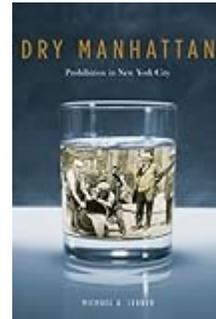




Michael A. Lerner. *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. viii + 351 pp. \$28.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02432-8.



Reviewed by Patricia Cunningham (Independent Scholar)

Published on H-Urban (April, 2008)

Thirteen-Year Drought: Legislating Abstinence and the Intent to Create a Model City

The 2000 Urban History Association Award for Best Dissertation in Urban History was awarded to Michael A. Lerner for “Dry Manhattan: Class Culture, and Politics in Prohibition-Era New York City, 1919-1933.” Now Lerner has completed his extensively researched book. An apt quote, attributed to Mark Twain, introduces Lerner’s text: “Nothing so needs reforming as other people’s habits” (p. 1).

Just as it would be erroneous to mistake the history of urban spaces for the complete chronicle of a culture, it would be disingenuous to believe that what happened in Manhattan during Prohibition is the whole picture of the Eighteenth Amendment. However, the dry coalition of reformers were quite determined to make New York City into a worldwide model of sobriety, and the scope of the reaction there to Prohibition enforcement illustrates what happened elsewhere. It is also a peek into what New Yorkers still like to consider their unique *joie de vivre*.

Prohibition zealot William Anderson believed he could shape New York into an exemplary standard that would be admired and replicated around the globe. Real-

izing that the world’s attention was always more focused on New York than, say, “Kansas or California, Oregon or Alabama,” Anderson hoped to promote an international wave of prohibition when other countries observed how successfully his dry campaign had transformed the city (p. 40). At the official start of Prohibition’s enforcement nationwide in January 1920, Anderson could celebrate “a new era of clean thinking and clean living” thanks to his years of concentrated effort (p. 41). Perhaps he was unaware that New Yorkers had been engaged in a frenzy of stockpiling alcohol and supplies, remodeling structures to conceal drinking activity, and other plans to circumvent the new law for months prior to that dry deadline day. Lerner depicts a city preparing for a siege.

Dry Manhattan does an excellent job of distilling reams of data on the years leading up to the passing of national Prohibition. Without a clear understanding of the incremental advances in “pressure politics” that led to that revolutionary legislation, the account of the fervor to prohibit Americans from alcoholic indulgences might be baffling, especially at the distance of almost one hundred years. Then again, we are currently experiencing a

similar upsurge in personal restrictions, particularly involving smoking, that rivals the thirteen years of Prohibition. In addition, just as Lerner details in his book, the fears of loss of revenue, jobs, and other economic impacts expressed around 1920 are echoed today. “Wets [as anti-Prohibitionists were called] asked where New York would recover the \$22.6 million in annual liquor tax revenue that it would lose under Prohibition, funds that constituted more than a quarter of the state budget” (p. 51). In both eras, those who favor restrictions eagerly argue that projected health benefits will result in great financial benefit to society as a whole—an expectation not borne out by statistics, except in the very early days of Prohibition, the book points out.

In Prohibition’s first year, “several notable hotels in New York [had] to close in 1920, not only robbing the city of some of its great institutions but also costing the city jobs” (p. 51). Then, as now, it was the smaller establishments that suffered the most. Cheaper places were not able to raise prices or add charges to recoup lost liquor sales and they “saw their revenues dwindle, their workers saw smaller paychecks, and their waiters received fewer and smaller tips” (p. 53). Interesting parallels can be drawn, as Lerner points out, between the extreme viewpoints on both sides of the “legislating abstinence” issue. “[N]either side acknowledged that larger economic trends” (p. 56) like high inflation, economic depression connected to war debts, and a general mistrust in the financial future could be blamed—an interesting point presenting an impetus for further comparative study.

Lerner shows that the “reform” sought by William Anderson and his coalition of the nation’s moral and political values often masked an intolerance of working-class and ethnic American habits. Anderson marshaled “strong nativist sentiments” which had long been part of some of the temperance movement’s energy (p. 97). His organization formed a coalition of dry interests designed to control undesirable elements of “foreigners, Catholics, Jews, and city dwellers [seen] as threats to everything genuinely American” (p. 98). A metropolis like New York, with its ever-swelling immigrant population, its long-established upper classes, and its ghettoized ethnic areas, was the perfect setting for “dry Americans” to trounce “wet foreigners.”

The book goes to great lengths to demonstrate that the actual enforcement of the Eighteenth Amendment (provided for in the Volstead Act)—ostensibly a federal law applicable to every citizen—heavily targeted ethnic groups. Small neighborhood establishments suffered

the most as they were subject to much more vigorous enforcement tactics—raids in which wine bottles were smashed and diners arrested—and were less able to recoup financial losses incurred through arrests and fines, destruction or padlocking of businesses, etc.

The impact of Prohibition on New York’s multicultural population is illustrated by Lerner’s many examples of how the law was enforced and how different citizens reacted to these restrictions. Irish, Italian, Jewish, and German inhabitants all had their favorite pleasure drinks as well as favorite gathering places. Working men found themselves with nowhere to go to relax after a day’s work. They were unwilling to risk a jail sentence by daring to celebrate with drinks the birth of a son, the arrival of relatives, or the wedding of a friend. Prohibition had significant impact on religious practices too. Catholics were obliged to use sacramental wine in a church mass and Jews needed wine for their religious ceremonies. The authorities frequently denied access to the “annual allowance of ten gallons of sacramental wine” to which each household was entitled (p. 117). In the spring of 1921, no licenses for Passover wine were issued. Viewing this as an anti-Semitic situation, rabbis in the city rallied to protest. A few months later an “American Liberties League” parade on the Fourth of July included most of the city’s ethnic groups along with the current mayor, veterans, and “thousands of other ‘blue-blooded’ Americans who opposed dry laws” (p. 125).

In a city of immigrants, neighborhood taverns, beer gardens, and mom-and-pop restaurants help newcomers establish connections with those who came before them as well as with the city itself. In one of the paradoxes of urban life, finding one’s “home territory” makes city life tolerable by offering a sense of belonging, while at the same time encouraging a segregation into bonded groups. The “dry” side saw working-class saloons as a threat whereby ethnic-identity differences would prevent assimilation, while “wets” found these establishments to be “bridges between the old world and the new” (p. 103). Lerner explores topics such as these with finesse.

One of the pleasures of reading this book is the continual attention to detail that reflects the author’s thorough research into his subject: the berserk policeman, for example, who attacked forty people in a self-styled raid where he “choked a seven-year-old girl, knocked a shoeshine man off his crutches, and struck five women including one with a baby in her arms” (p. 84). There are other telling details: for example, professional hostesses

in illegal nightclubs could earn between 150 and 400 dollars a week; President Hoover appointed a commission to investigate and make recommendations about modifying Prohibition and then ignored its five-volume report. Lerner's notes are extensive. However, the index seems hastily constructed and the book has no list of sources. Photographs and perhaps a map of the density of speakeasies would have more effectively supported the text than mere descriptions of pictures and cartoons. The author tends to forget that not all readers of his book about Manhattan will be familiar with the city's geography.

This very readable book tries hard to mitigate the author's bias against the prohibition of alcohol. It is a long-awaited alternative to popular images of the Prohibition era. Rumrunners, bootleggers, gangsters in Chicago, moonshine stills in rural states, and specially designed transport cars are not the focus of this work, even though some of them are featured. Although the basic facts of U.S. Prohibition and its legacies of violence and corruption are well known, the usual images many students have do not address the widespread disregard for Prohibition by "respectable" New Yorkers, or the impact of enforcement on myriad public officials and private business owners. The resiliency of nightclub owners who re-invented their secret pleasure dens again and again is amazing.

Dry Manhattan gives a new face to Prohibition: the ordinary citizen harassed on the street for possibly concealing a hip-flask; the overwhelmed judge with an impossible caseload of criminal casual drinkers, waiters, and restaurant owners; the law enforcer tempted beyond typical possibilities by the corruption of his extended powers. There is a good chapter about women and their "pivotal and surprising role in the demise of the noble experiment" (p. 171). Chapter titles pique interest: "Hootch Joints in Harlem" and "The Brewers of Bigotry."

Other reviewers of this book have mentioned a lack

of extrapolation on Lerner's part which would draw attention to contemporary affairs, as well as little emphasis on the disadvantages to a society of a "saloon politics" system and the effects of alcoholism, particularly on working-class citizens. But this might be the book's strongest attraction—we are allowed to take the facts and imagine our own comparisons or conclusions.

I recommend pairing this book with an earlier work of similar scope, Lewis A. Erenberg's *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture, 1890-1930* (1984). Well researched (but prone to sweeping generalizations), this other work completes the picture (indeed it has some excellent photographs) of urban dwellers emerging from the age of Victorian restrictions and finding their way as independent-minded citizens and consumers of city pleasures. While Lerner covers "nightclub-mad New Yorkers" (p. 137) in the 1920s, Erenberg gives us a tantalizing picture of the earlier cafe society. It is easier to grasp what New Yorkers had to give up when Prohibition descended on them in 1920 when one considers that the city's unprecedented culture of public mingling of the sexes, dancing, jazz music, and drinking had already captivated its inhabitants. This also explains why New York was chosen to be the "model city" by the dry lobby.

Lerner's final chapter is "The Wet Convention and the New Deal" which brings us full circle in the two decades of the Prohibition initiative. The failure of Anderson and his Anti-Saloon League in their noble experiment for a model city of sobriety set the stage for "FDR's decisive push for the repeal of the Eighteenth Amendment as part of the New Deal" (p. 308). Much greater in scope than a debate over alcohol consumption, the Prohibition era in New York turned out to be a time of confrontation over how citizens could be governed, the value placed on diverse cultures within a cosmopolitan arena, and the right to rebel against the moral absolutism of William Anderson and his followers.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

<https://networks.h-net.org/h-urban>

Citation: Patricia Cunningham. Review of Lerner, Michael A., *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City*. H-Net Urban, H-Net Reviews. April, 2008.

URL: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=14379>

Copyright © 2008 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for

nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.org.