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The Parable of Prohibition

A very bizarre chapter of history can teach us a lot.

By *Johann Hari*

Posted Thursday, June 3, 2010, at 10:03 AM ET

Since we first prowled the savannahs of Africa, human beings have displayed a few overpowering and ineradicable impulses—for food, for sex, and for drugs. Every human society has hunted for its short cuts to an altered state: The hunger for a chemical high, low, or pleasingly new shuffle sideways is universal. Peer back through history, and it's everywhere. Ovid said drug-induced ecstasy was a divine gift. The Chinese were brewing alcohol in prehistory and cultivating opium by 700 A.D. Cocaine was found in clay-pipe fragments from William Shakespeare's house. George Washington insisted American soldiers be given whiskey every day as part of their rations. Human history is filled with chemicals, come-downs, and hangovers.

And in every generation, there are moralists who try to douse this natural impulse in moral condemnation and burn it away. They believe that humans, stripped of their intoxicants, will become more rational or ethical or good. They point to the addicts and the overdoses and believe they reveal the true face—and the logical endpoint—of your order at the bar or your roll-up. And they believe we can be saved from ourselves, if only we choose to do it. Their vision holds an intoxicating promise of its own.

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Their most famous achievement—the criminalization of alcohol in the United States between 1921 and 1933—is one of the great parables of modern history. Daniel Okrent's superb new history, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition*, shows how a coalition of mostly well-meaning, big-hearted people came together and changed the Constitution to ban booze. On the day it began, one of the movement's leaders, the former baseball hero turned evangelical preacher Billy Sunday, told his ecstatic congregation what the Dry New World would look like: "The reign of tears is over. The slums will soon be only a memory. We will turn our prisons into factories and our jails into storehouses. Men will walk upright now, women will smile, and the children will laugh. Hell will be forever rent."

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The story of the War on Alcohol has never needed to be told more urgently—because its grandchild, the War on Drugs, shares the same DNA. Okrent alludes to the parallel only briefly, on his final page, but it hangs over the book like old booze-fumes—and proves yet again Mark Twain's dictum: "History doesn't repeat itself, but it does rhyme."

There was never an America without chemical highs. The Native Americans used hallucinogens routinely, and the ship that brought John Winthrop and

the first Puritans to the continent carried three times more beer than water, along with 10,000 gallons of wine. It was immediately a society so soaked in alcohol that it makes your liver ache to read the raw statistics: By 1830, the average citizen drank seven gallons of pure alcohol a year. America was so hungry for highs that when there was a backlash against all this boozing, the temperance movement's initial proposal was that people should water down their alcohol with opium.

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It's not hard to see how this fug of liquor caused problems, as well as pleasure—and the backlash was launched by a furious housewife from a small town in Ohio. One Sunday in 1874, Eliza Thompson—a mother to eight children, who had never spoken out on any public issue before—stood before the crowds at her church and announced that America would never be free or godly until the last whiskey bottle was emptied onto the dry earth. A huge crowd of women cheered: They believed their husbands were squandering their wages at the saloon. They marched as one to the nearest bar, where they all sank to their knees and prayed for the soul of its owner. They refused to leave until he repented. They worked in six-hour prayer shifts on the streets until the saloonkeeper finally appeared, head bowed, and agreed to shut it down. This prayer-athon then moved around to every alcohol-seller in the town. Within 10 days, only four of the original 13 remained, and the rebellion was spreading across the country.

It was women who led the first cry for Temperance, and it was women who made Prohibition happen. A woman called Carry Nation became a symbol of the movement when she traveled from bar to bar with an oversize hatchet and smashed them to pieces. Indeed, Prohibition was one of the first and most direct effects of expanding the vote. This is one of the first strange flecks of gray in this story. The proponents of Prohibition were primarily progressives—and some of the most admirable people in American history, from Susan B. Anthony to Frederick Douglas to Eugene V. Debs. The pioneers of American feminism believed alcohol was at the root of men's brutality toward women. The anti-slavery movement saw alcohol addiction as a new form of slavery, replacing leg irons with whiskey bottles. You can see the same left-wing prohibitionism today, when people like Al Sharpton say drugs must be criminalized because addiction does real harm in ghettos.

Of course, there were more obviously sinister proponents of Prohibition too, pressing progressives into weird alliances. The Ku Klux Klan said that "nigger gin" was the main reason that oppressed black people were prone to rebellion, and if you banned alcohol, they would become quiescent. An echo of this persists in America's current strain of prohibition. Powder cocaine and crack cocaine are equally harmful, but crack—which is disproportionately used by black people—carries much heavier jail sentences than powder cocaine, which is disproportionately used by white people.

It was in this context that the Anti-Saloon League rose to become the most powerful pressure group in American history and the only one to ever change the Constitution through peaceful political campaigning. It was begun by a little man called Wayne Wheeler, who was as dry as the Sahara and twice as overheated—and a political genius, maneuvering politicians of all parties into backing a ban. He threatened them by weaving together a coalition of evangelicals, feminists, racists, and lefties—the equivalent of herding Sarah Palin, the National Association of Women, David Duke, and Keith Olbermann into one unstoppable political force.

With the passage of the 18th Amendment in 1921, the dysfunctions of Prohibition began. When you ban a popular drug that millions of people want, it doesn't disappear. Instead, it is transferred from the legal economy into the hands of armed criminal gangs. Across America, gangsters rejoiced that they had just been handed one of the biggest markets in the country, and unleashed an armada of freighters, steamers, and even submarines to bring booze back. Nobody who wanted a drink went without. As the journalist Malcolm Bingay wrote, "It was absolutely impossible to get a drink, unless you walked at least ten feet and told the busy bartender in a voice loud enough for him to hear you above the uproar."

So if it didn't stop alcoholism, what did it achieve? The same as prohibition does today—a massive unleashing of criminality and violence. Gang wars broke out, with the members torturing and murdering one another first to gain control of and then to retain their patches. Thousands of ordinary citizens were caught in the crossfire. The icon of the new criminal class was Al Capone, a figure so fixed in our minds as the scar-faced King of Charismatic Crime, pursued by the rugged federal agent Eliot Ness, that Okrent's biographical details seem oddly puncturing. Capone was only 25 when he tortured his way to running Chicago's underworld. He was gone from the city by the age of 30 and a syphilitic corpse by 40. But he was an eloquent exponent of his own case, saying simply, "I give to the public what the public wants. I never had to send out high pressure salesmen. Why, I could never meet the demand."

By 1926, he and his fellow gangsters were making \$3.6 billion a year—in 1926 money! To give some perspective, that was more than the entire expenditure of the U.S. government. The criminals could outbid and outgun the state. So they crippled the institutions of a democratic state and ruled, just as drug gangs do today in Mexico, Afghanistan, and ghettos from South Central Los Angeles to the banlieues of Paris. They

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have been handed a market so massive that they can tool up to intimidate everyone in their area, bribe many police and judges into submission, and achieve such a vast size, the honest police couldn't even begin to get them all. The late Nobel Prize winning economist Milton Friedman said, "Al Capone epitomizes our earlier attempts at Prohibition; the Crips and Bloods epitomize this one."

One insight, more than any other, ripples down from Okrent's history to our own bout of prohibition. Armed criminal gangs don't fear prohibition: They love it. He has uncovered fascinating evidence that the criminal gangs sometimes financially supported dry politicians, precisely to keep it in place. They knew if it ended, most of organized crime in America would be bankrupted. So it's a nasty irony that prohibitionists try to present legalizers—then and now—as "the bootlegger's friend" or "the drug-dealer's ally." Precisely the opposite is the truth. Legalizers are the only people who can bankrupt and destroy the drug gangs, just as they destroyed Capone. Only the prohibitionists can keep them alive.

Once a product is controlled only by criminals, all safety controls vanish and the drug becomes far more deadly. After 1921, it became common to dilute and relabel poisonous industrial alcohol, which could still legally be bought, and sell it by the pint glass. This "rotgut" caused epidemics of paralysis and poisoning. For example, one single batch of bad booze permanently crippled 500 people in Wichita, Kan., in early 1927—a usual event. That year, 760 people were poisoned to death by bad booze in New York City alone. Wayne Wheeler persuaded the government not to remove fatal toxins from industrial alcohol, saying it was good to keep this "disincentive" in place.

Prohibition's flaws were so obvious that the politicians in charge privately admitted the law was self-defeating. Warren Harding brought \$1,800 of booze with him to the White House, while Andrew Mellon—in charge of enforcing the law—called it "unworkable." Similarly, the last three presidents of the United States were recreational drug users in their youth. Once he ceased to be president, Bill Clinton called for the decriminalization of cannabis, and Obama probably will too. Yet in office, they continue to mouth prohibitionist platitudes about "eradicating drugs." They insist the rest of the world's leaders resist the calls for greater liberalization from their populations and instead "crack down" on the drug gangs—no matter how much violence it unleashes. Indeed, Obama recently praised Calderon for his "crackdown" on drugs by—with no apparent irony—calling him "Mexico's Eliot Ness." Obama should know that Ness came to regard his War on Alcohol as a disastrous failure, and he died a drunk himself—but drug prohibition addles politicians' brains.

By 1928, the failure of Prohibition was plain, yet its opponents were demoralized and despairing. It looked like an immovable part of the American political landscape, since it would require big majorities in every state to amend the Constitution again. Clarence Darrow wrote that "thirteen dry states with a population of less than New York State alone can prevent repeal until Haley's Comet returns," so "one might as well talk about taking a summer vacation of Mars."

Yet it happened. It happened suddenly and completely. Why? The answer is found in your wallet, with the hard cash. After the Great Crash, the government's revenues from income taxes collapsed by 60 percent in just three years, while the need for spending to stimulate the economy was skyrocketing. The U.S. government needed a new source of income, fast. The giant untaxed, unchecked alcohol industry suddenly looked like a giant pot of cash at the end of the prohibitionist rainbow. Could the same thing happen today, after our own Great Crash? The bankrupt state of California is about to hold a referendum to legalize and tax cannabis, and Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has pointed out that it could raise massive sums. Yes, history does rhyme.

Many people understandably worry that legalization would cause a huge rise in drug use, but the facts suggest this isn't the case. Portugal decriminalized the personal possession of all drugs in 2001, and—as a study by Glenn Greenwald for the Cato Institute found—it had almost no effect at all.* Indeed, drug use fell a little among the young. Similarly, Okrent says the end of alcohol prohibition "made it harder, not easier, to get a drink. ... Now there were closing hours and age limits, as well as a collection of geographic proscriptions that kept bars or package stores distant from schools, churches and hospitals." People didn't drink much more. The only change was that they didn't have to turn to armed criminal gangs for it, and they didn't end up swigging poison.

Who now defends alcohol prohibition? Is there a single person left? This echoing silence should suggest something to us. Ending drug prohibition seems like a huge heave, just as ending alcohol prohibition did. But when it is gone, when the drug gangs are a bankrupted memory, when drug addicts are treated not as immoral criminals but as ill

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people needing health care, who will grieve? American history is pocked by utopian movements that prefer glib wishful thinking over a hard scrutiny of reality, but they inevitably crest and crash in the end. Okrent's dazzling history leaves us with one whiskey-sharp insight above all others: The War on Alcohol and the War on Drugs failed because they were, beneath all the blather, a war on human nature.

Correction, June 3, 2010: This article originally stated that Glenn Greenwald conducted a study on Portugal's decriminalization of personal possession drugs for the American Enterprise Institute. It was for the Cato Institute. ([Return to the corrected sentence.](#))

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Johann Hari is a *Slate* contributing writer and a columnist for the Independent in London. He was recently named newspaper journalist of the year by Amnesty International. You can e-mail Johann at j.hari@independent.co.uk or follow him on Twitter.

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**Cecilia Hayford**

Oh Demon Alcohol

Sad memories I can't recall

Who'd have thought that I would fall

Prey to Demon Alcohol?

Today, 12:28:54 – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)**gary daily**

Haven't read Orkent's book yet, but I doubt he would deny that the abuse of alcohol did contribute to lost work days, illness, unpaid rents, bare cupboards in working class kitchens and the physical abuse of women and children.

So let's not be too quick to paint the women who were in the lead for this reform as a puritanical bunch seeking to end male bonding and good clean fun at the local tavern. The WCTU documented the social problems related to alcohol abuse with the thoroughness of the muckraking press of the Progressive era.

Today, 08:57:40 – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)**Buck**

Very interesting take on the history of legalization in this country. One quibble though: the idea of blaming women's suffrage for Prohibition weakens when you correct your dates. The Prohibition amendment was passed in 1919, not 1921, as you claim. That was before women across the nation could vote.

Yesterday, 20:21:05 – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)Liked by  steveh46**strayan**

"Who now defends alcohol prohibition? Is there a single person left?"

Unfortunately yes. Here is an article from the Journal of Addiction:

<http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/20331549>Yesterday, 20:18:35 – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)**HAP**

SONNET 76

Why is my verse so barren of new pride,
So far from variation or quick change?
Why with the time do I not glance aside
To new-found methods and to compounds strange?
Why write I still all one, ever the same,
And keep invention in a notèd weed,
That every word doth almost tell my name,
Showing their birth and where they did proceed?
O, know, sweet love, I always write of you,
And you and love are still my argument;
So all my best is dressing old words new,
Spending again what is already spent:
For as the sun is daily new and old,
So is my love still telling what is told.

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Great article!! Good info!!

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Factcheck: I think you mean the National _Organization for_ Women.

Yesterday, 15:38:28 – [Flag](#) – [Reply](#)**Mujokan**Worth reading for backstory on the Mexican "crackdown". [The Montreal Gazette on the Sinaloa cartel.](#)

If you believe that prohibition doesn't reduce usage, and there's good evidence to suggest it doesn't in the case of marijuana at least, not a single argument in favor of prohibition remains standing.

Harm from drugs themselves (as opposed to the harms due to the effects of drugs being illegal) are widely overstated. The same applies to the increase in usage, if any, that would result from

legalization or decriminalization.

People ought to understand that prohibition is the dangerous choice, not legalization.

It's bizarre that the Tea Party, many of whom call themselves "libertarians", hasn't taken a stand against the war on drugs. That would be good for stopping illegal immigration (by making Mexico safer), for national security (by reducing income to terrorists and cartels), for taxes (tax drug sales), for reducing government spending (less money on police enforcement, army joint exercises and aid to Latin America), and for personal liberty (ending unjust seizure laws, police searches and raids). Have I forgotten any of their core positions?

Yet we don't hear anything about it from them. There aren't rational arguments for prohibition, only cultural ones about "lazy stoners" and so on.

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SB

so, what you're saying is that the war on alcohol and the war on drugs are what successful bipartisanship looks like while social security and medicare are what partisanship looks like. i know which strategy i'd choose.

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David Wayne Osedach

Fascinating. I'm ordering Last Call from Amazon!

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