
Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Bill: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Industry and Public Health Perspectives on the Bill

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Abstract

The proposal to introduce a Public Health (Alcohol) Bill marks a significant development in Ireland's alcohol policymaking landscape. While the Bill has generated support from public health advocates, it has also raised considerable opposition, particularly from industry. This analysis aims to examine the debate around this Bill using the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis and applying Carol Bacchi's *What's the Problem Represented To Be* critical mode of analysis. A key objective is to analyze the current prevailing representations of alcohol and its regulation in Ireland but also to consider what they reveal about the underlying governing rationality in relation to alcohol regulation. In particular, it questions whether the Bill signals a shift in the official governing rationality regarding alcohol regulation. The analysis illustrates how alcohol is problematized in markedly different ways in the debates and how such debates are often underpinned by multifaceted elements. Despite such differences, it argues that there are still signs of a neoliberal rhetoric emerging within the public health discourses, raising a question over whether the Bill and its supporting discourses signal a paradigmatic shift or are more indicative of a policy embracing hybrid forms of rule.

Keywords

alcohol policy, alcohol, availability, public health, sociology, critical theory

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Introduction

The Irish government's proposal to introduce a Public Health (Alcohol) Bill (hereafter, the Bill) is deemed a significant development in the state's regulation of alcohol, with the Department of Health and Children emphasizing that it is the "first time" that alcohol misuse is being addressed as a public health issue by the Irish state (Department of Health, 2013, 2015). Among the measures proposed in the Bill are minimum unit pricing (MUP) for retail of alcohol products, the structural separation of alcohol from other products in mixed trading outlets, more stringent restrictions on the marketing and advertising of alcohol, and health warnings on labels of alcohol products. Notwithstanding strong support for the Bill from public health advocates, the proposed legislation has generated considerable and mounting opposition from alcohol industry groups as well as some politicians and, more recently, from retailers selling alcohol products (Ahern, 2016; Minihan, 2015; Whelan, 2015). Responses to the Bill have, as a result, yielded multiple and competing discourses about the regulation of alcohol.

Against this background, this analysis seeks to examine the current alcohol policy landscape in Ireland by looking at the debate around the Bill through the lens of critical discourse analysis and applying Carol Bacchi's (2009, 2018) *What's the Problem Represented To Be?* (WPR) critical mode of analysis. A key objective is to determine what the current debate tells us in terms of how alcohol and its control are being represented in Ireland at present but also what it reveals about the underlying "governmentality" or governing rationality in relation to alcohol regulation in this country.

In this context, the analysis asks whether the Bill and its supporting discourses signal a shift in the official governing rationality regarding alcohol regulation. More specifically, and in light of the commentaries on Irish alcohol policy and social policy more generally that are discussed below, it asks whether they reflect a shift from a markedly neoliberal rationality to a more paternalistic or even postneoliberal rationality, whereby faith in the rational, self-disciplining citizen of neoliberalism is no longer assumed. In the context of this analysis, the research provides important clues regarding the prevailing modes of governance underpinning alcohol regulation in Ireland, situating the debate over the country's Bill in a wider political perspective and examining possible tensions and convergences therein, particularly between industry and those advocating a public health approach to alcohol regulation.

Contextualizing Ireland's Alcohol Policy Landscape

A number of commentaries on Irish alcohol policy have argued that, since the 1980s, Irish legislation has been particularly favorable toward the drinks industry (Butler, 2009, 2015; Hope, 2006; Hope & Butler, 2010; Mercille, 2016). This is reflected in the range of measures introduced that have facilitated the deregulation and liberalization of the drinks industry in Ireland, along with "a number of instances when regulatory restrictions on the drinks industry's freedom have been either struck down, diluted or never implemented" (Mercille, 2016, p. 63). Such measures have been accompanied by a significant rise in alcohol consumption levels. Between 1970 and 2003, for instance, alcohol consumption doubled in Ireland, during a period when consumption was falling in most developed countries (Byrne, 2010).

Hope (2006) contends that one of the main reasons for the lack of progress in implementing public health-oriented alcohol policies has been the failure to put in place "a fully integrated approach" (p. 469). One possible reason for this is the diverse range of government departments with responsibility for alcohol—as many as 11 government departments are deemed to have responsibilities relating to alcohol policy in Ireland, many of which reflect "a probusiness perspective" that is at odds with the World Health Organization public health approach adopted in the Department of Health and Children (Hope, 2006, p. 469). Referring to a similar situation in the UK, Jiang and Room (2016) contend that this partly reflects a "Balkanization of responsibilities in modern governments," but also the "inherent multidimensionality of alcohol issues and problems" (p. 85). In the case of Ireland, Hope (2006) argues, such fragmentation has provided "fertile ground for the drinks industry to lobby" (p. 469).

Against this background, some commentators have in more recent years sought to situate Ireland's alcohol policy in a wider political context. Mercille (2016), for example, situates the development of the alcohol industry and its regulation in Ireland since the 1980s within the "politico-economic context of neoliberalism" and argues that a number of key features of the restructuring of the drinks industry and its regulation flow directly or indirectly from the neoliberalization of Irish and world economies since the 1980s (p. 60). Butler (2009) similarly points to a neoliberal policy climate in Ireland, which he asserts has been "specifically antipathetic to the idea that the state should interfere directly in the alcohol market" (p. 343).

Indeed, historical analysis of the Irish policymaking landscape suggests that market-oriented priorities have similarly won out or taken precedence in earlier decades of the state's policymaking on alcohol (although earlier policies in this regard are more likely reflective of classical 19th-century liberalism rather than neoliberalism, which would have emerged considerably later in Ireland, *ca.* 1970s/1980s).¹ Irish historian Diarmaid Ferriter (2015), for instance, describes how since the formation of the Irish state in 1922, there has been "a tacit acceptance that any restrictive legislation would arouse the ire of the powerful licensed trade."

The increasingly liberalist approach taken by the Irish government to alcohol and its control has frequently sat in marked contrast to the measures supported by those calling for greater regulation around the availability, pricing and marketing of alcohol, and around drink-driving. Such measures, it should be highlighted, have been advocated for several decades by Ireland's public health community through various policy documents and research reports. Indeed, against the backdrop of growing international evidence on the harmful effects of alcohol and on the impact of alcohol policy on consumption levels and patterns, the government has made some concessions in more recent decades to those supporting a public health-oriented approach. Notable examples include the Irish government's publication of its first *National Alcohol Policy* in 1996 (Department of Health, 1996), its establishment in 2002 of a Strategic Task Force on Alcohol (STFA) and, on foot of this, a 2002 budget tax increase of 42% on spirits and 50% on alcopops (Hope, 2006), along with road safety legislation,² which reduced the blood alcohol concentration down to 50 mg per 100 ml of blood.³ Moreover, in 2006, the government introduced mandatory alcohol testing for drivers. Ironically, and perhaps tellingly, in the same year the government also permitted the below cost sale of alcohol through abolition of the Groceries Act—a move which illustrates perfectly the sometimes conflicting priorities of different government departments, or aforementioned "Balkanization of responsibilities," whereby one department seeks to increase control over alcohol while the other simultaneously relaxes it.

Notwithstanding the concessions granted to public health advocates cited above, other factors have thwarted progress in this regard. For instance, regarding the *National Alcohol Policy* of 1996, Butler (2009) contends that "its authors had failed to set in place the intersectoral or cross-cutting structures necessary for the implementation of these recommendations" (p. 347). Another significant factor, highlights Butler, was the growing emergence of the "social partnership" approach to governance in Ireland, which in relation to alcohol policy did not facilitate "open and robust debate in this contentious area," but instead "glossed over ideological differences, emphasising the middle ground" (2009, p. 352). On the whole, notwithstanding considerable lobbying by public health advocates for several decades, Butler (2009, p. 350) concludes that at best there has only been "nominal political support" for public health considerations by successive Irish governments. Rather, he asserts, the state "mediating uneasily between the public health sector and the drinks industry has, in the main, not accepted the evidence carefully presented by the former as constituting a legitimate basis for introducing alcohol control policies" (p. 355).

Against this background, the proposal by the current government to introduce a Bill therefore marks an interesting development, since, contrary to previous policies, it seems more aligned to public health considerations and antithetical to those of industry as well as retailers—given the emphasis on more regulatory measures around aspects such as pricing, advertising, and separation of alcohol products. So

how then are we to view the Bill in the context of a markedly neoliberal policy climate? Do the measures proposed in the Bill and supported by public health advocates signal a shift in the official alcohol regulation governmentality from a predominantly neoliberal rationality? Moreover, what can the debates around this Bill tell us more generally in relation to how the regulation of alcohol is being represented and legitimized in current discourses in Ireland?

Policymaking and Its Multifaceted Nature

The above overview contextualizes Ireland's alcohol policy historically and politically. This section considers alcohol policymaking more generally in the context of sociological perspectives on policy. In the debate over Ireland's Public Health (Alcohol) Bill, the divergent positions and different problematizations that have sprung from this debate underline the complex and multifaceted nature of policymaking. Indeed, sociologist of science Dorothy Nelkin (1992) argues that "[c]ontroversies over science and technology revolve around the question of political control" and have also assumed "an increasingly moralistic spin" (p. x), reflecting broader tensions in society, including the "struggle between individual autonomy and community goals" and "disagreements over the appropriate role of government" (p. xi). In her analysis of various controversies over science and technology, Nelkin contends that "they each involve multiple issues" and are never about just one thing (e.g., disputes over diet and cancer "not only reflect fear of risk, but they bear on freedom of individual choice"; environmental conflicts "are laden with ideological as well as pragmatic concerns") (p. xv). The significance of contemporary controversies over science and technology, Nelkin concludes, thus "lies in their expression of both political concerns about the democratic process and moral concerns about threats to fundamental rights" (p. xv). In the area of public health specifically, Peckham (2012) points to the political nature of this field due to the fact that it deals with social processes. Public health policy, argues Peckham (2012), involves decisions not only about the degree or distribution of health harm or benefit "but also about how to define those health harms and benefits and balance them against issues such as individual freedom" (p. 162).

Martin (1989) argues that in situations of scientific uncertainty or debate, a difference in values often comes to the fore and that, notwithstanding scientific evidence, various sides may differ in their assessment of the social benefits or costs of a particular measure or policy based on their differing values or worldviews. In the context of these different worldviews, Martin (1991) further conceptualizes the various arguments for and against a measure as "tools" or "resources" in a debate (p. 22), including for example claims about individual rights or reference to evidence-based studies, and highlights the "struggle for credibility" that often underpins such debates (p. 40). In analyzing this struggle, Reyes's (2011) account of the various legitimization strategies used in argumentation is particularly pertinent, illustrating the various and often similar strategies that are used by the different sides in a debate to legitimize one or other position.

In the debate over the Bill, similar complexities and strategies can be observed. For example, the debate not only highlights the contested nature of alcohol and its control but also points to wider issues such as the tension between the focus on individual autonomy versus wider community goals—a tension which Bayer (2007) argues lies at the very heart of public health. At the same time, the debate illustrates how strategies of legitimization are frequently enacted to support one problem representation and to simultaneously delegitimize the other.

A further consideration in this analysis is to uncover the underlying "governmentality" or governing rationality underpinning the various representations of, or positions on, alcohol and its control. Governmentality here refers to the Foucauldian notion of "mentalities of rule" or the different kinds of thinking associated with particular approaches to government—for example, "sovereign power" or "disciplinary power."⁴ In today's context, the prevailing governing rationality is frequently described as being largely "neoliberal" in its approach. Haydock (2014), in his analysis of the literature, points to

three key features of the neoliberal approach: firstly, an emphasis on market rationality; secondly, where this rationality is not always forthcoming, an emphasis on “technologies of citizenship,” which seek to ensure that citizens reshape their own preferences and actions through a sense of (self)-discipline rather than regulating the environment in which people act; and thirdly, when individuals fail to comply with the wishes of government, the use of coercive measures to directly target individuals, as they, rather than wider structures or organizations, are considered to have “violated the neoliberal compact” (p. 263). Lemke (2001) further highlights that neoliberalism does not simply refer to political rule but “to a continuum, which extends from political government right through to forms of self-regulation” (p. 201). Thus, aspects of a neoliberal governmentality can be observed across many different fields, not just in terms of state policy. Aiyo (2012), for instance, points to a neoliberal rationality in the area of health promotion, whereby people are encouraged to take responsibility for their own behaviour (p. 100).

Notwithstanding these key features of a neoliberal governmentality, the literature also issues a caveat against treating neoliberalism as a monolith (see, e.g., Bell & Green, 2016). Whitworth (2016), for instance, refers to neoliberalism as “a heterogeneous banner of related, but diverse and shifting, ideas” (p. 413), pointing, for example, to what he refers to as the growing emergence of “neoliberal paternalistic policies” (p. 426), which result in “internally diverse and contradictory views of the subject” (p. 414). Bacchi (2009), meanwhile, highlights how the different forms of power are not necessarily mutually exclusive, emphasizing what she refers to as “hybrid forms of rule” (p. 29).

Elsewhere, Davies (2012) raises the possibility of “an emerging post-neoliberal policy consensus” arising from “the failures of neoliberalism” that became apparent following the economic crisis of 2008, whereby consumers are no longer “to be trusted and liberated to the extent that we once were” (pp. 767–768). In this regard, Davies describes what he refers to as “an emerging neocommunitarianism,” which, guided by advances in fields such as behavioral economics and nudge theory,⁵ involves “a technocratic shift away from the generalisable presuppositions of neoclassical economics, and towards more psychological interest in behaviour, wellbeing and the cultural nature of economic activity, including markets” (p. 775). Crucially, such an approach no longer assumes that people are inherently rational, but rather acknowledges that individual consumer choice and desire are not only fallible, but often “dangerously disruptive” (Davies, 2012, p. 767).

These different viewpoints highlight the complexities involved in analyzing policy from a governmentality perspective. In analysis of policies such as the Bill, therefore, it is important not to assume the existence of a necessarily homogeneous political rationality therein but to acknowledge the possibility of more diverse and even contradictory viewpoints coexisting within the same governing rationality.

Theoretical Approach

This analysis uses the theoretical framework of critical discourse analysis to examine the debate around the introduction of the Bill. Critical discourse analysis has the potential to offer fresh insights into health-related discourses (see, e.g., Lupton, 1992). As a form of analysis, critical discourse analysis essentially sees discourse as “a form of social practice,” whereby “discourse is socially constitutive as well as socially conditioned” (Wodak & Meyer, 2009, p. 6). Foucault, one of the theoretical inspirations for the approach, believed that discourse did “not simply translate reality into language; rather discourse should be seen as a system which structures the way we perceive reality” (Mills, 2003, p. 55).

Within the wider framework of critical discourse analysis, Bacchi’s WPR approach (2009, 2018)—a poststructuralist theory influenced by the work of Foucault—provides the specific tools used in this analysis. WPR has been used as an analytic strategy in a growing number of studies in the alcohol and other drugs field (see Bacchi, 2018, for a review). Fraser and Moore (2011), for instance, draw on WPR

to examine Australian government policy on amphetamine-type stimulants, Månsson and Ekendahl (2015) apply WPR in their study on cannabis policy discourse in Sweden, and Manton and Moore (2016) use WPR in their study on problematizations of drinking among young adults in Australian alcohol policy. This analysis is the first study, as far as the authors are aware, to apply WPR in an Irish alcohol policymaking context.

The key premise of this approach is that policies, rather than being viewed as reactions to fixed, identifiable “problems,” actually “constitute (or give shape to) problems” and “contain implicit representations of ‘problems’” that carry “all sorts of implications for how the issue is thought about, and for how the people involved are treated, and are evoked to think about themselves” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 1). The ways in which particular “problems” are represented also play a central role in how we are governed. In her analysis, Bacchi is particularly interested in the Foucauldian concept of “governmentality,” citing governmentality studies as one of the intellectual traditions informing her WPR approach. In order to get at the thought in or behind government, Bacchi (2010b, 2018) highlights how Foucault himself recommended studying problematizations or how “problems” are conceived. Thus, in the context of an analysis of the Bill, interrogating the “problem representations” implicit in the discourses seeks not only to understand how the problem is being constituted but also to determine the governing rationalities underpinning such representations.

The WPR approach enables the researcher to “ask questions” of the text in a more systematic and ordered way and to examine the “implicit problem representations that impose a particular stamp on how an issue is understood” (Bacchi, 2010a, p. 70). Overall, the approach taken in this research has been to combine a thematic and discourse analysis of four chosen texts, using the WPR critical mode of analysis. In the context of this analysis, three questions from Bacchi’s (2009, p. xii) approach were deemed particularly relevant for analyzing the texts, namely,

- What is the problem represented to be?
- What presuppositions or assumptions underpin the representation of the “problem”?
- What is left unproblematic in this problem representation/where are the silences?

Method

For the study, four texts were purposefully selected for analysis on the basis of their relevance to the debate over the introduction of the Bill—two supportive of the Bill and two critical of it. As borne out by the responses to the Bill’s introduction, notwithstanding significant support for its provisions, it has also met with considerable opposition, yielding multiple and divergent discourses. The focus on preexisting texts, rather than generating new data through interviews or questionnaires, was deliberate and is indeed a common practice in discourse analysis: As Wodak and Meyer (2016, p. 21) highlight, such a focus implies specific strengths—in particular, the provision of “non-reactive data.”

The texts were purposefully selected in terms of their timeliness—that is, they were published at the time of, and in the immediate aftermath of, the publication of the Bill in December 2015—as well as in terms of their variety and significance to the debate. Initially, an online search was conducted via the Google search engine and using the search term “Public Health (Alcohol) Bill Ireland” in the summer (northern hemisphere) of 2016. The search results yielded a varied range of texts on the topic including media articles, government and industry press releases, letters to the editor from both public health and industry representatives, and Oireachtas (Irish legislature) statements. A sample of four texts was selected: firstly, a small sample allowed for a more comprehensive thematic and linguistic analysis of the material; and secondly, given the often iterative nature of the positions put forward by the respective sides, the selected texts proved sufficient to cover the various positions. More or fewer texts could have been chosen—there is no single approach to critical discourse analysis. A discourse

analysis of the Bill itself could also have been undertaken—however, the intention was to capture reactions to or positions on the Bill rather than examine the content of the Bill itself. Briefly, the texts comprise the following:

- A government press release announcing the Bill’s publication in December 2015 (Department of Health, 2015)—the press release was issued on the same day as the heads of the Bill were published and outlined the measures contained in the Bill as well as statements by the then Minister for Health at the formal launch of the Bill;
- a letter to the editor of a national newspaper signed by public health advocates in support of the Bill (*Irish Times*, 2015)—the letter outlines the position of a group calling for the Bill’s introduction, who went on to form a coalition (Alcohol Health Alliance) campaigning for its passing into law;
- a press release from an industry federation group (the Alcohol Beverage Federation of Ireland [ABFI] 2015) criticizing the Bill—the press release outlines the response to the Bill’s publication by the ABFI, the main group representing alcohol manufacturers and suppliers in Ireland; and
- the conclusions section of a drinks industry report which is also critical of the Bill (Fitzgerald, 2015)—the excerpt is taken from a report compiled by an Irish agrifood economist on sustainable growth of the drinks industry, which was commissioned by the ABFI.

These texts represent the most prominent players in the debate over the Bill—that is, the government, public health advocates, and drinks industry representatives. Of course, the sample is not exhaustive and as the debate has evolved, new players have entered the discussion (such as retailers). Therefore, the analysis, while representative of some of the main players in the debate, is not claiming to represent all positions or indeed new considerations that may have arisen in relation to the Bill over time.

Analysis

Divergent representations of alcohol

Analysis of the discourses around Ireland’s Bill demonstrates, firstly, how alcohol and its regulation are represented and problematized in markedly different ways and how language and other rhetorical devices are key factors in the framing of such problems. In both the government press release and newspaper letter from public health advocates, for example, the lexical choice is explicit in representing alcohol as a risky or harmful substance. The collocation of the word “damage” or “damaging” with alcohol (Department of Health, 2015), for instance, as well as the repetition of the word “harm” or “harmful” in relation to alcohol or drinking (*Irish Times*, 2015), positions alcohol as a dangerous or risky substance and is indicative of a risk-type discourse. At the same time, the texts are clear in extending the range of harms due to alcohol beyond the individual, highlighting the range of alcohol-related harms across society. In the letter to the editor, for example, it states that: “The harm caused by our alcohol consumption extends far beyond the individual who is drinking, to impact on children, families and communities throughout Ireland” (*Irish Times*, 2015). Similarly, in the government press release, the range of impacts arising from alcohol is listed: “damage to personal health and to society, absenteeism, the burden placed on the health services, public disorder and violence, traffic accidents, and the associated mental health consequences” (Department of Health, 2015). This type of framing, as highlighted by Katikireddi et al. (2014), emphasizes that the overall population is being harmed and represents alcohol as a health issue for the population rather than individuals.

Conversely, in the ABFI press release and drinks industry report extract, the language of commerce is pervasive, constructing alcohol as a valuable commodity rather than a drug with potentially

deleterious consequences for society. Significantly, the words “harm/harmful” or “damage/damaging” never appear in the text alongside “alcohol.” Instead, the more moderate word “misuse” is used in relation to alcohol, implying that the problem lies with the “user” rather than with the substance itself. As Room (2013, p. 3) highlights, an emphasis on misuse or “harmful use” implies that there is also “non-harmful use” of alcohol—a position which, he argues, “suits well the alcohol industry’s interest in avoiding usages that imply that their product in itself could play any causal role in harm” (p. 1397). Petticrew et al. (2016) further illustrate how industry campaigns tend to represent alcohol problems as a behavioral rather than a health issue, with the implication that consumption should be guided only by “self-defined limits” (p. 12). The emphasis on “use” is reinforced in the last sentence of the ABFI (2015) press release, which refers to “a small minority” who “abuse” the product, again emphasizing the “user” side aspect, which is only a “problem” for a few, and implying that alcohol problems are a behavioral issue that should be countered by individually oriented rather than population-wide initiatives. Alcohol is instead constructed as a commodity of key importance to the regional Irish economy, to future export growth and to tourism, as well as being associated with notions of “conviviality” and “sense of atmosphere,” highlighting the social benefits of alcohol and even implying that alcohol serves the public good.

The co-occurrence of the words “grow” or “growth” alongside alcohol is also apparent throughout the text in the drinks industry report extract (Fitzgerald, 2015, pp. 21–22), and in one instance Ireland’s well-known alcohol brands (Guinness, Jameson, and Heineken) are even elevated to the status of “iconic”—implying that such brands should be celebrated or even revered. Reference to the “craft beer and craft whiskey businesses” in the ABFI (2015) press release similarly evokes positive connotations, with the word “craft” now a standard term in drinks industry parlance, bringing to mind notions of “skill” and “high quality,” the idea that alcohol is an artisan product, as well as implying a sense of wholesomeness and goodness. Such references also point to the emerging “discourses of sensible, social drinking” related to the burgeoning craft beer industry, as Thurnell-Read (2017, p. 89) highlights, whereby craft beer enthusiasts are often positioned in marked contrast to the perceived problematic drinking associated with high-street corporate drinking venues where excess is encouraged.

Differences in underlying assumptions

Looking at the particular assumptions underpinning these divergent representations of alcohol, a crucial difference can be observed in the underlying worldview implicit in such representations, which point to two distinct approaches to alcohol policy more generally—commonly referred to as the “total consumption” or public health approach versus the “disease concept” approach. Briefly, the total consumption model, first espoused in the 1970s by the acclaimed Finnish social scientist Kettil Bruun, contends that the total consumption of alcohol determines the amount of alcohol-related problems in any population. Consequently, the overall consumption level should be a key target of preventive alcohol policy through control-side measures such as limiting availability and increasing taxation (Sulkunen & Warsell, 2012, p. 217). Significantly, Sulkunen and Warsell (2012) highlight that Bruun’s original conception of the total consumption model “stemmed from a much richer, liberal rather than authoritarian sociological background,” and not from any anti-alcohol sentiment but instead a more pragmatic goal to reduce harm, with Bruun calling for alcohol restrictions to be “universally applied in the same way for all” and advocating for “universalism against particularism” (p. 228).

The “disease concept” approach, on the other hand, essentially deems alcohol a harmless substance for the majority of consumers, “with only a minority of biologically vulnerable drinkers succumbing to this unitary disease called alcoholism” (Butler, 2009, p. 345). Mercille (2012) contends that such an approach has always been favored by the drinks industry “because it ascribes responsibility for alcohol-related problems like alcoholism and violence to drinkers themselves and not to the availability of alcohol” (p. 62).

The tension between these two approaches regarding alcohol is similarly reflected in the texts examined here. The government press release, for example, is explicit in its framing of alcohol as a wider public health issue. The title of the Bill itself—which juxtaposes the words “public health” alongside the word “alcohol”—along with the repeated assertion in the text that the Bill addresses alcohol “as a public health issue for the first time” underline this aspect, clearly representing the measure as a population-wide initiative targeting levels and patterns of alcohol consumption in the population as a whole (Department of Health, 2015). The emphasis on total consumption, as opposed to focusing on only a minority of individuals in society, is confirmed by the text’s stated goal “to reduce average annual alcohol consumption in Ireland from 11 to 9.1 litres per person by 2020.” Moreover, repeated references to “Ireland” as a whole, as illustrated in the government press release (*Irish Times*, 2015), serve to reinforce this sense of a total population approach that impacts on all of Irish society.

Conversely, in the drinks industry texts, the problem representation put forward correlates with the disease model, implying that alcohol-related problems are a user-side issue, concerning only a small segment of the population. The ABFI (2015) press release, for example, asserts that the “whole population should not be punished because a small minority abuse a product.” At the same time, the pro-industry texts emphasize the importance of more “targeted” measures: The ABFI (2015) press release, for instance, expresses its support for “targeted public health initiatives,” while the industry report asserts that the Bill’s measures do “not adequately target those whose consumption causes harm” (Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 21)—again implying that alcohol impacts only on certain individuals or a smaller section of society.

Based on this reasoning, the total consumption or public health approach endorsed in the Bill is represented as disproportionate and questionable in the industry discourses. For instance, the ABFI (2015) press release asserts that the additional advertising restrictions of the Bill “are excessive and their effectiveness unproven” and that such measures “will instigate a series of unintended consequences,” namely, job losses but no decrease in alcohol misuse. The industry report, meanwhile, alludes to selective use of evidence to support of the Bill, stating that, “Dissenting, peer reviewed research has been ignored and supportive evidence appears to have been cherry-picked from other jurisdictions” (Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 21).

Strategies of legitimization

Such statements illustrate perfectly Reyes’s (2011) earlier cited strategies of legitimization, which are enacted in debates to simultaneously reinforce one position and delegitimize the other. “Legitimization through rationality,” as described by Reyes (2011, p. 786), is one such strategy, whereby the position of the other side is questioned in terms of its rationality or reliability. In the same way, the aforementioned questioning of the reliability of the evidence and efficacy of the measures underpinning the Bill serves to simultaneously delegitimize the measures proposed and legitimize the concerns put forward by industry. Moreover, the repeated reference to the proposed legislation’s “unintended consequences” (ABFI, 2015) implies limited knowledge on the policy makers’ part, further undermining the Bill. Indeed, such legitimization strategies seem to mirror industry arguments more generally, which, according to one systematic review (Savell, Fooks, & Gilmore, 2015, p. 23), can be grouped into five main frames, namely, an “insufficient evidence” frame, which frames the issue as one in which the scientific evidence does not support the particular intervention or policy; a “regulatory redundancy” frame, which emphasizes individual responsibility rather than regulation; a “negative unintended consequences” frame, which argues that regulation will result in financial or job losses; a “legal” frame, which argues that regulation infringes the legal rights of companies; and a “complex policy area” frame, which industry uses to argue that the problem would benefit from collaboration with industry.

Further evidence of legitimization strategies includes “legitimization through altruism” (Reyes, 2011, p. 801), whereby actors legitimize their proposals as a common good rather than being driven by private interests—a strategy which also implies a type of moral evaluation in the sense that it refers to a system of values. In this respect, it is interesting to observe how both sides appeal to the notion of the common good, but in different ways. In the newspaper letter from public health advocates (*Irish Times*, 2015), for instance, references to the Bill’s potential to “save lives,” to “reduce the harm and deaths caused by alcohol” and to create a “life-changing” impact “for future and present generations,” among other statements, highlight the wider common good (both current and future populations), creating a powerful legitimizing effect as well as reinforcing the underlying moral tone in the text.

This underlying moral tone can also be observed in industry discourses, but from the perspective of its emphasis on the right to individual autonomy. In the ABFI (2015) press release, for example, the text highlights how the proposal to introduce structural separation of alcohol products under the Bill “undermines the sensibilities of people” and is a “true example of nanny state gone mad.” Further down, the text states that the “whole population should not be punished because a small minority abuse a product.” Such references point to a rights-based discourse, in particular an emphasis on the right to individual autonomy and free choice. Despite the moral tone underpinning this “rhetoric of rights,” it is possible however that it may be as much tactical as anything else—or as Nelkin (1992) highlights “simply a way to elevate instrumental behaviour to the level of a moral imperative in order to limit negotiation” and at the same time a way “to gain public support in a controversial political context” (p. xviii). Moreover, such emphases may be linked to the “rise of market-based ideology that posits the individual as free to make consumption choices” and repackages “patients” into “clients” or “consumers” (Winstanley, 2005, p. 380).

The moral tone evident in these and other health-related discourses illustrates Nelkin’s (1992) earlier cited observation that in controversies over science and technology, there is an underlying moral as well as political dimension, reflecting broader societal tensions and illustrating how such controversies “each involve multiple issues” (p. xv). At the same time, the “battle for legitimacy” that becomes increasingly apparent through closer analysis of the discourses brings to mind Martin’s (1991) aforementioned reference to the “struggle for credibility” frequently underpinning such debates. This sense of a “battle” or a “struggle” between opposing sides is indeed reflected in one of the metaphors invoked in the newspaper letter issued by public health advocates (*Irish Times*, 2015), in which military-type metaphors are used to represent the alcohol industry. References to a “sustained attack” from the alcohol industry, for example, to the “conflict” associated with industry providing public health advice and to the need to “protect” alcohol policies from “distortion” by commercial interests are evocative of the language of warfare, in particular a sense of being under siege by industry, and help to add force to public health arguments against industry practices. Such examples illustrate how use of metaphor by opposing sides constitutes a powerful rhetorical device in debates—in this instance, with one side invoking the sense of a “predatory industry” and the other of a “constraining nanny” (Hoek, 2008, p. 5). At the same time, it underlines an important dimension of the debate—namely, the ongoing battle for primacy over how best to control harmful alcohol consumption in Ireland—whereby opposing sides seek to “capture control” and wherein various strategies of legitimization and delegitimization constitute potent tools or “weapons” in this ongoing and frequently contentious debate.

Uncovering governing rationalities

The sections above illustrate how the respective discourses “give shape” (Bacchi, 2009, p. 1) to the alcohol issue, yielding different problem representations in relation to alcohol: on the one hand, with alcohol viewed as a toxic and addictive substance that potentially puts all consumers at risk of a spectrum of social and health problems; on the other hand, with alcohol deemed a key commodity in

the economy and source of jobs as well as tourism, proving problematic for only a “small minority” of people who “misuse” the product. In the debates around the Bill, these appear to be the two dominant constructions of alcohol in Ireland’s alcohol policymaking landscape at present—and indeed more widely. As outlined earlier, Bacchi (2009) highlights how the underlying problematizations give an insight into how particular issues are understood in prevailing discourses, but also into how we are being governed: “in order to understand how we are governed, we need to examine the problem representations that lodge within policies and policy proposals” (p. xiii). In the context of this analysis, therefore, how alcohol is constructed can offer clues regarding the wider governing rationality or governmentality.

Neoliberalism and industry discourses. Turning firstly to the industry discourses examined in this analysis, it can be argued that the way in which alcohol is represented strongly points to an underlying neoliberal worldview or governing rationality—a political rationality which, Lemke (2001, p. 201) contends, seeks to render individual subjects “responsible,” whereby responsibility for social risks such as illness, unemployment, poverty and for life in society is shifted “into the domain for which the individual is responsible” and transformed “into a problem of ‘self-care’.” This is illustrated in the texts particularly through the emphasis on personal responsibility. In the industry report extract (Fitzgerald, 2015, p. 21), for instance, the references to “responsible consumption” and “self-regulation” point to an underlying assumption in the text that places the focus on the autonomous, self-governing individual whose responsibility it is to manage their own drinking. The emphasis on personal responsibility is indeed a core idea in alcohol industry discourses more widely and of industry’s corporate social responsibility practices, which frequently promote the value of personal responsibility (see, e.g., Petticrew et al., 2016). One effect of this, however, argue Yoon and Lam (2013), is that it deliberately avoids emphasis on the “corporate sources of alcohol problems,” instead constructing “individual drinkers as deviant for harming others and violating rules” (pp. 3–4). At the same time, this rhetoric of responsibility “enables alcohol corporations to be selective about which areas of alcohol policy are to be adopted or eliminated” (Yoon & Lam, 2013, p. 4), with companies usually favoring more targeted educational measures and framing population-based measures as excessive or ineffective.

In the industry discourses examined in this analysis, measures proposed under the Bill are similarly questioned for their effectiveness and proportionality. The ABFI (2015) press release, for example, states from the outset that “the content of the Bill will not meaningfully address misuse.” The text goes on to refer to the advertising restrictions proposed under the Bill as “excessive and their effectiveness is unproven.” Statements questioning the rationality and validity of the measures are, at the same time, underpinned by more value-based language, which adds emotional charge to the text. For instance, regarding the structural separation of alcohol products in shops, the ABFI press release states that the measure “undermines sensibilities of people and is a true example of nanny-state gone mad,” while elsewhere the text describes the proposed advertising measures as “draconian.” Repetition of the word “ban” in the text regarding the Bill’s advertising restrictions—the Bill “will ban the use of pictures of people having a drink in a pub; it will ban any notion of conviviality; it will ban any sense of atmosphere”—similarly serves to frame the Bill as overweening and oppressive, further delegitimizing the measures proposed under it. Not only are the measures deemed excessive—they are also framed as having the potential to stifle innovation, thwart investment, and ultimately drive consumers away (in this case, over the border to Northern Ireland). At the same time, and as outlined earlier, positive references to alcohol are repeated and reinforced in the text—for example, through repeated references to “growth” in relation to alcohol. This permeation of the language of commerce in the two industry texts analyzed, alongside the emphasis on personal responsibility, are both indicative of an underlying neoliberal ethos in the discourses. In view of the historical analysis of Irish alcohol policy outlined earlier, it suggests that current industry discourses around the Bill seek to sustain or reinforce an

already strongly neoliberal rationality regarding alcohol in Ireland and to simultaneously delegitimize any attempts aimed at stronger regulation and state intervention regarding alcohol consumption.

Public health discourses and possible tensions therein. Regarding the two texts supporting the Bill, the analysis of the underlying governing rationality is less straightforward. Both texts are clear in their support for the measures proposed under the Bill, which, as outlined earlier, correlate to a “total consumption” approach to alcohol. In such an approach or worldview, as noted earlier, environmental strategies (such as higher taxes and stricter controls on availability and the marketing of alcohol) are generally deemed more effective than individual strategies and reliance on educational campaigns (Hope, 2006; STFA, 2002, 2004).

From the perspective of problematizations, this approach *produces* availability as the problem, implying that the more available or visible alcohol is, the more people will drink. However, this formulation, it has been argued, puts into question people’s judgement or willpower (Bacchi, 2015; Pennay, 2012). Moreover, as Keane (2009) observes, “[b]ecause pleasure and enjoyment are not counted as genuine benefits in public health and medical understandings of intoxication, it is difficult to interpret the deliberate and repeated pursuit of intoxication as anything other than irrational and perverse within this framework” (p. 139). Such an assessment, Bacchi (2015) highlights, “sits in stark contrast to the characterization of the neoliberal rational actor charged with self-regulation on the presumption that they will act in their own best interests” (p. 136). This raises an important question—do the measures proposed under the Bill signal a shift in the official alcohol regulation governmentality, from a markedly neoliberal rationality to a more paternalistic or even postneoliberal rationality? Or—to put it another way—does the government’s support for the said Bill suggest a certain crisis of faith in the prevailing neoliberal policy consensus?

It has been argued, for example, that MUP—one of the key measures of the Bill—is not a typically neoliberal policy measure and is one of the “emblematic policies” (Haydock, 2014, p. 269) that challenges the neoliberal interpretation, signaling a shift to Davies’s (2012) earlier cited “neocommunitarian” ways of thinking. The challenge to the neoliberal approach, explains Haydock (2014, p. 269), lies in the fact that “MUP accepts the contention of Thaler and Sunstein that people make choices that are against their ‘best interests’, and would reshape the drinking environment to help ensure that individuals do not drink ‘too much’.” Measures such as MUP, Davies (2012) asserts, illustrate perfectly this shift from neoliberalism toward neocommunitarianism modes of thinking, whereby “because individuals are not to be trusted with their own welfare, prices must be partly managed with this in mind” (p. 768).

Certainly, many elements of the Bill are indicative of a more interventionist role for the state that seems more neocommunitarian and less neoliberal in its overall thrust. Structural separation of alcohol products, for example, is suggestive of the soft paternalism endorsed under Thaler and Sunstein’s (2008) nudge type interventions, which accept that “real people make mistakes *systematically*” (Leonard, 2008, p. 2) and believe that it is legitimate therefore for “choice architects” (Thaler and Sunstein, 2008, p. 3) to try to influence people’s behavior for the better, albeit still giving them the freedom to choose.⁶ Moreover, the distinction between alcohol products and “ordinary products” in the government press release (Department of Health, 2015) echoes the seminal statement that alcohol is “no ordinary commodity,” as articulated by Babor et al. (2010, p. 6) who in turn underlined the value of “population thinking in alcohol policy” owing to its ability to devise appropriate interventions “that are most likely to benefit the greatest number of people” (pp. 7–8). MUP, meanwhile, has shades of “harder” forms of paternalism or at least “heavy nudging” (Bacchi, 2015, p. 136), it could be argued, as the measure seeks not merely to influence people’s choices but to essentially “eliminate very cheap alcohol from all stores and shops” by making it illegal to sell or advertise for sale alcohol at a price below 10 cent per gram of alcohol (Department of Health, 2015). The emphasis on sanctions is also indicative of a more paternalistic orientation in the legislation.

Such measures signal a shift in or at least a questioning of the neoliberal governing rationality that has prevailed in Ireland since the 1980s, since the inherent rationality of citizens is no longer necessarily assumed. Instead, measures seeking to reshape the environment are deemed necessary precisely because people are frequently *irrational* rather than innately rational. In the case of the Bill, this is evident in the range of measures proposed which aim to reduce the visibility, advertising, and financial availability of alcohol products in Ireland—that is, environmental as opposed to individually oriented measures.

Notwithstanding a possible shift toward more neocommunitarian ways of thinking, closer examination of the texts supporting the Bill also suggests possible tensions or contradictions in this position. In particular, the reference to MUP as “a targeted measure” is not insignificant. It could be argued that such a reference contrasts with the construction of MUP as a population-wide initiative, which, in line with Kjetil Bruun’s total consumption approach, should seek to reduce general consumption and thereby diminish the harmful effects of alcohol (Bruun, Pan, & Rexed, 1975, p. 288). In the newspaper letter from public health advocates, for instance, MUP is referred to as “a targeted measure that will affect only the strongest, cheapest drink in the off-trade, which is consumed mainly by the youngest and most harmful drinkers” and, it is highlighted, “will have absolutely no impact on the price of a pint, or any alcohol sold in pubs, clubs or restaurants” (*Irish Times*, 2015). Similarly, the government press release states that MUP is “aimed at those who drink in a harmful and hazardous manner” (Department of Health, 2015).

Commentaries on the representation of MUP in other countries indicate that the measure has been framed in different ways—further highlighting the political nature of alcohol policymaking. Butler, Elmeland, Nicholls, and Thom (2017, p. 147), for instance, outline that once established MUP quickly became “a fluid policy idea”: to many advocates, it represented an opportunity to reduce overall consumption, following Skög’s theory of collectivity in drinking behaviors; to others within the health community, it represented a far more targeted approach, impacting only on those drinking at the highest levels. In the case of Scotland, the first country in the world to pass legislation on MUP, Katikireddi, Bond, and Hilton (2014) outline that public health advocates of MUP framed alcohol policy as “a broad, multisectoral, public issue that requires a whole-population approach” (p. 250). Based on this framing, “minimum unit pricing was portrayed as an effective population health measure” (Katikireddi et al., p. 264). Conversely, in the case of the Westminster government (which subsequently scrapped the MUP proposal), MUP was framed in terms of a law and order rather than public health measure, with the then Prime Minister David Cameron emphasizing that MUP would tackle the “scourge of violence caused by binge drinking” and ministers stating that MUP would target young people with low disposable incomes who drink irresponsibly (cited in Butler, Elmeland, Nicholls, & Thom, 2017, p. 148). In their analysis of the divergences in policy progress regarding MUP in Scotland versus Westminster, McKay, Laverty, and Majeed (2017) similarly conclude that the Scottish government “framed the issue primarily as a health concern embedded within society, rather than a need to manage the irresponsible actions of some deviant individuals or population sub-groups, as suggested in the Westminster government’s strategy” (p. 360).

Since MUP as a measure can be represented differently, it is significant therefore that advocates of MUP in Ireland have sought to frame it as a targeted measure only (targeting youngest and most harmful drinkers) in the texts examined. One potential issue with this problem representation, however, is that rather than representing the intervention as one designed for a problematic substance and thus aimed at the whole population (in line with Bruun’s total consumption approach), it frames it as one targeted at problematic drinkers. In this regard, it could be argued that the framing of MUP by advocates in Ireland conjures up a neoliberal-type rationality—specifically, through its emphasis on the notion of “targeted measures,” which as outlined earlier, supports the idea of directly targeting individuals who “violate the neoliberal compact” (Haydock, 2014, p. 263) with more coercive measures. This distinction, adds Haydock, echoes Dean’s characterization of neoliberalism, whereby

certain individuals, groups, and communities become “targeted populations” (e.g., victims of crime, smokers, people who inject drugs, and the unemployed) and are subject to “technologies of agency,” with the “the object being to transform their status, to make them active citizens capable, as individuals and communities, of managing their own risk” (Dean, 2010, pp. 196–197).

Indeed, in his analysis of the UK situation, Haydock (2014) posits that MUP was similarly presented by the former coalition government as a targeted intervention (to address “binge drinking”) and concludes that, even while it was considered, MUP was presented “using neoliberal rhetoric” (p. 273). In the case of Ireland, therefore, notwithstanding the reframing of alcohol control as a public health issue by those supporting the Bill, the representation of MUP as a solely targeted measure by advocates somewhat belies the Bill’s wider population focus.

Moreover, in the newspaper letter from public health advocates examined in this analysis, the aforementioned statement that MUP “will have absolutely no impact on the price of a pint, or any alcohol sold in pubs, clubs or restaurants” (*Irish Times*, 2015) may have the effect of inadvertently problematizing only certain types of drinking (“the strongest, cheapest drink in the off-trade . . . consumed mainly by the youngest and most harmful drinkers”) while absolving other “sites” of drinking. At the same time, it suggests that the economic imperative of preserving the nighttime economy may not have been completely abandoned in the public health discourses examined here. References to “the youngest and most harmful drinkers” (*Irish Times*, 2015) also risk downplaying or diverting attention away from the issue of problem drinking among other population cohorts, and somewhat echoes drinks industry discourses, which often link alcohol misuse to particular groups or a “small minority” rather than the population as a whole.

In fact, Hilton et al. (2014, p. 163) warn that a lack of focus on alcohol as a population-level problem could prove counterproductive as it “might lead the public to perceive the problem as largely confined to small sub-sections of society.” As a result, they argue that MUP should be redefined “primarily as a solution to stem over-consumption at the population level”—moving away from a focus on young binge drinkers and heavy drinkers—because MUP “may be more likely to gain wider public support if people understand the importance of small, incremental reductions in alcohol consumption, and see the potential benefits of the intervention for everyone” (Hilton et al., 2014, p. 163).

Elsewhere, in the government press release, reference to the importance of people taking “responsibility for their actions” (Department of Health, 2015) is similarly evocative of a neoliberal rationality with its focus on the self-regulating, rational actor. It could also be argued that health labeling, a further measure proposed under the Bill, carries the assumption that individuals are potentially rational, as Haydock (2014) contends, “if only provided with the necessary information in the right way” (p. 263).

Thus, notwithstanding the emphasis on population-wide measures in the two public health texts, closer examination suggests that the more individualistic neoliberal rationality may still be somewhat ingrained in public health policy proposals aimed at reducing alcohol consumption in Ireland. From the government’s perspective at least, it is possible that this may reflect the tensions arising from the “Balkanization of responsibilities in modern governments” (Jiang & Room, 2016, p. 85), whereby the more paternalistic thrust of alcohol policy proposals put forward by the Department of Health and Children sits uneasily alongside the “probusiness perspective” (Hope, 2006, p. 469) of other government departments with responsibility for addressing alcohol.

From the public health perspective, it is possible that the framing of MUP as a targeted measure may be partly tactical, given the previous European Court of Justice ruling on the Scottish MUP case. The latter case arose following a petition for judicial review of the minimum pricing Act⁷ by a consortium of alcohol producers, led by the Scottish Whisky Association, which argued that the legislation was incompatible with European Union (EU) competition law.⁸ As interpreted by Bartlett (2016, p. 222), this ruling essentially held that “if a twofold objective is pursued” (i.e., reducing consumption generally and specifically), then “MUP is a disproportionate response.” In this regard, Bartlett concludes,

“[t]he implication is relatively clear—pursuit of a targeted objective *only* may result in MUP being proportionate” from an EU law perspective.⁹ Thus, the framing of MUP as a targeted measure by Irish public health advocates may be somewhat strategic in light of this ruling, whereby it may be deemed more politically palatable to frame the measure as a proportionate response targeting only those groups most at risk rather than one that is disproportionately anticompetitive and that will penalize everyone. Such an observation highlights how public health objectives can never entirely escape the economic imperative. At the same time, it may also reflect the wider neoliberal policy context that prevails today, wherein the universalistic approach endorsed in the 1970s by Bruun may prove less palatable since, as Sulkunen and Warsell (2012) contend, “it is more difficult today to weigh the public good against individual interest than half a century ago” (p. 229).

Conclusion

This analysis demonstrates how alcohol and its regulation can be represented in different ways and how such problem representations provide insights into underlying governing rationalities in line with Bacchi’s (2009) contention that the ways in which particular issues are problematized play a central role in how we are governed. Despite the limited number of analyzed texts, and notwithstanding the fact that the debate has since evolved, with new players entering the discussion, the analysis serves as an example of how problematizations and governmentality processes may be studied, enabling us to interrogate the various positions and their underlying assumptions more deeply.

Analysis of the discourses around the Bill in this discussion illustrates, firstly, how language and other rhetorical devices are used to frame the issue of alcohol and its control in different ways, highlighting the constitutive nature of discourse. From the perspective of Bacchi’s WPR critical mode of analysis, these different representations point to two distinct problematizations of the alcohol issue in current Irish policy debate: on the one hand, with alcohol represented as a harmful substance with potentially deleterious consequences for the wider population and thus requiring a population approach; on the other hand, with alcohol constructed as an important economic commodity and as a problem only for a small minority, thereby necessitating more individualized, targeted measures. From a governmentality perspective, the analysis contends that the industry discourses examined in the debate around the Bill seek to sustain an already strongly neoliberal rationality regarding alcohol in Ireland, whereas the public health discourses suggest a questioning of the prevailing neoliberal governing rationality that seems to have dominated Ireland’s alcohol policy landscape since the 1980s.

Closer analysis of the texts supporting the Bill, however, suggests a certain reluctance to abandon the prevailing neoliberal ethos completely, since, as outlined above, even while advocating for population-wide, interventionist measures, there is still at times a reliance on neoliberal type language to represent such measures. At one level, this may reflect a deeper ambivalence at the heart of Irish society in relation to alcohol, whereby, as Butler (2015) observes, notwithstanding acknowledgment of the negative impacts of alcohol, it is also the case that “alcohol is symbolic of relaxation, sociability, and sport—not to mention its role in the economic life of Ireland” (p. 115). At the same time, it may illustrate, as Haydock (2014) contends, how “neoliberalism as a mentality of government remains powerful and prevalent in its influence on policymaking” (p. 273). Such a conclusion is, indeed, more in line with recent analyses of the wider policy landscape in Ireland, which point to a “deepening of neoliberalism” following the economic crisis of 2008 (Mercille, 2016; Mercille & Murphy, 2015). Moreover, as Davies (2012) asserts, the use of “nudging” and behavioral interventions does not necessarily indicate a shift in governing rationality—rather, many such interventions “aim to teach and encourage people how to behave in a more rational, coherent fashion, precisely so as to enable the *survival* of neoliberalism, rather than its replacement” (p. 775).

On the other hand, if one were to view the Bill and its supporting discourses as signaling a shift from neoliberal toward more neocommunitarian ways of thinking, there is the added caveat that the two are

not necessarily mutually exclusive. As Davies (2012) warns, the relationship between neoliberalism and neocommunitarianism is still “very often supplementary rather than substitutive. Neoliberal problems and solutions have not gone away” (p. 775).

In this regard, perhaps the current debate serves to illustrate, as stated earlier, how neoliberalism itself is not necessarily a monolith but is “a heterogeneous banner of related, but diverse and shifting, ideas” (Whitworth, 2016, p. 413). In such a context, industry discourses regarding the Bill could be conceived as conforming to a more “strictly neoliberal system” (Haydock, 2014, p. 12), whereas the public health discourses could be viewed as embracing a more hybrid form of rule (Bacchi, 2009), combining, for example, “the twin thrusts of neoliberal paternalism” (Whitworth, 2016, p. 412) and resulting in “internally diverse and contradictory views of the subject” (p. 414)—that is, the essentially rational subject of neoliberalism versus the either irrational or unwilling subject of the hard paternalist.

How the ongoing debate over the Bill will unfold—and indeed whether the Bill will be enacted in full—will help to confirm the extent to which a more strictly neoliberal rationality is to be sustained or weakened in Ireland’s alcohol policymaking landscape. If the recent decision to abolish Ireland’s ban on Good Friday sale of alcohol (see, e.g., Kelly, 2017), as well as proposals to water down certain measures of the Bill (see, e.g., O’Brien, 2017), are any indication, it is likely that the contradictions inherent in the current alcohol policy landscape will, regardless, continue to be a common feature in Ireland, serving to maintain an already ambivalent attitude toward alcohol and its control in this country.

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Notes

1. For a brief comparison between “classical liberalism,” “expansive liberalism,” and neoliberalism, see Haydock (2014, p. 262).
2. Drink-driving in Ireland was first regulated under the Road Traffic Act (1961).
3. At the time of writing, further and stricter amendments to the legislation were being debated in government under the Road Traffic (Fixed Penalty-Drink Driving) Bill (see, e.g., Burns, 2017).
4. “Sovereign power” is described as a mentality that seeks to “perpetuate one’s rule over a given territory and its subjects,” whereas “disciplinary power” seeks to target “individual bodies and uses the techniques of surveillance and normalisation ‘to produce useful, calculable subjects’” (cited in Bacchi, 2009, pp. 26–27).
5. Thaler and Sunstein (2008), the authors of *Nudge*, define a “nudge” as “any aspect of the choice architecture that alters people’s behavior in a predictable way without forbidding any options or significantly changing their economic incentives” (p. 6).
6. Leonard (2008) outlines that: “A nudge steers the paternalized person, but always leaves open the option for the paternalized person to choose another course” (p. 356).
7. Referring to the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act (2012).
8. Specifically, they argued that the Act was incompatible with Article 34 Treaty on the Functioning of the EU (TFEU) allowing for the free movement of goods and that it could not be justified under Article 36 TFEU (circumstances in which derogation from Article 34 is justified—including on grounds of protection of health and life of humans, but only if appropriate and necessary for achieving the objective pursued; Bartlett, 2016).

9. Despite the EU ruling, the UK Supreme Court since ruled, in late 2017, that the Alcohol (Minimum Pricing) (Scotland) Act (2012) is in fact compatible with EU law and is appropriately targeted, lawful, and proportionate (see, e.g., Cramb, 2017). As a result, the legislation on minimum unit pricing is set to come into effect in Scotland in 2018.

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