

The New Temperance: The American Obsession with Sin and Vice, by David Wagner (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), \$16 paper, \$60 cloth.

Bad Habits: Drinking, Smoking, Taking Drugs, Gambling, Sexual Misbehavior, and Swearing in American History, by John Burnham (New York: New York University Press, 1993), \$19.50 paper.

REVIEWED BY
Lynn Appleton,
Dept. of Sociology,
Florida Atlantic
University, Boca
Raton, FL 33432,
Appleton@fau.edu.

The study of drug use was preoccupied with deviance until the realization that deviance was a moving target shifted our attention to "the normal." In 20-century America, normalcy is the cultural property of the metonymic middle class (DeMott, 1990). Like true north on the compass, this class locates the others. Disproportionately powerful in the normative and political realms, it shapes the iconic American Society.

Two recent books—sociologist David Wagner's *The New Temperance* and historian John Burnham's *Bad Habits*—examine the middle class and its attitudes toward the pleasures of the flesh. Both books consider the use of psychoactive drugs as well as a set of related practices: sexual behavior (in both books) and the "minor vices" of gambling and swearing (in Burnham's book). They offer analyses of the tension between pleasure and repression—or, if you prefer, self-indulgence and self-control—in the American middle class. Burnham covers the period from the mid-19th century to the late 1960s; Wagner's chronology begins where Burnham's ends. In these two books, Gusfield's dictum "[t]he sociologist picks up where the historian closes" (Gusfield, 1969:2) is literally true.

These equally compelling books are incompatible with each other. Burnham argues that the middle class has sunk ever deeper into intemperance and hedonistic amorality, while

Wagner argues that the same group has become increasingly judgmental and abstemious. Wagner believes the United States has become more repressive and intolerant, while Burnham argues that it has embraced tolerance at the cost of civility.

Maybe both arguments are valid and some huge change occurred around 1970. Maybe each argument reflects the disciplinary limits of its author. Maybe each analysis is skewed by the politics of its author. Maybe both authors are undone by the same methodological error: the search for confirmatory evidence and dismissal of disconfirmatory data. Maybe all of the above are true—in any event, both books are worth reading.

Each author's endpoint is shaped by his opening assumptions about whether this country is "going to hell in a handbasket" (as my grandmother would have put it) or "run by a bunch of damned bluenoses" (as my grandfather would have put it). Neither author provides particularly convincing evidence of the ubiquity of the values and practices around which his work is organized,* but each author's contentions have some ring of truth. Read in tandem, these books force closer inquiry about trends in middle-class values and personal behavior as well as their connection to public policy.

Wagner begins with a conviction that a "new temperance" exists in the United States. He argues that it is characterized by repression of and intolerance for the pleasures of the body: certain kinds of food (high in fat, high in sugar), forms of sexual relationships (multiple partners, "unsafe" sex), some patterns of alcohol use (frequent, high dose), and the use of other drugs (tobacco, marijuana). He assumes that the past decades have been a period of "high claimsmaking" in this multistage arena (p. 42) and that a global impulse to temperance underlies changes in each area.

Burnham begins with a different set of certainties, particularly that the American middle class is increasingly tolerant of what used to be called "the minor vices" (sexual promiscuity, cursing, gambling, drug taking). His history traces a century of decline in an American consensus about "respectability" that repudiated the deviant "lower orders" and included "decent" working-class people as well as the middle class. He assumes that temperance values currently are on the defensive and "do your own thing" is in ascendency.

Perhaps these authors see such differences in two overlapping slices of history because they hold different implicit assumptions about human and social nature. Wagner implies that people in a "good" society would be temperate, but that "industrial society does appear to generate a sense of deprivation, dullness, and barrenness that often leads people to seek compensation through the obsessive pursuit of pleasure" (p. 55). In contrast, Burnham implies that the "good" society checks the human passions that produce drunkenness, lewdness, crudity and other elements of the "ritual of antisocial behavior" (p. 208). For the former, hedonism is an attempt to combat the damages of the economic system; for the latter, hedonism is a consequence of the failure to create a society that civilizes all of its members.

Perhaps the authors differ so dramatically in their analyses because of differences in their politics. Leftish readers will be drawn to Wagner's arguments, and conservatives will applaud Burnham's; some elements of the so-called "new communitarian" movement embrace elements of both. Their political differences are illustrated by their positions on that mythic era dubbed "The Sixties." Although Wagner was a self-admittedly sober leftist activist during those years, he now views the hedonistic hippie counterculture as Hobsbawmian "primitive rebels" (Hobsbawm, 1959). Burnham reveals little of his personal history, but he does not seem as if he would have been at Woodstock or even wished to be there. Wagner wants

a society less concerned with the repression of the impulse toward pleasure and more concerned with achieving economic justice; Burnham wants a society that values personal freedom less and civic responsibility more.

Wagner and Burnham offer dramatically different analyses of the sources and substance of late-20th-century American attitudes about and involvement in drinking, the use of other drugs, carnal adventures, and the like. Wagner tends to emphasize the "agentic" aspects of human action: the poor take drugs to palliate their pain and symbolize their defiance; the middle class eschew drug use as part of a strategy to maintain their class position. Both strategies may be fruitless, but they are reasonable. Wagner recognizes that elites have exploited these social trends as a strategy to maximize their power. But the trends do not originate with a manipulative elite, and, in particular, he does not believe that "consumer culture" has fanned any of these passions. In contrast, Burnham argues that determined minorities have manipulated naive majorities to create a widespread acceptance of "the minor vices." His analysis suggests that much of the diffusion of the "bad habits" was accomplished by a coalition of their "proponents": commercial merchants of vice; rebels within the privileged classes and among the ranks of the poor; the "underworld"; cultural elites in the media; the culture of consumption itself.

Wagner argues that the most recent temperance crusades emerged from economic and political changes in the 1970s. As the economic security of the middle class diminished, its members increasingly worried about how to secure their class position and ensure that their children did likewise. Part of their solution was an increasing emphasis on self-control and "respectable" behavior. Almost superstitiously, they adopted the markers of a particular way of life as indicators of likely success in business, relationships, and life. Through the next decade the middle class developed a morality of "fitness, good eating, healthy living habits, and abstinence from smok-

ing" (p. 120). This morality was translated into electoral strategy and public policy as "the New Right" pioneered the "politics of puritanism." This political rhetoric was rapidly adopted by traditional Republicans and most politicians on the left of the American political spectrum. This bipartisan social agenda entailed temperance or abstinence in drug and alcohol use, monogamy in sexual relations, a mistrust of lusty heterosexuality, and a domestication or repudiation of homosexuality.

As both elite strategy and popular movement, temperance triumphed, and the vestiges of the rebellious 1960s were swept from the American political and cultural scene. "By the 1990s, the politics of danger had completely succeeded. Little, if any, difference seems to exist between conservative and liberal parties regarding campaigns to cleanse television, film, rock 'n' roll, even cyberspace, of sex and violence . . ." and a long list of other issues ending with "and campaigns warning children about the dangers of almost everything from suicide and AIDS to high cholesterol and cigarette smoking" (pp. 163–164). The politics of danger, Wagner warns, are supportive of the interests of conservative politics and contribute to the growth of a state that seeks to control vast realms of formerly "private" behavior.

Wagner crafts a provocative argument that deserves attention. He draws heavily on the work of Barbara Ehrenreich (1989), one of the few true "public intellectuals" of the American left, but his homage to her work is flawed by his failure to develop it or subject it to closer empirical analysis. Consider Wagner's claim (*pace* Ehrenreich) that beginning in the 1970s, the economic insecurity of the middle class made it culturally conservative and ready to embrace the politics of puritanism. For more than a decade, Clark and his collaborators (Clark and Ferguson, 1983; Clark and Hoffman-Martinot, 1998) have developed and empirically examined the argument that the middle class has become more tolerant of different ways of life and less likely to look to the state as the

solution to a wide range of problems. Social liberalism seems to be a significant long-term trend in the political loyalties of the middle class, explaining the persistence of a middle-class segment in the Democratic party (Brooks and Manza, 1997; but also see Durr, 1993). Wagner's arguments about political realignments would have been strengthened by a look at research on the partisan and entrepreneurial forces of the politics of morality (e.g., Gusfield, 1981; Meier, 1994).

Wagner's work also would benefit from more careful development of other areas. He overlooks an extensive literature on the failures of efforts to control Americans' access to alcohol (e.g., Cahalan, 1987), thereby overstating the power of temperance as public policy. His sweeping generalizations often fail to recognize variations in attitudes and behaviors across race, class, age, gender, and other social locations—as, for example, when he refers to “attitudes today towards the unwed mother, the pregnant teen, the cigarette smoker” (p. 15). He uses dubious references to buttress his assertions: for example, relying on Stanton Peale's *The Diseasing of America* to support his claim that “alcoholism is far less widespread” in countries where wine is regularly used at meals (p. 175). He conflates the incompatible as when, for example, he joins Foucault and Gramsci in an argument about the origins of temperance as an elite strategy (pp. 49-56). He makes no effort to review and empirically dismiss competitors to his arguments: for example, cyclical theories of tolerance and intolerance toward drug use (e.g., Levine, 1992; Musto, 1987) or arguments that the New Temperance is non-moralistic and non-coercive (Burt et al., 1994). He similarly ignores the work of those whose arguments are related to but distinct from his own, most notably work in cultural studies that follows Foucault's work on the disciplining of the body (e.g., Fox, 1994).

But Wagner's provocative work should be forgiven a few of its problems. As a fellow sociologist, perhaps I am more charitable than I should be in light of the discipline's absence

from the study of alcohol and drugs. In the early 1980s, the Reagan administration launched a war on federal funding of social and political analyses. In the drug and alcohol field, the later relocations of NIAAA and NIDA into NIH completed federal withdrawal from funding macro-level studies of this kind. Federally funded work became increasingly individualistic, reductionist, and applied. And, because few other sources of funding were available, increasingly dollar-driven academic researchers either matched their research to RFPs or abandoned the field. Some of the flaws in Wagner's work are easy to excuse. In an era of information overload, the unfunded scholar has many disadvantages. But, making a virtue out of necessity, Wagner might point out that he owes no debt to the status quo.

Neither does Burnham's *Bad Habits* owe a debt to the status quo. This book examines the Hundred Years War between respectability and "unrespectability" and how "by the late twentieth century, disrespectability overwhelmed traditional respectability in American society" (p. 1). The "respectables" are the good guys in Burnham's narrative. They were "prosocial," "fumbled towards some sense that a social order could improve the condition of all citizens" (p. 12), and defended the "common values and activities that made society both protective and compassionate" (p. 13). They also denounced the behaviors that Burnham dubs the "minor vices" or the "bad habits": drinking alcohol immoderately, using tobacco and other drugs, gambling, swearing, and engaging in non-marital sexual activity. Burnham suggests that the attack on this subculture's power to stigmatize the "bad habits" was an attack on its broader power to set the social agenda. So the triumph of the "bad habits" destroyed more than rules that prevented people from having fun. The triumph of the "minor vices" was part of "the process through which the dominant elements in society finally came to be dedicated to no-restraint and to the antisocial" (p. 22).

Burnham argues that the “advocacy” of the minor vices was part of a coherent cultural and political program—perhaps what Gusfield (1994) might call a “fluid” social movement. That program was advanced by an odd coalition of actors: at first, the Victorian underworld; later, bohemians and rebels from the privileged classes; the “vice-industrial complex” of purveyors of thrills and pleasure; the “free speech” enthusiasts of the mass media; a consumer culture that would pander to any market. In the mid-19th century, the minor vices were contained in geographically and culturally distinct locations such as “red light” districts. Rejecting attempts at “uplift,” the “lower order parochials” of these neighborhoods defended their way of life—promiscuous sex, intemperate use of alcohol and other drugs, gambling, and swearing. “When, therefore, commercial interest began to galvanize the minor vices, two powerful preexisting forces were waiting to reinforce and push the new social impact of the bad habits: the resentful parochialism of lower-order people who wanted, understandably, to devalue respectables . . . ; and the negativism of artistic and intellectual rebels who envisaged a society without personal constraints. With commercial stimulus, the subcultures turned into countercultures . . .” (pp. 237–238). And the countercultures gained sufficient power to challenge and maybe overturn the dominant culture. In Burnham’s narrative, the greed of the entrepreneur is joined to the perversity of Agnew’s “nattering nabobs of negativism” to serve the culture of the “boyz in the hood.”

Burnham develops his argument about the normalization of the “minor vices” through a series of impressionistic case studies of different vices. Like Wagner, he falls prey to what philosopher Abraham Kaplan (1964) once dubbed “the law of the hammer”: “Give a small boy a hammer, and he will find that everything he sees needs pounding.” As with Wagner’s book, I am left with the conviction that much of merit has been said—but that intemperance in argument has spoiled the final product. Burnham’s commitment to a unilinear history tempts him to ignore countervailing trends or alternative

explanations. As he develops an alternative to the historians' obsession with reform movements, he ignores those institutions and movements that opposed the diffusion of the "bad habits": crusades against juvenile delinquency and youthful misconduct; the public health movement and its allies (Leichter, 1991); waves of anti-drug crusading (e.g., Musto, 1987). In addition to ignoring reformers, he also ignores competing arguments about the origins of increased tolerance for and indulgence in the "minor vices": for example, arguments about changes in the locus and focus of social control in modern societies (e.g., Conrad and Schneider, 1992; Rieff, 1966). Finally, he ignores the degree to which boundaries dissolved in one realm might be reconstituted in others (Lamont et al., 1996).

Like the sociologists of an earlier era, historian Burnham seems to assume that "ordinary" people are captives of external social forces. As tired as I am of the word "agency," Burnham's work could use a dose of it. For example, consider his chapter on the sexual "minor vices"—premarital and nonmarital sex and, as near as I can discern, heterosexual sex beyond the missionary position. He seems to assume that unless manipulated by elites, most people would not seek to extend their erotic lives. "Material in the mass media and sometimes elsewhere convinced most writers, both mass and elite, that everybody was, in fact, doing it. They then furthered such activity by proclaiming the new standards. . . . Such evidence reinforces common sense in suggesting that the media invented and promoted as much as described change" (p. 193). Almost as dangerous as romance novels (p. 204) were the reports by Kinsey and his popularizers. They offered "a rationalization for acting on the code that the parochial lower-order or underworld people . . . had been insisting must be universal . . . —extended and diverse love play. Like mythical prostitutes, the women in this cult of mutual orgasm were supposed to want sexual experiences just as much as men did" (p. 191). Shocking! And, in a lament familiar to those who follow the rhetoric of the New Right,

homosexuality opened the floodgates of deviance: "Since no-restraint in general was the central goal of the advocates of the bad habits, the homophiles . . . found that their desire to break taboos in one limited area of behavior carried them into alliance with extremists and lack of restraint in other areas. So, for example, when gay liberation became public, spokespersons often advocated the use of offensive language and drugs" (p. 261). At times, then, Burnham stretches too hard to fit the available data into his argument; often he ignores scholarship that would disturb his story of Vice Triumphant. But the most useful hypotheses are often so simple that they seem simplistic. Burnham makes no claim to provide the definitive work on this topic. Indeed, he takes great pains to note that his work intends to "establish profiles and general patterns . . . rather than to provide exhaustive histories" (p. xvi). In this he succeeds admirably. Like Wagner's work, Burnham's is a challenge to a field that rarely indulges in "big picture" speculations.

Burnham's chronology of the Triumph of Vice ends around the same time as Wagner's story of the Ascendancy of Repression. The cursory epilogue to *Bad Habits* suggests that the past few decades have been "troubling times for the advocates of the bad habits" because there are "still limits to how much disturbing behavior people could and would put up with" (p. 295). But if Wagner's New Temperance was the sum of those "troubling times," then it is noteworthy that Wagner predicts an end to the New Temperance due to unspecified "new movements and new periods of unrest" (p. 176). Does this mean the victory must be conceded to the "bad habits"? Will the middle class return to applauding Lenny Bruce, two-martini lunches and mate-swapping?

My final, rhetorical question suggests a partial reply: that the question is the wrong question. Even during the periods of greatest middle-class intemperance (presumably the 1920s and the 1960s/early 1970s), most middle-class people were closer to Burnham's ideal of respectability than to his depic-

tion of vice. Similarly, even at the end of the Reagan administration, more middle-class people valued sensual gratification than Wagner concedes: according to highly touted marketing savant Faith Popcorn (1992), the beginning of the 1990s witnessed a "pleasure revenge" that included the resurgence of full-fat Häagen Dazs ice cream, martinis, and big cigars. Burnham and Wagner have sketched thesis and antithesis. Building on their work, the next round of scholarship might begin mapping tensions and coalitions between the forces of temperance and indulgence across the different forms of naughty pleasures. Perhaps such an initiative could reconnect the study of alcohol and drugs to the mainstream of the study of deviance and social control, reclaiming it from the technocrats and clinicians; it also might broaden the disciplines represented in the putatively interdisciplinary field of drug/alcohol studies.

The value of Burnham's work and, for that matter, Wagner's lies not so much in their descriptions—indeed, both of them are likely quite wrong about "who, what, when, where and how"—but in their revisioning of the terrain of "why." Burnham urges us to take another look at a familiar scene: to examine the self-interested manipulation of human appetites for pleasures; to examine the connections of putatively separate realms of consumption; to look for the generic processes through which the deviant becomes legitimated. Similarly, Wagner asks us to abandon our "public health" perspective and to ask some cynical questions about do-gooderism. Both academics and practitioners should enjoy these books. Read together, they are as much fun as the most feisty and brawling panels at our national meetings.

- Note * See Wolfe (1998) on middle-class tolerance and Jones-Webb et al. (1993) on lack of class differences on many attitudes about alcohol policy. See Klein and Pittman (1989) on the persistence of restrictive norms of alcohol use, as well as Weisheit and Johnson (1992) on widespread beliefs about the immorality of marijuana use.

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