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978-1-107-10266-8 - Global Anti-Vice Activism, 1890–1950: Fighting Drinks, Drugs, and “Immorality”

Jessica R. Pliley, Robert Kramm and Harald Fischer-Tiné

Excerpt

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Introduction

A plea for a “vicious turn” in global history

Jessica R. Pliley, Robert Kramm, and Harald Fischer-Tiné

Reflecting on her years of anti-vice activism on behalf of the World Woman’s Christian Temperance Union (WWCTU), American missionary and physician Kate Bushnell (1855–1946) commented:

Time was when so-called Christian civilization seemed able to send its vices abroad and keep its virtues at home ... That day has passed forever. With the invention of the steam as a locomotive power of great velocity, with the introduction of the cable, and later, the wireless telegraphy; with the mastery of these natural forces and their introduction in every part of the world, we see the old world being drawn nearer and nearer to us by ten thousand invisible cords of commercial interests, until shortly, probably within the life time of you and me, the once worn out and almost stranded wreck will be found quickened with new life and moored along side us.¹

Bushnell dedicated thirty years of her life laying bare those invisible cords that spanned the globe. As much as ideas, technology, people, and material goods circumnavigated the globe, so too did troubling habits such as alcohol abuse, drug addiction, and sex trafficking and with these, the anti-vice movements sought to combat the degenerative impact of excessive consumption.

Born at the apogee of the steam age and dying at the birth of the atomic age, Bushnell was well positioned to comment on the developments she observed, critiqued, and tried to change. Roaming the world as a “peripatetic puritan” Bushnell had faith that God would provide for her needs, that the British Empire could reform its sinful practices, and that men could be convinced to stop exploiting women and treat them as equals.²

Raised in Illinois, Bushnell attended Northwestern University as one of the first women admitted. She studied medicine, becoming a practicing physician by 1879. After graduation, the Women’s Mission Board of the Methodist Episcopal Church dispatched Bushnell to Jiujiang, China, where she served as a medical missionary until 1882. Bushnell returned to the

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United States, where she practiced medicine in Denver, Colorado, for four years before moving to Chicago to provide medical aid and other social services to Chicago's most dejected, despised, and detested population – the city's prostitutes. Her work brought her to the attention of her old mentor Frances Willard, who sent Bushnell into the distant and isolated lumber camps of northern Wisconsin to investigate allegations of forced prostitution for the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU).³

Bushnell uncovered a miasma of vice as she conducted her investigation in the lumber camps of the American upper Midwest in the summer of 1888. After interviewing more than 575 prostitutes, touring brothels, and compiling accounts from the area's evangelical activists, Bushnell documented a thick matrix of local corruption that functioned to keep brothels stocked with sex workers. She learned that most communities informally regulated prostitution through local police forces and doctors, who examined the women and certified that they were free of venereal diseases. More troubling to Bushnell was her discovery that most of the brothels entrapped sex workers through complicated debt bondage practices, and some sex workers had been induced into prostitution through fraud. Her investigation revealed the entangled nature of vices – like alcohol and prostitution – as well as respectable and ignominious practices – like physicians concerned with public health who had established “contagious disease acts ... patterned after the English acts.”⁴ The English Parliament introduced the Contagious Disease Acts in 1864 to combat the spread of venereal diseases among the British armed forces. The laws allowed for the detainment of any woman suspected of practicing prostitution, followed by a forced pelvic exam, and incarceration into a lock hospital (a prison-hospital for the venereally diseased) if found to be infected. The laws prompted vigorous protest by feminists in England, who contended that they constituted the state sanctioning of vice and disproportionately targeted poor women. Their campaign succeeded in repealing the laws in England in 1886, though some form of Contagious Disease Acts could be found in colonial settings.⁵ The British women's campaign received enthusiastic support from American social purity activists and Bushnell's revelation that local city governments had implemented local versions of the contagious disease acts in the United States served as a call to action to the purity community. Overall, Bushnell highlighted the structural – legal and economic – support for coercive prostitution, while also centering the experiences and humanity of sex workers. Her report generated reform of Wisconsin's laws governing prostitution, heightened the profile of the WCTU's social purity work, and launched Bushnell's career as an anti-vice investigator and activist.⁶

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The year 1891 found Bushnell halfway around the world, traveling throughout India with Elizabeth Wheeler Andrew as round-the-world missionaries for the WWCTU. During their three months in India, Bushnell and Andrew traveled 4,000 miles, interviewed 395 sex workers, studied 637 cases of military camp prostitutes, and visited ten military garrisons.⁷ Like the Wisconsin investigation, Bushnell privileged the voices of sex workers themselves (though in this case their “voices” were mediated through a translator and Bushnell’s own voice). After gaining entrance into a brothel, Bushnell and Andrew would lead a prayer service that concluded with a hymn. After the singing ended, Bushnell wrote that typically:

Then they begin to clamour for a chance to tell their individual stories. One is a girl who was left an orphan at the age of six years. At the tender age of eleven she says she was taken by an Englishman and kept three years as his mistress. When he deserted her, there was no door open to receive her but the *chakla* [military-run brothel]. One pretty girl said she had been deceived by a bad woman, under promise of employment.⁸

Their investigation revealed that *chaklas* reserved the women contained in them for British customers, that the lock hospitals kept women incarcerated and subjected them to “surgical rape,” and that the entire system stimulated sex trafficking to ensure a continually fresh crop of young women to work in the *chaklas*.⁹ Bushnell resurrected the slavery rhetoric that had characterized her Wisconsin investigation, describing the Indian women as “poor Army slave-women” and recalling, “We told them, ‘We are your sisters;’ they replied, ‘*We are your slaves*.’”¹⁰ Bushnell’s inclusion of such statements complicated the ideal of universal sisterhood celebrated by the WWCTU.¹¹ For Bushnell, the blame for such slavery landed squarely on British imperial governance.¹² Bushnell and Andrew illustrated the continuities of prostitution policy throughout the British Empire, noting that in the Cape Colony in South Africa, “it was always the military doctors, often fresh from India, who were most pressing in their demands for the regulation of prostitutes.” Similarly, when they traveled to Queensland and New Zealand after leaving India they noted that colonial officials enforced similar outlawed policies.¹³

As investigators of the WWCTU, Bushnell and Andrew next ventured to China and Japan in 1894 to work on behalf of temperance and to investigate the links between opium and forced prostitution. There they discovered that opium dens frequently offered prostitution and they compiled “an abundance of evidence that opium fed the social vice [prostitution], and

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that the two went hand in hand.”¹⁴ Their reports from China repeated the same arguments protesting the state-sanctioning of vice through the regulation of prostitution, the role of the British Empire in introducing regulation, the entanglements between alcohol, opium, and prostitution, and the ideals of universal sisterhood being complicated by allusions to slavery.¹⁵ For Bushnell the ideals of universal sisterhood required the absolute rejection of the consumption not just of her own sexuality, but the sexuality of all other women. “We cannot, without sin against humanity, ask the scoffer’s question, ‘Am I my sister’s keeper?’ – not even concerning – the poorest and meanest foreign woman, for the reason that *she is our sister*.”¹⁶ In Bushnell’s formulation the problem of vice manifested as a problem of consumption and as long as men (and the state) treated women’s bodies as objects of consumption – like opium and alcohol – then women’s equality would be forestalled.¹⁷

Bushnell’s single, though admittedly long, life captures a number of animating tensions of the anti-vice movement. She spent thirty years trying to shed light on the vulnerabilities of sex workers and drug users living and existing in liminal zones, while she herself inhabited a number of liminal, compromised, and complicated spaces: an American in service of reforming the British Empire; a medical women arguing against social hygiene policies; a single woman articulating the importance of monogamous marriage for community development, national stability, and “universal progress.” As the US anti-vice movement tracked toward a social hygienic (positive eugenicist) perspective during World War I, Bushnell became alienated from the movement. She found the social hygienic perspective disturbingly statist and hopelessly repressive in its treatment of women.¹⁸

The life of an American medical missionary illustrates that anti-vice campaigning had become global by the late nineteenth century. However, this world-spanning activism was nonetheless deeply embedded in at least three very specific cultural and ideological contexts. For one, Bushnell’s life-story seems to demonstrate that the movement to suppress “social diseases” of various kinds was particularly influential in “Greater Britain.”¹⁹ Both organizations that hired her – the Women’s Mission Board of the Methodist Episcopal Church and the WWCTU – had their headquarters in the United States and the itinerary of Bushnell’s voyage “around-the-world” actually only extended to a tour of the British Empire.²⁰ As Clare Midgley, Antoinette Burton, and others have shown, the critique of the colonial state and its tolerance – or even encouragement – of vice often indicated not so much a sign of fundamental opposition to imperialism than an attempt of enhancing the legitimacy and credibility of the imperial world

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order thereby securing its longevity.²¹ In this context it is tempting to see Bushnell's engagements overseas as part of a very peculiar variety of cultural expansion that gained momentum in the United States during the Progressive Era, what Ian Tyrrell has referred to as “America's moral empire.”²² Second, Bushnell's affiliation to missionary organizations and the omnipresence of the Christian rhetoric of sin and salvation indicates that the tenets of Christianity, particularly in its Protestant variety, infused anti-vice crusades. Last but not least, Bushnell's example would lead one to conclude that the agenda of first-wave feminism formed one foundation of the worldwide struggle against the consumption of liquor, drugs, and women's bodies.²³ The liberation of her poor or colonized “sisters” through a fight against regulated prostitution – or the “state regulation of vice,” as activists often called it – was clearly the most visibly feminist aspect of Bushnell's work.²⁴ However, the fight against opium consumption and alcohol abuse had a direct bearing on the situation of women. Whether in the working-class neighborhoods of Western cities, in African villages or Asian port towns: anti-vice activists blamed alcohol and drugs for the suffering of women and children through economic hardships and domestic violence.²⁵ What thus emerges from our first biographical vignette is a picture of Euro-American anti-vice campaigning in late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as a middle ground and melting pot for evangelical missionary zeal, “white man's burden”-imperialism, and early forms of the organized women's rights movement. Such a conceptualization of anti-vice activism points to a transnational, indeed global, phenomenon, but one whose operational center and ideological roots materialized in the West. It might be helpful, therefore, to complicate this slightly Euro-centric picture.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1874–1948) is one of the few political leaders from what used to be called the “Third World” who has become an iconic figure in the West. Admittedly, he is not typically thought of as an ardent crusader against the unholy trinity of drugs, drink, and debauchery, but rather celebrated as a spokesman and symbol of anti-colonial nationalism. Gandhi spent three decades of his life challenging precisely the kind of imperial world order that was being moralized by Bushnell. Yet, at the same time, Mohandas Gandhi started to cultivate a quasi-religious obsession with physical health and moral perfection that seems astonishingly close to the concerns of Christian purity crusaders. It made him engage in active campaigning against the very same evils targeted by Bushnell until his death.²⁶

Born in the small coastal town of Porbandar in the western Indian region of Gujarat, young Gandhi had been exposed to the cultural influences of

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the regional variety of *Vaishnava*-Hinduism and Jainism; both religious strands converged on the principles of strict abstinence, vegetarianism, and their aspirations toward very high moral standards often articulated in terms of sexual discipline.²⁷ The years Gandhi spent as a student of law in London significantly reinforced these principles.²⁸ Unlike many of his Indian fellow students, apparently the pubs, music-halls, and brothels of late Victorian London never tempted Gandhi and he preferred to spend his time instead with English members of the vegetarian and temperance movements.²⁹ His rigid anti-vice stance was confirmed during the two decades of his residence in South Africa (1893–1914). Among the local black working classes as well as among the Indian “coolies” whom he represented as a lawyer in those years, he witnessed with his own eyes the ways in which the “terrible scourge of drink ... ruined people morally, physically and economically” and in many cases also “destroyed the sanctity and happiness of their homes.”³⁰ Gandhi understood alcoholism as an emanation of the evil influence of Western civilization that imperial expansion helped to spread to places like South Asia, which he imagined as intact and innocent because in his mind alcohol had barely any roots in pre-modern Asian (or, for that matter, African) society. Western go-betweens, who shared Gandhi’s critique of “industrial civilization,” mediated his first major initiative to collectively resist such evil influences.³¹ While in the theosophist circles of Johannesburg, dominated by Jewish expats from Europe, Gandhi met the architect Hermann Kallenbach who had been raised and educated in East Prussia.³² As a practicing gymnast and bodybuilder who had received physical instruction at the hands of his compatriot and world-famous strongman Eugen Sandow, Kallenbach shared Gandhi’s obsession with disciplining the body and controlling dangerous physical appetites of all kinds.³³ Together they founded the experimental rural commune at Tolstoy Farm in 1910, where Gandhi would further develop the method of *Satyagraha* (“passive resistance”) that he had invented a few years earlier in Durban and would later deploy to great effect back in India.³⁴ The rigid prohibition of alcohol, strict vegetarianism, and the thorough policing of sexual chastity prevailing in the small political *ashram* near Johannesburg are thus not only remindful of similar experiments by adherents of the *Lebensreform* movement that developed more or less simultaneously in Europe and the Americas, but also show that vice-control and physical self-optimization formed central elements in the training of would-be political elites.³⁵ It should be mentioned that a strong gender dimension characterized this optimization project, as Gandhi held the view that “procreation and

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consequent care of children” – tasks he deemed to be the part of the “natural” duties of women – “were inconsistent with public service” and the political elites thus trained ultimately tended to be all male.³⁶

Like Bushnell, Gandhi believed in the “domino theory of vice.” He assumed that alcohol consumption almost inevitably led to sexual debauchery, gambling, and other forms of immoral and harmful behavior. Again sharing Bushnell’s view, Gandhi linked the rapid global spread of what he regarded as specifically Western forms of vice to “the invention of the steam as a locomotive power of great velocity.” In his oft-quoted anti-modern manifesto *Hind Swaraj* (or *Indian Home Rule*), ironically written on board a steamship en route from London to South Africa in 1909, Gandhi made it a point that he regarded railways as a sinister Western invention that would only serve to “propagate evil” whereas “good travel[e]d] at snail’s pace.”³⁷

Gandhi’s anti-vice attitude converged with his staunch anti-Westernism, which in turn drew on the arguments of “cultural pessimist” intellectuals and religiously minded conservatives in Europe and North America, who equated “Western civilization” with a new kind of “hedonistic modernism.”³⁸ This modernism, they feared, would erode societies and families with its “values of instant gratification, pleasure and egoistic individualism.”³⁹ Given these ideological affinities, it is not surprising that the fight against alcohol as a potent symbol of the alien and corrupt character of British colonial rule became a central feature of the Indian National Congress in the 1920 and 1930s. Gandhian strategies to implement the anti-vice agenda in nationalist politics included temperance campaigns among the “drinking classes” (i.e. industrial workers, low castes, and “untouchables”), the boycott and picketing of foreign liquor stores, and the promulgation of laws of prohibition, as soon as the Congress was in power on the provincial level in 1937.⁴⁰ There is by now a copious literature on the class conflict underlying the politics of drinking in late colonial India. The temperance campaigns of aspiring nationalist elites often clashed with the subaltern classes’ claims of autonomy over their bodies and leisure practices.⁴¹

Following the logic of the entangled character of vices, Gandhi extended his crusade against mood-altering substances to opium, which many associated with Asian rather than Western societies. As he wrote in *Key to Health*:

The criticism leveled against alcohol applies equally to opium, although the two are very different in their action. Under the effect of alcohol a person becomes a rowdy, whereas opium makes the addict dull and lazy. He becomes even drowsy and incapable of doing anything useful. The evil effect of alcohol strikes the eyes everyday [*sic*], but those of opium are not so glaring. Any one ... wishing to see its devastating effect should go to Assam or Orissa. Thousands have fallen victim of

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this intoxicant, in those provinces. They give one the impression on living on the verge of death.⁴²

Opium's spread to what Gandhi called the “immoral trade,” organized first by the East India Company and later by the Government of British India, perfectly lent itself to a forceful critique of the depraved character of “Western civilization” in its British imperial *avatar*. Quite predictably, therefore, the Indian National Congress under Gandhi's leadership used its media as well as international political platforms such as the League of Nations to put considerable pressure on the British to prohibit the opium trade.⁴³ However, the protracted anti-vice crusade did not target solely the colonial administration. The “Mahatma” also campaigned in the villages of the regions implicated in opium production and trade, attempting to convince peasants that they should stop cultivating poppy and persuade the opium smokers to quit their habit. Considering the striking discursive affinities between the evangelical and anti-imperial opposition to the consumption of intoxicants, it appears only logical that a Christian comrade in arms supported the Indian nationalist leader's anti-opium campaign. C.F. Andrews, Christian clergyman and long-time friend and supporter of the Indian nationalist cause, accompanied Gandhi on his tour in Assam, published many articles and pamphlets against opium trade and consumption, and even served on a Congress Committee of Inquiry into the effects of opium use by the population of India's north-eastern province.⁴⁴

As one might have guessed, the puritan leader of the Indian independence movement displayed similar missionary zeal when it came to the castigation of illicit sex and prostitution.⁴⁵ Indian historian Ajay Skaria has shown that the figure of the *veshya* (prostitute) was an important metaphoric trope in Gandhi's discursive repertoire. However, the “Mahatma's” preoccupation with prostitution was not restricted to the level of figurative speech. He was also concerned by the social reality of the existence of hundreds of thousands of “fallen sisters” in India, a fact that he perceived as a “matter of deep shame” and a “blot of the nation.”⁴⁶

Much like in the case of opium and particularly alcohol, Gandhi out-sourced the blame for this “tremendous and growing evil” to the West in general and British colonial rule in particular. Gandhi described the imperial metropolises Paris and London as well-known global centers of debauchery, “seething with the vice,” while simultaneously expressing his conviction that prostitution in pre-colonial India had been confined to a minuscule elite. Consequently, immorality in the past had not been “so rampant as now,” when the popularity of brothels was supposedly responsible for the

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“fast undoing the youth of the middle classes,”⁴⁷ whom Gandhi believed to be “afflicted by syphilis and other unmentionable diseases.”⁴⁸

In a remarkable statement made in an article published in his mouth-piece *Young India* in the summer of 1925, Gandhi summed up the pivotal importance of an encompassing war on all facets of vice for India’s political struggle for self-rule and concluded with a stunning lament:

If I had the power of persuasion, I would certainly stop women of ill-fame from acting as actresses, I would prevent people from drinking and smoking, I would certainly prevent all the degrading advertisements that disfigure even reputable journals and I would most decidedly stop the obscene literature and portraits that soil the pages of some of our magazines. But alas, I have not the persuasive power I would gladly possess.⁴⁹

Given the lack of the necessary persuasive (let alone legislative) power, the only solution for Gandhi consisted in protracted and concerted anti-vice campaigns that would gradually bring about the emergence of an “intelligent, sane, healthy, and pure public opinion.”⁵⁰ The growth of such a “pure” public opinion alone, he felt, would be able to keep the manifold perils emanating from vicious habits and threatening the nation-in-the-making at bay.⁵¹

The example of Gandhi’s nationalistic puritanism is instructive, primarily because it adds new layers of complexity to our understanding of global anti-vice activism. Clearly, the fight against the “social diseases” and “bad habits” was neither a purely Western phenomenon nor the prerogative of Christian reformers, early feminists, and paternalist imperialists. Non-Western elites added their own critiques and seamlessly integrated the agitation for the abolition of prostitution and the prohibition of alcohol and drugs as part and parcel of their emancipatory political struggle. That being said, it would be misleading to posit the existence of an alternative temperance ideology that would only be deeply embedded in Asian religious traditions and allegedly completely isolated from these Western groups and the anti-vice discourses they deployed. To be sure, Gandhi often invoked the teachings of sacred scriptures like the *Bhagavad Gita* or the precepts of Hindu sages like Tulsidas and Chaitanya in his pamphlets against alcohol, opium, and “the unpardonable sin of illegitimate sexual enjoyment,”⁵² thereby establishing links to local cultural traditions. Yet, his contact to the vegetarian-cum-temperance circles in London, his association with German Jewish life reformers like Kallenbach in Johannesburg, and his collaboration with British missionary brothers in spirit later in India illustrates that the “glocalized” or “pidginized” variety of anti-vice activism that crystallized in South Africa and India was “made over” by the exchanges and dialogues characteristic of the age of imperial globalization.⁵³

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Despite religious, racial, and gendered differences, both Bushnell and Gandhi participated in civil society and shared a common ground in their strong moral rather than social hygienic or scientific impetus against vice. Both also rejected the interests and interventions of the state in their life-long battle against vice. In both cases, the moral crusade could be even outright anti-state, as some reformers held state authorities responsible for the encouragement of vice. Yet, many other reformers turned toward the state for solutions; this dimension of global anti-vice activism steadily grew in importance as the twentieth century progressed. To bring the crucial paradigm of science as well as the ever-increasing importance of the modern state in the global engagement against alcohol, drugs, prostitution, and venereal disease into the picture, we include a third and final biographical vignette. Swiss entomologist, psychiatrist, and eugenicist Auguste Forel (1848–1931) realized at the height of his career in 1887 the necessity to secularize and scientize the campaigns for temperance that thus far had been dominated by the religious agenda and rhetoric of Christian moral reformists:⁵⁴

A great field of social hygiene became apparent to me, which was heretofore annexed alone by various sorts of religious faiths (*Glaubensarten*). The alcoholic is not the sinner, who must be rescued with conversion to God, he is the victim of blindness and ignorance of his fellow men and ancestors. Alcoholism, the social question (*soziale Frage*), psychiatry, penal law and science are inseparably entwined by intimate threads.⁵⁵

Born in Morges, in the Swiss Canton of Vaud in 1848, Forel studied medicine at the University of Zurich, Switzerland, until university administrators appointed him professor of psychiatry in 1879 and he subsequently served as director of the lunatic asylum Burghölzli near Zurich for two decades.⁵⁶ Stimulated by the propaganda of the influential temperance organization Blue Cross (*Blaues Kreuz*), he developed an abstinent lifestyle and founded the Swiss lodge of the International Organization of Good Templars (IOGT) in 1892. Colleagues and the public considered him one of the most learned scholars of his time. Professionally, he was a monistic physician, psychiatrist, and sexologist, while politically he played the role of social reformer by embracing anti-alcoholism, pacifism, socialism, and feminism. At the same time, however, his belief in social-Darwinian theories turned him into a staunch advocate of social hygiene and eugenics programs. He became notorious for his positive stance toward the castration of “chronic alcoholics” and a leading champion of the sterilization of “degenerates.” In Switzerland, Forel worked hand in hand with state authorities, for whom he contributed to the draft of a new penal code and also compiled