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Trans-mountain Moonshine: Liquor, Identity, and Resistance in the Appalachian and Carpathian Mountains

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This paper discusses the role of the local production of liquor – or hooch *– as a means of cultural reproduction and participation in the informal economy within rural areas, and what this has implied for both state control and local resistance. I examine these issues comparatively, looking at the informal production of moonshine in Appalachia, and* ţuica *in Carpathian Romania. A global comparative lens helps to illuminate the changing nature of state-society relations in the context of rural peripheries and the increasing globalization of local culture and lifeways.*

Keywords: *alcohol, informal economy, rural communities, cultural reproduction, state control*

1. Introduction: the historical roots of local alcohol production

Rural economies have long been and still are dependent on what scholars call "pluriactivity"— the diversity of activities that sustain the rural household economy (Brown and Kulcsár 2001; Kageyama 1999; Lira, Robson and Klooster 2022; Muică, Nancu, and Turnock 2000). This diversity of activities includes the products of cottage industry, often value-added agricultural products. Among these, perhaps the most universally produced (and perhaps also the most valuable) is liquor (see, e.g. Babor et al. 2023; Schrad 2021; Stoll 2017). For many reasons, alcohol—and distilled spirits in particular—play a crucial role in rural communities, as they have for thousands of years (Baschali et al. 2017; Egea et al. 2015).

Scholars have determined that the technology of distillation was discovered nearly simultaneously in the Mediterranean, middle east and modern-day China

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sometime around the turn of the Common Era, but it was perhaps more than 1,000 years later before humans started drinking distilled spirits recreationally (Hockings and Dunbar 2020; Park 2021). Fermented foods and beverages, which provide a crucial source of nutrition in many global diets, have been around much longer. But while fermentation is a naturally occurring process that humans have learned to control for their own purposes, distillation requires particular technologies that had to be developed over time. As science advanced and distillation practices were refined, the production and consumption of spirits exploded around the world. By the 15th century, not only was distilling being practiced nearly everywhere in the world, but significant international trade routes had sprung up to transport booze throughout Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America (Park 2021; Pierce and Toxqui 2014; Williams 2005; Schivelbusch 1992).

While the internationalization of liquor, therefore, goes back hundreds of years it also remains an intensely local practice (Peine and Schafft 2012). Despite the importance of cross-cultural influence in distilling technology, liquor itself is deeply tied to place, to land, to climate and to culture (Stoll 2017; Venkatesh 2019; Daiches 1969). On the small island of Scotland even a novice drinker can taste a difference in whiskeys produced only a few miles apart, and Serbians will argue bitterly over which kind of fruit makes the best *rakia*. In Romania there are a mind-bogglingly vast number of plum varieties (many commonly referred by several different names) used to make Romanian *ţuica* (or *palinca*, or *horinca*), each with its own particular qualities and characteristics. In this way, liquor is simultaneously strikingly universal and deeply local. Nearly every rural community in the world makes its own hooch[2], and the social, political, and economic conditions under which that alcohol is consumed are themselves produced by world-historical processes of imperialism, development, globalization and resistance (Mintz 1986; Venkatesh 2019).

This paper carves off a small corner of this much larger issue to raise the comparative question of what liquor means to the rural communities within the Appalachian region of the United States, and the Carpathian Region of Romania, and how the state has used control of liquor as a way to control rural people and attempt to transform rural places into sites of extraction. I discuss control of alcohol as a tool of state-making, as a strategy to consolidate power and undermine the rural self-reliance that threatened the legitimacy of imperial regimes.

[2] I use "hooch" here specifically to denote the local and informal productions of alcohol, often engaged as a mean of informal economic livelihood, and/or cultural reproduction.

In nearly every country worldwide, alcohol provides a compelling lens to examine the contestation of power, especially in the moment of nascent statehood, when local autonomy and centralized authority come most obviously into conflict (Meloni and Swinnen 2022; Stoll 2017). In every historical example, state control of alcohol is multi-faceted, combining political, economic, and socio-cultural strategies to limit or eliminate the autonomy of rural communities to make, and drink, their own booze under their own social and moral conventions (Babor et al. 2023). Sometimes this required restricting or criminalizing the alcohol culture that pre-dated imperial invasion (Valenzuela-Zapata and Nabhan 2003), while in other cases it meant restricting access to spirits introduced by the colonists themselves (Akyeampong 1996). In other places, it meant seizing control of the means of production (Dorondel 2016). Either way, attempts to repress, control, reconfigure, or eradicate local alcohol culture or practices were nearly universally met with resistance (Schrad 2017; Stoll 2017).

Liquor rebellions can be found across the world as a form of protest against state and/or imperial power. In some cases, it was an agrarian protest, as in the case of the whiskey rebellion in the US. In some cases, it was a form of working-class protest, as with the *akpeteshi* protests in Ghana under British rule (Akyeampong 2016). Sometimes, wealthy planters resisted the attempts of the state to make revenue off of their backs, as in the case of the cachaca revolt in Brazil (Pierce and Toxqui 2014). In still other cases, like the American Revolution, it was a matter of geopolitical conflict, or in the case of Mexico, an assertion of national identity. Each case has some element of all of these factors, and what connects them is the unique political economy of alcohol, and distilled spirits in particular (Schrad 2021).

2. Why booze?

In his political economic history of Appalachia, Steven Stoll (2017) argues that of all agrarian products the state could have taxed, whiskey was unique. First of all, intoxication as a human pursuit is politically and socially fraught. Many, if not all, cultures have norms that dictate what acceptable drinking behavior is and for whom. Attempts to re-write the social order often involve re-writing the rules of drinking. In terms of economic significance, unlike other products of the household economy, even other fermented beverages like beer or wine, liquor is uniquely both high-value and shelf-stable which allowed it to circulate in much wider

relations of trade (c.f. Muică and Turnock 1996). Spirits also serve as a medium of exchange in local economies and beyond. Made in most places from low-value agricultural surpluses or byproducts or from wild-foraged plants, alcohol is easily produced at the household level, with simple technology. It is also an important repository of cultural tradition and national identity, and therefore, control over the production and consumption of alcohol is a proxy for control over people.

Whether it was whiskey in Appalachia (and Scotland and Ireland), *ţuica*, *palinca*, or *horinca* in Romania, *mahua* in central India, *akpeteshi* in Ghana, *ogogoro* in Nigeria, vodka in Russia and Poland, *agraudiente* in Guatemala, *mezcal* in Mexico, or countless other examples, liquor became a lightning rod for state control. While this played out differently in Appalachia and in Carpathia, in different historical moments, under different political regimes, and in different cultural contexts, there are also many parallels that serve as illustrations of the universal in the particular – and how liquor quite literally shapes the social and political ecologies of rural life.

2.1. Liquor in cultural reproduction and in the informal economy

Liquor's economic role in rural communities is complex. In both Appalachia and Carpathia, it has served as a source of income but also as a medium of exchange. This was certainly the case in 19th century Appalachia in which there were established whiskey trade routes. Moonshine then functioned both as a commodity in its own right, and as a stand-in for cash in what Stoll describes as a "relatively cashless economy" (2017). It was liquor, in other words, that provided a medium of exchange and facilitated a robust consumer market within mountain society.

In the pre-communist Romanian countryside, Muică and Turnock describe how, *ţuica* was traded in cash and in kind, and even functioned as a form of credit (1996). In one article, Muică relates that his own father's distillery paid for his education (Muică and Turnock 2008). In one of my interviews in Eastern Tennessee, a local resident said that a prominent mechanic in town made most of his income modifying cars to carry heavy loads of liquor across state lines, and that money sent his son to medical school (Peine 2002). But moonshine is not just an economic asset. It has complex social and cultural functions as well.

According to Muică and Turnock, *ţuica* shaped social structures, and divided the peasantry into rich and poor—the former being those who owned their own distilling equipment, the latter being those who rented the facilities of the former

to make their own liquor (1996). During collectivization, possession of a still was used by the authorities to identify the “rich peasants” during the class war of the 1950s. Appalachia may not have had these same kinds of social hierarchies, but those who made the best moonshine were well known for their craft and enjoyed a certain social status that remains attached to the same surnames (many of whom continue to make moonshine today). Moonshining in Appalachia operated with a gendered division of labor—largely male moonshiners and female bootleggers—and, as in Romania, some even ran informal drinking houses out of their homes. In both places, as Kideckel says, making, distributing, and drinking home-produced liquor was a centerpiece of creating social solidarity and community insider status (1984).

3. State control

In both Appalachia and Romania’s Carpathian Basin, liquor distillers operated freely until they didn’t. In Appalachia, the first crackdowns came following the Revolutionary War when returning soldiers like George Washington tried to lay claim to the frontier lands they had been granted in return for their military service, only to find that the land was already occupied. Later attempts by Alexander Hamilton to raise revenue for the state by taxing whiskey being made on the frontier led to well-known Whiskey Rebellion (Mitenbuler 2015). In Romania, home distilling was heavily restricted during collectivization, with production being centralized and small-scale distilling banned except on the most remote farms (where license fees were prohibitively high) (Muică and Turnock 2008). In both instances, rural folks made liquor anyway, tucked away in hard-to-reach places, under the cover of night, and usually with the knowledge of local law enforcement. Muică and Turnock, for example, tell a story of a “man from Cristeşti who informed on his neighbour who was distilling at home, but the policeman insisted he was busy and could not carry out an immediate inspection; thus allowing time for the distiller to be alerted and the equipment concealed before a check was made after some delay” (1996, 204). In my own fieldwork in Appalachian Tennessee, when I interviewed former county sheriff alongside a notorious local moonshiner, Popcorn Sutton, they told me about a time that Popcorn’s sister-in-law informed on him in retaliation for a familial dispute. The sheriff and deputies went to Popcorn’s home, and they pulled a bunch of old defunct distilling equipment out of the barn, busted it up with an axe, and sent pictures to the informant (Peine 2002).

In both places, despite these attempts at repression, control, and criminalization, distilling continued, and began to take on new significances. One article states that one of the first things many peasants did after the Romanian revolution was to go and reclaim the distilling equipment that had been confiscated during collectivization (Muică and Turnock 2008). Today, as we all know, distilling is alive and well in Romania, as it is in Appalachia, albeit with some different characteristics. When asking modern-day Appalachian moonshiners why they still make liquor when bonded liquor is widely available, they inevitably invoke heritage, culture, and tradition. It is common to hear explanations like one I heard during my fieldwork in east Tennessee: "because my daddy, made it, and his daddy made it, and I'm here to keep the tradition alive. Because that's what my family has always done. We have to pass the skills on to the next generation". And there are always ready and willing consumers – perhaps more now than ever.

3. Commercialization and the marketing of authenticity: implications for rural futures

Over the last couple of decades, rural development orthodoxy has turned away from the kinds of massive industrial and infrastructure projects that dominated the post-war modernization era (McMichael 2022). Today, regional and/or small-scale, community-based strategies are gaining greater policy traction (Shucksmith 2010), and often that includes developing markets (often international ones) for the products of cottage industry. This coincides with the first-world cocktail revolution and the search for culinary authenticity that has put spirits like *mezcal* from Oaxaca, *feni* from Goa, and *shochu* from Japan onto American cocktail menus. Across the liquor landscape, efforts are being made to market artisanally-produced spirits to a global audience. What, then, will that mean for the rural communities that produce them? How will the inevitable trade-offs play out?

In Oaxaca, research shows that the expansion of a global market for *mezcal* has brought development opportunities to rural communities, but it has also put pressure on land, resources, and the traditional governance systems that regulate use of the commons (Lira et al. 2022a; Lira et al. 2022b). The formalization of production that global marketing requires also means establishing production standards, which can cover everything from the specific raw materials to be used (including how and where they are sourced), highly regimented production practices, location of production, safety and hygiene standards, among other

things. These standards then become of the literal definition of the "authentic" product. The question of who creates these standards and how they are codified becomes a matter of what Zinsli calls "epistemic authority"—the power to assert the legitimacy of knowledge and its relevance to policymaking (2022). In places where these markets are currently being created or are yet to emerge, who will have the epistemic authority to determine these standards, and what will that mean for the local traditions that they are supposed to protect? Whose version of *țuica* will become the gold standard for the international market?

In the case of Appalachian moonshine, countless licensed distilleries sell products that bear the name, but they have little if anything to do with their illicit namesake. In fact, many will argue that "commercial moonshine" is an oxymoron, as moonshine by definition is distilled illegally. Formalizing US moonshining was not a rural development strategy. Rather, it was a marketing strategy for established distilleries to capitalize on American's thirst for nostalgia. Absent any protection of the meaning of the term, well-known distilleries like Buffalo Trace slap the label on an unaged version of their signature bourbon. Meanwhile, folks in rural Appalachia continue to make, trade, and drink their own liquor that might be made from fruit, grain, or cane sugar, and call it moonshine, too.

Despite the stark differences in the socioeconomic dynamics of market (in)formality, what connects rural distillers across these mountain ranges is the crucial role of liquor in the economic and cultural life of rural places, and its meaning as a symbol of tradition, identity, and place. As urbanization continues apace throughout Eastern Europe and the United States, the importance of homemade liquor as a connection to the land may continue to become more symbolic, and less material. In which case, the survival of the village *țuicaria*, or the mountain still, becomes ever-more important.

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