

## How Progressive Was Prohibition?

Commentary on Mark Lawrence Schrad, *Smashing the Liquor Machine: A Global History of Prohibition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021) for the Francesco Guicciardini Prize Forum, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, 2023. To be published with DOI 10.1080/09557571.2023.2274738 at <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09557571.2023.2274738>.

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In a 2001 global survey of psychoactive commerce I observed that transnational campaigns to restrict or prohibit alcohol and other drugs were “fundamentally progressive in nature.”<sup>1</sup>

*Smashing the Liquor Machine* is a 750-page case for excising the word “fundamentally.” Schrad argues that temperance and prohibition efforts in all countries and colonies were progressive reforms, period.

Schrad casts prohibition as a global struggle to eliminate predatory systems of liquor trafficking rather than an attempt to suppress individuals’ right to imbibe. Once we see that liquor traffickers ranked with slaver traders and imperialists as thieves of human freedom, we can properly understand prohibition of their commerce as integral to “the long-term people’s movement to strengthen international norms in defense of human rights, human dignity, and human equality, against traditional exploitation” (552). If we spin the globe and stab our fingers, we will find prohibitionists who opposed slavery, militarism, and imperialism. Or who championed woman

suffrage and social democracy, if not an outright socialist state. Frederick Douglass's famous line, "all great reforms go together," serves as the book's unifying theme.

Reformers' hatred of the liquor traffic stemmed from its protean ability to addict, exploit, and corrupt. Schrad catalogs the traffic's evils. Extractive tax-and-tavern systems, as in Czarist Russia. "Alco-imperialism" against colonized peoples, as in the Congo Free State. Venal-voting alliances with thuggish political machines, as in the United States. Cozy arrangements with reactionary aristocracies, as in Bismarckian and Wilhelmine Germany. Progressive prohibitionists wanted to take the broom of reform to the lot.

Schrad is not the first historian to place temperance and prohibition in the reform mainstream. That distinction goes to James H. Timberlake, who, sixty years ago, published *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement, 1900-1920*.<sup>2</sup> Schrad's contribution, however, is novel and ambitious. He has shaped years of reading and archival research into a comparative global history, enriched with fresh vignettes and subaltern perspectives. The international cast of characters, from European politicians like Sweden's Hjalmar Branting to Seneca chief and orator Sagoyewatha (Red Jacket), alone makes the book worth reading. Some case studies of liquor predation, such as the account of alco-imperialism in the Philippines after the War of 1898, will rattle even specialists.

Rattling specialists is what Schrad means to do. More than a transnational history of prohibition, *Smashing the Liquor Machine* sets out to smash temperance and prohibition historiography. From his first pages Schrad takes aim at journalists and historians who have advanced cultural and religious accounts of the reform's history. Like a gunfighter entering a saloon, he pushes

through the swinging doors of political and economic reform, draws his guns, and calls out befuddled adversaries slumped over the socio-cultural bar.

It is a long bar. On one end are historian Richard Hofstadter and sociologist Joseph Gusfield, who, in the 1950s and early 1960s, poisoned the well with influential but under-researched and over-theorized narratives featuring prohibitionists as interfering moralizers driven by resentment. Pseudo-reformers, Hofstadter called them, beset by “the shabbiness of the evangelical mind.”<sup>3</sup> At the other end of the bar are latter-day writers and documentarians like James Marone, Daniel Okrent, W. J. Rorabaugh, Ken Burns, and Lynn Novick. In Schrad’s telling, their narratives compound the original sin of psychologizing dry activists by understating or missing altogether reformers’ focus on the liquor traffic, as opposed to drinking liquor itself. From the temperance movement’s inception in the 1820s, Schrad writes, “it wasn’t the alcohol that was considered evil, but the act of making money by selling it to others” (545).

Yes and no. The tavern and saloon and their colonial or frontier equivalents, drink shops and liquor-stocked trading posts, were exploitative, corrupting, vice-harboring enterprises that merited strict regulation, if not outright suppression. But during the nineteenth century reformers became increasingly convinced that alcohol itself threatened the well-being of individuals, families, nations, and entire races via teratogenic and degenerative hereditary effects. As Timberlake argued, and Schrad acknowledges, progressives marshalled a growing body of scientific and medical evidence about alcohol’s harms. They recognized that liquor had become vastly cheaper to manufacture and transport. And they knew that outlawing the traffic would raise prices, reduce access, and cut alcohol consumption, which is what in fact happened during the global prohibition wave of the early twentieth century. Prohibition may not always have

aimed at legislating virtue, but it did aim at improving individual and collective health by curtailing access to beverage alcohol.

Prohibitionists also meant to improve morals. Gandhi condemned, not just selling drink, but drink itself. He called alcohol a moral poison that clouded reason and dissolved conscience. The British would not have so cruelly foisted drink on India had they not been drinkers themselves, he observed in 1921. “I hold drink to be more damnable than thieving and perhaps even prostitution,” he wrote later that year. “Is it not often the parent of both?” As for self-purification, it was impossible without giving up alcohol, as well as ganja, opium, and visiting prostitutes.<sup>4</sup>

Like Gandhi, most progressives carried large anti-vice portfolios. Wilbur Crafts, a devout Presbyterian minister and transnational activist, attacked even the medicinal use of alcohol, not to say narcotics, cigarettes, gambling, Sabbath sports, and “vulgar” movies, whose censorship he successfully advocated.<sup>5</sup> Crafts was quite happy to legislate individual morality, which is presumably why Schrad accords him only a single, cameo appearance (441). Yet Crafts, who in 1895 founded the International Reform Bureau and who took his purity crusade to twenty-nine countries, was as prolific, peripatetic, and progressive as the book’s featured hero, William “Pussyfoot” Johnson. Crafts even championed Esperanto, which, like many secular reformers, he thought the key to universal betterment. A true *lingua franca* would make it easier for all great reforms to go together.<sup>6</sup>

The anti-vice activities of Crafts and many other dry activists were broader, more religiously inflected, and more intrusive than the liquor-traffic-focused thesis allows. I say many activists, not all. What is fascinating about temperance and prohibition, key components of what historians

now call global anti-vice activism,<sup>7</sup> is that they sprang from so many different religious and economic temperaments. Some anti-alcohol reformers, like the influential Swiss psychiatrist, neuroanatomist, eugenicist, and socialist Auguste Forel, were secular intellectuals who repudiated capitalism. (Forel makes no appearance in Schrad's pages, owing perhaps to the inconvenient fact that he was a frank racist.) Other reformers, like Crafts, were tactically modern religious authoritarians who accepted capitalism but who sought, on morally reactionary grounds, to outlaw certain of its products and amusements.

For all its length, *Smashing the Liquor Machine* omits evidence and personalities that fail to dovetail with its opening proclamation, "Everything You Know about Prohibition is Wrong" (1). Everything you know about Prohibition is not wrong, including claims that racial, ethnic, and class considerations shaped reform. The point applies to both the laws and the manner of their enforcement, particularly in the United States. In *The War on Alcohol* Lisa McGirr, another historian who draws Schrad's fire, has shown that prohibition enforcement was selective. Proprietors and patrons of swanky watering holes like New York City's Cotton Club had little to fear. Not so poor whites, African Americans, and immigrants who bootlegged, or simply possessed, liquor.<sup>8</sup>

Selective enforcement bred resentment among the socially marginal, those whom Schrad insists prohibition was meant to liberate and uplift. (The same thing happened with narcotics enforcement, though blowback mattered less for narcotic policy because opiate addicts and marijuana smokers were less numerous and politically active than drinkers.) Again, the story is complicated. And ironic, considering that the dry crusade's iniquitous and moralizing

elements—highlighted by the alcohol industry’s public relations organs as well as by suspicious historians—helped to normalize post-Repeal drinking and to keep national prohibition buried.

Many of Schrad’s criticisms, particularly of Hofstadter’s smuggerly, hit home. However, by taking on so many historians of American prohibition (or historians of American evangelicals’ international influence, as in the case of Ian Tyrell), Schrad draws attention from the comparative history of his first seven chapters, the book’s real strength. “The history of temperance and prohibition in any other country is vastly overshadowed by the voluminous historical literature about the United States,” Schrad observes (11). That is exactly right. Puzzling, then, that he should devote nine chapters to the United States—more than to the rest of the world—and spend most of his introduction and conclusion quarreling with historians of American temperance and prohibition.

Schrad’s attack mode is better suited to the global liquor traffic. Like the progressives he champions, he amasses evidence that it was everywhere a corrupt enterprise begging for reform. In hindsight it was the most socially regressive species of capitalism, the limbic variety, in which cut-throat businesses (and the governments and gangs with which they were complicit) maximized consumption of neurotoxic products that rewarded and rewired consumers’ brains. Limbic capitalism radiated externalities, not least alcoholism and alcohol poisoning.

Schrad underscores the point by likening liquor manufacturers and wholesalers to Purdue Pharma, the manufacturer and promoter of OxyContin, and McKesson, one of the opioid’s regulation-skirting distributors (558). Booze trafficking was the scandalous and addictive equivalent of an earlier era. Someone had to act.

They did. Sometimes too aggressively. And often with mixed motives and biased enforcement. Major reform movements are congeries whose parts do not all fit together. That was true of prohibition. Admitting, even embracing, this reality in no way interferes with rehabilitating prohibition as—to reassert the adverb—a fundamentally progressive reform.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> David T. Courtwright, *Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2001), 206.

<sup>2</sup> James H. Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement, 1900-1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to FDR* (New York: Vintage, 1955), 288.

<sup>4</sup> *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* (November 1920-April 1921), vol. 19 (Government of India: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 1966), 285; vol. 20 (April-August 1921), 191; vol. 21 (August-December 1921), 20.

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<sup>5</sup> “Film Censors for Virginia,” *New York Times*, March 18, 1922, p. 6,  
<https://timesmachine.nytimes.com/timesmachine/1922/03/18/issue.html>.

<sup>6</sup> David T. Courtwright, *The Age of Addiction: How Bad Habits Became Big Business* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2019), 101-102, 114, 115, recounts Crafts’s career and outlook.

<sup>7</sup> *Global Anti-Vice Activism: Fighting Drinks, Drugs, and ‘Immorality,’ 1890-1950*, ed. Jessica R. Pliley, Robert Kramm, and Harald Fischer-Tiné (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>8</sup> Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: Norton, 2016), 67-102.