

Review-Essay
Learning from History
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The United States and International Drug Control, 1909-1997
David R. Bewley-Taylor
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“In reading the history of nations, we find that, like individuals, they have their whims and their peculiarities; their seasons of excitement and recklessness, when they care not what they do. We find that whole communities suddenly fix their minds upon one object, and go mad in its pursuit; that millions of people become simultaneously impressed with one delusion, and run after it, till their attention is caught by some new folly more captivating than the first. We see one nation suddenly seized, from its highest to its lowest members, with a fierce desire of military glory; another as suddenly becoming crazed upon a religious scruple; and neither of them recovering its senses until it has shed rivers of blood and sowed a harvest of groans and tears, to be reaped by its posterity.... Men, it has been well said, think in herds; it will be seen that they go mad in herds, while they only recover their senses slowly, and one by one.” (Mackay 1852)

It is difficult to say whether history or science has been the more ignored in the making and promoting of 20th Century drug policy. True, both historical and scientific ‘facts’ are featured widely in the ongoing drug policy debate. Yet the choice of which ‘facts’ are used and the case that they ‘prove’ is often seen to be determined by the pre-existing political, ethical, and religious convictions of whomever is making the argument. The Drug War, or even the United States’ ‘noble experiment’ with alcohol prohibition, for example, is hailed as a success or denounced as a failure, and reams of scientific and historical ‘facts’ are mustered as ‘proof’, yet the position of the opposing faction always seems little influenced, much less converted.

In the contemporary scene it might appear that the findings of science are the more applied to ongoing drug policy debate and formulation. According to prohibitionists — at least when they are not preaching that drugs are ‘wrong’, the ‘scourge of humanity’ and a ‘universal evil’ — science is their mainstay and an inexhaustible well for proving the necessity and effectiveness of prohibitory policy. Reformers echo a similar but antithetical line, quoting statistics and think-tank studies in their argument that prohibition has failed as a solution to drug abuse and therefore must be part of the problem. But science seems always such a dull tool for creating or justifying social policy, especially in an age where ‘scientific results’ can often be bought like any other product of industry. Whether science is the more ignored in modern drug policy would therefore depend heavily on what kind of science we are talking about. Science as it is perceived and practised by its more

dispassionate advocates may well be a scarce commodity in drug policy debates and decisions.

As for history, we rarely hear contemporary prohibitionists quoting those who constructed the very edifice they worship — luminaries such as Hamilton Wright, Bishop Brent, Adolph Lande and Harry Anslinger — nor do prohibitionists often attempt to justify present policy through an historical examination of how and why the forerunners of modern drug policy came into existence. Presumably, any modern institution would be capable of illustrating its legitimacy through an examination of its history, evolution, and the biographies of its establishing figures. But when it comes to prohibition, history reveals a dirty little secret: Prohibition has been brought to us by a remarkably small coterie of messianic do-gooders, the remnants of 19th Century radical temperance movements and other assorted fanaticisms. And the history of the establishment of the world prohibitionary regime shows coercion, bribery, dirty tricks, and imperialist manoeuvrings were more often than not the methods used, racist-colonialist and culturally-biased attitudes the guiding outlook of its instigators. History may thus demonstrate that for the messianic do-gooder any and all means to an end are justified — no matter what the moral contradiction or collateral damage — or that their professed deep concern for the welfare of the human race is a mere cover story for personality traits that might better be treated than revered. No wonder then that the history of prohibition and its architects is rarely mentioned by present-day descendants of the moral entrepreneurs of yesteryear.

The failure of history to support the legitimacy of modern-day drug policy goes back much further, of course, to a long series of failed prohibitions commencing with the first Western Drug War, that against Native Americans of 500 years ago who were treated with the greatest of barbarity by the Inquisition for their age-old traditions of ‘drug abuse’. As for sufficient condemnatory historical evidence of modern Drug Warriorism, however, we may confine our attention to prohibition in the 20th Century and the small band of true believers who foisted prohibition on the entire world as if it were the long-lost 11th Commandment. Indeed, history shows not only that modern prohibition springs from the minds of a small cohort of devout zealots whose methods, hypocrisies, and professed moral stance leaves little doubt that a dubious religious fundamentalism is at the root of their convictions, but an even more comprehensive history shows that the fertile ground that enabled prohibition to become a world-wide fiasco — the extraordinary receptivity of the 20th Century western mindset — also must be understood in a religious and psychological context if we are to explain how prohibitionist efforts have made such remarkable progress.

The existence of a modern vacuum of belief in the organised religions — the beliefs that shaped human psychology for millennia — combined with the undoubted persistence of archaic instinctive necessities that enabled such religion to thrive and propagate over the ages, have resulted in a ‘common modern man’ who in default of, and as a substitute for the designated demons of the past, is quite obviously prepared to believe practically anything at all a devil and ‘universal evil’ worthy of crusading against. Formerly, only the highest religious authorities were accepted as genuine proclaimers of what was, and what was not the work of Satan. Today, the merest politician or Ph.D. in political science may lead us off on a well-attended crusade against ultimate evil. History shows that modern man has fallen for the drug-as-devil paradigm as thoroughly as medieval man was sucked into his belief in witchcraft. Ostensibly rational and scientific, and having laid aside superstition and primitive delusion, 20th Century Man seems a victim of the greatest of all superstitions — that he is no longer affected by the archaic structures of his own nervous system and the associated instinctive drives that evolved over millions of years, a period compared with which the duration of our enlightened age is but a heartbeat.

There is little to criticise in David Bewley-Taylor's expanded and much-developed doctoral thesis, *The United States and International Drug Control, 1909-1997*, although I suppose that some professional historians may raise a few points of debate and disagreement. For example, the author's new views on the role of Harry Anslinger in the construction of modern prohibition are particularly interesting and thus certain to draw some rebuttal from those having already gone on record with differing views. The new view seems to clarify and demystify Anslinger's role and make of him a figure of lesser power than has been believed by those wanting to see him the primary and influential, single-minded architect of the regime that has led to today's drug policy woes. As revealed by Bewley-Taylor, Harry was above all a bureaucrat who, like J. Edgar Hoover, managed through all sorts of tricks and manoeuvres to attain his main goal: staying in power far longer than his accomplishments would have merited. He was apparently often at odds with the U.S. State Department and other U.S. officials and policies, and thus he now appears far more the permitted fool than the approved spokesman for the U.S. position over the years. The result is that we now have a far less important scapegoat for the idiocies of modern prohibition, and must attribute them more widely.

As for the book's mechanical aspects, it is well-referenced, as one would expect of a thesis, and chapter introductions and conclusions are well composed and can be effectively used as a refresher to the arguments. Yet I did find the early part of the story a bit brief for a reader who is new to the topic: It seems written as a mere introduction and prelude to the more informative chapters on post-WWII drug control policy. Thus interested readers might also profitably refer to other classic histories such as Musto's *The American Disease* to more fully understand drug policy developments of the early years of the century. Bewley-Taylor's narrative really gets going when telling the details of drug control in the 1950s and 1960s, and here the story-telling is especially clear and engaging. But I also found the occasional paragraph somewhat over-written, too densely expressed or with ambiguous punctuation, and thus tricky to understand at a first reading. And here and there in the book some major idea or finding is repeated excessively, but these minor faults of style by no means distract from the far greater content that must be praised.

The dirty little secrets about prohibition are well-covered in this lucid history of 20th Century International Drug Control — a misnomer if ever there were one — and the book incites one to explore new avenues for understanding our present folly and the great, seemingly insurmountable difficulty in reversing it. The centrality of fundamentalist moralism and messianic crusading in the story of prohibition is revealed in all its vainglory, and impels one to see the entire institution of 'drug control' as a misguided religious phenomenon or even perversion. Such excellent history teaches the lesson that drug policy reform efforts should pay more attention to history than has been the case, for the history we read here seems a far sharper tool for proving the futility and self-defeating nature of prohibition than the run-of-the-mill scientific research on drug policy that is so often presented in debate.

Not only should the history of 20th Century prohibition told here discredit all current reliance and belief in it for many readers, but the story also illustrates the way the U.S. installed world prohibition and the U.N. drug treaties — via threats, bribes, coercion, back-room meetings and tactics — never through informed debate by all parties — and thus delegitimises those treaties to such an extent that no one today should be foolish enough to believe they are up-front agreements between nations existing for the common good of all. Bewley-Taylor shows that the U.N. drug treaties today serve mostly to infringe the rights of nations to develop their own approaches to drug policy — approaches that are less contaminated with anachronistic moral zealotry and above all more effective at reducing the social problems associated with drug use. The Single Convention Treaties appear like a Faustian bargain signed by all the world's nations in a moment of ignorant panic, and now we seem in mortal fear even of questioning their legitimacy much less telling the Devil

where He can get off. Perhaps it is a shame we no longer have Harry Anslinger to blame as top devil in this affair, for blame must now reside now with many who should have known better.

Bewley-Taylor's three major themes, well described in the Introduction, deal with the relationship of U.S. power and hegemony to the prohibitionist enterprise, the frequent discrepancies between the announced goals of international drug control and Washington's wider foreign policy objectives, and interpretations of the reasons for such oscillation of policy. Bewley-Taylor remarks, "Washington has frequently pursued wider foreign policy objectives that have undermined its own goals for transnational drug control — a paradox that continues to characterize contemporary U.S. narcotic foreign policy.... U.S. narcotic diplomacy can ultimately be understood as the product of oscillation between two forces. These are, first, American moral idealism and, second, what can be termed political realism: an approach to foreign policy based on rational calculations of power and national interest."

Since the events of September 11, 2001, however, the nature of Washington's goals and intentions for its role in the coming century — aspects of U.S. power that have been ever-present but largely concealed from those outside the inner sanctum of U.S. government — reveals that much of what America has been thought to be is a myth. What Bewley-Taylor calls a paradox may have been more a high-level strategy of the National Security State that the U.S. has become since WWII, the apparent oscillation a mere artefact of an overall covert and constant strategy by the National Security Honchos in the U.S.'s highly opaque security apparatus.

That power corrupts is certain, and that the rich and powerful in the U.S. must by nature have the same human faults as the rich and powerful of other times and places, cannot be doubted. Being born and rising to power in America carries no special guarantee that God is on one's side, despite oft-heard odes to the contrary. Thus we must suspect that the supposed moral idealism of the U.S. and its leaders may well be a cover story and one of the great myths of the modern age. Just as the new views presented about Harry Anslinger make him appear far more the permitted fool than the guiding light, it now seems that American moral idealism has for some time now been the 'permitted nonsense' — truly believed by the masses and even most of the politicians and spokesmen for U.S. goodness, of course — helping to obscure the obvious fact that American power has all along been like any other. Post 9-11 events are beginning to show America in another light entirely, and are leading to a re-evaluation of much of what America has done since Harry Truman dropped the Big One on Japan, ostensibly to avoid the projected American casualties of invasion, but more realistically to prevent the Soviets from getting wild ideas. The string of atrocities that followed over the years, from Vietnam right through to the U.S.'s predominant role in forcing sanctions on Iraq that have directly caused the deaths of untold numbers of Iraqi innocents, including women and children, make the idea that America is even moderately guided by moral idealism and concern for other cultures more than a mere myth. The nature of great overweening wealth and power is revealed once again, and is no different than it has been throughout the ages, although far better equipped.

Harry Anslinger, however, was a 'permitted fool' not because he was too powerful to remove, like Hoover, but because the foolishness was perceived as advantageous to those in the inner sanctum of U.S. power. Since the quirky nature of the 20th Century western mindset was so susceptible to the fanaticism of prohibition, far be it for Washington's powers-that-be to ignore the phenomenon or squelch those who wished to incite it. It was rather put to use with a vengeance. And so with the 'permitted foolishness' of America's purported promotion of and overriding concern for democracy and human rights around the world, America's help for the poor and disadvantaged of the world..., what more effective banner — perhaps 'shroud' would be a more accurate term — for world domination could exist than such self-proclaimed largesse and heart-felt concern? No matter that the masses

still believe the myth in their hearts, nor could they be convinced otherwise even by a protracted history lesson, so strong are their convictions. As Nietzsche warned, “convictions are more dangerous enemies of truth than lies.”

Although there is plenty of evidence in Bewley-Taylor’s document that incites one down such avenues of informed speculation, he correctly avoids going into such matters directly, leaving us with only the obvious suspicions about the ‘paradox and oscillation’ of U.S. policy. He does state clearly that “The fight against drugs is almost certainly being used as a cover to increase U.S. influence in the [Latin American] region and reassert hemispheric hegemony.” But I would go much further, and insist that it is global hegemony at issue. When Bewley-Taylor writes,

“The Department of State’s belief ... that its international successes against the drugs trade ‘confirm the general soundness of [our] approach’ affirms that the United States pursues an international strategy based on prohibition with the same enthusiasm today as it did in the early decades of the twentieth century. American officials follow the same path as that trodden by Brent, Wright, Porter and Anslinger. A steadfast belief in the moral superiority and practical effectiveness of U.S. prohibitive policies has maintained the momentum of proselytization. This has remained so despite abundant historical and contemporary evidence to show that the policy is ineffectual in dealing with illegal drug use. References to the drug trade as an ‘opportunistic disease that breeds only amidst social and moral decay’ demonstrate a continuing preoccupation with morality rather than the concrete socio-economic realities that often underpin illicit drug use...

... I would say that those in the U.S. State Department convinced of prohibition’s worth, or those following in the footsteps of early prohibitionists or so concerned with the morals of the entire human race, are either ‘permitted fools’ or actually ‘encouraged fools’ and that those in the higher strata of power are the ones doing the permitting and encouraging in line with an overall and well-calculated, if cynical and anti-democratic strategy. If, on the contrary, the highest levels of U.S. power are infested with people of the intellectual calibre of the Bishop Brents and Harry Anslingers of this world, we are in a great deal more trouble than even conspiracy theorists suppose. A more realistic view, reinforced by post 9-11 evidence, would indicate that although there are plenty of complete idiots in Washington, we must assume there are some others at the top, far more informed and aware, who know as we do that prohibition and ‘supply-side control’ of drugs cannot possibly work, and never have. Those at the top surely are, and have long been far more like Nixon, Kissinger, Haldeman and Hunt than the moralising front-men now leading prayer sessions and hymn-singing bashes in their hallowed Washington offices, the ‘encouraged fools’ placed in the media limelight as if they were the free world’s caring and squeaky-clean leaders. Thus the ‘continuing preoccupation with morality’ is surely the permitted and encouraged foolishness of a higher level power structure.

Such a story is far more difficult to research and tell convincingly, even with post 9-11 developments in evidence, and of course goes far beyond the perimeter of the story of the U.S. and international drug control. And, of course, this book was written before those great events which have changed the course not only of history but of the perception of America’s role in the history of the modern world. And perhaps these are concerns best left for the history writing of a future age, for at the moment we appear to be going down the road well-described by Mackay, enjoying our seasons of excitement and recklessness, when we care not what we do, not to recover our senses until we have shed rivers of blood and sowed a harvest of groans and tears, to be reaped by posterity...only eventually to recover our senses slowly, and one by one.

It is tempting and reassuring to believe that we here in the extra-American world might continue to make step-by-step progress in developing effective, even revolutionary drug policy, even to the extent of slowly shifting the position of the U.N. toward recognition of the faults of its international drug treaties despite U.S. dominance of that august body. And that this progress must eventually start to erode even the obsolete position of the United States federal government itself. Given the facts of the current situation, however, I suspect that the most that can be done in the near future is to further increase the polarisation of position on drug policy, with the United States becoming ever more repressive and oppressive, the Europeans slowly more bold and united against the U.S. Somewhere along in this process, with men 'one by one recovering their senses', a groundswell of realisation must occur, and the entire concept of prohibition be widely seen for the folly that it truly is. Whether there remains sufficient time for the lengthy and patient effort that will achieve this end, or whether ecological, financial, and/or political crises will soon make advances in drug policy a mere unaffordable luxury, is an open question. What is worrying is that there appears to be a current parallel to the way the U.S. fomented the panic that led to our modern, truly insane policies on drugs: Another and even greater panic is now being fomented on us all, that Armageddon is just around the corner and will be brought to us by terrorists and axis-of-evil perpetrators whose main preoccupation is hating American-style freedom and democracy. And that we must fight an everlasting war against those who threaten that freedom. There is an ironic truth here that Jefferson would have greatly appreciated.

We have for some time been living in a world where, as Aldous Huxley predicted in 1958,

"The constitutions will not be abrogated and the good laws will remain on the statute book; but these liberal forms will merely serve to mask and adorn a profoundly illiberal substance... [W]e may expect to see in the democratic countries a reversal of the process which transformed England into a democracy... All the traditional names, all the hallowed slogans will remain exactly what they were in the good old days. Democracy and freedom will be the theme of every broadcast and editorial -- but democracy and freedom in a strictly Pickwickian sense. Meanwhile the ruling oligarchy and its highly trained elite of soldiers, policemen, thought-manufacturers and mind-manipulators will quietly run the show as they see fit." (Huxley 1959)

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When even such great scientific minds as Baroness Susan Greenfield's can be entrapped in fuzzy thinking for support of the prohibitionist folly — and many other scientific names of renown could also be mentioned — we should realise that science will continue to be a fickle ally in reforming drug policy. History may prove to be a more effective tool, yet reading the history of drug control, we cannot fail to see the religious nature of the enterprise, and religious conviction is the kind of thing that sticks in men's minds long after scientific and historical proof of its folly has been established. Most of us are apparently still too immersed in our times to understand that prohibition fulfils a religious need in its supporters, far more than a political or regulatory need, and that 'drug crimes' are the modern analogue of the heresies of ages past, prosecuted as a pretext for the gratification of political, cultural, and religious hatred. The parallel to the Inquisition's fixations and persecutions could not be more evident.

The final question we must ask is : If both science and history are such weak weapons in the war on prohibition, where shall we turn for assistance?

What must be exposed and attacked is the higher level cynicism and intellectual corruption which continues to use prohibition as a tool for wider strategies. This will be no easy task, and history teaches that attacking such a superior enemy is best done by stealth, and by helping along the self-destructive aspects of such enterprises. Encouraging a religious mania — even one illegitimately promoted by the corrupt and non-believing popes of Washington — to continue on enthusiastically to its logical conclusions is one time-honoured way to tackle it, but I might suggest another, and recent events have shown that it is effective. High-level judicial decisions, such as those by supreme courts of nations or by international courts, are in a sense similar to the papal edicts or other religious statements of infallible authority of ages past, and encouraging the various judiciaries of the nations and world to pass condemnatory judgement on prohibition may well be the most effective pathway to reform. History and science may be brought to bear in this process, but it takes religious techniques, or their modern equivalents, to attack and dispel religious delusion.

References

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