

Sobering the State: The Cultural Origins of Alcohol Regulation in Canada, 1820-1929

[WORKING PAPER]

The act of drinking in contemporary Canada is scarcely imaginable without the state. Any Canadian in search of a drink today will almost inevitably deal with provincial wholesale and retail monopolies on spirits, wine, and beer (e.g., the Liquor Control Board of Ontario, the BC Liquor Distribution Branch, the Nova Scotia Liquor Corporation, etc.). Even before the first sip, alcoholic beverages have already been taxed at the point of manufacture. At the point of purchase, consumers may lament the higher tax rates placed on spirits compared to lower alcohol beverages, significantly impacting final retail prices. Strongly regulated licensing systems shape where, when, and how much one can drink on-premises. After the last sip, drunk driving laws ensure that drivers do not surpass potentially life-threatening blood-alcohol levels.

Government alcohol control touches virtually every point of the drinking experience – and yet, drinking behaviour is also highly regulated by forces outside state control. Canadian civil society actors, organizations, and ideologies ardently promote alcohol control, whether through preachers of moderation, substance-focused non-profit organizations (e.g., Mothers Against Drunk Driving), ‘socially conscious’ enterprises (e.g., the many self-proclaimed “family-friendly” craft breweries), or ideological conceptions of individualized risk and responsibility. The contemporary attitude of moderate consumption does not merely reflect a powerful regulatory system. Rather, alcohol regulation in Canada exceeds the bounds of state enforcement into the realm of civil society, where individuals are urged to act as their “own Liquor Control Board” (Ontario Ministry of Health, 1975, n.p.).

The current research investigates the origins of contemporary ‘hybrid’ Canadian alcohol regulation, focusing on the roughly hundred-year period from pre-Confederation to the era of

national and provincial prohibitions. I ask: how does drinking become a public problem in Canada? How is responsibility for this problem negotiated between state and society actors? The current paper suggests that between the first few decades of the early 19th and 20th centuries, ownership of the ‘alcohol problem’ was transferred from civil society to the state – a process epitomized by the transition from mass temperance to prohibition in Canada. I argue that two key necessary conditions define this regulatory transition from society to state: (1) the social structuring and material implications of alcohol use prior to regulation, and (2) the active cultural work of intermediaries to problematize this existing structure. While the socially stratified impacts of alcohol use in pre-Confederation Canada created a *potential* coalition of actors with converging ‘interests’ against alcohol (e.g., women, employers, clerics), the combination of religious and economic doctrines by temperance leaders enabled the formation of a coalition between these actors in practice.

Alcohol and the State: The Making of a Public Problem

The regulation of alcohol production, consumption, and distribution has been a central prerogative of states since the Neolithic era (Chrzan, 2013). The Code of Hammurabi mandated the exchange of beer for equivalent amounts of grain or corn and sanctioned the death penalty for violators (Handcock, 1920). As in Babylon, the ancient Egyptian state established beer rations for labourers (around 8 pints per day; Burch, 2011), while the Han court instituted a virtual monopoly over alcohol production and distribution in 1st century BCE China (Sterckx, 2015). Building from seminal archaeological work on early agricultural societies (Childe, 1936), some anthropologists have argued for alcohol as a central vehicle for social solidarity in Neolithic grain-farming communities. These arguments suggest that sedentarism permitted investments in time-intensive fermentation processes, while alcohol raised the spirits of toiling labourers tasked

with constructing irrigation systems and feeding growing populations (Chrzan, 2013). Early modern European states regulated the content of alcoholic beverages to reduce price competition for staple commodities, such as the Bavarian *Reinheitsgebot* of 1516, which decreed that beer could only contain barley, yeast, and water (thus safeguarding bread prices, which generally relied on wheat and rye). Despite its Bavarian origins, the law became a symbolic anchor for emergent German nationalism after unification and was adopted nationwide by 1906 (Depenbusch et al., 2018). Thus, for millennia, alcohol and its regulation have been a central force for state formation.

In the following analysis, I analyze the processes through which the “public problem” of alcohol passes from civil society to state regulation. Drawing on Joseph Gusfield’s (1963, 1981) seminal works, the current study treats public problems as symbolic constructs legitimated by those endowed with the authority to (re)define them. Alcohol, from this constructivist perspective, is not inevitably problematic. Instead, cultural intermediaries (or the ‘owners of public problems’ in Gusfield’s terms) must perform active cultural work to institutionalize new visions of the social world. For instance, colonial America exhibited ubiquitous drinking (mostly hard liquor) at social and work activities, but alcohol was not invoked to explain deviant behaviour (Levine 1978). As America industrialized through the 19th century, employers began to view drunkenness as a problem of labour discipline. At the same time, elite federalists cast alcohol as a harbinger of social disintegration at the hands of an expanded popular electorate. The American temperance movement flourished under these circumstances, led by Protestant evangelicals and a new moralistic middle class, eventually culminating in Prohibition by 1920 (Gusfield, 1963). After the repeal of Prohibition in 1933, medical science exerted increasing power to regulate understandings of alcohol as a “dangerous commodity” by treating specific

deviant drinkers afflicted with “alcoholism.” By the 1970s, the rise of anti-drunk driving campaigns transformed drinking into a public health issue with risk to the general population (Gusfield, 1981).

However, public problems are not *merely* symbolic – i.e., arbitrarily defined by whoever has the most power to institutionalize them. Instead, actors resonate with depictions of phenomena *qua* public problems within particular conditions of existence. Social movement leaders must therefore ‘frame’ their representations of a given situation in the context of their audiences’ material realities. That is, those seeking ownership over a public problem (and thus, legitimacy in its definition as such) make particular elements of a situation salient (or invisible, unremarkable, etc.) to cast it as “an issue” – an injustice that can be remedied through collective action (Snow et al., 1986, p. 466). Claims to legitimate ownership of a public problem stand or fall on their ability to make the ‘issue’ perceptible and meaningful given the everyday, embodied experiences of actors. Public problems, though symbolic constructs, arise from inescapably material origins. Thus, I argue for this ‘materiality of origins’ as the first of two necessary conditions in the transition from civil society to state regulation of public problems. The following analysis will demonstrate how the socio-material reality of drinking in pre-Confederation Canada – its ubiquitous and excessive consumption among male settlers resulting in pervasive violence against women, alcohol-related illness, injury and death, public drunkenness, and later, issues of labour productivity and contract enforcement – was central to the initial perception of alcohol as a public problem by civil society actors.

‘Objective’ social conditions provide a necessary basis for shifts in the collective perception of problems, but are insufficient to explain how particular definitions of problems become legitimate or inspire mobilization. This insight can be traced back to Marx’s (1991

[1852]) clarification of his theory of collective political action, in which he shows that *common class conditions do not necessarily or inevitably lead to collective mobilization of that class*.

Likewise, the Canadian temperance movement – characterized by its broad coalition between social strata – suggests that divergent class conditions can nevertheless breed cross-class alliances in the political realm. I argue that this apparently fickle relationship between class and political action can be accounted for by intermediaries' active symbolic work, supplying potential audiences with new meanings to perceive, understand, and act on social phenomena.

In the case of Canadian temperance, I demonstrate that a weak state enabled the emergence of new ‘moral entrepreneurs’ (Becker, 1963). Successful temperance activists preached abstinence as a means for both religious self-improvement (or, more cynically, status distinction; Gusfield, 1963) and commercial success. Combining both spiritual and worldly preoccupations in their mobilization efforts, these intermediaries realized an ‘elective affinity’ between evangelical doctrines of millenarian salvation and economic doctrines of accumulation. As the failures of civil society approaches to alcohol regulation became apparent, emergent prohibitionists transported the religious ethos of temperance into the rational-legal realm. Although the prohibitionists displaced the temperance movement’s earlier appeal, I argue that the temperance activists’ simultaneous representation of material and symbolic interests was a necessary precursor to later acquisitions of state power.

Periodization

The analysis proceeds based on a basic periodization. First, the “temperance period” begins roughly in 1820 and ends in 1897, i.e., until the national prohibition plebiscite. The current analysis treats this plebiscite as a significant turning point in temperance strategy (of course, strategies oriented towards state power acquisition were germinal in earlier local option

ballot initiatives and the later passing of the *Scott Act*). Second, the “prohibition period” lasts from 1898 to 1929, i.e., from the national plebiscite to the end of prohibition in Canada (except PEI). The following analysis of the period from 1820 to 1929 suggests a useful analytical - if heuristic - divide between the society-dominant and state-dominant approaches to alcohol regulation that characterize the temperance and prohibition eras, respectively.

To gain insight into the ways that the ‘problem’ of alcohol passes from society to state ownership, I selected key primary texts to represent each period based on the extant historical literature on Canadian temperance and prohibition (with heavy reliance on Noel’s [1995] landmark work, and Smart & Ogborne’s [1996] review of Canadian alcohol policy). I conduct a historical-processual analysis of key actors, contexts, and moments in Canada's transition from temperance to prohibition. Processual analysis aims to disentangle the path dependencies involved in the shaping of present social realities by tracing the development of single cases over time (as opposed to comparative historical analysis which seeks causal regularities in cases assumed to be independent; Bargheer, 2023). Rather than focusing on top-down moral and political impositions – as is common in analyses of North American alcohol regulation (c.f. Noel, 1995; Sevelsted, 2023) – the present study analyses texts written by the everyday actors involved in the struggle for alcohol control, from the manifestos and histories of the ‘moral entrepreneurs’ engaged in the temperance and prohibition movements to the diaries and observations of contemporary laypeople. Initial thematic coding of texts focused on how authors frame the problem of alcohol as a *public* problem in need of regulation. Of central concern is where authors identify the locus of responsibility for alcohol control (i.e., internal/external, state/society), and the nature of the problem of drink (e.g., economic, moral, social, political).

Alcohol Regulation in Canada: From Temperance to Prohibition

Alcohol and Statelessness in Pre-Confederation Canada

Temperance is perhaps the most successful and long-lasting mass movement of Canada's early history. Over 500,000 colonists pledged total abstinence between the founding of the first temperance society in 1822 and New Brunswick's prohibition in 1855 (with similar efforts in Nova Scotia and the Province of Canada; Noel, 1995, p. 217). Historians of temperance typically characterize the movements that emerged around the 18th century in England, the United States, and British North America as unnecessary impositions of Puritan fervour over unsuspecting populaces – particularly historians writing during American prohibition. However, Canadian historian Jan Noel (1995) notes that such scholars, along with the public, “tended to confuse what had been a progressive and vital reform in the hard-drinking nineteenth century with the reactionary response to the much milder problem of the twentieth” (p. 13). Any social history of alcohol regulation must account for the ubiquity of alcohol in everyday pre-Confederation life, whether in the pioneer villages, port cities, or frontier settlements.

Historian Elsbeth Heaman (2015) has mused that “there is no such thing as the state in Canada” (p. 1). The ‘statelessness’ of Canada, if provocatively overstated by Heaman, is nowhere more observable than 19th-century British North America and its drinking culture. Liquor served an impressive variety of functions during this period. As a stimulant, it gave strength to fieldhands, soldiers, sailors, cabmen, and carters (often before breakfast) and concentration to judges and lawyers. As a replacement for unclean drinking water, it permitted good health for the men, women, and children of the villages. For nursing mothers, it provided endurance. Politicians secured votes and businessmen secured customers with it. For travellers, it served as a defense against fatigue (Guillet, 1969). Alcohol was cheap and plentiful – cheap rum from the West Indies abounded in Atlantic Canada and Lower Canada as settlers exploited

favourable British import policies. In Upper Canada and Red River, poor transportation networks meant that it was more profitable to produce whisky from grain rather than export it (Noel, 1995, p. 15). Taverns were essentially the only venues for sociability in pioneer society (often, these were the first public buildings erected in settlements). These institutions functioned not only as leisure spaces but as magistrates' offices, courts, wedding venues, militia and political party headquarters, rest stops for travellers, polling stations, and even informal banks (Barron, 1976; Garland & Talman, 1931). The mid-century settler diarist Susanna Moodie (1852) notes that

this frightful vice of drinking prevails throughout the colony to an alarming extent. Professional gentlemen are not ashamed of being seen issuing from the barroom of a tavern early in the morning or of being caught reeling home from the same sink of iniquity late at night. (p. 28)

The absence of the state in Upper Canada is complemented by the presence of alcohol. Public infrastructure in this region often owed entirely to mutual aid. Large public works – including land clearing, logging, mowing, barn raising, shanty raising, and lime burning – were accomplished through “bees,” or collective mobilizations of (predominantly male) labour in pioneer villages (Guillet, 1969). Alcohol was an integral feature of bees, with each attending family customarily receiving a gallon of whisky or more (*ibid.*). The expectation of drunkenness was so strong among bee participants that if it was found that insufficient or no alcohol would be served, the bees would not be attended (Smart & Ogborne, 1996, p. 30). Further, these collective work projects were usually overseen by a “grog boss,” whose task was to ensure that workers were adequately supplied with whisky. Such events involved significant numbers of deaths from drunken accidents (*ibid.*).

In Upper Canada, assault and battery was the predominant crime, often involving alcohol (Noel, 1995, p. 15). Drunkenness – essentially a male phenomenon in pre-Confederation Canada – regularly exposed women and children to male violence. As the Women's Christian

Temperance Union (WCTU) activist and suffragist Nellie McClung noted a century later, “the greatest victims of alcohol had never tasted a drop they were the women and children related to alcoholic men” (in Smart and Ogborne, 1996, p. 48). The situation was particularly dire for women under the British system of property tenure, which enshrined exclusive male control. In 1830, propertied women were officially barred from voting in the Atlantic provinces and the Province of Canada (Noel, 1995, p. 37). From this perspective, it is unsurprising that women formed a significant bloc of temperance activists, petitioning town councils, magistrates, and political leaders. By the last decades of the 19th century, the WCTU would be instrumental in instituting temperance curricula in Canadian schools (Sheehan, 1984), educating the generation that would later vote in favour of prohibition.

Temperance as Civil Society Regulation

Thus, in many ways, temperance was a necessary response to genuine problems of safety and quality of life in the Canadian colonies. From this perspective, the broad coalition of temperance supporters in early Canadian society can be explained. Along with the middle-classes typically associated with temperance (upwardly mobile merchants and entrepreneurs, small-holding farmers, artisans), Noel (1995) highlights the social diversity of pre-Confederation temperance: “Catholics and Protestants, Irish immigrants, roving sailors, Indian bands, little girls, and burly lumberjacks all lined up in the 1840s to take the pledge” (p. 8). With the ubiquity of pre-Confederation drink in mind, the success of the temperance movement is notable. Aggregate alcohol consumption decreased dramatically in provinces with a strong temperance movement by the late 19th century and never returned to previous levels (Noel, 1994). Drinking on the job vanished by the hand of temperance activists, falsifying the previously “necessary” relationship between hard labour and alcohol (in 1853, the Province of Canada formally banned

the sale of liquor on public works sites; Noel, 1995, p. 221). Taverns became fewer and farther between and would continue to disappear with the prohibitions of the 20th century (Guillet, 1964).

The Canadian temperance movement emerged in the 1820s in the Atlantic provinces. Initially, this movement was led by religious revivalists of the Baptist and Methodist denominations. The revivalists took inspiration from earlier temperance movements in New England and were particularly impressed by Maine's prohibition on alcohol importation, manufacture, and sale in 1846 (Barry, 1986; Campbell, 1989). Many of the founders of early temperance societies were Baptist ministers like Charles Tupper, Edward Manning, Theodore Seth Harding, and Ingram Bill Sr. (Noel, 1995, p. 24). The movement's birth also aligns with the growth of the transient Maritime workforce of the timber and shipping industries, which reliably brought drunkenness to the port towns of Halifax and St. John. It is in this context that New Brunswick's early move to outlaw alcohol in 1856 can be understood (Acheson, 1985). Twenty percent of Saint John's adult population belonged to a temperance society in 1834, and twenty-five percent in 1843. Sandra Barry (1986) notes that support for temperance legislation during this period was best predicted not by party or class, but by religion (with evangelicals making up significant portions of temperance supporters). This religious basis of temperance attitudes challenges the dominant sociological interpretation of temperance as middle-class status-seeking (Gusfield, 1963), which struggles to explain the dramatic support for temperance across socio-economic divides in pre-Confederation Canada.

The religious origins of temperance provide a useful background for understanding the civil society strategies and reforms proposed by early activists. R. D. Wadsworth's *Temperance Manual* (1848) will be a focal point for the analysis of this period. Wadsworth was a Methodist

minister and apothecary in Montreal who became a teetotaler in the mid-century. At the time, Montreal was a booming centre for a new wave of temperance activists – particularly emerging from the professional classes. The secretary of the Montreal Temperance Society, Wadsworth toured Canada West from 1843-4, lecturing on temperance and the dangers of drink. From this tour, 250 “hard cases” took the pledge of abstinence, heeding Wadsworth’s advice for managing addiction – namely, drinking milk or water instead of alcohol and praying to combat cravings. This ardent temperance activist epitomizes the civil society approach to alcohol regulation. In the context of a weak Canadian (or, properly, British North American) state, the emergence of travelling “temperance speakers” in the early to mid-19th century reflects the movements’ institutional borrowing from church practices and organizational forms to shore up the gaps in colonial state governance. This institutional borrowing likely fulfilled a dual purpose: teetotaling ministers grafted a new social legitimacy over their existing religious consecration. At the same time, their familiar organizational settings and practices allowed temperance messaging to resonate with (predominantly revivalist) audiences. Further, temperance activists of this period firmly emphasized civil society – rather than the state - as the locus of social reform. For instance, Wadsworth founded a boarding-house for abstemious Montrealers who found difficulty staying sober in an alcoholic world. For those abstainers outside of Montreal, he set up dispensaries via the Montreal Temperance Society where people could obtain temperance literature, songbooks, and other materials (Noel, 1995, p. 74).

However, religious revivalism was clearly not a sufficient condition for temperance, as similar revivals (e.g. the Newlight revivalism in late 18th century Nova Scotia) hardly exhibited a desire for sobriety (Barry, 1986). Instead, Noel (1995) argues that the distinct combination of revivalist ideals and economic diversification created a hospitable climate for temperance. If the

first temperance advocates were clergymen, their first converts were drawn from the growing body of businessmen and professionals (Barry, 1986). For an emergent class of owners, sobriety ensured worker efficiency and trustworthiness of exchanges across expanding markets.

Thus, in addition to their born-again Christianity, the founders of the Montreal Temperance Society (perhaps the most influential temperance society in pre-Confederation Canada) were all rising businessmen: original members included Joseph MacKay (a prominent dry goods merchant), John Fraser (British American Land Company), Jacob DeWitt (Bank of Canada director), and John Redpath (Redpath Sugar, involved in the Lachine Canal, as well as the Champlain and St. Lawrence railway projects) (Noel, 1995, p. 68). In the work of early temperance activists, the spiritual and the material were inextricably combined (Gavreau, 1991). For instance, John Dougall, editor of the widely distributed temperance papers *Canadian Temperance Advocate* and *Montreal Witness* (with major readership outside of Quebec), saw enterprise and ‘the regeneration of humanity’ as necessarily linked. After all, it was enterprise that enabled Dougall and many other temperance entrepreneurs to finance sailors’ homes, anti-slavery societies, and public schools in the name of moral transformation. Like many of the anglophone temperance activists of Montreal, John Dougall was an evangelical and Scottish immigrant who quickly found a home in the city’s emergent business community, first entering the textiles industry and later directing the Montreal Provident and Savings Bank. The so-called “temperance prophet” also became closely tied to the Redpath empire (and therefore, Montreal high society) on account of his marriage to Elizabeth Redpath (one of John Redpath’s daughters) (Dougall, 1973, p. 149-50). It was both evangelical fervour and economic capital that allowed Dougall to become a key moral entrepreneur in the temperance movement of the mid-century,

powerfully shaping Protestant Canadian views on alcohol, and worldviews in general (Noel, 1995, p. 76).

The market origins of “second-wave” temperance activists enabled their moral programme to travel into the centres of power, granting previously fringe religious ideas a tinge of political legitimacy. These origins also facilitated the maintenance of alcohol regulation under civil society control. However, this reliance on civil society measures to promote moral transformation soon dissipated as new regulatory challenges presented themselves. “Exhausted by their efforts to convert all the world one by one, the frustrated faithful [sought] the help of the state in erecting their City Upon a Hill” (Noel, 1995, p. 88). Thus, a possible explanation for the transition from society-centric to state-centric models of alcohol regulation may involve the changing basis of temperance leadership from religious revivalists to sober businessmen.

Whereas the rural movements led by evangelical ministers in the early to mid-19th century in the Maritimes and Upper Canada (and to a lesser extent Lower Canada and Red River) tended not to seek state support, the urban temperance movements of Montreal and Toronto often involved activists with close ties to the state (or were members of government themselves). As alcohol control became not just an issue of moral rectitude but of economic necessity, the state arguably had to step in (from the standpoint of the rising industrialists) to enforce contracts and ensure labour efficiency.

Crucially, attempts at civil society regulation failed in several key constituencies outside of the anglophone ‘Canadas’ and Maritime provinces, namely, in Red River and Quebec. These constituencies exhibited many of the same material conditions that compelled a wide-ranging coalition of citizens to pledge and practice abstinence. These regions saw ubiquitous daily consumption of hard liquor, high rates of alcohol-related violence and work injuries, and the

concentration of political and legal power in male hands combined with the masculinization of drink (of course, Red River differed from Eastern Canada in many important respects – most obviously its governance by the Hudson’s Bay Company rather than colonial magistrates; Noel, 1995, p. 183). While the material realities of alcohol consumption in Red River created a potential body of support for temperance, local intermediaries failed to make these material conditions symbolically meaningful for their populaces. Unlike in the Canadas and the Maritimes, these intermediaries could not effectively mobilize the elective affinity between religious and economic doctrine.

In Red River, religious and economic conditions prevented civil society attempts at temperance. While temperance missionaries regularly proselytized in the Prairies, the region’s much lower population of Christian evangelicals hindered successful messaging (excluding among some local Orangemen). Presbyterianism struggled to gain a stronghold in Red River, even among Scottish settlers, while Irish Catholics generally disdained the Puritan elitism of travelling teetotallers. Alcohol was the principal trade commodity, used (often coercively) to bargain with and secure fur supplies from Indigenous traders. The Hudson’s Bay Company actively distributed alcohol across the region in lethal quantities to induce trade with Indigenous Peoples and prevent them from dealing with the competing North West Company. After the North West Company was absorbed by Hudson’s Bay in 1821, the company officially instituted a ban on alcohol to address alcohol abuse in its ranks. No longer requiring alcohol for trade purposes, Hudson’s Bay began enforcing strict ‘temperance’ policies, including prohibitions on sale to Indigenous buyers and the removal of alcohol rations for workers – of course, devoid of any religious content and much more nakedly focused on labour productivity. One company official in the 1820s describes “walking into company headquarters and seeing bottles and

glasses all about, half the people off duty, officials and employees too drunk to stand. These employees allowed the hides and wool to rot” (Noel, 1995, p. 189). When more employment opportunities became available in Red River by the 1860s, alcohol consumption rose steadily. Without an accompanying moral or religious basis, the economic rationalism of the HBC’s temperance efforts failed to legitimate new meanings surrounding alcohol and its uses.

Prohibition and the State Regulation of Alcohol in Canada

Among the challenges of temperance-based regulation were the economic incentives of colonial governments, which relied on liquor imports for at least one-quarter (and up to one-half) of its revenues. Likewise, liquor licenses provided a crucial revenue source for local governments, and magistrates often held interest in their local taverns (sometimes serving as tavern landlords; Noel, 1995). While Nova Scotia began instituting quotas on taverns in the 1830s and stopped dispensing new licenses by the 1850s, illegal taverns and rum runners filled whatever gaps in consumption the new regulations left (Dick, 1981). Local option laws in the Maritimes and Canada West proved particularly popular (by 1874, 209 of Nova Scotia’s 264 polling districts refused to grant tavern licenses). The *Canada Temperance Act* (also known as the *Scott Act*) in 1878 enshrined these local option plebiscites in all maritime provinces (Noel, 1995). However, the local basis of temperance era regulations meant it was often relatively easy to find a drink in neighbouring wet counties. Halifax famously provided such a haven, retaining the power to grant licenses until 1886 (Fingard, 1989). Where local option prohibitions were instituted, enforcement remained a constant challenge. Violators were too numerous on the one hand, and magistrates often refused to prosecute violations on the other hand (Noel, 1995, p. 46). Given these difficulties, disillusioned temperance activists and organizations increasingly adapted their strategies to target the acquisition of state power. This approach would remain

dominant for several decades, eventually resulting in the (unsuccessful) national plebiscite on Prohibition in 1898. Unsurprisingly, the Maritimes saw an 87% approval rate for prohibition in the referendum, i.e., where temperance efforts were strongest (Noel, 1995, p. 53).

From Confederation onward, most provincial and federal elections involved the question of alcohol control. Excluding Quebec, Prohibitionists won most local options and provincial ballot initiatives up until 1921 (Smart & Ogborne, 1996, p. 40). In the same year that the Supreme Court ruled that alcohol regulation is within federal jurisdiction, the Scott Act provided a legal basis for Prohibition, requiring a petition of at least one-quarter of a county/city's electorate to initiate a poll. The year 1898 saw the first national plebiscite on Prohibition. While Prohibition received the majority of votes, Prime Minister Laurier (a public critic of Prohibition) rejected the results based on the low voter turnout (44% percent; Dostie & Dupre, 2012). It was not until World War One that the dream of national Prohibition came true under Prime Minister Borden, which banned the sale, manufacture, import, and distribution of beverages over 2.5% alcohol volume. However, this top-down institution of prohibition was passed under practical military and industrial concerns and ended in 1919 alongside the War Measures Act. Through a series of provincial referenda, Prohibition remained in Ontario, Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta into the 1920s (with the last Prohibition ending in 1929 in Nova Scotia). Prince Edward Island continued its Prohibition until 1948 (Smart & Ogborne, 1996).

Ruth Spence's *Prohibition in Canada* (1919) is likely the most notorious partisan text of the prohibition era. This text recounts the history of temperance efforts in Canada from the pre-Confederation local option initiatives to the prohibition measures of the 1910s. Spence was the daughter of Francis Stephens Spence, an Irish-born Toronto settler and prohibitionist who died

two years before the text was published. Spence prepared the book through a detailed study of her father's works and materials. F. S. Spence marks a transition from the pre-Confederation era of locally organized temperance societies targeting county-level change to the post-Confederation era of nationally organized lobbies that targeted widespread prohibition. As the secretary of the Dominion Alliance for the Total Suppression of the Liquor Traffic (1884-1912), Spence led the national movement towards prohibition. Behind Prime Minister Robert Borden's war-time prohibition in 1917 was the Dominion Prohibition Committee, of which Spence was a member, contributing its manifesto and appearing in the Borden deputation.

Like the failure of earlier local options, loopholes and enforcement issues meant that drinking was far from absent during the Canadian Prohibition(s). Since these Prohibitions were largely provincial affairs, interprovincial trade was often legal, and distillers in Ontario and Quebec began building depots in border towns like Kenora and Yorkton (Smart & Osborne, 1996, p. 51). Ontario distilleries and breweries also found business in the illicit American market, officially producing for export to "Cuba" or "Mexico" (*ibid.*). Moreover, Prohibition laws made an exception for medically prescribed alcohol (which was still a common occurrence in the 1920s), which physicians and 'patients' alike were quick to exploit. In British Columbia, one doctor ordered 4,000 bottles of alcohol per month, and others ordered over 2,000. Reports from Ontario indicate that one physician wrote 487 prescriptions for alcohol in one day; another wrote 2,005 within a month and received 2 to 3 dollars apiece (Hallowell, 1972).

That bootleggers and illicit taverns remained open throughout Prohibition signalled the futility of government bans, even among avowed prohibitionists. Enforcement was publicly viewed as ineffective or an encroachment on public freedoms. J. Spracklin, a special agent and former Methodist minister, notoriously patrolled Windsor with his band of gun- and club-toting

officers, eventually murdering a prominent bootlegger. Incidents such as these, as well as police corruption scandals, led to the delegitimation of prohibition efforts.

Texts written by Prohibition critics also indicate a growing disdain for the total state regulation of alcohol. Notable among these texts are Stephen Leacock's *The Warning of Prohibition in America* (1919) and C. D. Boyce's *Prohibition in Canada* (1923). The British-born Canadian political scientist and humourist Stephen Leacock was an ardent critic of prohibition, publishing several articles in the 1920s on the topic. The essay cited above articulates a common criticism of prohibition during this era: that regardless of legality, people would find a way to drink. Boyce, a member of the Moderation League of Ontario, offers the increasingly popular view that prohibition is not a feasible solution for the problem of alcohol. Instead, moderate consumption of alcohol could curb its social ills while removing the need for unenforceable and draconian legal measures. Prohibition falsified the promises of early temperance movements, which righteously framed abstinence as a cure against violence, hunger, and poverty. Moderation leagues began to emerge as an alternative to outright abstinence in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia (Smart & Osborne, 1996, 53-5). These organizations would become part of a large post-prohibition chorus of voices demanding government *control* as an alternative to the increasingly discredited Prohibition.

Membership figures in temperance societies began to decline significantly by the interwar period, and celebrated temperance activists often moved on to other causes (Noel, 1995). However, the rise of new 'moderate' social movements must be understood in the context of the earlier temperance movements' *material* victories – by and large, temperance worked. From the early part of the 19th century to the beginning of the 20th, alcohol consumption decreased dramatically, public drunkenness and taverns were virtually eradicated, and alcohol-

related assault and battery – the most common crime of pre-Confederation Canada – became much less frequent (Noel, 1994; Smart & Ogborne, 1996; but see Noel, 1995 on the relationship between economic modernization and alcohol consumption). That is, the temperance movement in Canada lost its popular appeal in the early 20th century in part because it had radically changed the material conditions of alcohol use. Moderation leagues grafted their political messaging onto these material conditions and eventually succeeded in displacing temperance’s state power. However, their proposed ‘hybrid’ alcohol regulation policies – i.e., a combination of provincial alcohol control and civil ‘responsibility’ – echoed the temperance movements’ earlier concern with individual drinking habits as an indicator of moral status. The elective affinity between evangelical and economic doctrines enabled the initial path-dependent diffusion of temperance beliefs and practices. Eventually, evangelism no longer accompanied attempts at alcohol regulation, as the ideal of responsible citizenship through moderate drinking emerged from and replaced the doctrine of spiritual salvation through pledges and prohibitions.

Conclusion

How do public problems pass from civil society to state ownership? This study examined a pertinent case of such a transfer: alcohol regulation in Canada from the early 19th to the early 20th century. I showed that the success of temperance as a mass movement hinged on key *material circumstances*, enabling temperance messaging to resonate with a broad coalition of supporters. These material circumstances represent necessary but insufficient grounds for the making of a perceptible public problem. Intermediaries in the temperance and prohibition movements legitimized frames with which to understand the problem of alcohol and generate appropriate reforms. In the case of Canadian temperance, middle-class evangelical temperance activists blended the spiritual and the material in their discourse on abstinence. This elective

affinity between religious self-control and commercial expansion fostered temperance's resonance with a predominantly rural and revivalist population on the one hand, and entrée into emergent elite financial and political networks on the other. The spiritualism of the early temperance movement eventually faded from the explicit ideologies and programmes of later alcohol control advocates, but survived in the secular notion of individualized consumer responsibility. The transfer of ownership over alcohol regulation from civil society to the state cannot be explained without the materiality of its origins nor the symbolic work of movement intermediaries.

Moving beyond conventional interpretations of temperance as a top-down imposition of middle-class Puritan values, the preceding analysis offers a view of the everyday processes through which elites and laypeople pursue alcohol regulation. The palpable impacts of alcohol use and abuse make its regulation a useful case study for examining how material social conditions afford resonance with regulatory platforms, whether through the state or civil society. As such, this study suggests two significant implications for the study of collective political action. Analyses of how state and civil society actors represent public problems must be grounded in an appreciation of the material circumstances from which these representations emerge. Definitions of public problems cannot be reduced to their material origins, but are nevertheless grafted onto the everyday practical experiences of actors. Thus, in the (quite literally) 'unsettled times' of pre-Confederation Canada, the ubiquity of alcohol inspired a diverse coalition of potential temperance supporters and activists. Alcohol's profound disruption of coherent 'strategies of action' for settler constituencies – women, church officials, employers, etc. – opened up space for the diffusion of new explicit ideologies around alcohol and social reform (Swidler, 1986; Moodie, 1852 provides a firsthand account of such disruption). The

success of these ideologies hinges on the power of intermediaries to legitimate new meanings around alcohol as a problematic substance. Thus, the study of collective political action cannot reduce social movements to their objective conditions of emergence and transformation nor to their subjective power but must attend to the symbolic mediation of material conditions.

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