitive characteristics of the classic Potlatch. An exaggerated example of this kind of behavior appeared among Alaskan crab fishermen in the boom years of the 1980s, when young men were earning tens of thousands of dollars in a few weeks of work (Walker 1991). Fishermen would walk into a crowded bar and ring a bell to announce they were buying everyone drinks, or put an ounce of cocaine out on the bar for everyone to snort. This kind of game is generally about gaining status and respect through conspicuous generosity, not as a simple form of egotism, but because respect in crew culture is a more essential form of capital than money.

Disdain for money could be carried to extremes, where men competed to get rid of it in elaborate ways. In this respect gambling could best be seen not as a way to win money, but as a way to lose it quickly. "If money did not go fast enough, watches were fried, bank-notes eaten between bread and butter, and every practice resorted to for the purpose of its riddance." (anon. 1871). But more often men found that their money was taken or stolen by the large numbers of agents, prostitutes, thieves and professional gamblers who were attracted to the towns and districts where gang workers congregated. Spending much of their lives in a cashless working environment, gang workers were often unsophisticated handlers of money, who quickly found themselves broke again after being paid off. "I could make plenty of money, but it was of no use to me, as there was always some allurements to take it away." (B.A. 1864: 7) "But what was the use of our getting money when we did not know how to use it? We were soon decoyed, or what they call shaghaied like any poor

slaves.” (B.A. 1864:95) Tough and skillful in their own workplaces, gang workers often found the cash economy bewildering, alien and emasculating.

Contemporary observers, and participants in binge culture understood that while it built solidarity and bound men together, it was destructive to their health and wellbeing, kept them in a long-term cycle of debt, made it impossible for them to escape from gang labor, and brought great economic benefit to their employers and the communities which specialized in servicing their binges.

“Even before his foot touches the shore he is surrounded by a crowd of swindlers, pimps, courtesans and “sharks” generally, and his employers who belong to the ruling class in such places afford every facility to the leeches to suck his blood. It is their interest. The quicker a sailor spends his hard earnings, the sooner he will be ready to ship again, and the more abject his poverty, the better terms for themselves they can get out of him. So they encourage him to spend his money, and countenance all the means that are used to defraud him.” (Alonzo 1867:32)

Binge consumption is therefore full of contradiction. Men look forward all year to being paid off and getting ‘home’, but then quickly consume the resources that, if saved, might eventually allow them to switch occupations and stay there. Long periods of life in homosocial society leave them ill-equipped for heterosocial life. They may have duties and obligations to distant kin, but feel stronger obligations to their workmates. In order to maintain their standing in their peer group, they have to alienate themselves from their families. The hard and challenging rigors of worklife made the spree seem like a period of release and freedom, an exaggeration of the characteristic work-release rhythms of capitalist production (Nichter and Nichter 1991). But after some time engaged in the bodily pleasures of a binge, many men reported returning to work with a sense of relief, cleanliness, security, and even freedom. The means by which they achieved release from the rigors and bondage of work ended up just making those bonds even tighter.

In public at least, employers often said that workmen’s binges were disruptive and wasteful, and they lamented the needless injury and loss of life which followed heavy drinking and brawling.

As frontiers developed and changed, employers of gangs were sometimes called to account by communities which sought to change their public image, by religious and legal authorities, and groups which sought labor reform. But employers tended to treat workers on a binge with great indulgence, because they knew the result just bound the worker more tightly to their job.

Drunkness, fighting, debt and the legal troubles left men with few options but going back to work for their old employers with new debts. In any case, sailortowns and red light districts were full of labor recruiters, press gangs, 'crimps' and other kinds of agents who found ways to persuade or cheat men into new labor contracts.

FURTHER QUESTIONS

As I have outlined it here, gang labor and masculine crew culture had limited temporal and geographic distribution. Extractive economies were heterogeneous and locally specific, each with its own unique characteristics. Crew cultures varied widely in their relationships to colonial and plantation communities; in some cases they were just seasonal gang workers, as with chicle gathering in Central America. Sometimes men were only gang workers for a part of their lives, as with Irish canal-digging Navies in the US Midwest or modern crab fishermen in Alaska. In other cases they were lifelong full-time specialists, like Belize loggers and Georgia pine tar tappers.

Industrial synthetic products gradually replaced many of the raw materials gang workers produced; for example, the logwood that was extracted from the swamp forests of Belize in the eighteenth century was replaced by aniline dyes in the nineteenth century. Changes in metropolitan fashions for corsets or feathered hats could destroy the livelihood of an entire workforce halfway around the world, causing them to disperse and seek entry into other extractive work, or attempt to return to an agricultural or industrial economy. Different groups of gang workers often competed with one another in the same market, so the success of one led to the demise of another. Rich new

territories could open up, leading to gluts, price collapse, and the displacement or idling of workers. The Belize mahogany economy endured at least five boom and bust cycles between 1840 and 1950. New technologies like steam tractors or harpoon guns could suddenly make a lifetime of skill and experience useless and redundant.

The heterogeneity of the settings in which we find crew cultures begs the question, was this all one culture, through which a single form of masculinity was transmitted, or a series of cultures which evolved separately? Here of course is the classic question of diffusion vs innovation which preoccupied mid-twentieth century anthropologists. Unfortunately the world does not present us with such neat experimental cases, and the proper answer is probably that when capitalism had certain needs, masculinity was there to suggest a particular answer. It is striking, however, that similar forms of masculine crew cultures developed among gang workers from such different cultural traditions as Zambian cooper miners (Ferguson 1999) and Chinese miners and pearl fishermen in Australia (Rolls 1982).

Because gang labor was so often a part-culture, a fragment, it is hard to tell just how the kinds of masculinity that flowered in this context relate to similar kinds of masculinity we see among other groups of male workers on plantations, in industrial settings, in coal mines, and in the violent masculine cultures of modern prisons, youth gangs, football hooligans, and criminal organizations. Unlike gang workers, male workers in these occupations and subcultures usually *did* belong to households, and they sought and maintained conjugal and kinship relationships, supported legitimate children and entered community life. They maintaining some of the masculine trappings of crew culture, but squeezed and reshaped into the special contexts of the saloon, the shop floor, the union hall, the sporting club and other male social spaces.

Gang labor could become a phase of life or a rite of passage for men who expected to spend the majority of their life in other occupations; a spell of military service or a few years of 'toughening' at sea before settling down to get married and support a family. Given the quickness

with which many resources were exhausted and destroyed on the frontier, it was not unusual for sealers, loggers, miners, or cowboys attracted to a place by the prospect of gang labor to end up staying and changing their way of life when the resources ran out or the mode of exploitation intensified. Men who ended life in the respectable middle class may have spent part of their earlier careers, and learned basic lessons about gender roles, in the context of a crew culture.

It would be much easier to trace the historical connections between different kinds of masculine crew cultures if the records of these groups had not been so completely distorted and transformed by the dual process of romanticism and demonization which began in the eighteenth century, when pirates and buccaneers became figures of public curiosity and representations of liberty (eg. Defoe 1999, Linebaugh and Rediker 2000). By the time of the US Civil War, while many crew cultures were just reaching their peak, cowboys, outlaws and gamblers were already the central preoccupation of popular 'pulp' literature oriented towards working and military men.

Cowboys in particular became aware that their occupation had attracted the popular imagination, and some tried to cash in by writing their stories or giving exhibitions (Siringo 2000). By the late 19th century most men in crew cultures probably knew that their occupations exemplified heroic masculinity. It was not uncommon for parents in the respectable middle class to send their children to the forest or to sea for a year or two to 'toughen' them up, and novelists and other adventurers sought out at least the tamer sorts of gang labor as a challenge to their abilities.

The late 19th century is often seen by scholars as a time when Western Europe and North America went through a 'crisis' of masculine identity (Gerzon 1982, Beynon 2002). Men were perceived as becoming 'soft' and feminized by office work, domesticity, education and feminine company. Leaders like Roosevelt and Baden-Powell idealized the masculinity of crew culture and presented distilled and selected forms of it as solutions to the crisis of masculinity, adding yet another layer of mythos and reflexive burden to the real lives of gang laborers.

At the same time they were being idealized by the upper middle class, religious reformers and prohibitionists identified gang workers and crew culture as the literal agents of satanic power on earth. Anti-saloon leagues and other groups formed initially in western towns where gang labor was seen as the main threat to bourgeois life, and many engaged in farming, commerce and industry sought to push it to the margins. The red light districts, gambling, prostitution and other businesses which serviced gang workers, became targets for social reformers, in a movement which connected with religious revivals, women's suffrage and political reform (Goldman 1981). When local histories were written, gang workers usually became no more than a picturesque footnote, a prelude to the economic development which followed.

THE QUESTION OF CONTINUITY

Perhaps the most difficult question about the historical role of masculine crew cultures is the connection between the kinds of binge consumption practiced as a release from the strictures of rations and harsh gang labor, and binge consumption which appear in so many places in the variegated consumer lifestyles of the early 21st century. The normalizing narratives of consumer culture have tended to pathologize binge consumption, and have retarded and marginalized the topic to the point where we really know very little about how and why people today feel the need to 'let go' and consume without thinking about the consequences.

One possible form of connection is culture historical. It is possible that binge consumption became so thoroughly embedded in masculinity during the era of crew culture that today any kind of masculine performance requires a form of bingeing. For this explanation to make sense we have to use masculinity as Judith Butler does, to denote a gendered performance which is available to both men and women. This kind of explanation would require demonstrating some sort of historical continuity between communities, to show how cultural conceptions of masculinity were

transmitted. It would also require a better understanding of alternative forms of masculine performance, and it probably gives a larger historical role to the poorest working class men than most contemporary gender historians would accept.

A more 'ecological' explanation would acknowledge that the original circumstances of gang labor which promoted crew culture and binge consumption are mostly gone today, but would point to the continuing patterns of restraint and release, of hard work followed by breaks, weekends, and holidays, which have become essential in the rhythm of production and consumption (Ilmonen 2001, Shove 2003). We could make the same sort of functional argument for the modern workplace as I have made for gang labor, that employers and businesses, indeed the capitalist system itself, requires that workers keep spending and getting in debt in order to maintain work discipline, keep up competition for jobs, and keep wages low (eg. Schor 1998). This kind of functionalism can never really explain how the needs of capital get translated into the desires of real working class people, however. But it may indeed be true that bingeing is an adaptation, a means to survive and stay sane in an economic setting which otherwise presents impossible conditions and insoluble contradictions.

Neither of these two possibilities can really be assessed independently because crew culture has been such a focus for public discourse, religious proselytization, political agitation, and mass media for so long. Crew culture has become a symbol of opposition to middle class ways of life and comfortable consumer lifestyles. The idea of 'living for the moment' as a metaphorical grasshopper rather than an ant, is an appealing ideological alternative to the constant emphasis on rationality, responsibility, domesticity and calculation which is so prevalent in bourgeois society (Day et al 1999). In the end it may prove impossible to ever separate the romance of the binge and the free life of the open range from the miserable realities of harsh working conditions, horrible food, and predatory whores. But they may never *have been* entirely separated in practice either.

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¹ These cases are Texas Cowboys 1860-1880 (Knox 2002, Siringo 2000, Slatta 1994), Maine loggers 1800-1880 (Pike 1984), Belize loggers 1840-1890 (Gann 1925, Fowler 1879, Bolland 1986), Venezuelan Llaneros 1820-1880 (Slatta 1994), Argentine Gauchos 1850-1890, Atlantic merchant sailors 1780-1860, Texas oil roughnecks 1920s (Lynch 1987, Boatright and Owens 1982), and Alaskan crab fishermen 1980s (Walker 1991).