Review of *Drink: A Social History of America*

Author: Andrew Barr
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The use of alcoholic beverages has been a peculiar part of social science studies. During and shortly after the Prohibition period it was mired in the pros and cons of that sometimes called "noble experiment." There were some notable exceptions such as works by Krout (1925) and Odegard (1928). These gave way to more scholarly work in American history, politics and sociology. As they did so they tended to study alcohol drinking from a "problem" perspective, interested in legislation. Only recently have alcohol studies begun to include the study of drinking and its contexts as a part of American popular culture; of the uses of leisure and of consumption. However it is still the case, as I have written elsewhere, although my work has been on law and politics *in re* alcohol, I am still often referred to as an "expert on alcoholism."

In this book, Andrew Barr presents the reader with an account of drinking, not as a problem but as a behavior; of what many Americans do and have done since colonial eras. In doing so he also attempts a spirited (pun intended) defense of drinking. It is a useful hook and a needed addition to the studies now on the shelves. But it too is its own problem. Like the girl with the curl in the middle of her forehead, when it is good, it is very, very good but when it is bad it is horrid!

The book is divided into eight chapters, including an introduction titled "Drink and Drugs" in which Barr gives much space to a criticism of the disease theory of alcoholism. Then follow six chapters in which various aspects of the history of drinking in the United States are described, discussed and documented. Each chapter covers the

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entire range of American historical periods. Chapter 1 details the transformation of British drinking habits into American ones, with emphasis on the decline of wine drinking and rum. Barr focuses here, as he does throughout the volume, on the role of climate, economics and technology in producing changes.

Chapter 2 is an account of American eating habits and their relation in drinking. Here, and in Chapter 3 on gender differences, Barr finds a significant relation to changes in eating out and American drinking. Chapter 4 contains much useful information on differences between beer, wine and spirits in American history. There is a very valuable account of the ways in which beer and wine interests sought to separate their industry from spirits in an effort to exempt their product from being labeled intoxicating. Chapter 5 is an analysis of efforts to control drinking. Here Barr analyzes Prohibition and drinking-driving laws. Chapter 6 is concerned with alcoholic drinking as contrasted with American consumption of tea and coffee and with the transformation in consumption from rum to whiskey and from whiskey to beer.

In the final chapter, "Conclusion: Social Drinking" Barr pulls together the general orientation which has been underlined in the previous chapters. He is critical of the American tendency to see alcohol beverages as a problem rather than as sociable conduct; to hurry through meals and fail to substitute wine for other drink. In his conclusion, Barr engages even more fully in writing diatribe rather than analysis. He is critical both here and in earlier parts of the book of the American disposition to restrict drinking--in hours of sales, in teenage drinkers and otherwise to treat drinking as a flaw of persons and events.

Throughout the work Barr is given to shallow uses of materials, often substituting assertion for analysis. His treatment of teenage drinking dwells only on the civil liberties issue of age discrimination, resulting in another diatribe against the 21 age "line" for limits on sales. While there is validity to his argument it ignores the elements of auto deaths that have given rise to the issue. He neither deals with them nor attempts to analyze their factual base. This gives the reader a sense of special pleading rather than wise observation of the total context.

A number of such examples of worthy viewpoints backed by dubious assertions and poor use of materials mar his work. It begins in the first chapter of which the following is an example of what is repeatedly found in the volume. This is from a discussion of the disease theory of alcoholism:

> Denial is not caused by the disease of alcoholism; it is denial of reality that causes people to become alcoholics. (p. 26)

He seems either unaware or unconcerned that there is a very vast literature on alcoholism ending in no consensus about causes. Nor does he reckon that denial of reality is a complex condition and may characterize many people who do not become alcoholics.

I will cite two other egregious examples of assertion and diatribe that greatly weaken his claims to scholarly accuracy. Scholars who have studied Prohibition have pondered the question of its effects. Barr is clear that it was a failure; that it did not diminish consumption; that it has caused Americans to privatize drinking. He begins his discussion of Prohibition by writing, "The one thing everybody knows about Prohibition is that it did not work" (p.23). To support his claim that it taught respectable women to drink he quotes an observer,

Alice-Leone Moats. Why she is to be accorded any greater powers of observation about American drinking habits rather than others goes unstated. There is a considerable literature on Prohibition, on the varying definitions of "success," even on the matter consumption. Barr uses only one source on that complex question - Rorabaugh's *The Alcoholic Republic*. He ignores the many limitations Rorabaugh placed on such material, derived largely from another source that placed even greater limits. Other scholars find the outcomes of Prohibition on later consumption less definitive and by no means supportive of Barr's claims.

This manner of using quotes from ambiguous sources as evidence and ignoring the different sides of an issue is followed much too often in the book. Not unlike other writers, Barr seems to be taken by the magic of print: whatever is written is necessarily correct. All research is accorded the same status, except where it seems to disagree with his views, in which case, as in his discussion of the Fetal Alcohol Syndrome, the studies are scrutinized more carefully. His analytical tool is a sledgehammer rather than a scalpel.

Yet there is much that is valuable, especially on the transformation of American drinking habits and uses. There is a huge set of references that is alone worth the purchase of the book. The references present an additional problem. In place of conventional footnotes there are sections at the back of the book that refer to topics in a general paragraph. Thus one section has material on drinking places with a section on beer gardens that was discussed in the text. This seems to refer to a specific and important study mentioned in the text but which and where, among the references, it is to be found is not given. It is very difficult to find specific supports for specific assertions. The reader has to guess which relate to what.

A goodly amount of space is given to analysis and criticism of American taste and uses of wine. I know little about Barr but that he published a book entitled *Wine Snobbery* and, apparently, writes often for wine magazines.

Books like Barr's are difficult for the reviewer to assess in a scholarly journal such as this one. Given the copious and valuable notes and references and the development of historical problems it has much significance. Given the shallow use of materials, where I am familiar with them, and the diatribes, even when I agree with them, it loses much utility for the scholar. Should the reader interested in the topic read it or is it a waste of time? It definitely should he read by scholars, but it should be diluted with "rocks" of skepticism and garnished with a large slice of doubt.

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