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Eugenics and Xenophobic Sentiments during the Prohibition Era

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Prohibition is usually presented as moment in United States history when alcohol was illegal for all. Yet in practice, the 18th Amendment affected Americans differently predicated on their race and class. Given this reality, this paper argues that when Prohibition is put in conversation with anti-immigration legislation and eugenic thought of the early twentieth century, it emerges not only as a law that rendered alcohol illegal but as yet another expression of the era's anti-immigrant sentiment.

Alcoholic beverages were an essential substance for many Europeans. It was an important part of the new immigrants' lives, allowing them to practice their community life, family celebrations, and religious rituals in the new land. Alcohol was also a part of many immigrants' identities; passed down from generation to generation. Each ethnicity had a specific drink that represented their heritage and homeland. Germans, preferred to drink lager, Italians wine, and the Irish whiskey.¹ By consuming the drink that represented their country, they were able to connect to their homeland. They also drank to socialize with people of similar backgrounds and created a sense of community within saloons.

On January 16, 1919, the Eighteenth Amendment was ratified which prohibited "...the manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors..."² The amendment was enacted to

¹ Michael A. Lerner, *Dry Manhattan: Prohibition in New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 103.

² U.S. Constitution. Amendment 18, section 1.

affect every person living in the United States during this time. However, the law was largely enacted by white Anglo-Saxon Protestants and in practice targeted new immigrants. As historian Lisa McGirr argues in *The War on Alcohol* "...Prohibition was an anti-immigration initiative, and it waved the banner of personal liberty."³ Fearing that new immigrants' cultures diminished American culture, some white Anglo-Saxon Protestants felt responsible to enforce the law in order to preserve the country's identity and social purity; and both concepts were rooted in eugenic thought.

Many prohibitionists perceived the Eighteenth Amendment as a way to police the actions of new immigrants and Americanize them. Some saw "prohibition as a weapon against the immigrants"⁴ who "were conceived of as biologically distinct from and inferior to 'real' Americans, members of the Anglo-Saxon race."⁵ However, what constituted being a "real" American? Real Americans had to be white Anglo-Saxon Protestants who had a strong passion for "American" culture. Some in this demographic found immigrant-drinking cultures problematic too. They argued that saloons were a threat because immigrants, who spread their "evil sins" over American values, ran the majority of them. However, to immigrants, these establishments "served as a bridge between the old world and the new..."⁶ and created a sense of community identity and belonging. These saloons also created a sense of home to new immigrants by displaying symbols of their nationality. Whether Irish or German or some other ethnic identity, the motifs, decorations, music, food, and flags on the windows represented a

³ Lisa McGirr, *The War on Alcohol: Prohibition and the Rise of the American State* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016), 34

⁴ Daniel Okrent, *Last Call: The Rise and Fall of Prohibition* (New York: Scribner, 2010), 46.

⁵ Nancy K. MacLean, *Behind the Mask of Chivalry: The Making of the Second Ku Klux Klan* (Cary, NC: Oxford University Press, 1995), 138.

⁶ Lerner, *Dry Manhattan*, 86.

place where they could talk and sing in their native tongues. These spaces also allowed them to assimilate to American culture without forcing them to give up their values and tradition.

Perhaps it was because of the strong communal life that these saloons were deemed so threatening.

Groups such as The Woman's Christian Temperance Union, The Anti-Saloon League, and the Ku Klux Klan worked to see an end to such gatherings. David Reed, Senator from Pennsylvania argued in 1923 that immigrants were unable to adapt to the new culture and "...want neither to learn our common speech nor to share our common life."⁷ This reluctance to assimilate was seen a threat to white Protestant culture and as an insult to the American way of life. This conflict lead to concern over the United States' economic, cultural, and racial composition. As KKK Imperial Wizard Hiram Wesley Evans argued: "Our unity is threatened by hordes of immigrants...who bring foreign ideas and ideals into our land, two things must be done: first, we must stop influx of foreigners; second, we must through education, bring all people to common program of acting and thinking."⁸ During this speech, Evans explained how immigrants negatively affected Americans ideology and described the methods to bar further immigrants from entering the country while simultaneously Americanizing those already here.

European immigrants were under great scrutiny in the wake of World War I. German-Americans were frequently suspected of disloyalty to United States. It is worth noting that as a result of this the belief that German Americans, the United States "...imprisoned 4,000 people in 1917 and 1918 for allegedly spying or for simply endorsing the German war effort."⁹

Ethnocentric prejudice against European immigrants became an important issue for old-stock

⁷ David A. Reed, "America of the Melting Pot Come to End." *New York Times* (New York City), April 27, 1924.

⁸ "The Klan Rides Again." *Between the Wars: The Klan*.

⁹ "World War I Hysteria Threatened Freedom." *St. Cloud Times*: 13.

Americans to further their prohibition agenda. The hysteria made it acceptable for Americans to close Germans saloons and eradicate trappings of German culture. Arguably Prohibition also unleashed a new wave of anti-ethnic sentiment in the United States “cloaked as patriotism, which undermined the ability ethnic of Americans to challenge the dry movement in any meaningful fashion.”¹⁰ Many of these immigrants were unable to express their opinion on Prohibition because they feared they would give the impression of disloyalty to the new country.

In a more violent expression of these sentiments, the second rise of the Ku Klux Klan targeted not only Blacks but also immigrants, Jews, and Catholics.¹¹ The Klan became one of the largest citizen enforcement groups of Prohibition in the era. By supporting eugenic “policies of immigration restriction, segregation of those judged socially ‘unfit,’ and programs of human selective breeding,” they worked to maintain the racial purity of the United States, as they understood it.¹² The KKK believed that in order for the United States to have a homogenous white Protestant population again “...the immigrant tide must at all cost be stopped and America given a chance to stabilize her ethnic beings.”¹³ Given the relatively large amount of members in the Klan at the time, there were some who held government positions and worked for anti-immigration legislation. Not only did they want to reduce the overall immigrant population, they also wanted to change the views of the immigrants living in the United States. Immigrants were encouraged to attend American study groups meetings to “shed their ethnic cultural practice for

¹⁰ Lerner, *Dry Manhattan*, 31.

¹¹ Robert A. Divine, *The American Story: Combined Volume* (Boston: Pearson, 2013), 823.

¹² Steven Selden, *Inheriting Shame: The Story of Eugenics and Racism in America* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1999), 1.

¹³ Thomas Streissguth, *The Roaring Twenties: An Eyewitness History* (New York: Facts on File, 2001), 69.

American ones.”¹⁴ These methods bolstered the efforts to defend Protestant values, which were threatened by social and cultural transformation.

The KKK, WCTU, and ASL worked in conjunction to enforce Prohibition and their own social authority. Together they worked to pass The National Origins Act, more commonly known as “the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924. “Which allowed only two percent of immigrants of their respective countries from entering the United States.”¹⁵ Even President Coolidge felt that the new law was “beneficial” for the country's cultural modifications as he said during his third annual message: “while not enough time has elapsed to afford a conclusive demonstration, such results as have been secured indicate that our immigration law is on the whole beneficial.”¹⁶ Its main effect was to control the incoming immigration from “undesirable” countries of Eastern and Southern Europe.

Due to the large scale of immigrants and their cultural differences, some Protestant Americans felt that: “Prohibition represented a symbolic issue for older stock white middle-class Americans, since they feared a status decline as new immigrants entered the country.”¹⁷ Curbing cultural practices around alcohol dovetailed with the literal restriction of immigrants to the United States and created an American society that resembled a United States of an earlier era. After the Immigration Restriction Act of 1924, most Americans felt that it was in their best interest that the new wave of immigration should reflect, “the same races as those of us who are

¹⁴ Neil A. Hamilton, *Lifetimes: The Great War to the Stock Market Crash: American History through Biography and Primary Documents* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 5.

¹⁵ Okrent, *Last Call*, 238.

¹⁶ Hamilton, *Lifetimes*, 66.

¹⁷ Ira M. Wasserman, “Prohibition and Ethnocultural Conflict: The Missouri Prohibition Referendum of 1918.”

already here so that each year's immigration should so far as possible be a miniature America."¹⁸

This meant that the system was predicated on a desire to clearly shape the immigrant community that would be allowed into the country. "Essentially, it was an attempt at social engineering—admitting immigrants from acceptable nations and not admitting those deemed unacceptable in an attempt to keep the American population as homogeneous as possible."¹⁹ This meant that the majority of new immigrants who were permitted into the country were from Great Britain and Nordic areas since they supposedly resembled American values, culture, and religiosity.

The hatred towards these immigrants and their dedication to keep the country as a homogeneous entity was the prominent concern of the KKK. During Prohibition, they took it upon themselves to enforce the law because the authorities failed to do their job: "if our officials cannot enforce the law, we should teach them how..."²⁰ Working alongside the WCTU and ASL, the Klan walked the streets enforcing the anti-liquor crusade and using Prohibition as an excuse to target the working class, Catholics, and racial minorities. Imperial Wizard William J. Simmons believed that "To assure the supremacy of the white race we believe in the exclusion of the yellow race and the disfranchisement of the Negro" as well as Catholics, and Jews because "it was god's act to make the white race superior to all others."²¹ In sum, he claimed a divine power gave white Protestants their racial superiority and thus justified their actions.

Unfortunately, such thinking was not in the purview of Klansmen alone. New research about racial superiority was being done during the early 20th century in order to understand if human behavior and traits were predetermined by the genetic composition, which could be

¹⁸ David A. Reed, "America of the Melting Pot Come to End." *New York Times* (New York City), April 27, 1924.

¹⁹ Michael Shally-Jensen, *The 1920s (1920-1929)* (New York: Grey House, 2014), 37.

²⁰ McGirr, *The War on Alcohol*, 134.

²¹ Alva W Taylor, *The Christian Century: A Journal of Religion* (Christian Century Company, 1922), 850.

inherited. This research was viewed by some people as a means to rationalize the racial structure and beliefs of a dominant race. The whole eugenic project started to interpret genetic difference in “culturally bounded areas such as intellect, morally, and beauty...”²² The research argued that the white race was “superior” and thus anti-immigration legislation justified in order to preserve white Anglo-Saxon supremacy. These researchers opened the gate for new feelings of supremacy and superiority towards other races and ethnicities. This ignited even more resentment towards those who were “unfit” and altering America’s tradition.

White Anglo-Saxon Americans wanted to protect their pigmentation and heritage as the prominent ones in the United States. They were anxious about the influx population of European immigrants that were changing the cultural dynamics of the country. As Charles Davenport argued in *Heredity in Relation to Eugenics* the racial change and behavioral problems occurring in the United States at the time was because of the recent entry of European immigrants. He claimed:

The population of the United States will, on account of the great influx of blood from South-eastern Europe, rapidly become darker in pigmentation, smaller in stature, more mercurial, more attached to music and art, more given to crime of larceny, kidnapping, assault, murder, rape, and sex-immorality and less given burglary, drunkenness, and vagrancy than were the original English settlers. (219)

This “research” targeted Southeastern-European immigrants arguing that their “bad” traits were inherited from generation to generation. According to this logic, if there was an intermingling of the ethnicities then there existed an immediate threat that Anglo-Saxon society would lose much of its purported value.²³

²² Selden, *Inheriting Shame*, 15.

²³ Charles Benedict Davenport, "Heredity in Relation to Eugenics: Davenport, Charles Benedict, 1866-1944: Free Download & Streaming: Internet Archive." Internet Archive. April 01, 2008.

Some Americans were eager to protect their old-stock Anglo-Saxon/Nordic backgrounds because of the eugenic belief that people of Nordic extraction were the most superior race of all. “...well-organized and efficient society must reflect a hierarchy of races with the Nordic at its acme; that racial intermarriage would lead to undesirable results.” If such an event were to occur (that is inter-racial marriage and then potentially offspring) “the best course of action was sterilization” in order to prevent the birth of a racially-mixed child.²⁴

During Prohibition, European immigrants were targeted due to the cultural, religious, and ethnic difference they suffered discrimination from groups such as the WCTU, ASL, and KKK that worked to see an end to their cultural values. These aforementioned groups and others wanted to change and erase the culture of new immigrants and implement American values. At times, these groups worked together to enforce Prohibition as a type of vigilante justice force. They also promoted anti-immigration laws that restricted certain populations of immigrants from entering the country. (These laws favored Northwestern Europeans because they seemed closer to American cultural standards, and penalized Southeastern Europeans because of their cultural differences; which many saw as a threat to their own way of living.)

Nativism and xenophobia were central components that drove Americans to question and ultimately try and arrest immigration during the early twentieth century. The same ideologies bolstered Prohibition’s cultural underpinning and mixed enforcement. Old-stock Americans believed they were superior racially and culturally and that the country's racial and cultural composition should replicate its roots in order to create a thriving homogeneous country. The story of Prohibition is a history of many things, including one of prejudice and anti-immigration

²⁴ Selden, *Inheriting Shame*, 16, 17.

sentiment that helped create a divided nation between white Anglo-Saxon Protestant nativists and recent immigrants. It is a story of restriction and eugenic thought that allowed Americans to choose those they believed “fit” to enter the United States; an idea that continues to haunt us.

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