

## Don't blame the booze, for the disease is inside us

**Violence on the streets has nothing to do with the regulation of alcohol. If you don't believe me, ask the Germans.**

There's a popular theory getting around lately. It goes something like this: Our fragile society is awash with grog. A culture of binge drinking has turned our young men into vicious brutes who attack at random and respect no authority but that of the one-punch fist. The streets of our major cities have succumbed to violent, drunken anarchy. If we don't clamp down hard on this devil drink, all hope for our nation's future is lost.

It's easy to get swept away with the tide of moral panic. But before we do, let's take a moment to consider some important distinctions. First of all, Australia does not have a problem with alcohol. Australia has a problem with violence. Violence is not caused by trading hours or licensing rules. Nor is it caused by advertising or labelling or sponsorships. Violence is caused by violent people, in the same way that rape is caused by rapists and murder is caused by murderers.

Second, there is scant evidence to support the idea that drinking heavily will turn an otherwise peaceful person into a violent one. If you don't believe this, I'd recommend a trip to Germany. Living in Berlin for the past four years has given me a very ... ahem, sobering view of the true relationship between alcohol and public violence – ie, there isn't one. The prohibitionists and public health fanatics who dominate our debate on this issue would do well to take notes on the German experience.

Germany is well known for its liberal approach to the bottle. In Berlin you can buy and drink alcohol anywhere, at any time of the day or night. Were you so inclined, you could walk into a convenience store at 4 am on a Tuesday and buy ten bottles of vodka. You could then take those ten bottles onto the street, or into any public park, and proceed to drink yourself silly – without breaking a single law.

This is a land utterly bereft of lock-ins, lock-outs and last drinks. There are no legal limits on the trading hours for licensed venues. Pubs and bars stay open until the manager decides to close up, usually around 5 or 6 am when the last punters stumble home to bed. And the big nightclubs don't close at all – they operate 24 hours a day from Friday evening until Monday morning.

Drinking in Germany is also incredibly cheap. A case of beer retails for around 12 EUR (17.50 AUD). Which might help to explain why the Germans are some of the most enthusiastic boozers on Earth. Among the OECD nations, Germany ranks fourth in the per-capita consumption of alcohol. Australia, it might be noted, languishes in 15th place, behind the likes of Slovenia and Portugal. We can't even hold our own against our weakest European rivals. So much for the alcohol crisis.

Now this is the interesting part. If you believe much of what's been published in the Australian media lately, there is a direct link between the availability of alcohol and the prevalence of social mayhem. By this logic, a country such as Germany – with its ravenous appetite and unlimited supply – must be some kind of barbaric hell-world where every night at the pub ends in a brutal orgy of violence.

Alas, the reality here is a little different. Compared to King's Cross or the Melbourne CBD, Berlin's myriad nightlife districts are peaceful – almost serene. You can party all night long without witnessing so much as a heated argument. I go out for a beverage most weekends, and in four years I have not encountered a single instance of unprovoked aggression.

The police statistics tend to support my own observations. In the 2013/14 financial year, the state of Victoria recorded 163.6 public assaults per 100,000 population. In Berlin, which is both a city and a federal state, that figure was 102.7. And down in Bavaria, where burly men drink beer by the litre, it was just 55.5.

In other words, public violence in Berlin is 37% lower than in Victoria, while in Bavaria it's 66% lower. These aren't perfect scores for the Germans, but they're a whole lot better than ours. And the numbers are all the more striking when you consider that Germany imposes virtually no restrictions on the sale and consumption of everyone's favourite drug.

The reasons for this disparity in public violence are unclear. It may have something to do with the hard lessons of history. Perhaps being on the wrong side of both world wars has given the Germans a special incentive to think twice about the long-term dangers of aggression. Or maybe it's the sports we play. Many Australian men grow up with rugby and Aussie rules, both of which are inherently more violent than Germany's favourite ball game.

But that's pure speculation. Whatever the underlying factors, Germany's experience tells us something very important about our own: A culture of heavy drinking is not the same thing as a culture of public violence. They are two separate phenomena, and one does not necessarily lead to the other.

Few would deny that public violence is a real problem in Australia, although it is much less of a problem than violence against women and children. But to blame any kind of assault squarely on alcohol is to absolve the perpetrator of moral responsibility, while making scapegoats of the thousands of small business owners and their employees who earn an honest living in the hospitality trade.

The practice of punching a stranger in the head for no good reason has less to do with alcohol than with some of the darker and more primitive aspects of our national character. The disease is deep inside us. And if we hope to some day bring it under control, we might start by exploring the genuine root of the problem, rather than embracing yet another round of oppressive regulations that punish the majority for the actions of a small minority.