Symbolic Crusade

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For many observers of American life the Temperance movement is evidence for an excessive moral perfectionism and an overly legalistic bent to American culture. It seems the action of devoted sectarians who are unable to compromise with human impulse. The legal measures taken to enforce abstinence display the reputed American faith in the power of Law to correct all evils. This moralism and utopianism bring smiles to the cynical and fear to the sinners. Such a movement seems at once naive, intolerant, saintly, and silly.

Although controversies of morality, religion, and culture have been recognized as endemic elements of American politics, they have generally been viewed as minor themes in the interplay of economic and class conflicts. Only in recent years have American historians and social scientists de-emphasized economic issues as the major points of dissension in American society. We share this newer point of view, especially in its insistence on the significant role of cultural conflicts in American politics. Our social system has not experienced the sharp class organization and class conflict which have been so salient in European history. Under continuous conditions of relative affluence and without a feudal resistance to nineteenth-century commercialism and industry, American society has possessed a comparatively high degree of consensus on economic matters. In its bland attitude toward class issues, political controversy in the United States has given only a limited role to strong economic antagonisms. Controversies of personality, cultural difference, and the nuances of style and morality have occupied part of the political stage. Consensus about fundamentals of governmental form, free enterprise economy, and church power has left a political vacuum which moral issues have partially filled. Differences between ethnic groups, cultures, and religious organizations have been able to assume a greater importance than has been true of societies marked by deeper economic divisions. "...agreement on fundamentals will permit almost every kind of social conflict, tension and difference to find political expression."

It is within an analytical context of concern with noneconomic issues that we have studied the Temperance movement. This is a study of moral reform as a political and social issue. We have chosen the Temperance movement because of its persistence and power in the history of the United States. Typical of moral reform efforts, Temperance has usually been the attempt of the moral people, in this case the abstainers, to correct the behavior of the immoral people, in this case the drinkers. The issue has appeared as a moral one, divorced from any direct economic interests in abstinence or indulgence. This quality of "disinterested reform" is the analytical focus of our study.

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3 Benson, op. cit., p. 275.
This book is an interpretation rather than a history because our interest is largely with the analysis of what is already known of the movement rather than with the presentation of new data. Some new field data will be presented and some new primary historical material has been gathered. A large number of already published materials has been utilized. Our interest is not in a definitive history of the movement. We have written within the methodological perspective of the sociologist interested in the general process of moral reform. Our concern is with the structural and cultural roots of the movement and with the consequences of Temperance activities and goals for its adherents, its "victims," and the relations between these two.

The sociologist picks up where the historian closes. Put in another way, he delves into the assumptions with which the historian begins. The amount written about Temperance is monumentally staggering to someone who tries to read it all. Claims, counterclaims, factual histories, and proceedings of organizations overwhelm us in their immensity. Despite the plethora of documents and analyses, we are left with either partisan writings, histories which preach, or analyses which fail to go beyond general remarks about moral perfectionism, rural-urban conflict, or the Protestant envy of the sinner. It is here, in the analysis of the process, that the sociologist focuses his interest. He studies just that which is so often ad hoc to the interpretation of the historian.

In this book we will describe the relation between Temperance attitudes, the organized Temperance movement, and the conflicts between divergent subcultures in American society. Issues of moral reform are analyzed as one way through which a cultural group acts to preserve, defend, or enhance the dominance and prestige of its own style of living within the total society. In the set of religious, ethnic, and cultural communities that have made up American society, drinking (and abstinence) has been one of the significant consumption habits distinguishing one subculture from another. It has been one of the major characteristics through which Americans have defined their own cultural commitments. The "drunken bum," "the sophisticated gourmet," or the "blue-nosed teetotaler" are all terms by which we express our approval or disapproval of cultures by reference to the moral position they accord drinking. Horace Greeley recognized this cultural base to political loyalties and animosities in the 1844 elections in New York state: "Upon those Working Men who stick to their business, hope to improve their circumstances by honest industry and go on Sundays to church rather than to the grogshop [italics added] the appeals of Loco-Focoism fell comparatively harmless; while the opposite class were rallied with unprecedented unanimity against us."

Precisely because drinking and nondrinking have been ways to identify the members of a subculture, drinking and abstinence became symbols of social status, identifying social levels of the society whose styles of life separated them culturally. They indicated to what culture the actor was committed and hence what social groups he took as his models of imitation and avoidance and his points of positive and negative reference for judging his behavior. The rural, native American Protestant of the nineteenth century respected Temperance ideals. He adhered

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4 A major exception to this is John A. Krout, The Origins of Prohibition (New York: A. A. Knopf, 1925). Even Peter Odegard’s otherwise excellent work on Pressure Politics (New York: Columbia University Press, 1928) is marred by his utter lack of sympathy with Temperance goals. The same moralistic condemnation of moralism limits the utility of the very recent work of Andrew Sinclair, Prohibition (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1962).
5 Quoted in Benson, op. cit., p. 199.
to a culture in which self-control, industriousness, and impulse renunciation were both praised and made necessary. Any lapse was a serious threat to his system of respect. Sobriety was virtuous and, in a community dominated by middle-class Protestants, necessary to social acceptance and to self-esteem. In the twentieth century this is less often true. As Americans are less work-minded, more urban, and less theological, the same behavior which once brought rewards and self-assurance to the abstainer today more often brings contempt and rejection. The demands for self-control and individual industry count for less in an atmosphere of teamwork where tolerance, good interpersonal relations, and the ability to relax oneself and others are greatly prized. Abstinence has lost much of its utility to confer prestige and esteem.

Our attention to the significance of drink and abstinence as symbols of membership in status groups does not imply that religious and moral beliefs have not been important in the Temperance movement. We are not reducing moral reform to something else. Instead, we are adding something. Religious motives and moral fervor do not happen in vacuums, apart from a specific setting. We have examined the social conditions which made the facts of other people's drinking especially galling to the abstainer and the need for reformist action acutely pressing to him. These conditions are found in the development of threats to the socially dominant position of the Temperance adherent by those whose style of life differs from his. As his own claim to social respect and honor are diminished, the sober, abstaining citizen seeks for public acts through which he may reaffirm the dominance and prestige of his style of life. Converting the sinner to virtue is one way; law is another. Even if the law is not enforced or enforceable, the symbolic import of its passage is important to the reformer. It settles the controversies between those who represent clashing cultures. The public support of one conception of morality at the expense of another enhances the prestige and self-esteem of the victors and degrades the culture of the losers.

In its earliest development, Temperance was one way in which a declining social elite tried to retain some of its social power and leadership. The New England Federalist "aristocracy" was alarmed by the political defeats of the early nineteenth century and by the decreased deference shown their clergy. The rural farmer, the evangelical Protestant, and the uneducated middle class appeared as a rising social group who rejected the social status, as well as political power, of the Federalist leadership. In the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the moral supremacy of the educated was under attack by the frontiersman, the artisan, and the independent farmer. The Federalist saw his own declining status in the increased power of the drinker, the ignorant, the secularist, and the religious revivalist. During the 1820's, the men who founded the Temperance movement sought to make Americans into a clean, sober, godly, and decorous people whose aspirations and style of living would reflect the moral leadership of New England Federalism. If they could not control the politics of the country, they reasoned that they might at least control its morals.

Spurred by religious revivalism, Temperance became more ultraist than its founders had intended. The settling of frontiers and the influx of non-Protestant cultures increased the symbolic importance of morality and religious behavior in distinguishing between the reputable

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6 The term "Temperance" is an inadequate name for a movement which preaches total abstinence rather than "temperate" use of alcohol. The word was affixed to the movement in its early years (1820's) when its doctrine was not yet as extreme as it later came to be.
and the disreputable. During the 1830's and 1840's, it became a large and influential movement, composed of several major organizations. Religious dedication and a sober life were becoming touchstones of middle-class respectability. Large numbers of men were attracted to Temperance organizations as a means of self-help. In the interests of social and economic mobility, they sought to preserve their abstinence or reform their own drinking habits. Abstinence was becoming a symbol of middle-class membership and a necessity for ambitious and aspiring young men. It was one of the ways society could distinguish the industrious from the ne'er-do-well; the steady worker from the unreliable drifter; the good credit risk from the bad gamble; the native American from the immigrant. In this process the movement lost its association with New England upper classes and became democratized.

The political role of Temperance emerged in the 1840's in its use as a symbol of native and immigrant, Protestant and Catholic tensions. The "disinterested reformer" of the 1840's was likely to see the curtailment of alcohol sales as a way of solving the problems presented by an immigrant, urban poor whose culture clashed with American Protestantism. He sensed the rising power of these strange, alien peoples and used Temperance legislation as one means of impressing upon the immigrant the central power and dominance of native American Protestant morality. Along with Abolition and Nativism, Temperance formed one of a trio of major movements during the 1840's and 1850's.

Throughout its history, Temperance has revealed two diverse types of disinterested reform. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, these had become clear and somewhat distinct elements within the movement. One was an assimilative reform. Here the reformer was sympathetic to the plight of the urban poor and critical of the conditions produced by industry and the factory system. This urban, progressivist impulse in Temperance reflected the fears of an older, established social group at the sight of rising industrialism. While commercial and professional men saw America changing from a country of small towns to one of cities, they were still socially dominant. The norm of abstinence had become the public morality after the Civil War. In the doctrines of abstinence they could still offer the poor and the immigrants a way of living which had the sanction of respect and success attached to it. Through reform of the drinker, the middle-class professional and businessman coped with urban problems in a way which affirmed his sense of cultural dominance. He could feel his own social position affirmed by a Temperance argument that invited the drinker (whom he largely identified with the poor, the alien, and the downtrodden) to follow the reformer's habits and lift himself to middle-class respect and income. He was even able to denounce the rich for their sumptuary sophistication. He could do this because he felt secure that abstinence was still the public morality. It was not yet somebody else's America.

A more hostile attitude to reform is found when the object of the reformer's efforts is no longer someone he can pity or help. Coercive reform emerges when the object of reform is seen as an intractable defender of another culture, someone who rejects the reformer's values and really doesn't want to change. The champion of assimilative reform viewed the drinker as part of a social system in which the reformer's culture was dominant. On this assumption, his invitation to the drinker to reform made sense. The champion of coercive reform cannot make this assumption. He sees the object of reform as someone who rejects the social dominance of the reformer and denies the legitimacy of his life style. Since the dominance of his culture and the
social status of his group are denied, the coercive reformer turns to law and force as ways to affirm it.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, coercive reform was most evident in the Populist wing of the Temperance movement. As a phase of the rural distrust of the city, it was allied to an agrarian radicalism which fought the power of industrial and urban political and economic forces. Already convinced that the old, rural middle class was losing out in the sweep of history, the Populist as Temperance adherent could not assume that his way of life was still dominant in America. He had to fight it out by political action which would coerce the public definition of what is moral and respectable. He had to shore up his waning self-esteem by inflicting his morality on everybody.

As America became more urban, more secular, and more Catholic, the sense of declining status intensifies the coercive, Populist elements in the Temperance movement. The political defeat of Populism in both North and South heightened the decline, so evident in the drama of William Jennings Bryan. With the development of the Anti-Saloon League in 1896, the Temperance movement began to separate itself from a complex of economic and social reforms and concentrate on the cultural struggle of the traditional rural Protestant society against the developing urban and industrial social system. Coercive reform became the dominating theme of Temperance. It culminated in the drive for national Prohibition. The Eighteenth Amendment was the high point of the struggle to assert the public dominance of old middle-class values. It established the victory of Protestant over Catholic, rural over urban, tradition over modernity, the middle class over both the lower and the upper strata.

The significance of Prohibition is in the fact that it happened. The establishment of Prohibition laws was a battle in the struggle for status between two divergent styles of life. It marked the public affirmation of the abstemious, ascetic qualities of American Protestantism. In this sense, it was an act of ceremonial deference toward old middle-class culture. If the law was often disobeyed and not enforced, the respectability of its adherents was honored in the breach. After all, it was their law that drinkers had to avoid.

If Prohibition was the high point of old middle-class defense, Repeal was the nadir. As the Prohibition period lengthened and resistance solidified, Temperance forces grew more hostile, coercive, and nativist. The more assimilative, progressivist adherents were alienated from a movement of such soured Populism. In 1928, anti-Catholic and anti-urban forces led the movement with a "knockout punch" thrown at Al Smith in an open ring. By 1933, they had lost their power and their fight. In the Great Depression both the old order of nineteenth-century economics and the culture of the Temperance ethic were cruelly discredited.

The repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment gave the final push to the decline of old middle-class values in American culture. Since 1933, the Temperance movement has seen itself fighting a losing battle against old enemies and new ones. In contemporary American society, even in his own local communities, it is the total abstainer who is the despised nonconformist. The Protestant churches and the public schools are no longer his allies. The respectable, upper middle-class citizen can no longer be safely counted upon to support abstinence.
What underlies the tragic dilemmas of the Temperance movement are basic changes in the American social system and culture during the past half-century. As we have changed from a commercial society to an industrial one, we have developed a new set of values in which self-control, impulse renunciation, discipline, and sobriety are no longer such hallowed virtues. Thorstein Veblen, himself the epitome of the rural, middle-class Protestant, saw the new society of consumers coming into being. In his satirical fashion, he depicted a society in which leisure and consumption fixed mens' status and took precedence over the work-mindedness and efficiency concerns of his own Norwegian-American farm communities. More recently, David Riesman has brilliantly depicted the major outlines of this society by pointing to the intensity with which modern Americans are replacing an interest in work and morality with an interest in interpersonal relations and styles of consuming leisure.

For the "other-directed" man neither the intolerance nor the seriousness of the abstainer is acceptable. Nor is the intense rebelliousness and social isolation of the hard drinker acceptable. Analysis of American alcohol consumption is consistent with this. The contemporary American is less likely than his nineteenth-century ancestor to be either a total abstainer or a hard drinker. Moderation is his drinking watchword. One must get along with others and liquor has proven to be a necessary and effective facilitator to sociability. It relaxes reserve and permits fellowship at the same time that it displays the drinker's tolerance for some moral lapse in himself and others.

For those who have grown up to believe in the validity of the Temperance ethic, American culture today seems a strange system in which Truth is condemned as Falsehood and Vice as Virtue. The total abstainer finds himself the exponent of a point of view which is rejected in the centers of urban and national society and among their followers at all levels of American communities. Self-control and foresight made sense in a scarcity, production-minded economy. In an easygoing, affluent society, the credit mechanism has made the Ant a fool and the Grasshopper a hero of the counter-cyclical maintenance of consumer demand. In a consumption-centered society, people must learn to have fun and be good mixers if they are to achieve respect. Not Horatio Alger but Playboy magazine is the instructor of the college boy who wants to learn the skills of social ascent. Though they have their noses to the grindstone, their feet must tap to the sound of the dance.

It is at this point that the study of Temperance assumes significance for a general understanding of contemporary American politics and social tensions. Social systems and cultures die slowly, leaving their rear guards behind to fight delaying action. Even after they have ceased to be relevant economic groups, the old middle classes of America are still searching for some way to restore a sense of lost respect. The dishonoring of their values is a part of the process of cultural and social change. A heightened stress on the importance of tradition is a major response of such "doomed classes."

This fundamentalist defense is a primary motif in the current phase of Temperance. To different degrees and within different areas, the contemporary Temperance adherent is part of the rear guard with which small-town America and commercial capitalism fight their losing battle against a nationalized culture and an industrial economy of mass organizations. Increasingly, he fights alone. Churches, schools, and public officials are disdainful of "rigid" attitudes and doctrines. Within the American middle class, in almost all communities, there is a sharp split between two
stylistic components. In one the abstainer can feel at home. Here the local community of
neighbors and townsmen is the point of reference for behavior. In the other, the more
cosmopolitan centers of urban institutions are mediated to the town through national institutions,
communications media, and the two-way geographical mobility which brings in newcomers and
sends out college students for training elsewhere. The clash between the drinker and the
abstainer reflects these diverse references. The localistic culture clings to the traditional while the
easier, relaxed, modern ways are the province of the national culture. It is this national culture
which becomes the more prestigeful and powerful as America becomes more homogeneous.

The anger and bitterness of the "doomed class" is by no means an "irrational" reaction. There has
been a decline in the social status of the old middle class and in the dominance of his values.
This sense of anger at the loss of status and bitterness about lowered self-esteem pervades the
entire Temperance movement today. It takes a number of forms. At one extreme and within
certain Temperance elements, it is expressed as a general, diffuse criticism of modern political
and social doctrines and a defense of tradition in almost all areas of American life. At the other
extreme, within other parts of the Temperance movement, it is part of the intense nationalism,
economic conservatism, and social stagnation of the radical right. (This latter is especially true of
the Prohibition Party.)

The study of the American Temperance movement is a phase of the process by which, as
Richard Hofstadter expressed it, "a large part of the Populist-Progressive tradition has turned
sour, become illiberal and ill-tempered."^7 The values and the economic position of the native
American Protestant, old middle class of individual enterprisers have been losing out in the
shuffle of time and social change. The efforts of the old middle class and of those who have built
their self-conceptions on their values to defend and restore their lost prestige have taken a
number of forms. In fluoridation, domestic Communism, school curricula, and the United
Nations, they have found issues which range tradition against modernity. Temperance has been
one of the classic issues on which divergent cultures have faced each other in America. Such
issues of style have been significant because they have been ways through which groups have
tried to handle the problems which have been important to them.

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