From public problems to social experiences: the alcohol ban in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

In 2020, the South African government adopted a controversial measure in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, a nationwide ban on the sale and transport of alcoholic drinks. In this article, we explore the process that led to the construction of alcohol consumption as a "public problem" in the country, highlighting connections between alcohol drinking, politics, the economy, public health, public safety, and social inequality. We observe how the 2020 alcohol ban was decided upon, justified and enforced, following a long history of government attempts to control alcohol consumption among poor non-White South Africans. Based on ethnographic data, we present some patterns and meanings of alcohol consumption in popular settings and provide a glimpse into the drinking practices of more affluent South Africans during the alcohol ban. In doing so, we intend to offer a broader portrait of the phenomenon, one that helps grasp this intricate issue.

Keywords: South Africa; COVID-19 pandemic; alcohol drinking; alcohol ban; public problem; social inequality.

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De problemas públicos a experiências sociais: a proibição do álcool na África do Sul durante a pandemia de COVID-19

Resumo

Em 2020, o governo sul-africano adotou uma medida polêmica em resposta à pandemia de COVID-19: a proibição nacional da venda e do transporte de bebidas alcoólicas. Neste artigo, exploramos o processo que levou à construção do consumo de álcool como um "problema público" no país, destacando as conexões entre consumo de álcool, política, economia, saúde pública, segurança pública e desigualdade social. Observamos como a proibição do álcool em 2020 foi decidida, justificada e aplicada, após uma longa história de tentativas do governo de controlar o consumo de álcool entre sul-africanos pobres não brancos. Com base em dados etnográficos, apresentamos alguns padrões e significados do consumo de álcool em ambientes populares e fornecemos um vislumbre das práticas de consumo de bebidas entre os sul-africanos mais ricos durante a proibição do álcool. Com isso, pretendemos oferecer um retrato mais amplo do fenômeno, que ajude a apreender essa intrincada questão.

Palavras-chave: África do Sul; pandemia de COVID-19; consumo de álcool; proibição de álcool; problema público; desigualdade social.

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Introduction

> *The role of drink in the lives of black men and women has a long history. And it is complex because it was never simply about drinking and drunkenness.* (la Hausse 1988: 1)

In March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a worldwide COVID-19 pandemic.[1] Reactions to the declaration varied. Some countries, like Brazil and the United States, struggled with alarmingly high death and contamination rates,[2] caused mainly by misleading political messages and actions[3]. Others, however, recognizing that COVID-19 was more than "just a flu", implemented stringent regulations, including school and workplace closures, restrictions on public gatherings and stay-at-home requirements. In South Africa, the national government promptly recognized the menace of the virus and enacted one of the strictest government responses to the pandemic.[4] A nationwide ban on the sale and transport of alcoholic drinks was one of the many measures that the South African government took. Restrictions on alcohol consumption were established in many countries primarily through the closure of liquor stores, bars, and restaurants. Only South Africa and a few other countries did resort to a ban.[5]

Alcohol abuse is a severe social and health problem in South Africa. According to the 2018 Global Status Report on Alcohol and Health (WHO, 2018), the country has the world's 6th highest rate of alcohol consumption per capita. More significantly, South Africa is marked by *binge* or *heavy drinking*, a phenomenon often associated with violence against women and children (Mager, 2010).[6] In this article we examine how the consumption of alcoholic drinks has been construed as a "public problem" during the pandemic in South Africa.

1 Research reported in this publication was supported by the National Council for Scientific and Technological Development (CNPq); the Coordination for the Improvement of Higher Education Personnel (CAPES); the Research Support Foundation of the Federal District (FAPDF); the Research Support Foundation of the Rio de Janeiro State (FAPERJ); and the University of Brasilia (DPI/DPG/UnB).

2 On December 21, 2020, the United States had reached a total of 18,324,702 coronavirus cases and 325,295 deaths caused by COVID-19. By the same date, Brazil had 7,241,612 coronavirus cases and 186,818 deaths caused by COVID-19. See: https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries.

3 For the Brazilian case, see the Dossier "COVID-19 in Brazil", organized by Segata, Grisotti and Porto (2022), and the edited volume *Cientistas Sociais e o Coronavírus* (Grossi and Toniol, 2020).

4 Researchers at the Blavatnik School of Government at the University of Oxford brought forth a comprehensive dataset on the stringency of government responses to COVID-19 across the world, based on publicly available information. According to the study, South Africa implemented stricter policies than all European countries. See: https://ourworldindata.org/policy-responses-covid.

5 India, Thailand, Panama, Sri Lanka, and Botswana also banned alcohol sales nationwide due to the coronavirus.

6 The relationship between alcohol and intoxication and gender-based violence, also indicated by Wojcicki (2002), Pitpitan *et al.* (2013) and Bonner *et al.* (2019), will not be examined in the present article. We do acknowledge the two phenomena to be intertwined and think that their complexities deserve careful consideration.

To do so we follow the advice of Gusfield (1981) who highlights that not all sources of pain or struggles deserve this qualification.[7] According to the author, the main attribute of public problems is that they are perceived as potentially harmful to society as a whole, "instituted" (Bourdieu, 1996) as a matter that should be addressed collectively as a priority for governmental actions and public policy. The construction of a "public problem" is also an asymmetric struggle between differently positioned social actors operating according to different capacities, backgrounds, and projects to wield power to influence the public agenda. In that regard, we understand that our recognition of the urgent need for alcohol regulation in South Africa should not obfuscate our perspective, as anthropologists, of the symbolic struggles and cultural politics involved in the matter. By doing so, we hope to contribute to a more complex and encompassing approach to the issue in public policy and the academy.

Anthropologists have often been accused of belittling the severity of alcohol problems. In 1984, Robin Room led a discussion on the supposed tendency of anthropologists to minimize the seriousness of drinking problems, saying that "problem deflation" was a function of the ethnographic research process itself. Caricaturing anthropological practice, Room asserted that ethnographic methods "may underestimate the problems related to drinking because they are better attuned to measuring the pleasures than the problems of drinking" (Room *et al*., 1984: 172). Indeed, anthropological studies of alcohol, primarily until the 1980s, focused on the role of alcohol in creating and maintaining social cohesion, challenging the orthodox perspective that saw alcohol consumption primarily as an individual pathology (Dietler, 2006). Since then, new theoretical approaches in the social sciences have led to other developments. If drinking liquor contributes to a sense of community and identity, it also reinforces difference, conflict, authority, and control. We understand that the debate on alcohol consumption is not properly examined if the issue is limited to an opposition between "pleasure and pain" (Bryceson, 2002). Fully recognizing the consequences of alcohol consumption includes observing its use in macro/micropolitics and in the manipulation of power.

In times of crisis, societies tend to reveal structural conflicts that are at times diffuse and even underestimated in ordinary life. As we will show, public officials, activists, and researchers perceived the COVID-19 pandemic and the alcohol ban as opportunities to promote a broad discussion on alcohol consumption in South Africa, using available channels to try to influence what they projected as the "new normal", a category widely used at the time to refer to the effects of the pandemic in rearranging established social relations and power structures. In this article, however, we will show how two essential elements in this process may dim this bright future: the multifaceted nature of alcohol consumption by the "community", which is a proxy category used by some of our interlocutors to refer to the "problematic" habits of people living in townships and rundown areas of South African cities; and the violence of selective enforcement of the alcohol ban regulation, a phenomenon that highlighted the brutal nature of the outstanding levels of social inequalities in the country,[8] revolving around painful memories and reenacting old ideologies of past segregationist eras.

The article is also an experiment in pandemic research conducted by three Brazilian researchers with significant experience doing fieldwork in popular South African milieus. Due to restrictions on mobility imposed throughout 2020, part of the field material presented here was collected while the three authors were restrained to their homes, surveying information remotely from news reports but also through friends and research interlocutors in South Africa about their experiences, not just of the alcohol ban,

7 As sharply stated by Gusfield (1981), "[h]uman problems do not spring up, full-blown and announced, into the consciousness of bystanders. Even to recognize a situation as painful requires a system for categorizing and defining events. All situations that are experienced by people as painful do not become matters of public activity and targets for public action". (Gusfield, 1981: 3)

8 South Africa, the largest country in the Southern African Customs Union (SACU), is the most unequal country in the world, ranking first among 164 countries according to the World Bank's Inequality in Southern Africa: An Assessment of the Southern African Customs Union, released in 2022, and that examines the process of household income generation to identify the sources of inequality in the region. The report found that the member countries of SACU, Botswana, Eswatini, Lesotho, Namibia, and South Africa, compose the world's most unequal region.

but of the enforcement of the State of Disaster as a whole. This desk-work material is presented primarily in the sections *Alcohol ban, police violence, and the building of a sanitary order* and *The discursive construction of a public problem and the project of a "new normal"*. In the final section, called *A portrait of alcohol consumption in South African popular milieus*, we present an ethnographic account of varied social experiences involving alcohol consumption in popular settings, focusing on local categories with which Black commoners deal with the pleasures and plights of drinking.

Inspired by the methodological approaches of George Marcus and his "multi-sited ethnography" (1995) and Jacques Revel's (2010) historical analysis, we pursued the issue of the alcohol ban during the COVID-19 pandemic by using a range of observation sites and data sources, articulating micro/macro scales of memory and history. We initiate our discussion with a historical review of state regulations of alcohol consumption in South Africa in the section *A brief history of a controversy: the 2020 alcohol ban*. We show how liquor intoxication is an inherently ambiguous practice. It may lead not only to addiction and interpersonal violence but also to a "heightened form of social experience" (Karp, 1987) . It is a common leisure practice, and it is important to recognize that addiction, violence, and leisure may carry a variety of meanings in an unequal society. The article, therefore, explores the multifaceted process of construing the consumption of alcoholic drinks as a "public problem", in an effort to provide a contemporary glimpse into long-term structures of inequalities in the country.

A brief history of a controversy: the 2020 alcohol ban

On 15 March 2020, in a much-anticipated statement, President Cyril Ramaphosa addressed South African citizens to announce the country's measures to fight the COVID-19 pandemic.[9] Ramaphosa proclaimed the need for an extraordinary response, with mechanisms to prevent and reduce the coronavirus outbreak and measures to mitigate its economic impacts. He declared a State of Disaster, which made it possible to limit certain rights within the country. This included imposing a travel ban, closing schools, and prohibiting gatherings of more than 100 people. Furthermore, Ramaphosa called on everyone to wash their hands frequently, cover their nose and mouth and avoid close contact with other people. In his own words, he was calling for "a change of behavior amongst all South Africans".

The President's address to the nation on 23 March 2020,[10] dramatically escalated the response to the pandemic. The beginning of a nationwide lockdown was announced. Individuals would not be allowed to leave their homes except to seek medical care, buy food or medicine, and collect social grants. All shops and businesses would be closed except those providing essential services. More specifically, the Disaster Management Act (2020) stated that liquor sales, dispensing, and distribution were prohibited.[11] The same applied to tobacco products.[12] In addition, the President announced that he had directed the South African National Defence Force (SANDF) to support the South African Police Service (SAPS) to patrol the streets and enforce lockdown regulations.

Panic buying ensued among the population. For three days before the beginning of the announced lockdown, those who had financial means ran to shops, stockpiling toilet paper, hand sanitizers, cigarettes and alcoholic drinks. Soon after, South Africans realized that shops could maintain adequate stocks of essential goods, reducing anxiety. But alcoholic beverages could not be purchased for the following two months.

9 The complete statement can be found at: https://www.gov.za/speeches/statement-president-cyril-ramaphosa-measures-combat-covid-19-epidemic--15-mar-2020-0000.

10 https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-escalation-measures-combat-coronavirus-covid-19-pandemic-23-mar.

11 https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202004/43258rg11098gon480s.pdf.

12 The prohibition of cigarette sales during the pandemic is another important topic, but, in this article, we will prioritize the alcohol issue.

The national government created a "schedule of services", indicating permitted activities in each sector, based on five alert levels, level 5 being the strictest. Off-premises consumption of alcohol would be enabled again at Level 3, with sales allowed during limited hours.

Accordingly, on 25 May 2020, alcohol sales returned. South African drinkers celebrated. Fireworks could be heard in certain areas of Cape Town, and consumers waited in long queues at liquor stores. However, on 12 July 2020, Ramaphosa addressed the nation and surprised South Africans, stating that the sale, dispensing and distribution of alcohol would be suspended again "with immediate effect". According to the president and the cabinet of ministers, there were two reasons for the prohibition. News from different countries showed a major increase in gender-based violence when the population was ordered to stay home. Reducing alcohol consumption, therefore, was a way to fight systemic violence suffered by South African women. Moreover, road accidents and other "booze-related" traumas were said to burden clinics and hospitals. The ban was intended to limit pressure on the healthcare system, conserving hospital facilities for COVID-19 patients. The national government faced a substantial reaction from different sectors – particularly from the wine industry, which is highly important to the country's economy. Under pressure, the second alcohol ban was lifted on 15 August 2020.

Liquor prohibition during the pandemic was not an isolated event in South African history. A comprehensive chronology of the 2020 alcohol ban should begin much earlier. The production and drinking of various fermented alcoholic beverages pre-dates colonialism in Southern Africa, and are important aspects of the modes of life and cosmologies of Indigenous populations. European rule, however, opened the region to industrialized liquor, stimulating alcohol abuse and using it as a strategy to recruit and control labor (Ambler, 2003: 11).

The practice of paying non-White farm workers with cheap wine instead of wages (or in addition to a small monetary payment) – known as the Dop or Tot System – was used in the Cape Colony farms since the seventeenth century. Despite becoming illegal in 1961, the practice persisted until the end of the twentieth century (London, 1999). The Dop System was first used to induce Indigenous peoples to work for White settlers. It soon became institutionalized as a mechanism to reduce labor costs, maintain the workforce at farms, and provide a market for low-grade alcohol products. The Dop System was "an insidious means of attempting to dominate and control a rural underclass" (Scully, 1992: 57). It was indeed a doping system that led to increased alcohol consumption and drunkenness in the Cape (and elsewhere in South Africa). Until today, fetal alcohol syndrome is extremely prevalent in the region. During the nineteenth century, the drinking practices of non-White populations raised concerns among African leaders. Further, European moral reformers related to the Temperance Movement campaigned against the Dop System, stimulating policies to restrict non-White people's access to alcoholic beverages. As contradictory as it may seem, both the Dop System and the following alcohol legislation were developed to subordinate and control non-Whites in South Africa.

The instrumentalization of liquor in labor and racial relations in the country kept pace with parliamentary measures to control drinking practices of the Black and Coloured populations. The legal landmark of restrictive legislation was the Liquor Act of 1891, whereby repeated public drunkenness, a source of iterative complaints in the Cape, could be punished with prison sentences. An 1898 Amendment to the Liquor Act introduced the first conditions on liquor sales to the so-called "Natives", as well as restrictions on the production of "African beer" in rural areas.[13] The 1927 Liquor Act prohibited "Africans" from buying "European Liquor" or industrialized beverages, which thus became a perquisite of the country's White population. The Act, moreover, turned the production and sale of sorghum beer, a traditional pre-colonial drink and staple food (La Hausse,

13 The "traditional beer" in South Africa, known as *Mqombothi*, is a soured fermented drink produced from malted sorghum. It is opaque and brownish because of the large number of solid particles suspended in the solution (Rogerson, 2019: 254). Its alcohol content is considerably low (usually less than 3%).

1988: 7), into a monopoly of municipal authorities across the country. In the 1930s, Hellmann registered two consequences of the 1927 Liquor Act: the flourishing of an illicit beer trade and a sense of injury among poor Black Africans (Hellmann, 1934: 39, 53). Indeed, frequent police raids on townships and the arrest of women and men involved with the illegal liquor market were deeply resented in popular settings. Yet official restrictions on the consumption of industrialized alcohol by the non-White population in the country were lifted only in 1962.[14] [15]

Excessive drinking by White working-class men and women was also a concern during apartheid, particularly from 1948 to 1960. It was seen by the elite as a threat to fundamental arrangements of the racial order, disrupting the fiction of White respectability (Roos, 2015). It is worth noting that the state found specific ways to respond to White drinking. Although alcoholism was a problem that crossed racial borders, the logic of segregation led to racially different interventions by the state, based on policies that also had a class bias. Working-class Whites who drank to excess were subjected to a disciplinary and reformist approach, taken to work colonies aimed at re-socialization and rehabilitation (Roos, 2015: 1179-1181).

Another important aspect of this controversy is that the lifting of the restrictions in 1962 was motivated by economic concerns. As Mager (1999: 387) stated, "the apartheid regime's revision of the liquor laws was initially motivated by the economic imperatives of the malt beer brewers, winemakers and distillers". As we have mentioned, during the 2020 alcohol ban, these powerful economic actors raised their voices once more against the official prohibition on the sales and consumption of alcoholic beverages. Despite an initial truce during the lockdown's early stages in the country,[16] by August 2020, the Southern African Agri Initiative (SAAI), together with wine farms and associations, went to court over the issue. They said that the initial ban on sales had resulted in losses of more than 3 billion rands (over 180 million US dollars) and that the new ban, "arbitrary and irrational", would threaten the existence of many wine farms.[17] They claimed that the regulation was unconstitutional and regarded it as part of a long-term agenda against alcohol usage.[18] Dr Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma, Minister of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs (COGTA) and the head of the National Coronavirus Command Council, replied that "there is no desire on the part of government to leave this prohibition in place for longer than it is regarded necessary".[19] But about four months earlier, Police Minister Bheki Cele, who associated alcohol to South Africa's high crime rate, had firmly stated: "I wish alcohol ban could be extended beyond lockdown".[20]

By going to court, the SAAI sought to obtain permission to sell and consume wine in restaurants and farms. The argument was clearly stated. According to the organization, "reports show that wine consumers fall within the 'safe' category of alcohol consumers and that there is no evidence of wine consumers contributing to the overburdening of the country's health system".[21] They also stated that restaurants are "a regulated,

14 Anne Mager termed as "liquor freedom" the opening of the market of "European liquor" to Black South Africans and highlighted its consequences: "Africans were effectively drinking themselves deeper into apartheid and urban squalor" (Mager, 1999: 388). The new dispensation met resistance among some sectors of the Black population, whilst others felt the shift was the end of a longstanding offence, which still haunts the memories of Black commoners in the country (Lage da Cruz, 2017). During the SOWETO Uprising in 1976, bottle stores and beer halls were attacked. The protesters associated both institutions to the state's control apparatus and deemed that alcohol abuse entailed the political quiescence of adults (Nieftagodien, 2014).

15 The history of alcohol consumption and legislation in South Africa shares similarities with other African contexts. Akyeampong (1996) shows how the history of *akpeteshie*, a Ghanaian local gin, is intertwined with colonial rule, economic interests, class conflict, nationalist politics, and the emergence of a popular culture. The edited volume *Beer in Africa: Drinking spaces, states and selves* (Van Wolputte and Fumanti, 2010) covers cases from Namibia, Ghana, Nigeria, Cameroon, South Africa, and Burkina Faso.

16 http://www.capetalk.co.za/articles/381155/update-liquor-forum-puts-threatened-court-case-over-alcohol-ban-on-ice.

17 https://ewn.co.za/2020/07/21/saai-heading-to-court-over-govt-s-lockdown-alcohol-sales-ban.

18 https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-08-06-no-need-for-total-alcohol-ban-farming-organisation-to-argue-in-court/.

19 https://businesstech.co.za/news/business/421048/government-to-review-south-africas-alcohol-ban-on-a-regular-basis-report/.

20 https://www.news24.com/citypress/news/bheki-cele-i-wish-alcohol-ban-could-be-extended-beyond-lockdown-20200405.

21 https://www.iol.co.za/pretoria-news/news/nkosazana-dlamini-zuma-defends-alcohol-ban-f99f1f3e-b123-4689-a741-61fce203fdcf.

hygienic environment where physical distancing is applied".[22] The organization said that Dlamini-Zuma was wrong because she "has merely assumed that all alcohol is equal".[23] And they were right. As we are trying to show, the history of alcohol consumption in South Africa is marked by extreme inequality. Patterns of alcohol consumption have been distinctively related to race and class. *Safety*, *regulation*, and *hygiene* are just a few categories in a comprehensive classificatory system that still separates and attributes different values for alcohol consumers.[24]

Taking the pandemic as a dramatic contrast, the following sections will highlight the dangers of ranking alcohol consumers and of selective enforcement in the institution of a public problem. We intend to explore issues of representation and citizenship that can turn a legitimate demand for state regulation into a sad tale of corruption, violence, and privilege.

The alcohol ban, police violence, and the building of a sanitary order

"I'm the media! I'm the media!", desperately shouted the reporter Azarrah Karrim, after a group of South African Police Service (SAPS) agents enforcing the level 5 COVID-19 lockdown aimed their riot guns, frantically spitting rubber bullets in her direction. In the video,[25] the reporter from News24, a major Internet news channel in South Africa, is filming a group of four to five officers supported by a riot-control vehicle in an empty corner of Yeoville, a predominantly Black neighborhood in Johannesburg's inner-city area. The officers appear to be adopting crowd control conduct; the video, however, shows that the streets are empty. People were shouting from their balconies at the police when, suddenly, the cops glimpsed the reporter. Probably taking her for a resident, they immediately began to chase Azarrah in the street. Realizing their "mistake", she ran yelling in the opposite direction, "I'm the media! I'm the media!". We can only hear what happened next; her cell phone only captures their voices. She repeats, "I'm the media!". The police officers then ask for her identification and reply, sounding irritated, "why didn't you tell us this!?".

Collin Khosa, a resident of Alexandra, a township in Johannesburg's metropolitan area, was not so fortunate, and died after being beaten by members of the South African National Defence Force (SANDF), helped by Johannesburg Metro Police Department (JMPD) agents. According to witnesses' statements to the press, the 40-year-old Black man and members of his family were gathered in their shared yard in the township when two female SANDF soldiers approached and accused them of breaking the lockdown regulation. Khosa and his family were allegedly disrespectful when arguing that they were at home, and therefore not breaking any regulation.[26] Then, after asking for JMPD reinforcements, the soldiers broke into the property and attacked Collin, who, according to the accounts, was seated with a half-full glass of liquor by his side. One of his relatives described the assault to the *Sunday Times* as follows.

22 https://ewn.co.za/2020/07/21/saai-heading-to-court-over-govt-s-lockdown-alcohol-sales-ban.

23 https://www.news24.com/news24/southafrica/news/all-alcohol-equal-wine-court-case-on-ice-after-unbanning-of-liquor-sales-20200818.

24 Bourdieu's "science of taste and cultural consumption" may be very inspiring for a study of South African society. Bourdieu (2010) shows how the social production of taste works to legitimate social differences. Although he specifically deals with distinctions between social classes, we believe the idea can be extrapolated to discuss racial relations in South Africa. Preferences in drinks – as well as in food, music, sports, and clothes – are ordinarily used to talk about "racial differences".

25 See: "Police open fire on residents in Yeoville", https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hGex7ckhMPk.

26 The Ministry of Defence concluded that the JMPD and SANDF agents involved could not be held responsible since the altercation that led to Collin Khosa's death was due to "a lack of respect towards female soldiers and provocation". Therefore, the agents' choices in terms of use of force were deemed justifiable. See: "Lockdown brutality: victims speak out as law enforcement conduct come under scrutiny", https://bit.ly/35tA8DS.

> In particular, they poured beer on top of his head and on his body; one member of the SANDF held his hand behind his back, while the other choked him; slammed him against the cement wall; hit him with the butt of the machine gun; kicked, slapped him, punched him on his face and on his stomach and ribs, and slammed him against the steel gate.[27]

The limited police-oversight capacity of bodies like the Independent Police Investigative Directorate (IPID)[28] did not allow a more comprehensive account of the extent and characteristics of the phenomenon during the pandemic. However, media coverage of the case was extensive, exposing the problem in all its bloody details. As in the case of Colin Khosa , these accounts were consistent in thematizing the habits of popular classes and their places of living. Walter Manyani, another victim of police brutality, was shot in his right leg while going to an outside toilet in a yard that he shared with ten other families in Alexandra. Another township resident, Petrus Miggels, a Coloured 55-year-old Ravensmead man, died shortly after being assaulted by police when buying quarts of beer from a local *shebeen*.[29] Like other police-oversight bodies, the existence of the IPID does not guarantee that adequate policies and accountability mechanisms are in place to prevent police brutality in South Africa, a phenomenon still strongly informed by old apartheid racial and spatial hierarchies.[30]

Drinkers from all walks of life infringed on the prohibition to trade and publicly consume liquor during the draconian phases of the country's lockdown, despite military roadblocks and an increase in police patrolling,[31] whether in poor, non-White areas or the affluent, mainly White suburbs. However, while scuffles between commoners and agents in the urbanized areas and interprovincial freeways predominantly involved bribery requests, in the townships, physical violations – at times with deadly consequences – were more recurrently reported in the media. Indeed, as many research interlocutors suggested, even the police illegally acquired beer in the areas that they patrolled. The South African media reported the arrest of cops for buying,[32] selling[33] and drinking[34] liquor, particularly in townships.

Reports of local White residents in Johannesburg, inhabitants of affluent suburban areas, present a more permissive attitude of police authorities towards the lockdown regulations. "We were able to buy alcohol the whole time; they were serving cheap wine and bad spirits, and we had to pretend to be drinking something else, but we never had issues accessing alcohol in Joburg", reported a local interlocutor. For those able to afford it, the lockdown violations turned out to be just a matter of mild financial inconvenience, a world of bribes and expensive bad liquor. In the days following the beginning of the alcohol ban, a case (12 units) of a popular beer like Black Label soared from 150 to 350 rands (approximately from $10 to $23 US dollars).

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27 See: "'Beer poured over his head, choked, kicked, hit with machine gun': how Collin Khosa died in Alex", https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-15-beer-poured-over-his-head-choked-kicked-hit-with-machine-gun-how-collin-khosa-died-in-alex/.

28 Appointed by the Minister of Police, the IPID executive director position remained vacant from March/2019 to August/2020 due to the resignation of its previous occupant Robert McBride. The annual IPID Report for 2020-2021 didn't provide any specific analysis of the cases of police brutality during the pandemic, showing a slight increase of 11% in assault by police officers' cases, a reduction of 8% in the total number of deaths in police custody and of 11% in deaths as a result of police action. A Study from the Institute of Security Studies (ISS), however, shows that during the lockdown in South Africa the IPID recorded 376 cases and 10 deaths linked to lockdown enforcement. The IPID 2020-2021 Annual Report can be found at http://www.ipid.gov.za/sites/default/files/documents/IPID%27s%20Annual%20Report%202020_21.pdf. The ISS report "Lockdown Lessons: violence and policing on a pandemic" can be found at https://issafrica.s3.amazonaws.com/site/uploads/sar44.pdf

29 "Shebeens" are informal liquor sales points in townships, which operate beyond government registration.

30 See the Institute of Security Studies (ISS) report on "How to reduce police brutality in South Africa", by David Bruce (2020). More in https://bit.ly/35WX3cS.

31 This is no surprise since in South Africa and elsewhere "history has shown that it does not matter how often or to what extent alcohol consumption has been problematized or prohibited – people still continue to drink" (Hands 2018: 2).

32 https://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/news/fleeing-cops-arrested-after-allegedly-buying-alcohol-at-strand-store-amid-lockdown-46587329.

33 https://apnews.com/article/d61d033687711d56f0d37790b3bd38ea.

34 https://www.timeslive.co.za/news/south-africa/2020-04-20-cops-arrested-for-drinking-alcohol-at-tavern-others-arrested-for-corruption/.

Accordingly, interlocutors in a small town and in a squatter-camp resorted to the production and drinking of *mqombothi* (sorghum beer) and pineapple beer. These traditional, domestic-made beverages then became a profitable market, in contrast to pre-pandemic days, when the drinking of industrialized beers prevailed over the so-called "traditional beers".

The selective character of state violence flared up old but very vivid racial tensions in South Africa, raising issues with the Black majoritarian government of the ANC.[35] Members of the ANC government, however, very vocally dismissed the violent consequences of the enforcement of the alcohol ban in township areas. Because of the apparent persistence of people breaking lockdown regulations in pursuit of stupor, Bheki Cele, Minister of Police, gave the following statement: "I hear them [people in townships] crying that cops and soldiers are brutal. Not listening to us is brutality". Cele also publicly expressed his desire to see a post-COVID South Africa free of liquor sales. "I just hope that one day there will be no liquor", he said on another occasion, immediately explaining his reasoning: "I don't run the country, but what has happened when you look at the crime stats, for that fact that shebeens are closed, people are sleeping. They don't move around here in shebeens and taverns being incontrollable [sic]".[36] In addition to the stigmatizing way they address the problem of substance abuse in townships, almost as a "civilizational" matter, statements like these are highly problematic because they tend to treat a health problem as a police issue.

When Collin Khosa was killed two weeks into the implementation of the lockdown, South Africa had registered only 24 deaths by COVID-19. The first victim of the pandemic in Alexandra township may have died at the hands of those who were supposed to protect them from the virus.

The discursive construction of a public problem and the project of a "new normal"

Scientific knowledge – manifest especially through the language of statistics – plays an important role in the construction of a *public problem*, both as the conveyer of legitimate representations of a problem as collective, and by making it eligible to the state as a domain of life that deserves to be the object of political strategy (Foucault, 2007, 2019). A public problem somehow manages to resonate in the realms of public opinion, policy and politics. But public arenas are only misleadingly considered the ultimate realm of equality. As concrete political forces operating across different capitalist societies (a "thing-in-itself"), democracies are unstable processes of class struggle highly sensitive to specific economic and historical conditions (Lukács, 1991). In the practical realms of citizenship, it can be expected that some actors have greater influence in electing the most important public problems from among various pressing issues. That is why representational struggles are core to the democratic agenda today. They expose a big divide between the "public", active authors of their position in this asymmetric game of power and values, and those who are targeted as "problems", treated as passive recipients for governmental action (or inaction), when not as public enemies (Chatterjee, 2004).

In this section we illuminate a limited but crucial dimension of this process by discussing the development of a series of webinars in South Africa about the effects of the alcohol ban regulations. Arranged by two African-based NGOs operating regionally in Southern Africa, the webinars were broadcast live to an audience of subscribers. They included members of the South African government, health practitioners, researchers,

35 "I will never forgive the ANC government, Cyril Ramaphosa, SANDF and SAPS for abusing the people during this lockdown, kicking and killing us, while Whites were having a braai [barbecue], and not a single one of them touched, I will never!". See "Army and police violence spurs racial tensions", https://bit.ly/31moVUT.

36 See: "'Not listening to us is brutality,' says Bheki Cele on lockdown", https://bit.ly/3eU18Qs.

social movements, and community leaders.[37] The two online meetings took place in May 2020. The topic guiding the discussions was the effects of the strict lockdown regulations on crime and other social predicaments, especially the impacts of the alcohol ban during levels 5, 4 and 3. We will now describe this online fieldwork experience as a case study, focusing on the different discursive strategies used to take a position in the debate.

In addition to the episodes of police brutality, two major trends made the headlines about lockdown regulations, reinforcing the statements initially raised by the national government, as shown in the previous section. The first was the association between the liquor ban and the drop in homicides, assaults, and other violent crimes, including gender-based violence and femicide. The second was the effects of the ban on the decrease in alcohol-related hospital trauma admissions, associated with events like road accidents, falls and stabbings. Although drawing legitimacy from the broader beneficial impact of the ban on the country, the portrayal of "problematic drinking practices" and their negative consequences were concentrated in townships, depicting almost exclusively the lifestyle of the urban poor.

The goal of the first online meeting was to openly influence the South African government to toughen the regulations on alcohol sales, and the pandemic was seen as an opportunity to influence the public agenda in that matter. The hegemonic position within the group tended towards "prohibitionism", although there were a few dissident voices among the panelists who advocated for a more moderate and grounded approach to the regulation. Even when openly seeking to achieve political goals, these positions were presented as rational and imperative responses to the statistics. One of the panelists, a White man who identified himself as "the voice of the rural fringe", told terrifying first-hand stories of alcohol-related crimes and used statistics of HIV, mental disorders, and poor fetal development, among others, to strengthen his argument. "The less the people consume alcohol is better; we have to convince people that, in the long-run, they will be better without it; but the unions will resist, many of their members have substance abuse issues too", he concluded, anticipating some resistance to his perspective.

In the second meeting, organized by a multidisciplinary network of researchers, the overall perspective was to promote "evidence-based" policies as the only way to improve the impacts of COVID-19 regulations on crime statistics in South Africa. One of the panelists, a medical scientist from Cape Town, opened his presentation by saying: "my dream for South Africa is a 'new normal' led by evidence". In the same meeting, a local health agent working in the Cape Flats, a peripheral area in Cape Town, after presenting numbers on the reduction of trauma admissions in the local hospital, was also very graphic about the "savage attacks and killings" related to alcohol in the communities. "We know what happens from every day; it's a small proportion of big drinkers that are the 'troublemakers', that go from shebeen to shebeen all day", said the man, concluding right after, "those are the people involved in crime, the people that are going to the emergency room".

Occasionally, comments insinuated some "social orthopaedic" ambitions in the audience: "we have to teach them to socialize differently, in a different environment, like the coffeeshops", "people have to understand the statistical relationship between alcohol and crime", "we have to bring the community with us, to a new normal without alcohol". The participants often stated the importance of data as a prerequisite for good governance: "quality data, quality decision making in a click of a button", "we cannot do anything without the data", "we just see a part of the problem; we have to collect data to support a great change in society". However, a South African National Liquor Authority member challenged the expectation in one of the meetings. "We wish that policy was made based on evidence all the time; data is important, but it's not enough for us [the government]", she concluded.

37 Permission to attend the meetings was requested from the organizers by e-mail, when one of the authors was explicitly presented as someone "researching the enforcement of liquor regulation during the COVID-19 pandemic" in Brazil and South Africa. The identity as a "researcher" at one of the most reputed South African universities established a legitimate identity as a representative of the scientific community and as someone familiar with the country's reality.

The attendance at the meetings revealed yet another important continuity between the two webinars. The cultural forms used to frame the affected territories and populations depicted the life of popular classes, who provide the labor for affluent areas of South African cities, and a structure of subaltern integration that still resembles the old apartheid society. According to the participants, the "problem of alcohol in South Africa" was one of abusive consumption, deregulated markets, and high levels of illegality. Those issues, although framed as a "national problem", were said to affect mostly townships, illegal settlements, and other peripheral areas in the country. Another way to frame the situation was the descriptions of what was being called "problematic patterns of drinking" and their harmful effects on society. "We all know the 'patterns of drinking' that are considered problematic; the patterns of drinking are not the same in all areas and all classes; in township areas, alcohol is part of a culture, and the lack of entertainment; people in townships have very little to do", one participant stated.

Although they were constantly mentioned in the meetings, people from townships were poorly represented among the panelists on both occasions. In the meeting with the researchers, as mentioned above, one community health agent from the Cape Flats talked about the impacts of prohibition in a local hospital. In the meeting with social organizations, the host announced the attendance of one township youth group. In both cases, however, they emphasized the challenges to "involve" or "convince" the communities, the word used by the participants often as a synonym for "township". As one participant affirmed in the first meeting: "they [the communities] should all participate in this idea [of an alcohol-free South Africa], but that would make us lose support within the communities; the illegal shebeens and home brewing are part of the local economy and culture, especially in the Black townships".

Meanwhile, the circumvention of the ban in elite and White circles remained out of sight and was not raised in the debates. In other words, white-collar drinking has not been treated as an object of official concern nor as a police target. The circumstances called to mind a seminal manifesto in which Laura Nader noticed the "fact that crimes are differentially stigmatized and prosecuted according to class" (1969: 15). Nader argued that it was not only official agencies and government personnel who had neglected a thorough investigation of delinquency among the upper classes. According to her, social scientists too had long privileged the study of non-Western cultures and the popular strata in general, thus contributing to the knowledge gap on deception and crime among the powerful. Drinking patterns in elite circles have remained immune to public scrutiny, for power and wealth are, *inter alia*, the cornerstone of privacy (Barrows and Room, 1991: 7).[38]

Another common trend in the two meetings was a lack of critical thinking about the regulatory dimension of the suggested legislative changes. The severity of state violence during the enforcement of the alcohol ban in townships was, therefore, not seriously approached. One of the panelists, a member of the ANC, even advocated for more government support for the police. "The problem is that we need more enforcement; the enforcement of the state is very weak", said the politician, "the police don't have the legislative means to do their job, to make arrests; they don't know what to do", he concluded. There were brief mentions of police corruption in the comments. In one case, in the chat area during the second meeting, a police station within Johannesburg's inner city was mentioned for participating in the illegal trading of alcohol. There was also an explicit problematization of how prohibition criminalizes peripheral populations, by a panelist from the University of Cape Town in the first meeting. Beyond these mentions of the role of police agencies in implementing alcohol regulations, the potential criminalization of populations was not seriously discussed. As the pandemic has shown, this can be dangerous, especially for already stigmatized areas and populations.[39]

38 "The well-to-do had the luxury of privacy and elaborate etiquettes surrounding drinking and dining, and their consumption remained discreetly hidden from the public record. For better and for worse, labouring people lacked such luxuries".

39 Police excess towards White people in affluent areas portrayed in the media were rare and anecdotal, as when police agents chased an old woman who was walking her dog during level 5 of lockdown.

Although disastrous in human terms, the global COVID-19 crisis was, in many ways, an opportunity. In this case, an opportunity to project the "new normal" for a post-pandemic South Africa. The idea of "evidence-based approaches" was the unifying creed among participants in both webinar series. Discursively stripped of all subjectivity, the numbers seemed to help establish a position above all positions, safe from bias and the restraints of localisms. But what would a world "led by evidence" be like? Would it necessarily be more democratic or inclusive? Numbers make people recognizable and manageable by the state, but they are not necessarily more "objective". They are the most tangible outcome of a complex inscription process produced by the work of devices and the very mundane procedures of the ordinary life of organizations and their members (Latour, 1987). Although not formally excluded from the idea of "evidence", qualitative approaches to the issue during the meetings were limited and anecdotal. To be fair, we have to recognize the limitations imposed on systematic fieldwork activities during the pandemic in South Africa.

For the urban poor, usurped of the authorship of their own social existence, old colonial ideologies thematizing the "uncivilized masses", a core instrument of colonial domination in Africa (Fanon, 2008), were reframed in episodes of police brutality during the pandemic. Hence, what deserves attention is not infringement *per se*, but the insistence of South African authorities and experts to target stigmatized townships and populations. In contrast, the illegal trade and consumption of alcohol among the middle and upper classes remained under a comfortable veil of oblivion and public silence. As Nader (1969) warned, criminality does not fall under racial and economic boundaries. Fortunately, even the privilege of privacy has limits, and drinking leaves its clues, such as the accumulation of empty bottles waiting for garbage collection in the streets of affluent suburbs. Despite the prohibition of in-premise consumption of alcohol, the authors noticed beer drinking in restaurants and domestic gatherings, as well as other social occasions. Direct acquisition of wine in producing areas was also witnessed. All free of the inconvenience of police brutality. In an Italian restaurant in Johannesburg, waiters offered red and white "juice" to customers in a quasi-biblical transmutation.

As we have shown, the broader social consequences of the issues raised above were poorly addressed during the meetings. As widely noted by the panelists and participants, however, when you listen to "the community", responses can be much more ambiguous and challenging to the formal logic of statistics and policy. Those complexities were at times framed as a matter of ignorance (of statistical correlations, of healthy forms of amusement), at times as impediments (cultural, economic, or ideologic) to public policies, and at other times as limited perspectives impeding the implementation of "evidence-based approaches". In the next section, we offer an ethnographic account of some of the complexities regarding alcohol sales and consumption in South African townships. By doing so, we hope to highlight the importance of further qualitative analysis of the effects of prohibition during the pandemic and carefully consider the possible negative impacts of future regulatory measures on the everyday life of peripheral areas.

A portrait of alcohol consumption in South African popular milieux

The institutional framing of the liquor issue during the stricter phases of the COVID-19 lockdown in South Africa did not do justice to the variety of experiences associated with the use of alcoholic beverages in the country. In this section, we present ethnographic material gathered in 2016 in a squatter camp in a metropolitan area and a small town, to offer a grounded portrait of what authorities, experts and NGO members have proposed in the previous sections. It is important to emphasize here that we are neither advocating against "evidence" nor deflating the predicaments of excessive alcohol consumption, which we and our interlocutors

do recognize. Rather, we wish to address the role of liquor as an important aspect of popular leisure strategies and the reinforcement of social bonds. The multifarious functions, pleasures and plights of drinking have long gone in tandem.[40]

Bra D.,[41] as D. Khumalo was called in the squatter camp where he lived, passed away in his early sixties. He and his friends constituted a *drinking club*, a regular gathering of men around a local preference: industrialized beers. In his last years, bra D. had stopped smoking cigarettes and *zolo* (hemp) due to extensive lung damage. Yet he never quit the habit of drinking beers and frequenting the local taverns, where his well-known exaggerated anecdotes were met with pleasure and overtones of ridicule. When drunk, the often-cheerful D. could turn somewhat quarrelsome. Yet he was not the "fighting type". Rather than animosity, happiness figured prominently in his motto: "Me, if I'm drinking, I'm happy. I feel happy. [...] If I'm not drinking, I'm not happy. Just like that".

Bra D. openly depicted how alcohol consumption in a squatter camp – a predominantly disheartening landscape – alleviates discomfort and contributes to an atmosphere of fellowship and joy.[42] Yet this interlocutor made clear a troublesome phenomenon associated with beer drinking: the formation of *liquor-slaves*. In a recorded interview, he recollected events leading to his divorce: "When I was 37 or 36, I told my first wife: can you leave me? Because you're drinking too much... [...] The first times were all right. After two or three years, she started to drink... Too much. [...] After three years, she was a liquor slave".

Beer worms is another South African term characterizing the slave-like addiction to which bra D. alluded and which arguably applied to himself. Although "drinking too much" and "liquor-slaves" are terms often applied to describe others, some drinkers do apply both categories to themselves. According to a 30-year-old interlocutor in the squatter camp: "the beer is a problem. You can drink one and sleep. Me no, I can't sleep. If I get one, I want more and more and more. That's why when you have the money you can't sleep. We are slaves for drinking".

Another liquor category often mentioned in South African popular milieux is *babalas* – pronounced *papalasi*. Borrowed from Afrikaans[43] and meaning "hangover", *babalas* can be best understood among heavy drinkers as a compulsion or urge, the drive behind the continuous ingestion of alcoholic beverages. We may see it as an index that "alcohol-dependence syndrome is a psychobiological reality, not an arbitrary social label" (Room *et al.*, 1984: 175). Interlocutors in the squatter camp experienced *babalas* as an irresistible impulse towards drinking additional doses of alcohol. According to the above-quoted man,

> when you get drunk there's a problem. If I wake up in the morning, I need one or two beers, to keep babalas out. If you buy me a cold drink, my babalas is not fine. If I drink the beer, the babalas goes out. Yesterday [Sunday] and today [Monday] in the morning, I was busy drinking. In the morning I needed a beer. Then my body was fine, I've got the energy. It's the liquor.

The notions of *babalas* and *liquor-slaves* indicate that the "drinking culture" (La Hausse, 1984) in popular South African settings may well amount to a form of captivity and that drinkers are aware of the problem. Neither captivity nor compulsion, however, fully portray an intricate social fact related to alcohol consumption. Beer drinking in an area deprived of leisure options is almost the sole source of daily relief and contentment, according to M., another interlocutor, and a skilled worker in a factory.

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40 Krige (1932), Hellman (1934), La Hausse (1984, 1988, 1992), Crush and Ambler (1992), and Ambler (2003) present compelling historical and ethnographic records on the complexities of alcohol consumption in South Africa over 200 years.

41 *Bra* is a local contraction of "brother", used as a deference to older men, but not the eldest, who are designated as *babas*.

42 The beer-induced alleviation of an oppressive existence is recognized by La Hausse (1984: 93).

43 Afrikaans language, also called Cape Dutch, is one of the eleven official languages of South Africa, and was the former official language of the *apartheid* regime.

> Here there's no entertainment to entertain the minds. You can't go to the library bring the book to home, play the computer... There's nothing to entertain your mind. You sleep, you work, and then have a beer and stay together. We just can't go on and on. There's no complex, cinema, all things to entertain the minds. No ground to play football. There's nothing.

A frank ethnography of leisure in this popular milieux is the foundation for our affirmation that the moments when many South Africans find respite and contentment take place around liquor – especially beers. There is nothing new about this. Though in a colonial language, a pioneer of ethnographies in 1930 Johannesburg's popular settings reported that "beer-drinking, because of the social amenities attendant upon it, is as favoured a recreation of the urban Native as of the tribal Native" (Hellmann, 1934: 39). To restate this in twenty-first century South Africa is neither to essentialize the "African population"[44] nor to restrict leisure to drinking. As a couple composed of a teetotaler woman and a very moderate beer drinker residing in the squatter camp once said, "to enjoy life is not to drink. People going to churches are enjoying their lives". Moreover, church attendance, beer-drinking and the consumption of other inebriating substances are not necessarily incompatible forms of enjoyment, as portrayed by another interlocutor.

A. is a 55-year-old "church-goer", domestic worker, and the main caretaker of two grandchildren. A respectable grandmother, during the week A. liked to sit after work to smoke *zolo* and chat with her dearest neighbors. On weekends, A.'s daily pleasure with hemp used to be combined with beer drinking. Her house was the gathering point of neighbours and, from Friday to Sunday, women and men, younger and older, would come in a continuous flow throughout the day. By weekend nights, the sound of nearby taverns enlivened her yard, where beers, *zolo* and cigarettes were shared hand to hand, mouth to mouth. She used to drink moderately in permanent charge of her grandchildren and was involved in occasional weekend church activities, but sometimes A. and her closest friends shared the pleasures of inebriation. A similar joyful dynamic took place at A.'s mother's house in a small town, where even the 75-year-old matriarch used to join in family beer-drinking, moderately, and away from the public scene.

In addition to alcohol consumption in domestic, and family settings, fieldwork experience also allowed us to observe the dynamics of *shebeen* attendance. During the week, *shebeens* were frequented mainly by men, most of them workers stopping to drink and chat. Such places were also the gathering point of youth, some smoking *zolo*, some drinking, and some just chatting or watching TV. During the weekends, different dynamics were set in motion, with a continuous flow of people coming to sit, drink, smoke, talk, and debate.[45] Roughly, male attendance prevailed, especially among the older patrons. Yet the profile of customers had no clear-cut gender or age-strata patterns. To the contrary, some *shebeens* became discos at night, where both young men and women came to drink, gamble, and dance until dawn.

La Hausse (1988; 1992) and Hellmann (1934) have already alluded to this phenomenon in the past: "beer was brewed, food was prepared and at six p.m. on Saturday the dance commenced to continue for a full twelve hours" (Hellmann, 1934: 52). The current Minister of Transport also mentioned this practice: "people are out of control in terms of alcohol. [...]. It's a mess. This over-access of alcohol, we drink from six to six — it's over — it must come to an end".[46] Interlocutors in the squatter-camp were well aware of the dangers associated with night-long drinking in *shebeens* or taverns. According to one of them: "six-to-six is not right. For example, you drink every day with G. If you meet him in the morning, you'll force him to share the beer with you. If he doesn't want, you fight". Accordingly, this interlocutor said he only engaged in six-to-six drinking at home.

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44 By presenting this excerpt from Hellmann (1934), we are not condoning expressions such as "the Native", whose racist assumptions are not only false but also immoral. We believe, however, that the excerpt can be taken as an ethnographic and historical index of the centrality of beer drinking to popular leisure strategies.

45 A local category designating conversations with clear signs of dissent among its participants.

46 https://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/gauteng/curtail-the-sale-of-booze-says-mbalula-after-alleged-drunk-driver-crash-tragedy-98f88624-5b-23-4153-affa-5e4830e4229a.

Among younger interlocutors, a taste for night-long drinking at taverns seemed to prevail. V., a 20-year-old mother of two, said: "I can go Friday, Saturday, Sunday without sleeping. I enjoy drinking at the tavern". Yet she also recognized the fights in these places as a problem: "they are shooting each other, they are beating each other with bottles, but it doesn't happen every day". Another interlocutor, a 35-year-old woman who also attended *shebeens*, called attention to dangers other than brawls: "they may drug you; they say they buy a lot of beers [for you] and you must have sex with them". Wojcicki (2002) has also recorded this phenomenon. Pitpitan *et al*. (2013) and Bonner *et al*. (2019) have essential data on the correlation between drinking in taverns or *shebeens*, gender-based violence and exposure to HIV.

As we mentioned, our purpose is not to deny the nefarious effects of alcohol, particularly of alcohol intoxication or binge drinking (WHO, 2018). Statistics on trauma admissions in hospitals, crime rates and gender-based violence tell only part of the story, and "drinking culture" (La Hausse, 1984) remains paradoxical. Even the superlative case of *six-to-six* (night-long drinking) involves not only a fall into a world of slave-like compulsion and gender brutality but also an ascension into a highly sociable and affective atmosphere. An interlocutor called attention to the effects of night-long drinking on the reproduction of cooperative, team-like social bonds:

> In township, there's something connecting people. You can make islala [six-to-six] together. We are just a team like this.

Alcohol-lubricated sociability does create an atmosphere of togetherness, and night-long drinking also gives rise to an effervescence that shall not be taken as mere evanescent excitement, because the reproduction of "long-lasting social relations" are at stake (Karp, 1987). Like the beer parties analyzed by Karp among the Kenyan Iteso, night-long drinking in South Africa also brings about a "heightened form of social experience" (1987: 93).[47] Rather than a direct comparison between two different African contexts, what is at stake is alcohol's "tension-reducing properties" and "unifying effects in rituals of solidarity" (Douglas, 2002). A South African interlocutor once referred to such heights of social existence in transcendental terms. It was a particularly vivid Friday night and, in A.'s living room, she and her former companion, with some kin and neighbors, were all drinking, dancing, clapping, and singing together. In the improvised choir, the refrain declared: "no problem, God is here". At some point during the celebration, the host's best friend enthusiastically said: "you see God, he's happy like us". The association between alcohol intoxication and transcendent-like experiences arises in alcohol studies and, as such, cannot be considered as a South African particularity (Blocker *et al*., 2003; Singaïny, 2015).

That rapture may coexist with the brutality of township brawls and gender-based violence indicates that paradox is an outstanding feature of the "drinking culture" (La Hausse, 1984). Whether one appreciates it or not, to turn a blind eye to such complexities is not only a theoretical and ethnographic mistake but creates the mirage that simplistic, unilateral solutions could tackle an intricate issue. As we said before, it is not a matter of choosing between pleasure or pain but rather trying to grasp the somewhat erratic, certainly ambivalent constitution of socialized alcohol consumption. Reducing such a multivalent social fact to a statistical, disembedded matter only thickens the veil covering the social meanings of drinking practices in South Africa. This may well serve the biopolitical administration of citizens, but not a deeper understanding and a frank debate on the matter.

47 Mager (2010: 5) also utilizes Karp's observations on the communal dimension of beer drinking to understand the South African drinking culture.

Conclusion

In 1934, only seven years after the passing of the Liquor Act, which had prohibited Blacks both from making traditional grain-beer and from drinking "European liquor", ethnography led Hellmann to notice: "despite the heavy penalties which are incurred by an infringement of the law, beer-brewing flourished in Johannesburg" (1934: 39). Twenty-six years after her pioneer observations, the South African Institute of Race Relations stated: "it is abundantly clear that, particularly in urban areas, the liquor restrictions have proved ineffective" (Horrell, 1960: 14). As La Hausse (1984) once stated, despite decades of official repression, the "drinking culture" in South Africa proved "resilient". As it has proved itself to be once again. Not even the stringent measures set in motion to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic brought the alcohol trade to a halt. Between March and August 2020, many Blacks, Coloureds and Whites continued to purchase and drink liquor illegally. Yet not all such practices were treated as crimes and public problems deserving expert data, official responses, and police actions, thus narrowing down a vast and colorful universe of law-infringement to historically stigmatized areas, townships and urban peripheries inhabited by poor non-White South Africans.

Inspired by the analysis of Partha Chatterjee (2004), we can say that the townships in South Africa – as opposed to affluent, and predominantly White suburbs – have been represented as mere "target populations", discernible in this case by their distinctive marks and performances regarding alcohol consumption, and not fully entitled as citizens. By adopting the language of "government", evidence-based advocacy should not neglect important aspects of the life of the "governed" (Chatterjee, 2004). As anthropologists, our contribution is to support policymakers with qualitative insights on the matter and reveal a complexity to which many have turned a blind eye.

There is another issue that must be challenged. As a panelist mentioned in one of the online meetings, "evidence" is not the main force driving governmental action. In a way, the work of "evidence" becomes political, helping to unveil forms of structural violence. Policies on drinking during the South African lockdown reinforced a longstanding institutional bias that associates so-called "problematic drinking patterns" with the country's popular strata, as though illegal alcohol consumption and abuse fell within racial and class lines. That it does not fall within these lines is an ethnographic finding we presented in this article to offset our anthropological bent to investigate the destitute (Nader, 1969). Moreover, not even when popular patterns of alcohol abuse in South Africa were under discussion, was the immediately affected population properly consulted. The ethnography of webinars that discussed alcohol regulation showed a poor representation of township dwellers, despite their centrality in the characterization of "problematic drinking patterns". The evidence-based approach of the webinars left mostly untouched the intricate field of social experiences and subjectivities, without which neither alcohol consumption nor the violence related to it can be dealt with adequately.

Against this background, we portrayed different circumstances and meanings attributed to drinking practices in popular settings and recognized that they remain involved in contradiction, a crucial category in liquor studies in South Africa (La Hausse 1988; Crush and Ambler, 1992). We presented local notions such as *liquor-slaves* and *babalas* as an indication that commoners are well aware of the plights of alcohol abuse and thus cannot be treated as infant-like, immature subjects (Mager, 1999: 370) who must be enlightened by the word of experts and authorities, a leitmotiv in the history of liquor restriction in South Africa. Our point is that despite awareness of the predicaments derived from alcohol abuse, social alcohol consumption remains a central feature of modes of living, a pleasure that defies official prohibitions and soldiers' boots on the ground. History, we insist, has shown this challenge to be a social phenomenon among the well-to-do and the poor. As stated by Hands (2018), "it does not matter how often or to what extent alcohol consumption has been problematized or prohibited – people still continue to drink" (Hands, 2018: 2).

Why do people continue to drink? Rather than answering the question, our effort has been to recognize and follow a controversy, which in South Africa has historically taken the form of "complicated struggles [...] over the very meaning of alcohol itself" (Crush and Ambler, 1992: 1). Regarding the conceptualization of alcohol as a "public problem", we showed how controversies revolve around various actors, who are differentially positioned and vested with asymmetrical powers and capacities to define and raise social facts as themes of collective concern. In a somewhat contra-hegemonical bid, we strived to offset one-sided meanings attached by authorities and experts to alcohol consumption. Such discussion, we hope, is not a case for political inaction; to the contrary, it is a reason for optimism, for awareness is a precondition for hope (Biko, 2004: 114).

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