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The Decline of Abstinence

Bad Habits. Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Gambling, Sexual Misbehavior, and Swearing in American History. by John C. Burnham

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# BOOK REVIEWS

## The Decline of Abstinence

**Bad Habits. Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Gambling, Sexual Misbehavior, and Swearing in American History.** JOHN C. BURNHAM. New York University Press, New York, 1993. xx, 385 pp. + plates. \$35. The American Social Experience, 28.

In an earlier America, as portrayed by John C. Burnham in *Bad Habits*, respectable people clearly understood that certain behaviors (the "minor vices") were socially unacceptable: drinking alcoholic beverages, smoking cigarettes, taking drugs, gambling, swearing, and engaging in sexual relations outside of marriage. (Indeed, even talking or reading about, or looking at, matters sexual was improper.)

By contrast, in Burnham's account, engaging in this conduct epitomized life among the "Victorian underworld" and all too many "parochials" (mainly Catholics, apparently) from the "lower orders" (the poor and working classes). But the value system of dominant America treated the minor vices as taboos that decent people did not break, and it condemned those people who did.

Through the course of this century, according to Burnham, our value system has been turned upside down, and the descendants of those who stood for formerly deviant values now dominate. How did this happen? He finds a startlingly effective partnership between criminals and degenerates from the lower orders and greedy capitalists; and through subtle and largely invisible manipulations they have managed to foist their values onto the rest of us. In this process they have been unwittingly helped by other powerful forces in our culture such as artists, writers and journalists, Hollywood, and, more recently, those responsible for other forms of popular culture (such as TV and rock music). These others, according to Burnham, selfishly

indulge in rebelliousness, unaware of the real beneficiaries of their defiance of convention.

I find this analysis baffling. Of course, today lots of "respectable" people drink, gamble, read and look at sexy magazines, movies, and books, swear, have affairs, and the like. Obviously, there has been a slackening of what Burnham calls the former "restraints on impulses."

But if there were really an *inversion* of values, then our society would admire the crack addict, the drunk, those who spend their lives at the racetrack, the foulest mouths, the pornographers, and the like. This is manifestly not the case. Instead, throughout mainstream America, smokers are increasingly shunned, druggies and prostitutes are at best pitied, drug dealers and smut sellers are loathed, drunk drivers are detested, and rampant cursers are thought vulgar and avoided.

To be sure, moderate drinking can even be chic, civic leaders sometimes use

for many of Burnham's vices, what is condemned is "abuse," not mere "use."

Why do so many people while considering themselves completely respectable now bet on football pools, travel to Las Vegas for holidays, drink beer or wine with dinner, and watch erotic movies? Burnham claims this is the outcome of America's having been seduced by the culture of earlier immigrants and gangsters. I'm skeptical. Scandinavia, for example, isn't famed for its criminal elements, nor has it had an infusion of foreigners; but there too participation in the minor vices must be enormously more widespread today than a century ago.

Burnham emphasizes slumming—that people engage in the minor vices in order to mimic certain people from lower social classes who, they imagine, are less inhibited and have more fun. But surely many Americans engage in the minor vices in order to emulate a glamorous jet set.

This is not to dispute Burnham's point that there is more self-indulgence today. But we're a wealthier people now, and so many more of us can afford leisure-time pleasures of all sorts. Why do many find the minor vices enjoyable in moderation? For pretty much the same reasons people enjoy sports events and holidays. They give us pleasure in ways neurologists can understand; they provide us utility in ways economists can understand. Undoubtedly their fashionability is part of the pleasure. Here, quite plainly, Burnham's nasty advertisers come into play.

But even in today's marketing-oriented society it is very difficult to convince most people to harm themselves. Most bettors don't gamble away all their money; most drinkers don't get drunk; 50 million people have quit smoking; snorting cocaine is no longer trendy. On the whole, today's abusers of the minor vices are drawn from the same populations that featured users in the past.

Burnham doesn't really discuss the thinking behind the earlier religiously based commitment to abstinence. Did respectables a century ago believe that even moderate use was dangerous, or that most people would be unable to stop with moderate

use? If so, maybe experience has simply changed people's minds. Or maybe it is just that religious preaching in favor of abstinence has sharply declined.



"Late-nineteenth-century ethnic promotion of lager beer." [From *Bad Habits*; courtesy Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress]

four-letter words, and recreational gambling is widely viewed as harmless entertainment. In some circles, modest drug-taking is more than tolerated. Nowadays,

Or was it that social leaders previously believed that their own abstention from the moral vices would set an example that would lead others to abstain? If so, there seems little faith in this idea now. Nor is there much confidence today in the idea that the majority should use its political power to repress conduct viewed largely as self-destructive.

Hence, even though the adoption of Prohibition may have temporarily validated the way of life of the old guard and reduced alcohol consumption to boot, it is, because of problems associated with enforcement, widely viewed as a failure. So, too, most people who speak up today in favor of legalizing drugs and prostitution, and are given any serious attention, don't promise that indulgence won't increase. It is rather, they believe, that the gigantic social costs of the current criminalization strategy makes it counter-productive.

Burnham sees mutually reinforcing efforts by advocates of the vices and commercial interests. It can hardly be surprising that where consumer goods and services are involved self-serving capitalists and advertising will also be found. More interesting are the extent to which criminal activities have been supplanted by legalization and social acceptance and the extent to which profits have been reduced to normal levels by taking previously condemned conduct off the illicit list. In short, we would have been better served by Burnham had he given more attention to the competition between legitimate enterprises and criminals.

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## The Age of Our Species

**Men Among the Mammoths.** Victorian Science and the Discovery of Human Prehistory. A. BOWDOIN VAN RIPER. University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993. xvi, 267 pp., illus. \$45 or £35.95; paper, \$16.95 or £13.50. Science and Its Conceptual Foundations.

To life scientists, the historical resonance of the year 1859 stems from the publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. But another event with remarkable implications for our understanding of life history occurred that year: key scientists recognized that humankind had been on Earth for a disturbingly long time.

This recognition was born from accept-

ance of the stratigraphic co-occurrence of stone tools and the remains of such now-extinct mammals as mammoth and woolly rhinoceros as evidence that humans and the mammals had been contemporaries. For reasons that go back another century, this recognition had profound meaning. As the 18th century progressed, it had become abundantly clear to natural historians that all of Earth's history could not be compressed into the roughly 6000 years provided by a literal reading of Genesis. The solution to the resulting theological quandary was provided in most powerful form in 1778 by the French natural historian Georges Leclerc, Comte de Buffon. Buffon split Earth and human history, making the former ancient while confining the latter to the last 6000 years or so. Equally important, in Buffon's system people did not appear until the Earth had become modern in form.

It had made good theological sense for the creation of humankind to have occurred immediately after the creation of the Earth itself. After all, the Earth had been made for us, and an Earth without people was surely an Earth without purpose. Now, however, the lengthy history of the Earth prior to our creation became evidence of the care that the superintending Creator had taken in preparing a fit habitat for His supreme creation, the human species.

As Buffon left it, this view of human history was immune to empirical test, but that did not last long. By the beginning of the 19th century, the French paleontologist Georges Cuvier had documented the reality of extinction and demonstrated that an entire fauna, typified by the mammoth, had become extinct during the relatively recent past. The end of this extinction event marked the beginnings of the modern Earth. It followed, as Cuvier explicitly recognized, that human remains could not be contemporaneous with the remains of the extinct mammals.

What happened next provides one of the most fascinating tales in the history of any discipline, a tale that has been told with varying degrees of accuracy in a number of popular accounts; by myself, in a book published a decade ago; and now, from a British perspective, by A. Bowdoin Van Riper in *Men Among the Mammoths*.

Because Van Riper's account focuses on Great Britain, it is far narrower in geographic scope than the issues themselves. We have a right to expect that the geographic narrowness will be balanced by greater depth. Since Van Riper is swimming waters that have been swum before, we have a right to expect that he will at least splash a new route. Happily, we get both of these things, and we get

them in a well-written, thoroughly enjoyable volume.

Among other matters, Van Riper explores three issues that have received insufficient attention in previous attempts to understand the new resolution of the issue of human antiquity that was reached in 1859. First, he examines and distinguishes the roles that British amateurs and "career" geologists played in reaching the new resolution, making clear, for instance, the very different kinds of contributions that each group made in the critical excavation of Brixham Cave in 1858. Second, he carefully explains why those he calls "historical archaeologists" (antiquarians) played no role in the debate over questions concerning human antiquity in Great Britain. Third, he provides an insightful and informative examination of the reaction of the educated British public to the new resolution. In this brief section, he argues that the introduction of higher criticism into Great Britain and the advent of Darwinian evolution combined to lessen the significance of the discovery of a deep human antiquity. "Claims about the age of the human race," he observes, "were tame compared to those that seemed to derive men from monkeys and the Bible from fallible human authors" (p. 182). In this perspective, a deep human antiquity was a lesser evil, and peace was made with it quickly.

I disagree with quite a bit that is in this book. To take but one example, Van Riper emphasizes the geological nature of the archeology that emerged as a result of the new resolution of human antiquity and asserts that in this modern paleoanthropology bears the stamp of its mid-Victorian origins. But, because Cuvier framed the argument in geological terms, the resolution *had* to be geological, and both British and Continental scientists recognized this. No wonder, then, that the resolution played out in geological terms on both sides of the Channel and that the resultant archeology was heavily interdisciplinary. Indeed, while modern paleoanthropology is dependent on geology, so is modern French Paleolithic archeology. The latter, however, traces its roots back not to such Victorian scientists as Evans and Prestwich but to such quintessentially French contemporaries as Lartet and de Mortillet. Modern interdisciplinary archeology is not derived solely from Victorian Great Britain, and in matters like this (there are others), Van Riper's geographical constraints have let him down.

It is a good sign that I am tempted to go on. A book worth taking issue with is a book worth reading. This one is both.

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