Exploring Craft Beer

It is safe to say that, as an industry, craft beer affects thousands of people directly and millions of people indirectly. As a culture, craft beer serves as a stage for the negotiation of different dimensions of cultural identity.

Today, I will describe North American craft beer culture and discuss some aspects of cultural identity as they are negotiated by members of that culture. This presentation is the result of my preliminary exploration of craft beer culture as a craft beer enthusiast and homebrewer for the past several years. As such, this presentation is based less on hard data than on direct personal observation of craft beer culture and on informal interaction with members of the culture. Yet even this preliminary exploration has given a great deal of insight into craft beer culture.

Because of its preliminary nature, my presentation will greatly benefit from your suggestions for further research. Comments and suggestions may be sent to my main email address, enkerli@gmail.com.

Entering Craft Beer Culture

My involvement in craft beer culture has been as a craft beer lover since the 1990s and as a homebrewer since 2001. During that period, I have been in direct contact with craft beer culture in different parts of Switzerland, Canada, Mali, and the United States. Furthermore, as an active member of beer-related online communities, I have been able to discuss several aspects of craft beer culture with insiders from different parts of the world.

As an ethnographer, I tend to adopt an observational approach to many social interactions. More specifically, my approach is often one of participant-observation, negotiating my status as both an insider and outsider in specific social contexts. My involvement in craft beer culture has provided me with an opportunity to apply this observational approach to the world of craft beer.

It should be noted however that this approach, though informed and influenced
by ethnographic practice, does not represent ethnographic fieldwork. My obser-
vations and this presentation are the result of informal activities which only serve
as a preliminary step on the way to academic research.

Definitions
Some key terms need to be defined in the context of this presentation.
“Beer” may refer to any fermented drink made with grain. In most cases, though,
beer refers to fermented beverages made with malted barley, hops, water, and
cultured strains of saccharomyces cerevisiae (so-called “ale yeast” or “top-
fermenting yeast”) and/or saccharomyces uvarum (so-called “lager yeast” or “bot-
tom-fermenting yeast”).

In Canada and the United States, “craft beer” usually refers to barley malt beer
brewed locally by a small commercial brewery, typically a microbrewery or brew-
pub. In the context of this presentation, “craft beer” also includes homebrewed
beer as well as some of the beer imported from foreign, typically European,
breweries.

The definition of craft beer in fact varies in context and depends in large part on
what may be called “macrobreweries” or “macros.” Macros are the large industrial
breweries which produce massive quantities of beer. Craft beer culture defines
itself by opposition to “macro” beer. In craft beer culture, macrobreweries are the
common enemy and macro beers are generally perceived negatively as insipid
“macroswill.” In the United States, the name Budmilloors is used a collective
name to describe macro beers (from the brand names of the three most popular
beers in the United States). Similarly, in Canada, macros are sometimes called
with the collective name “MolBatt” from Molson and Labatt (brand names for the
two most popular beers in Canada).

Perhaps surprisingly, beer brewed by the major breweries on the global scene
which have a more limited presence in the United States and Canada (for in-
stance, Diageo’s Guinness brands and InBev’s Leffe brands) are sometimes per-
ceived similarly to craft beer despite the size of their breweries.

“Craft beer culture,” the theme of this presentation, implies the negotiation of dif-
ferent aspects of cultural identity, from gender to political affiliation, in relation to
craft beer.

“Craft beer people” are the subject of this presentation. They form a loose social
group whose members are involved, directly or indirectly, in the consumption
and/or production of craft beer. These include professional and amateur brewers
of craft beer as well as people who enjoy craft beer.

Overall, craft beer people may be seen as sharing the value that beer should be
a culinary item, enjoyed more for its aromas and flavors than for its inebriating
potential.

In Canada and the United States, craft beer people are represented by trade or-
ganizations, regional and national publications, and many online and local
groups.
Use of Stereotype

Concerned primarily with cultural identity, this presentation centers on a stereotype. While stereotypes may be harmful, they often help in the analysis of a social group. Elements of this stereotype may help us identify important elements of the cultural identity of craft beer people. It must be noted that this specific stereotype is a compound description of homebrewers and other craft beer people based on interactions with members of the culture. Some specific elements of this stereotype have been made explicit by either by members of the culture or by outsiders while this overall description is an analytical construct.

Because of my involvement in the homebrewing community, this specific stereotype relates most directly to homebrewers. Given the fact that many if not most professional craft brewers have been homebrewers themselves and the strong connections between homebrewers and craft beer lovers, homebrewers seem rather representative of craft beer culture as a whole.

The Stereotype

*College-educated, middle-class, middle-aged, suburban, European-American, married men with a bald spot and a beer belly.*

While this stereotype may sound like a caricature of craft beer culture, it does not represent a social stigma. People described by this stereotype are fairly non-distinctive. In a way, they could almost be anyone’s uncle. As a group, they represent a very significant demographic and one which carries significant social power. In fact, the people thus typified are one of the main targets of advertising agencies.

These dimensions might not need explanation. However stereotypical it might, this portrait of the craft beer person seems to make sense. Yet all of those dimensions contribute to the identity negotiation processes undergone by craft beer people.

Stereotypical Dimensions

*Occupational Identity*

In my experience, most homebrewers and craft beer lovers have undergone at least some college or university training. College and university students, including several graduate students, afford significant representation within the group. Post-secondary education makes sense in the context of craft beer production as brewing requires a fairly broad expertise on technical, scientific, and artistic issues. Craft beer consumption is easily associated with a degree of perceived sophistication often given to college- and university-educated individuals. In addition, a “thirst for knowledge” is likely to characterize craft beer lovers in their
quest for quality beer. Through their appreciation of quality beer, craft beer lovers put forth the sophistication of their palate and knowledge of beer. A craft beer lover knows his beers and is unlikely to resist the temptation of flaunting this knowledge in public.

**Social Network**

Connected to their educational status, the socio-economic status of craft beer people as members of the so-called “middle-class” has several important implications in terms of cultural identity. Middle-class status often implies social mobility. Craft beer’s emphasis on quality and sophistication may help maintain this social mobility as acquisition of a sophisticated taste may favor the achievement of a higher social status. A beer connoisseur might impress members of his professional and social milieu much the same way as a sophisticated wine drinker or cigar aficionado. However, given the image of beer as a more popular item, the prestige effect of beer connoisseurship is mediated by the notion that a beer lover, even a sophisticated one, is still a “regular guy.”

Related to social mobility is the fact that a craft beer person’s social network is likely to be rather sparse and often characterized by simplex relations. Craft beer people may know many people but these people may not know each other and the bonds between members of the network are likely to be limited to a single sphere of activities. Such a network contrasts with so-called “working-class” networks characterized by dense networks with multiplex relations. Some craft beer people in fact lack the type of support system typical of dense network and come to rely on acquaintances made through the craft beer connection to satisfy some of their social needs.

In such a context, the bonds between craft beer people are likely to be rather fluid. A passion for craft beer connects individuals across different social boundaries and may lead to friendship as well as professional relationships. Yet such relationships are relatively precarious, if not fickle, and social mobility is preserved.

Clearly, a passion for craft beer benefits from disposable income. While not atypically wealthy, many craft brewers will devote rather important sums of money to beer-related expenses. These expenses might include expensive beers as well as “breweriana.” Similarly, homebrewers often make equipment purchases which take up a significant proportion of their budgets. In several cases, the apparent futility of such purchases prompts negative reactions on the part of the craft beer person’s spouse. Yet craft beer people often gain social capital through such purchases.

Craft beer people often undertake beer-related trips to different parts of North America and Europe. Those trips often increase the sophistication of the craft beer person and may further enhance his social capital.
Generational Identity

Craft beer people vary in age. Some people become craft beer enthusiasts as soon as they reach the legal drinking age of their region and some craft beer people remain passionate about craft beer after retirement. Yet the stereotypical image of the middle-aged craft beer person might relate to yet other dimension of cultural identity. While it is undergoing important changes in this respect, craft beer is usually not seen as a typically “cool” drink by younger people in most parts of the United States and Canada. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the drinking patterns of different generations might cut across distinctions between craft and macro beer yet the craft beer market tends to target middle-aged rather than younger drinkers.

While homebrewing may be taken up at any stage in life, it represents an interesting activity for middle-aged men undergoing a mid-life crisis. Contrary to the whimsical purchasing behavior stereotypically associated with a mid-life crisis, the jump into homebrewing may represent a more calculated attempt to achieve a sense of accomplishment.

Local Identity

While craft beer people may be found in any location, suburbanites seem to make up for a higher proportion of craft beer culture than city-dwellers and members of rural communities. Homebrewing especially seems to involve more people from the suburbs than from large cities partly because of the perceived need for real estate to undertake homebrewing activities.

Whether or not suburbanites are over-represented among homebrewers and other members of craft beer people, the suburb is a likely locale for craft beer. Regional identities are a tricky but fascinating issue among craft beer people. Contrary to “macro” beer, craft beer is localized. In fact, it might be said that the “craft beer movement” is oriented against the beer globalization. Slogans like “Think Global, Drink Local” abound in the craft beer world.

Yet craft beer also connects people across local and regional boundaries. The bonds between craft beer enthusiasts from different regions are visible in interactions in national and international beer-related activities such as festivals and competitions.

Occasionally, regional identity is negotiated in such a context by boasts and rivalries. For instance, in the Good Beer Show podcast from Indianapolis, IN, statements about the superior quality of Hoosier and Midwestern craft beers expose the importance of regional identity for the people involved.

This type of regional pride resembles that of sports fans. A nationally-recognized beer from a specific region might have some of the same significance as, say, the Red Sox in Boston.

A certain degree of regional specificity exists in craft beer. In Europe, local, regional, and even national brewing traditions contribute to the cultural identities of different parts of the continent. In North America, regional styles and brewing practices have been either revitalized or even created through craft beer culture.
For instance, the Pacific Northwest region of North America is known in craft beer culture for their hops. Not only do craft beers from that region often display distinctive hop flavors and aromas but craft beer people from other regions readily associate the Pacific Northwest with hops.

“Ethnic” Identity

In several parts of the United States and Canada, most craft beer people are of distinctively European origins. Perhaps unsurprisingly, German origins often make up a significant part of a craft beer enthusiast’s cultural identity, especially in the United States. In the United States, German-American identity is rarely marked. Given the high number of United States of German ancestry, German origins are simply part of mainstream culture. Given the association between Germany and beer, craft beer allows for the active negotiation of German-American identity. Germany is well-known as a beer-producing country and beer is an important part of German national identity.

The history of beer in the United States is often connected with German-American identity. For instance, most of the early breweries in the United States have been founded by German-American families and individuals. Later, Chicago’s German-American community was directly involved in the Beer Riots of 1855. While the representation of German-Americans among beer brewers might be directly proportional to their presence in the general population, it is fair to say that people of several origins seem to be under-represented among beer brewers. For instance, Italian-American brewers exist but their cultural identity seems to be less significant in relation to beer. For the most part, African-Americans and Asian-Americans are conspicuously absent from craft beer culture in the United States and Canada.

Gender Identity

Not only is the overwhelming majority of craft beer people male but masculinity and even virility are significant aspects of craft beer culture. While many women do drink beer, the association between men and beer is a strong one throughout the United States and Canada.

Not unlike adolescents affirming their gender and sexual identities, members of craft beer groups frequently make sexual jokes, describe certain beers as “girlie,” and generally use beer as proof of their manhood. In this respect more than in others, craft beer groups may resemble “Old Boys’ networks.” None of this is meant to imply that craft beer culture excludes women or that craft beer men hold degrading attitudes toward women. From an insider’s point of view, craft beer culture is perceived as welcoming and open-minded. Anyone, irrespective of gender or origins, is encouraged to become a craft beer enthusiast. Women who take part in craft beer related activities, especially as professional or amateur brewers, are often saluted and praised. Yet the mere fact that
their presence is noticed may reveal the importance of gender identity for craft beer people. Several craft beer men in fact display uxorious tendencies. In some craft beer circles, a brewer’s wife is often called “she who must be obeyed” (through the acronym “SWMBO”), an expression popularized by Australian craft brewer Graham Sanders in reference to British television show “Rumpole of the Bailey.” Use of this expression and the overall relationship between a craft beer man and his wife might even be described as fearful respect for, at least, some women. The negotiation of gender identity is an especially significant dimension of home-brewing and often relates to the gender differentiation of food in general. Brewing is similar to cooking in several respects. Homebrewing especially is often done in the kitchen and often involves cooking instruments and methods. In cases in which the home kitchen is seen as the woman’s domain, a homebrewer may even need to ask for his wife’s permission to use the kitchen. Brewing lore directly associates beer brewing with women. Historically, alewives and other brewsters have been responsible for domestic beer production. Contemporary (male) brewers often acknowledge the importance of women in the history of brewing. Yet the passage from a woman-centric domestic brewing practice to a male-dominated brewing industry and then to an overwhelmingly male craft beer culture rarely seems to represent a continuous process. It is as if male brewers, and especially homebrewers, were saying that despite their presence in the kitchen, they were still men. Perhaps unsurprisingly, homebrewing often connects with the barbecuing, the most masculine of cooking methods.

**Representing Women**

Beer advertising typically targets men and the sexist character of much beer advertisements is an object of discussion in the general population. What might be more surprising is that craft beer culture displays the same gender bias as “macro” beer. For instance, women are represented in craft beer publications as young and attractive waitress-like servers bringing beers to the male craft beer enthusiasts. In fact, Ale Street News, a national beer newspaper, sells merchandise, including a “Candy Apple Red Thong,” to what they call the “Beer Goddess®.” Their description of the aforementioned divinity emphasizes visual appearance.

**Beer Goddess® Definition**

Possessing an inner beauty beyond description, elegance, confidence, poise and a look that will stop traffic on Times Square. A beautiful lady that lets no beer stand in her way and can party with the best of them. Beer Goddesses come in all shapes and sizes! Catch the spirit today!

**Physical Appearance**

As is typical for middle-aged males in Canada and the United States, visual ap-
pearance is rather unimportant for craft beer men. The “bald spot and beer belly” of the stereotype may bring stigma in the general population but they almost serve as badges of honor in craft beer culture. After all, a bald spot is a sign of masculinity and (physical) maturity. The beer belly, though potentially linked to health issues, serves as a sign of a craft beer enthusiast’s love for food.

**Beer and Politics**

Though part of the abstract for this presentation, political affiliation is not part of the stereotype used as a guide for my description of craft beer culture. Contrary to most other identities negotiated by craft beer people, political affiliation varies from an individual to the next and may represent a source of significant tension. In other words, craft beer culture is neither “conservative,” “liberal,” or “moderate.”

In my experience, craft beer enthusiasts position themselves at different points of the so-called “political spectrum” and political discussions often become quite involved. Groups in which open discussion is the norm often apply, tacitly or explicitly, a taboo on political discussions. While such a conversational taboo may be typical of other groups involving middle-aged North American men, it does not imply that political identities are never negotiated among craft beer people. Political implications of identity negotiation should be obvious, especially in connection to perceived social class and ethnicity. While craft beer culture supports a relatively homogeneous group of people, political issues unravel important differences of opinion among craft beer people.

The political side of craft beer culture may also be seen in the existence of the Brewers Association, a 501(c)6 not-for-profit trade association which foresees that “[by] 2010, America’s craft brewers will . . . be politically influential enough to secure fair legislative and regulatory treatment for craft brewers.” If the craft beer stereotype described here has any accuracy, political influence may in fact be a significant part of craft beer culture.