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Author(s): S. J. Mennell

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Prohibition: a Sociological View¹

by S. J. MENNELL
University of Exeter

I

Prohibition was a fascinating episode in American history which has attracted the attention of a number of writers.² This paper does not seek to present any new historical evidence. Perhaps, in history as well as in photography, over-enlargement can lead to loss of definition, so the object is to assess what evidence is appropriate in answering various questions about Prohibition.

First, should we dismiss Prohibition as an aberration of no historical consequence? If we do, we are expressing only our own viewpoint, but saying nothing about the importance of the alcohol issue in the eyes of the American people at the time. As Richard Hofstadter has written, 'The truth is that Prohibition appeared to the men of the Twenties as a major

¹ An earlier draft of this paper was read to the Colloquium on 'America in the 1920s' held at the University of Exeter on 8 February 1969. I should like to thank my colleagues at Exeter, especially Professor G. D. Mitchell, Dr M. Hewitt, Mr M. Shaw and Mr J. Stanyer, as well as Mr C. A. Sheingold of Harvard University, for their helpful criticisms.

² Among historians, Andrew Sinclair's *Prohibition: Era of Excess* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962) is a particularly brilliant presentation of massive evidence. See also H. Asbury, *The Great Illusion: An Informal History of Prohibition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1950); C. Merz, *The Dry Decade* (New York: Doubleday Doran, 1931); J. H. Timberlake, *Prohibition and the Progressive Movement 1900-20* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1963). There have been a number of useful studies of individual States: N. H. Clark, *The Dry Years: Prohibition and Social Change in Washington* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1965); G. M. Ostrander, *The Prohibition Movement in California 1848-1933* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957); J. B. Sellers, *The Prohibition Movement in Alabama 1702-1943* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1943); D. J. Whitener, *Prohibition in North Carolina, 1715-1945* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1945). One sociologist has made a major study of the American temperance movement: see J. R. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1963); 'Social Structure and Moral Reform: A Study of the Women's Christian Temperance Union', *American Journal of Sociology* 61 (3) (1955), 221-32; 'Status Conflicts and Changing Ideologies of the American Temperance Movement' (in D. Pittman and C. Snyder (eds.), *Society, Culture and Drinking Patterns*, New York: Wiley, 1962). M. Nelson, 'Prohibition: A Case Study of Societal Misguidance', *American Behavioural Scientist*, 12 (2) (1968), 37-43, cites some of the same literature. This article reached me too late to be fully discussed here. Its chief aim is to fit the Prohibition drive of 1913-17 into the categories of Etzioni's 'theory of societal guidance', which I do not find especially illuminating. Nelson's concern is particularly with the organizational aspects of the movement, and is thus complementary to mine.

issue because it *was* a major issue...¹ That Prohibition in the 1920s rested not on an ordinary Congressional statute, but on an amendment to the Federal Constitution, which made it part of the most basic and sacred law of the land, should emphasize the salience of the issue. To change the Constitution requires that the amendment be passed with a two-thirds majority by both Houses of Congress, and then ratified by the legislatures² of three-quarters of the States of the Union—by 36 out of the then 48 States. It is not easily done, and had previously been achieved only seven times since the adoption of the Bill of Rights in 1791. This gives some indication of the degree of popular support which had to be mobilised to carry the 18th Amendment, which from January 1920 forbade ‘the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors within, the importation thereof into, or the exportation thereof from the United States’. And equally it indicates the support necessary to reverse the decision by the 21st Amendment fourteen years later. The problem is to account for the success of *two* popular movements, antithetical yet separated in time by only a few years.

How then did it come about that suppression of alcohol consumption was elevated to the status of a principle of the state equal to that of separation of powers or *habeas corpus*? The movement to legislate against liquor had deep roots.³ In the years before the Civil War, many northern and midwestern States had adopted Prohibition laws. This was a consequence of the growing social consciousness of the churches in the 1840s and 1850s. Such famous anti-slavery orators as William Lloyd Garrison also thundered against Demon Rum. But the movement lost its strength in the Civil War, and most of the existing legislation was repealed. The liquor trade boomed between 1860 and 1880, and drunkenness became a major social problem. Liquor interests frequently allied themselves to corrupt politicians and vice rings, the saloon becoming a centre of prostitution, crime and political graft.

The members of the Protestant churches saw this situation as a direct challenge to their values, and went into politics to clean up government and smash the liquor rings. The Methodists were everywhere prominent

¹ R. Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform: From Bryan to F.D.R.* (New York: Knopf, 1956), p. 287.

² Or by conventions in three-quarters of the States—the procedure adopted for the 21st Amendment.

³ J. A. Krout, *The Origins of Prohibition* (New York: Knopf, 1925), traces the temperance movement from early colonial times to the first important prohibition legislation, the Maine law of 1851. E. H. Cherrington, a leader of the Anti-Saloon League, takes the story to the 18th Amendment in his *The Evolution of Prohibition in the United States* (Westerville, Ohio: American Issue Press, 1920). See briefly A. S. Link, *American Epoch* (New York: Knopf, 1955), pp. 36–7, on whose summary of nineteenth-century prohibition drives I have drawn here.

leaders, in alliance with other Protestant groups such as the Southern Baptists. Their aims were 'local option' or State prohibition. They precipitated a second wave of temperance legislation in the 1880s.

Two church-based organisations are central to the story of prohibition: the Women's Christian Temperance Union, formed in 1874, and the Anti-Saloon League, founded at Oberlin, Ohio, in 1893.¹ The WCTU was at first a movement of broad social concern, under its greatest leader, Frances Willard, who was strongly influenced by the Fabians in England.² But after the turn of the century it became more monomaniac, as was the Anti-Saloon League from its inception. The League united the Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians and Congregationalists so effectively that it had, in many areas, more power than any other group. It led the third wave of prohibition legislation, which can be reckoned from the passing of State-wide prohibition in Georgia in 1907. By 1917, two-thirds of the States had liquor laws (though not all banned every kind of alcohol), and as much as three-quarters of the population of the USA lived in dry counties.³ That the movement chose to concentrate its political efforts at the State and local level, where its leverage could be greatest, contributed greatly to its success. The League never sought to elect a President, a tactic which has been the doom of other social movements in American history. It is no accident that the Prohibition Party, formed in 1869, which was committed to seeking national prohibition by direct political action, fielding its own candidates and unsullied by alliances with the main parties, never played a major role in the advance of Prohibition.⁴

But, of course, local or even State prohibition could not deprive people entirely of alcohol, when they could import it from the neighbouring 'wet' areas. The implication was obvious, and, intoxicated with nothing stronger than its own success, the Anti-Saloon League in 1913 began the drive for national prohibition. The locus of the League's power dictated its choice of means. To obtain a Constitutional amendment, it could apply pressure at the State level and on Congressmen back in their districts.

As early as 1913, the 'dry' lobby in Congress passed the Webb-Kenyon Act, which used the Federal powers over inter-State commerce to forbid dealers in wet States to 'export' liquor to customers in dry ones. The 1916 elections put even more dry supporters in Congress, and America's entry into the First World War gave them the opportunity to pass more anti-liquor legislation. The Conscription Act forbade its sale near military bases,

¹ See E. H. Cherrington, *History of the Anti-Saloon League* (Westerville, Ohio: American Issue Publishing Co., 1913).

² J. R. Gusfield, 'Status Conflicts and Changing Ideologies...' (*op. cit.*), pp. 111-12.

³ Merz, *op. cit.* p. 23.

⁴ This point is emphasized by Carl Sheingold (personal communication).

hopefully to keep the fighting men sober. The Lever Act conserved grain by prohibiting its use in brewing and distilling during the War. Late in 1917, Congress passed the 18th Amendment and sent it to the States. In 1919, Nebraska was the thirty-sixth state to ratify it; the 'wet' lobby had been confident that it could hold thirteen states—a blocking quarter—but it was overwhelmed by the wave of idealism which swept the Amendment forward to ratification. (That rural areas were over-represented in many State legislatures no doubt helped.) Prohibition came into effect one year later, at midnight on 16 January 1920. By legal action, the United States had destroyed millions of dollars-worth of private property in the brewing and distilling industries, without compensation.

One further measure must be mentioned: the Volstead Act of 1919, which was the Federal statute under which the Constitutional provisions were to be implemented. It defined the term 'intoxicating' in the Amendment as meaning anything containing more than one half of one per cent proof alcohol—a proportion low enough to ban beer as well as wines and spirits. It was a tough law to enforce a mildly phrased amendment, and represented the final triumph of the temperance extremists, for whom temperance had lost all meaning distinct from total abstinence.

II

So much for the brief history and mechanics of Prohibition. But it tells us little about *why* all this came about. At the most superficial level, an explanation lies in the brilliant organisation and ruthless tactics of the Anti-Saloon League. Its machinations inspired Professor Peter Odegard to write one of the earliest and best studies of pressure group politics.¹ It supported dry candidates in elections, irrespective of whether they were Republicans or Democrats, to the disgust of the purist Prohibition Party. Where both candidates were dry, it backed the drier, and, where both were wet, it opposed the wetter. Not infrequently it supported a corrupt dry against an honest wet, which led to a number of scandals. Odegard headed one chapter 'Money Changers in the Temple'.

When it had elected politicians, the League kept an eye on them from the public gallery, and if necessary punished them for their transgressions at the next elections. As it demonstrated its power to unseat opponents, it came to terrorize legislators across the country. It was observed that, had there been a secret ballot in Congress, the 18th Amendment would never have been submitted to the States. But Congressmen were weary of being

¹ P. H. Odegard, *Pressure Politics: The Story of the Anti-Saloon League* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1928).

bullied, and of the liquor issue dominating politics, so they off-loaded their burden onto the States in the misguided belief that they would never ratify it in sufficient numbers.

Yet the very fact that the dries were able to wield such power in elections is itself an indication that tactics and organization alone cannot explain their success. Prohibition *was* an issue which strongly motivated large numbers to support it at the polls. The saloon was identified with sin; the prohibitionists had achieved ideological dominance.¹ How was this? What accounts for the mass appeal of Prohibition?

It ought to be recognized that Prohibition, like any major social movement, appealed at several different levels simultaneously.² The personality characteristics of individuals, the symbolic expression of group sentiments, and rational consideration of means and ends all contributed to the strength of the movement. All three are discussed below. To argue that any one of them fully accounts for the appeals of Prohibition, or to neglect any of them, does not much advance our understanding. All three factors would influence some individuals, the relative weight varying from case to case. Their weighting might be systematically and unequally distributed through different strata of the movement, but it would be conjectural, on present evidence, to suggest precisely how.

One opponent of Prohibition, Congressman Vollmer of Iowa, scoffed at it as an example of the great American superstition, 'belief in the magic formulae: Be it resolved and Be it enacted'.³ Similar thoughts have prompted speculation about the psychology of Prohibition as 'magical thinking' and wish-fulfilment. Andrew Sinclair speculates along Freudian lines,⁴ presumably inspired by Freud's assertion that 'man's judgements of value follow directly his wishes for happiness—that accordingly they are an attempt to support his illusions with arguments'.⁵ He stresses the morbid base of Prohibition in sexual and racial fears, and illustrates his point convincingly in one case at least, that of Mrs Carrie Nation, the eccentric lady who toured the States in the first decade of the century smashing up saloons with her axe.⁶ Prohibition provided many people with a simple ideology which explained all the world's complexities.⁷ This analysis is

¹ A. Sinclair, *op. cit.*: ch. 3 and *passim*.

² Cf. E. Frenkel-Brunswik, 'Interaction of Psychological and Sociological Factors in Political Behaviour', *American Political Science Review*, 46 (1) (1952), 44–65.

³ A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* p. 174.

⁴ *Ibid.* ch. 2. For an even more orthodox psychoanalysis of Prohibition, see A. M. Lee, 'Techniques of Social Reform; An Analysis of the new Prohibition Drive', *American Sociological Review*, 9 (1) (1944), 65–77.

⁵ S. Freud, *Civilisation and Its Discontents* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1962), p. 92.

⁶ A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* pp. 74–7. See also H. Asbury, *Carrie Nation* (New York: Knopf, 1929).

⁷ Lee, *op. cit.* pp. 74–5.

congruent with what we now know about the association of 'authoritarian personalities' and 'intolerance of ambiguity'.¹ But sociologists are usually reluctant to accept mass neurosis as an explanation of social and political movements on the scale of Prohibition. However useful psychological studies may be in accounting for the motivation of perhaps a large minority of the most committed supporters,² this is not the stuff of which Constitutional amendments are made. This is not to deny the existence of 'projective politics',³ but it still has to be explained why neuroses should have found their expression in protest against alcohol. It is still necessary to examine the rational foundations of a temperance movement that was able to involve many well-balanced people. Not all rationality is rationalization.⁴

For many people the Prohibition drive was a rational expression of their religious beliefs. (This is to say nothing about the religious values themselves, which are assumed to have had an absolute quality. That is, in Weberian terms, support stemming directly from religious conviction was *wertrational* action.)⁵ We have already seen the part played by the evangelical churches in the Anti-Saloon League. It appears as a typical manifestation of the ascetic, self-denying outlook of these denominations. Although it is true that the less evangelical churches, such as the Lutherans and Protestant Episcopalians, were relatively lukewarm to Prohibition, and that the Catholics eventually formed the core of the repeal movement, some support was drawn from these quarters.⁶ Most significantly, the Social Gospel movement, politically left-wing and with affinities to the Christian Socialists in England, also condemned alcohol. Walter Rauschenbusch, its most famous leader, called alcohol 'a spirit born of hell'.

But, for many more people, Prohibition was also rational in the fuller sense of *Zweckrationalität*.⁷ For them, Prohibition appeared naturally con-

¹ See T. W. Adorno *et al.*, *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York: Harper, 1950); E. Frenkel-Brunswik, 'Intolerance of Ambiguity as an Emotional and Perceptual Personality Variable', *Journal of Personality*, 18 (1) (1949), 108-43; M. Rokeach, *The Open and Closed Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1960). Also compare Hofstadter (*op. cit.* pp. 70-81) on 'History as Conspiracy' in the folklore of populism.

² Biographies of temperance leaders are suggestive—for example V. Dabney's study of the single-minded Bishop Cannon, *Dry Messiah* (New York: Knopf, 1949).

³ The term is used by Richard Hofstadter, 'Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited', in D. Bell (ed.), *The Radical Right* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1964), p. 100.

⁴ I specifically disagree with Lee Benson's assertion ('A Tentative Classification of American Voting Behaviour', in W. J. Cahnmann and A. Boskoff (eds.), *Sociology and History: Theory and Research*, New York: Free Press, 1964) that the categories rational and non-rational 'have value connotations that make them necessarily subjective and drastically limit their usefulness'. I use the terms in their strict Weberian sense: that is, they denote a quality of the means-end relationship *as it appears from the perspective of the actor*—in this case, the supporter of Prohibition.

⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society* (3 vols.) (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968): vol. 1, pp. 24-6.

⁶ Timberlake, *op. cit.* pp. 30-2.

⁷ Weber, *loc. cit.*

sonant with other goals of the Progressive movement in the first two decades of the century. Hofstadter characterizes the Progressive movement as:

...that broader impulse toward criticism and change that was everywhere so conspicuous after 1900, when the already forceful stream of agrarian discontent was enlarged and redirected by the growing enthusiasm of middle-class people for social and economic reform... Its general theme was the effort to restore a type of economic individualism and political democracy that was widely believed to have existed earlier in America and to have been destroyed by the great corporation and the corrupt political machine; and with that restoration to bring back a kind of morality and civic purity that was also believed to have been lost.¹

Progressivism, then, was a movement much broader than the populist support for William Jennings Bryan, and much more enduring than support for independent Progressive presidential candidates—Bull Mooser Theodore Roosevelt in 1912 and ‘Fighting Bob’ LaFollette in 1924. It ‘never really existed as a recognizable organization with common goals and a political machinery geared to achieve them’.² Nevertheless, the diverse roots of Progressivism also nurtured the Prohibition campaign.³ The saloons came immediately under attack as centres both of political and of moral corruption. In the words of Herbert Asbury:

The saloon was a blight and a public stench...dingy and dirty, a place of offensive smells, flyblown mirrors and appalling sanitary facilities. It ignored the law...corrupted the police, the courts and the politicians. It was the breeding place of crime and violence...the backbone of prostitution.⁴

The brewers made a gross tactical error in seeking to defend the saloon as ‘the poor man’s club’, repeatedly ignoring wiser advice to set about reforming the saloons which they controlled.

Saloons were centres of political corruption particularly in areas with large immigrant populations. To the peasant immigrant from an alien political culture,

...politics tended to be not a means of realizing high moral principles and the general welfare as it was to the middle-class progressives, but rather a means of meeting his personal needs, to get him jobs, relief, favours and protection. For this reason, he gave his loyalty and vote to the local boss who often satisfied these needs.⁵

¹ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform* (*op. cit.*), p. 5.

² A. S. Link, ‘What Happened to the Progressive Movement in the 1920’s?’, *American Historical Review*, 64 (1959), 833–51.

³ Every reform movement in Californian history with one exception—that of the Workingmen’s Party—supported Prohibition. G. M. Ostrander, *op. cit.*

⁴ Asbury, *The Great Illusion* (*op. cit.*), p. 114.

⁵ Timberlake, *Prohibition...* (*op. cit.*), p. 117.

This bargain was usually struck in the saloons.¹ Middle-class Progressives supported Prohibition as one of many reforms to democratize government and to curb Big Business. But they also sought to democratize government in order to improve the lot of the lower classes and to Americanize the immigrants.²

Scientific evidence also supported Prohibition. It is generally emphasized that temperance propagandists were selective in the evidence they used, and that tentative findings were represented as conclusive. Yet scientific opinion seemed to be against John Barleycorn. Many old myths about the beneficial and medicinal effects of alcohol on the body had recently been exploded. More seriously, a number of studies claimed to show that inebriety in parents was a cause of physical, mental and moral degeneracy in children.³ Then again, in the early years of the century, evolutionary and eugenic theories were prevalent; alcohol was labelled a 'racial poison'. Alcohol was also said to facilitate the spread of venereal disease. Writers even in such serious sociological journals as the *American Journal of Sociology* seem to have accepted all this as serious scientific evidence.⁴ Because such theories have now been largely discarded, recent historians have tended to portray temperance propaganda as a process almost entirely of distortion.⁵ But as T. S. Kuhn has pointed out in a different context:

If...out-of-date beliefs are to be called myths, then myths can be produced by the same sorts of methods and held for the same sorts of reasons that now lead to scientific knowledge. If, on the other hand, they are to be called science, then science has included bodies of belief quite incompatible with the ones we hold today... Out-of-date theories are not in principle unscientific because they have been discarded.⁶

In the same sense, there were also good economic arguments for Prohibition. Economic theory at this date could be used to support the view that the liquor industry was in some sense 'unproductive'.⁷ Furthermore,

¹ That Al Smith had begun his career in a saloon affiliated with Tammany Hall, and that he sought to defend the saloon, genuinely horrified many respectable people, and moved them to vote against him for President in 1928, for reasons other than his religion and his accent. See R. M. Miller, 'A Footnote on the Role of the Protestant Churches in the Election of 1928', *Church History*, 25 (1956), 145-59.

² See Timberlake, *op. cit.* p. 128.

³ *Ibid.* p. 44. This sort of evidence was drummed into schoolchildren by the McGuffey readers in personal hygiene.

⁴ For a passionate case for Prohibition from a sociologist, see G. E. Howard, 'Alcohol and Crime: A Study in Social Causation', *American Journal of Sociology*, 24 (1918), 61-80.

⁵ For example, A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* ch. 3.

⁶ T. S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962), pp. 2-3.

⁷ That Irving Fisher, of 'Quantity Theory of Money' fame, was a leading temperance spokesman, serves to put the economics of the period in perspective.

employers thought, with some reason, that drinking made their workers both inefficient and dangerous.¹ They were supported in this view by many union leaders, who, moreover, saw that the worker sought to escape from his misery and poverty by getting drunk rather than by getting organized.

These were some of the plausible and rational considerations which gave the prohibition drive its content. Yet it is almost as misleading to explain the coming of Prohibition solely by the operation of cold unemotional reason as by individual psychology. A third source of strength was that Prohibition became an emotionally charged symbol for many groups. Prohibition can scarcely be seen as a mere expression of the clash of economic interests. The temperance movement seems to be a fairly distinct case of what Hofstadter² has called 'status politics' as opposed to 'interest politics'. (This dichotomy is derived from Weber's discussion of stratification,³ and is a useful antidote to the often subconscious quasi-Marxism which tends to underlie the attribution of economic motivation to political movements, or the definition as 'most important' of those issues which affect the allocation of resources. But the distinction is not entirely satisfactory, as Hofstadter himself has pointed out in his later essay.⁴ 'Interest' politics involve economic interests; 'status' politics involve non-economic interests. Hofstadter suggests that 'culture politics' may be a better term than 'status politics'. I approve of this particularly because of its connotation of the influence of subcultures. For, as S. P. Hays has justly remarked:

Groups act not from 'self-interest' [at least, not always!—S.J.M.] but from 'limited perspectives', from conceptions of their society and themselves which are bounded by their own experience and therefore directly related to it.⁵

This, of course, is a problem in the sociology of knowledge.)⁶ Prohibition supporters were seeking to maintain and improve not so much their economic position in society as their place in the status order, in the distribution not of wealth but of honour or prestige, and of political power.⁷

¹ Perhaps a little cynically, it has been suggested that some of the biggest contributors to temperance funds, such as the Rockefellers, saw the issue as a diversion from issues more strategic to the control of economic and political power (Lee, *op. cit.* p. 68). Later, the same motive could be adduced for contributing to the repeal movement, which makes this factor a useful, if far from decisive, one in explaining the reverse of Prohibition.

² R. Hofstadter, 'The Pseudo-Conservative Revolt', in D. Bell (ed.), *op. cit.* pp. 43 ff.

³ Weber, *op. cit.* vol. III, pp. 926–39.

⁴ Hofstadter, 'Pseudo-Conservatism Revisited' (*op. cit.*), pp. 98–9.

⁵ S. P. Hays, 'New Possibilities for American Political History: The Social Analysis of Political Life', in S. M. Lipset and R. Hofstadter (eds.), *Sociology and History: Methods* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), p. 201.

⁶ Hays' point is developed at length in P. T. Berger and T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality* (London: Allen Lane, 1967).

⁷ Weber, *loc. cit.*

Prohibition became a symbolic expression of their struggle: thus Gusfield has called it a 'symbolic crusade'.¹

Temperance was a middle-class obsession. The American Protestant middle-class complex of industry, thrift and self-denial can be taken as a datum,² and temperance as a symbol of it. Lower-class life was equally typified by high alcohol consumption and frequent drunkenness. Drinking became a symbol of a negative reference group for middle-class people.³ Prohibition is therefore seen as a middle-class expression of their superiority—building approval of their life-style into the law of the land.

Prohibition has even more frequently been seen as an expression of a rural, anti-urban reaction, of the disgust of the clean-living countryside at the corruption and immorality of the city.⁴ There is little evidence to support this. Most of the States which never had Prohibition laws before 1920 were those with at least 60% of the population in urban areas—like California, New York, Massachusetts and Illinois. But these were also the States where less than half of the population was of old American, Anglo-Saxon stock, and less than half belonged to the Protestant churches.⁵ Then again, in strongly Prohibitionist States (for example in Washington),⁶ much support for the movement came from urban areas. This is not unexpected, since even the evangelical Protestant churches had many members in urban areas.⁷

In fact, as Timberlake has pointed out:

There was little in the nature of country life to make rural Protestants any more abstemious than their urban counterparts. . . Nor, on the other hand, was there anything inherent in city life to prevent urban Protestants from supporting a movement for total abstinence and Prohibition.⁸

¹ Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade* (*op. cit.*). The fact that some of the groupings involved in the issue were nonetheless recognizably economic has created some confusion (see Nelson, *op. cit.* p. 38) and disagreement. Hofstadter and Sinclair tend to emphasize the aspect of rural-urban cultural conflict, while Timberlake and Gusfield in response emphasize the middle-class base of the movement. Both aspects are involved, as indicated below. But a grouping defined chiefly by its common economic characteristics may have symbols of common identity and pursue symbolic goals just as may a status-group. To label this 'false-consciousness' does not much advance the argument.

² Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*, *op. cit.* pp. 102-3.

³ On reference groups, see R. K. Merton, *Social Theory and Social Structure* (Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1967), pp. 225-386. Lee Benson (*op. cit.* pp. 417-21) advances a three-fold analytic distinction between the pursuit of political goals, fulfilment of political roles and orientation to reference groups, which if useful ought to be applicable in this case. But the latter pair are two kinds of reference group orientation, corresponding to the difference between normative membership reference groups and comparative reference groups. The type of action with which we are concerned here is at one and the same time pursuit of a political goal (of a status kind), the expression of membership in a normative reference group, and of non-membership in a negative reference group.

⁴ A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* ch. 1 and *passim*.

⁵ Clark, *op. cit.* p. 114.

⁷ Timberlake, *op. cit.* p. 29.

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 118.

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 30.

So it was not that Prohibition's appeal was uniquely to those who actually *lived* in rural and small-town America, but that, associated with the Jeffersonian image of the virtuous countryside,¹ it appealed to sections of the urban population as well. The best conclusion seems to be Clark's:

...the conflict was one of rural *values* against urban *values*, and 'the country' and 'the city' become potent symbols of the two ways of life.²

Samuel Hays, in seeing a conflict between 'community' and 'society' values as the unifying theme of the social history of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, supports this view.³ As he recognizes, these Toennies-inspired terms are far from simply identifiable with city and country. In Prohibition, as in Progressivism, adherents of 'community' rejected the innovations stemming from 'above', in the new 'society' levels of organization.

Clark discovered a 'minor corollary of the Frederick Jackson Turner thesis'⁴ in Washington's strong support for progressivism and prohibition.

The West was a safety valve for the frustrations of poverty and immobility... the progressive movement expressed their determination to avoid the social iniquities they had left behind them.⁵

Peculiarly symptomatic of the image of rural virtue was the Volstead Act. While banning the beer and whiskey of the urban worker, it specifically exempted the home production of light wine and cider in the countryside. As Alben Barkley enquired, if apple juice and grape juice were legal, 'how about corn juice?'⁶

Finally, linked with the middle-class, rural Protestant symbolism was a streak of nativism and anti-Negro prejudice. In the South, Prohibition was seen as one way of keeping the Negro sober and in his place, it being understood that the law would not be enforced against Whites. Will Rogers predicted that 'Mississippi will hold faithful and steadfast to prohibition as long as the voters can stagger to the polls'.⁷ Equally, drink was identified with the immigrant populations—wine with the Italians, beer with Germans—and this enhanced the nativism of many Progressives.

¹ See M. and L. White, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1962), *passim*.

² Clark, *op. cit.* p. 114; emphasis supplied.

³ S. P. Hays, 'Political Parties and the Community-Society Continuum', in W. N. Chambers and W. D. Burnham (eds.), *The American Party Systems* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1967).

⁴ See S. M. Lipset and R. Hofstadter (eds.), *Turner and the Sociology of the Frontier* (New York: Basic Books, 1968).

⁵ Clark, *op. cit.* p. viii.

⁶ A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* p. 190.

⁷ Quoted in Miller, *op. cit.*

III

When all the appeals of Prohibition are set out, it is still unlikely that the 18th Amendment would have been passed had it not been for the War, which centralized authority in Washington, made it urgent to save food, and discredited things German. That Prohibition seemed to have been 'put over' during war-time was to feed resentment during the 1920s. Yet it is remarkable that a movement with such deep roots should have been supplanted by an equally strong one in the opposite direction. What happened to change its appeal, and why did people change their minds? Even allowing for the demise of voters and legislators who backed the 18th Amendment in 1917-19, there remains to be explained a large movement of opinion by the time of the drive for the 21st Amendment in 1928-33.

Before examining profound changes in social structure, it is as well simply to consider the impact of new facts which might persuade people to change their opinions on the issue. Some people would be prepared to change their minds more readily than others. The theory of cognitive dissonance¹ suggests that people with a high commitment to the success of Prohibition, particularly those who had led or actively supported the campaign for the 18th Amendment, would be the most reluctant to change their opinions. The less active would offer less resistance to adverse evidence. Those who were willing to reconsider the issue rationally in the light of its actual consequences, comparing them with the hoped-for benefits, might gradually collect the evidence to make them change their minds.² For the actual consequences were largely unanticipated and unintended.³ And a course of action which appears a rational means to a desired end when viewed from a social perspective of incomplete knowledge may come to appear non-rational when new information is available to the actor.

One of the very few prominent figures who had prophetic insight was

¹ L. Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (New York: Row, Peterson & Co., 1957). For an excellent survey of this idea and other 'consistency' theories, see R. B. Zajonc, 'The Concepts of Balance, Congruity and Dissonance', *Public Opinion Quarterly*, 24 (2) (1960), 280-96.

² After the early voting studies, sociologists came to virtually discount the rational-independent voter of democratic theory. Anyone who changed his mind seemed an apathetic being on the margin of the political process. But more careful analysis has indicated the error of this view. See H. Daudt, *The Floating Voter and the Floating Vote* (Leiden: H. Stenfort Kroese, 1961). A. Campbell *et al.*, *The American Voter* (New York: Wiley, 1960), pp. 256-65, also provides a more accurate view (though not to Daudt's entire satisfaction). The voting studies came long after the Prohibition period, of course, but I feel justified in assuming that significant numbers of voters did change their minds.

³ See R. K. Merton, 'The Unanticipated Consequences of Purposive Social Action', *American Sociological Review*, 1 (1936), 894-904.

ex-President William Howard Taft, who declared, before the Amendment had been ratified:

...The business of manufacturing alcohol, liquor and beer will go out of the hands of the law-abiding members of the community, and will be transferred to the quasi-criminal class...In the communities where the majority will not sympathize with a Federal law's restrictions, large numbers of federal officers will be needed for its enforcement...It will produce variation in the enforcement of the law. There will be loose administration in spots all over the United States, and the...national administration will be strongly tempted to acquiesce in such a condition. Elections will continuously turn on the rigid or languid execution of the liquor law, as they do now in prohibition states.¹

Ironically, Taft became Chief Justice of the Supreme Court under President Harding, and in spite of these views he became a strong upholder of Prohibition. He suffered a plain case of role-conflict. For most people, the movement of opinion was in the opposite direction.

Little need be said beyond that Taft's prophecy was fulfilled in every detail. Enforcement was effective only in those areas of the South and mid-West where it had the support of public opinion. States with large immigrant populations—including New York, New Jersey, Maryland, Illinois, Ohio and Wisconsin—were against. And, by refusing to compromise even to the extent of permitting light beer, the Anti-Saloon League deprived the Volstead Act of much respect. Drinking became more fashionable than ever before. Demand was met from many sources—smuggling from Canada and 'Rum Row', 'needled' beer, bathtub gin and bootleg liquor. Thirsts were quenched by criminal gangs who were at the same time large-scale entrepreneurs, whose turnover was large enough to buy the co-operation of the police. Courts became clogged with liquor cases, but were reluctant to impose harsh penalties. A jury in San Francisco was itself put on trial for drinking up the evidence in a liquor case.² There developed a situation which has been described as 'patterned evasion of norms'.³ What this entailed was perhaps best captured by Al Capone himself:

I make my money by supplying a public demand. If I break the law, my customers, who number hundreds of the best people in Chicago, are as guilty as I am. The only difference between us is that I sell and they buy. Everybody calls me a racketeer. I call myself a businessman. When I *sell* liquor it's bootlegging. When my patrons serve it on a silver tray in Lake Shore Drive, it's hospitality.⁴

It was a situation of institutionalized hypocrisy.

¹ Quoted in Asbury, *The Great Illusion*, *op. cit.* p. 155.

² A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* p. 231.

³ R. M. Williams Jr., *American Society* (New York: Knopf, 1960), pp. 372-96; cf. Gusfield, *Symbolic Crusade*, *op. cit.* pp. 111-17.

⁴ A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* p. 240.

Congress responded to the popular mood. Andrew Sinclair labelled it 'the Amphibious Congress'. It voted appropriations quite inadequate to the enforcement of the Volstead Act. The drys acquiesced, because they were reluctant to admit how unsuccessful Prohibition was. But, in fact, Congress was striking a more realistic pose than it had when it passed the Volstead Act. Then, it had failed to strike the necessary equilibrium of consent.¹ Attempts at rigorous enforcement, which really only began under President Hoover, merely alienated public opinion further. The translation of a misdemeanour into a cardinal sin forced many to examine their ideological fundamentals. Those who were willing, were able to coolly assess the consequences of Prohibition, weighing costs against benefits, especially after the report of the Wickersham Commission made the facts available to everyone.

But not everyone was so detached; commitment distorted perception. Thus Wayne B. Wheeler of the Anti-Saloon League said:

The very fact that the law is difficult to enforce is the clearest proof of the need for its existence.²

And corruption was seen merely as an excuse for the failure of Prohibition. As late as 1931, Upton Sinclair wrote *The Wet Parade*—a 'dry' propaganda novel, including a Prohibition agent hero who is killed. It closes with the slogan:

PROHIBITION HAS NOT FAILED!
PROHIBITION HAS NOT BEEN TRIED!
TRY IT.³

Upton Sinclair was one of the most left-wing of the pre-War muckrakers, and his continuing commitment to Prohibition is particularly striking. For he alleges that it was always the 'little fellow' who was hit by enforcement, never the big liquor rings, and he fully recognizes the enormous cost of enforcement. He says that it would cost \$1 million a day, and compares this to the actual expenditure in caustic references to President Coolidge's 'five per cent enforcement policy'.⁴ So large numbers of Americans remained committed to Prohibition. But their position was being undermined by broader changes than the consequences of Prohibition itself.

The inadequacy of personality-centred explanations is particularly obvious when we try to account for the rapid reverse in Prohibition senti-

¹ Merz, *op. cit.* pp. 132–3.

² *Ibid.* p. 185. Compare with the defences against failure of the millenarian group studied by L. Festinger *et al.*, *When Prophecy Fails* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1956).

³ Upton Sinclair, *The Wet Parade* (London, T. Werner Laurie, 1931), p. 449.

⁴ *Ibid.* p. 292.

ment; we can scarcely argue that personalities changed abruptly unless we argue tautologically. Nor did the religious arguments for Prohibition change very much. However, the influence of the Protestant religion itself was in decline during this period. Robert Handy has spoken of a 'religious depression' which began in the mid-1920s, antedating the economic one by some years.¹

But the rational justifications for Prohibition were being undermined in the 1920s. As we have seen, the main social and political arguments were being refuted—crime and corruption were made worse. Scientific support for temperance dwindled too, with more accurate physiological research and the discrediting of eugenic theories.² When the Depression came, a restored liquor and brewing industry seemed a source of employment, not waste. (Early versions of Keynesian economic theory became available to justify this.) Bad liquor impaired the workers' efficiency more than good.

Difficult to account for fully, yet nonetheless real, there was in the Twenties a reaction against reform, idealism and the Progressive temper. The change of mood was demonstrated immediately after the war with the reaction against the Versailles Treaty, Henry Cabot Lodge's successful blocking of America's participation in the League of Nations, and the return of 'normalcy' under Warren Harding. Internally it was seen in the repression associated with the Red scare and the Sacco and Vanzetti trial. The elements of a Progressive coalition remained during the Twenties—farmers, organized labour, urban Democrats and the remnant of radicals and Social Gospellers—but they were disunited and lacked leadership between the collapse of Wilson's coalition and the building of Franklin Roosevelt's.³ Prohibition itself stood as a divisive issue, and also as the very embodiment of excessive reforming zeal. Prohibition, in Hofstadter's phrase, 'was a means by which the reforming energies of the country were transmuted into mere peevishness'.⁴ The general discredit of reform was expressed by Mayor Jimmy Walker, who defined a reformer as 'a guy who floated through a sewer in a glass-bottomed boat'.⁵

The defectors from Progressivism and Prohibition included large numbers of the urban middle-class. If Prohibition was a symbol of the middle-class effort to assert and retain their social prestige, one reason for their defection was a greater sense of security of status. Big Business, Big Labour and Big Finance no longer seemed about to crush them in their

¹ R. T. Handy, 'The American Religious Depression 1925-35', *Church History*, 29 (1) (1960), 3-16.

² A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* pp. 423-30.

³ Link, 'What Happened...', *op. cit.*

⁴ Hofstadter, *The Age of Reform*, *op. cit.* p. 290.

⁵ A. Sinclair, *op. cit.* p. 361.

vice. The 1920s saw the dawn of managerial capitalism and of 'high mass consumption',¹ the age of the middle class. No longer vulnerable,

... their temper was dynamic, expansive and supremely confident. They knew they were building a new America, a business civilization based upon a whole new set of business values—mass production and consumption, short hours and high wages, full employment and welfare capitalism. And what was more important, virtually the entire country (at least the journalists, writers in popular magazines, and many preachers and professors) acknowledged that the nation's destiny was in good hands.²

So what further need of Prohibition? One of the biggest blows to the dry cause was the appearance of middle-class people (and—unthinkable—middle-class women) in the movement for the repeal of the 18th Amendment.

What of that other prestigious symbol of temperance, virtuous rural America? Its prestige declined when writers like Sherwood Anderson and Sinclair Lewis revealed that it was not so virtuous after all. The nation laughed at its religious bigotry as manifested in the anti-Evolution campaign and in the Scopes 'monkey trial'; and it was disgusted at the activities of the Ku-Klux-Klan.³ More fundamentally, rural self-satisfaction was undermined by the car and the radio, which exposed it to urban culture. And rural America was shrinking. The foundations of Prohibition were being undermined everywhere.

Repeal came surprisingly quickly; the effort required by the wets to carry the 21st Amendment turned out to be nowhere near that put in over many years by the drys for the 18th. The wet counter-attack really began seriously with the 1928 Presidential election, when Al Smith, the wet Roman Catholic Governor of New York, was the Democratic candidate against Herbert Hoover. At this stage, Smith did not set his sights as high as repeal of the Amendment, but wanted drastic change in the Volstead Act. Even so, the lines of battle were drawn; Prohibition was the major issue of the campaign.⁴ In 1928, Hoover and the drys won. What Smith's

¹ W. W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth* (Cambridge U.P., 1960).

² Link, 'What Happened...', *op. cit.* p. 843.

³ R. M. Miller, 'A Note on the Relationship between the Protestant Churches and the Revived KKK', *Journal of Southern History*, 22 (3) (1956), 335–68. Miller points out that there was very considerable opposition to the Klan within the Protestant churches.

⁴ Prohibition has traditionally been seen as a veil for the real issues, especially for religious prejudice. But the following references can be cited in support of the view that religion was not decisive in 1928: W. F. Ogburn and N. S. Talbot, 'A Measurement of the Factors in the Presidential Election of 1928', *Social Forces*, 8 (1929), 176–83; R. M. Miller, 'A Footnote on the Role of the Protestant Churches...' (*op. cit.*), and more fully in his *American Protestantism and Social Issues 1919–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1958); P. H. Odegard, 'A Catholic for President?' (in Odegard (ed.), *Religion and Politics* (New York: Oceana Publications, 1960), pp. 162–7); S. M. Lipset, 'Some Statistics on Bigotry in Voting', *Commentary*, 30 (1960), 286–90; and

campaign achieved was to lay the foundations for Roosevelt's rebuilding of a Progressive coalition unencumbered with support for Prohibition.¹ The next year, the formation of the Women's Organization for National Prohibition Reform, led by rich and prominent ladies, demonstrated the new respectability of the wet case. In 1930, the Congressional elections showed the increasing strength of the wet movement.

Shortly after his election, Hoover set up the Wickersham Commission to investigate the enforcement of law in the USA. Its report was a death-knell to Prohibition. (Actually, its signatories supported Prohibition, but their conclusion was so obviously a *non sequitur* from the evidence presented that people drew their own and opposite conclusions.) Yet, just as the 18th Amendment would probably not have been carried had it not been for the First World War, so the 21st owed much to the Depression. To restore the brewing industry would give work to thousands, and, together with distilling, back in legitimate hands it could raise millions of dollars in taxation to offset the Federal budget deficit. And so it was. In 1932 the Democrats adopted a straight repeal plank, and President Roosevelt immediately legalized beer. The Amendment took a little longer, but not much—it was ratified by the 36th State on 5 December 1933. The 'noble experiment' came to an end.

History usually appears inevitable in retrospect. To show anything as a facet of massive social processes makes it seem even more predestined.² Prohibition was such a facet, and yet it came and went in a coincidence of multiple circumstances.

'Religion and Politics in the American Past and Present' (in R. Lee and M. E. Marty (eds.), *Religion and Social Conflict* (New York: Oxford U.P., 1964), pp. 69–126).

In any case, not all the arguments were at the level of bigotry; even in 1932, many of the radical Social Gospellers voted for Hoover as a last hope of defending Prohibition. See D. B. Meyer, *The Protestant Search for Social Realism 1919–1941* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1960).

¹ See Campbell *et al.*, *op. cit.*, for a discussion of 'maintaining', 'deviating' and 'realigning' elections, based on Key's idea of the 'critical election' (V. O. Key, Jr., 'A Theory of Critical Elections', *Journal of Politics*, 17 (1955), 3–18, and 'Secular Realignment and the Party System', *ibid.* 21 (1959), 492–510). The 1928 election was, in New England at least, a preliminary to the great realigning election of 1932, when prohibition was only one element in the general flux. (On this last point, see Miller, 'American Protestantism...', *op. cit.* pp. 119–20.)

² Cf. J. H. Goldthorpe, 'The Development of Social Policy in England, 1800–1914', *Transactions of the 5th World Congress of Sociology* (Washington D.C.: International Sociological Association, 1964), vol. 4, pp. 41–6.