As the reader may have gathered even from this inadequate account, Luhmann’s main intent is to reconceptualize and set within a comprehensive and distinctive theoretical framework arguments and findings many of which are fairly well-known. In this, as in other ways, Luhmann significantly resembles Parsons, but he also differs from him substantially. For instance, he criticizes Parsons’ overly “architectonic” approach to theory-building, and rejects his systematic over-reliance upon normative and value factors. Also, unlike Parsons, Luhmann is a very tough-minded thinker, with a shrewd and informed understanding of the contemporary realities-on-the-ground of politics and administration.

The question, with work of this nature, is: how much distinctively new insight is being generated? As far as this book is concerned, the answer must be: much, but not very much. Though in many ways it demonstrates Luhmann’s outstanding talents (among others, a stunning command of the vast international literature on power), this book lends itself to some criticism on its own terms, that is apart from objections one might raise against Luhmann’s overall theoretical perspective. The main reason why it is not wholly successful, in my view, is that it really constitutes one chapter from what one might call a serial treatise, that is one which Luhmann is producing in the form of a series of lengthy essays and shorter books. It is useful to Luhmann to publish his treatise in this fashion, since the feedback generated by each essay or book can inspire or improve those yet in the works. But the individual product tends to be somewhat elliptical, lacing as it does (when read as a self-standing book or essay) the hinterland constituted by the others, and which it needs to be fully made sense of.

Also, since this is the first lengthy piece to appear on the theme of the communication media, too much of its argument deals with what all media have in common (some chapters treat money or truth almost as extensively as they do power). Furthermore it does not deal systematically with the relations between individual media; it left me quite unclear, for instance, as to exactly how the uses of money as a separate medium relate to its uses as a power-basis.

Thus, Macht would not constitute a good point-of-entry for readers determined to improve their sociology (and stretch their German) by coming to terms with Luhmann. One might start rather with some of the essays in Soziologische Aufklärung (2nd ed., Westdeutscher, 1972) or with the lengthier (and more arduous) pieces in the Habermas-Luhmann book, or with the first few chapters in Vertrauen: Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität (2nd ed., Enke, 1973). Only after thus grasping Luhmann’s main message will one be able to evaluate properly, and possibly make full use of, his discussion of power in this book.


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There is a belief among sociologists and others that the talk in bars and taxicabs is somehow truer and more revealing than the conversation of work, home, or interview. In this study, E. E. LeMasters reports on his three years as a patron
of a working class bar in a suburban area of Madison, Wisconsin. Since ethnographic studies of American taverns and tavern talk are too few, I opened the book with the anticipation of tasting Chivas Regal. What I found was only bar sherry.

Two questions form the organizing themes of the book. In one the author is interested in the problem of the homogenization of American life styles. Since the tavern he studied was chiefly frequented by construction workers and their families, he explores the possible existence of a working class life style under income conditions that permit a more middle-class standard. The second question is more directly aimed at the study of bars and alcohol. Here he is concerned with the functions of the family-type tavern in the lives of the working class. There are separate chapters on aspects of life style—work, marriage, kin, children, sex, politics, and race. There are two chapters on tavern social life and on drinking patterns. LeMasters’ earlier work having been on family, it is understandable that the book is dominated by this facet of life.

LeMasters originally entered the tavern as just another customer, but his evident professional status led him, after a year, to express intentions to write a book about blue-collar people’s feelings toward American society. Fortunately, a proficiency at pool enabled him to play on the tavern team and participate in the social life of the bar. The heavy representation of the “blue-collar elite” of skilled construction workers made it a good location at which to study the homogenization thesis. Conversations were recorded sometime after their occurrence—usually within an hour after returning home.

LeMasters’ work leads him to the general view of Herbert Gans, Bennett Berger, and Mirra Komarovsky; “the homogenization process, if it exists, is far from complete” (p. 197). The construction workers do not express feelings of alienation toward their work. They find great satisfactions in their craft and competence. In their styles of life, they practice more sexual segregation than seems to LeMasters typical of middle-class “togetherness.” In general, in their attitudes expressed toward marriage, sex, children, and politics, “these men are reactionary—that is, they yearn for the America that began to disappear yesterday or the day before” (p. 90).

Using the bar as a “good listening post” LeMasters records a political sentiment of deep cynicism toward government and politics. In the 1960s, when the study was done, they were no longer loyal Democrats but had become “swing” voters whose prevalent attitudes suggested a Nixon conservatism and/or support for George Wallace. They were critical of welfare programs, applauded the police action in the 1968 confrontations at the Democratic convention, and were clearly resentful of the movements toward Black equality and Women’s Liberation.

It is marriage and male-female relations that occupy much of the interest of the author in this study. Here he sees great divergence from middle-class styles and a distinctive working-class ethic, especially among the men. Both the men and women in The Oasis (the bar LeMasters studied) express a disenchantment with marriage and a sense of continuing conflict. The men seek companionship in their own segregated sex groups while the women struggle to keep them home. The husbands fight to maintain independence and supremacy while the women are beginning to demand the kinds of egalitarian marriages which have become the ideal of the middle-class in America. Marriages survive among...
the customers of The Oasis but, as LeMasters indicates, “love” is not a descriptive term used by marital partners. In general, both in and out of marriage, “The basic attitude of men and women... toward each other seems to be that of wary distrust” (p. 88).

The shallowness of the ethnography practiced here makes the writer’s conclusions dubious. Conversations are reported with little contextual information. We do not know who the speakers are; their history, their fuller pattern of social and marital relationships. LeMasters takes everything for granted, as if talk bears no relationship to its setting or to those with whom one is talking. He forgets that the book’s subtitle is “Life Styles at a Working Class Tavern.” The talk is just that—talk in a particular male-dominated setting with specific listeners and its own rules. In a universe of many realities, in vino is only one veritas.

It is more convincing when the speakers are discussing distant objects and events, as in politics. When they refer to subtle and multiple levels of a human relationship as complex as marriage or familial life, the sociologist should be especially careful not to accept the cynicism of talk as all there is to the “reality.” LeMasters apparently made no effort, even in the three year span, to go beyond what may well be a fashionable pattern of male cynicism, to observe behavior, or talk to customers in some other setting. Compared to the attentiveness to ambiguity and ambivalence and defensive talk which Liebow used in studying marriage in Tally’s Corner, LeMasters treats his bar peers as if they were respondents to an attitude questionnaire. This loses much of the virtues of the ethnographic method.

The book is most useful as a study of bar behavior. Here it does make a contribution to the small ethnographic literature on American drinking patterns. Particularly interesting are the insights and reports about the relation of work to drinking. LeMasters suggests that their sense of responsibility about the job supplies time limits to the construction workers’ drinking. Unemployment, by removing those limits, puts the worker in a leisure-time situation which encourages excessive drinking. His description of the tavern as a center of working-class social life is an effective reminder of its role in recreational life and sociability.

The book suffers from being two very different books. In one, LeMasters uses the talk of the tavern as a way of trying to learn about something outside the tavern—work, marriage, politics. In the other, the tavern is itself the subject, and he reports what he saw and what he heard in and about that setting. I wish he had taken to heart the advice of the mother of an earlier generation who said to her teenaged daughter about to attend her first drinking party: “Never mix, never worry.”

As a book about the American worker, it lacks the depth necessary for an adequate analysis of working class life styles. As a book about “normal” drinking patterns and settings, it makes a small contribution to much-needed literature. Blue Collar Aristocrats is hardly a work that produces much intellectual intoxication or even a scholarly “buzz.” I expected a much stronger brew and am disappointed to find only a mild aperitif.