

The Temperance Movement and Social Work

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This article examines a forgotten episode in social work history: the involvement of the profession in the temperance movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Though some notable social workers such as Jane Addams, Robert A. Woods, and Representative Jeannette Rankin (the first woman elected to the U. S. Congress), championed the temperance cause during this period, little is remembered of their efforts today. Suggestions are also drawn from this historical incident about current efforts in the profession to again deal with social justice issues on a national scale by reintroducing a more vigorous "moral element" into the profession's response to such problems.

KEY WORDS: *morality in social work; social causes; social work history; social work profession; temperance*

Social work's involvement in the temperance movement in the late 19th and early 20th centuries is largely forgotten, and social workers of today might wonder why this particular historical incident needs revisiting now as the temperance movement of the past is today viewed with a mixture of scorn and ridicule (Aaron & Musto, 1988). Study of this historical episode is important to current social workers for three reasons. First, it was the first time the field was actively engaged as a profession in the promotion of a social reform measure that was universal in scope. Campaigns for reform issues such as women's pensions, labor reform, women's suffrage, immigrant rights, and racial equality all sought to benefit specific groups or minorities. Temperance was seen as a social reform measure that applied equally to all citizens in the name of social justice and public health. Second, the temperance movement for the first time gave social workers experience with the challenges of conducting a national campaign. Until that time most social work reform involvement had occurred on a citywide, community-wide, or at best a statewide basis. Third, though the campaign for national temperance finally failed, social work's experiences in helping to infuse a more vigorous "moral element" into the public life of that day may provide some valuable lessons for the field today as it struggles to once again introduce moral insights into campaigns for such national social justice issues as health care, welfare reform, and human rights.

In concurrence with Specht (1990; Specht & Courtney, 1994), I believe that social work possesses

a moral "mission," meaning that it should strive to be in the forefront of those social forces that seek a more just and equitable society both in this country and in other nations where the profession exists as an established presence. However, social work's involvement in the temperance campaign offers an early example of a particularly poignant feature of such campaigns for justice. This is the distinction, often lost in practice, between moral effort and "moralizing," or self-righteous behavior (Kerr, 1973). Although moral effort can lead to the achievement of socially approved and worthwhile goals, the moralizing imperative can lead to moral arrogance, division, and defeat unless properly controlled. As Hofstadter (1955) once famously pointed out, the moralizing imperative was the chief temptation, and possibly the chief sin, of the temperance movement and some of its advocates. The temperance movement offered social work one of its earliest experiences of this temptation and dilemma on a national scale. Therefore, the study of the movement's growth, eventual failure, and the responses of social work to its defeat might help to clarify for the profession some of the risks involved in such campaigns and the parameters that need to be observed if such efforts are to succeed.

THE RISE OF THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

The idea that temperance, or abstaining from consuming alcoholic beverages, could once have been the source of a nationwide movement is today viewed with curiosity or amusement. Temperance is now seen as a personal decision, best reinforced,

not by legal coercion, but by education, counseling, or peer group support, such as that offered by groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous. However in the 19th and early 20th centuries, temperance was perceived as an extremely important social, legislative, and moral reform issue. In the eyes of the temperance crusaders of that day, the abolition of the liquor trade was felt to be as important as the abolition of slavery had been to the previous generation of reformers. Alcohol, in fact, was seen by such advocates as a new and more dangerous form of slavery (Kelly, 1973/1914). The success of the temperance movement was therefore seen as essential because it was felt that without it no other needed reforms could ever succeed. According to the reform literature of the time, intemperance, or the abuse of alcohol, "destroys the sense of decency and honor, silences conscience and deadens the best instincts of the human heart." [Furthermore, wherever] "it touches human life it leaves the awful shadows of disease, crime, poverty, shame, wretchedness, and sorrow" (Timberlake, 1970, p. 6). In this perspective, any moderate use of alcohol was impossible because of its seductive and destructive qualities, and therefore it was believed that the only sensible option was what came to be called *temperance*, or complete abstinence (Gusfield, 1986).

In the United States, temperance first emerged as a social cause in the early 19th century largely because of the insistence of religious groups, such as the Methodists and other evangelical movements, on the debilitating effects of alcohol on human reason. Such groups feared that the wide use of alcohol would eventually result in driving individuals away from sound religious doctrine and, therefore, from church membership and virtuous behavior. In addition, there was concern that a country based on popular government, such as the United States, risked danger to its fundamental institutions if the populace was consumed and deluded by drink. These views were often reinforced and underscored by the various religious revival movements that swept the country during that time and later in the century (Gusfield, 1986).

Temperance subsided as an important social issue in mid-19th century politics as public attention became focused on the problem of slavery and, eventually, by the civil crisis that led to the Civil War in the early 1860s. Following the war, however, temperance once again began to dominate public discussion as the nation embarked on an extensive

course of industrialization. Although religious groups remained in the forefront of the movement, they were now joined by secular groups, such as the powerful Anti-Saloon League of America, which, in addition to stressing alcohol's attack on reason, emphasized its debilitating effects on public health aspects and on human productivity and community life. Anti-liquor sentiment increasingly focused on the social causes of intemperance, such as the deplorable living conditions caused by industrialization and the vast power and pro-alcohol propaganda of the liquor industry. In addition, the vast social effect of intemperance on society took on added significance. If a drunken husband could ruin an entire family in a few months and a drunken mob destroy a whole community in one night, a drunken railroad engineer at the throttle of a train could kill hundreds of people in a few minutes (Timberlake, 1970).

SOCIAL WORK AND TEMPERANCE

Historical information on the contribution of social work to the temperance movement is currently scant, and such information as exists needs to be sifted out from the work of social historians, contemporary accounts, and individual memoirs by professional leaders. Little evidence remains, such as newspaper and magazine accounts, that might shed light on the daily lives of ordinary social workers who took part in temperance activities. Nevertheless, sufficient information remains to give us at least a small glimpse into the social context that provided the driving power for the lives of such individuals.

Social workers first became widely involved in the temperance movement in the late 1890s after they observed the destructive effects of alcohol on individuals and families. Because they witnessed such community disintegration firsthand, these effects were particularly shocking to social workers in the temperance cause who were representatives of the settlement house movement, including such luminaries as Jane Addams, Robert A. Woods, Lillian Wald, and Graham Taylor. All of these individuals, except for Addams, is little known today. At that time, however, they were nationally known social workers who knew each other personally and who served on numerous local and national committees to promote a wide variety of social reforms (Woods, for example, assisted Addams in the publication of her earliest social work articles). Eventually, as social work's involvement in temperance grew, other well-known social workers such as Jeanette

Rankin, the first female member of the United States House of Representatives, and Elizabeth Tilton, a leader in Boston Associated Charities, also joined the movement. These examples of participation by leaders helped to swell the ranks of social workers who eventually became active and involved in the temperance cause (Timberlake, 1970).

The temperance activities of these social work leaders at first consisted mainly of educational efforts, such as speaking and writing on behalf of local alcohol reform efforts. Later they would largely abandon such educational work and instead, despite some misgivings, push for full legal nationwide abolition of the alcohol industry itself (Timberlake, 1970). Their first full-fledged campaigns were local drives to control and, if necessary, eliminate saloons, then seen as the primary tool used by wealthy liquor interests to subjugate and enslave citizens and workers. During the late 1890s and early 1900s such drives were organized in both rural and urban communities by local temperance committees across the nation. The saloon at that time was, to temperance advocates, a potent symbol of political and moral corruption. According to Woods, saloons, such as those in his native city of Boston, could best be tamed and controlled by licensing and community monitoring measures. However, if this was unsuccessful, he believed that the noxious influence of the saloons would have to be stopped by stronger legal measures or threats of closure: "...once branded by law as the entrance to a bottomless pit, larger numbers of novices would be repelled from its doors (Woods, 1970/1898, p. 294).

Woods stressed that such an accomplishment would be difficult because the saloon had become not only the tool of the liquor industry but also the home base of the political boss, who had both a financial and a political stake in protecting its existence (Woods, 1970/1898). Addams noted that drinking establishments were particularly numerous during her early days in Chicago and stated that one square mile of the city near Hull House was found to contain at least "four hundred saloons" (Addams, 1930). Reflecting on this period later in her life, Jane Addams offered her perspective on the difficulties involved in the struggle against the saloon during her early days at Hull House in Chicago:

The boss of our ward controlled numerous saloons in the ward and owned two saloons downtown...He distributed favors there and all

the appointments with himself or his henchmen were made in these saloons. The entertainments given by the politician to his constituents and friends...largely depended for their success upon the amount of liquor which was distributed. (Addams, 1930, pp. 222–223)

From the very beginning, these temperance efforts were actively opposed by numerous vested interests, such as local politicians, the alcohol manufacturers associations, immigrant groups (particularly those who culturally had no objection to the consumption of alcohol), and civil libertarians who objected to controls on private behavior (Kerr, 1973). Opposition also arose because the temperance crusade, along with many other social reform campaigns, such as women's suffrage and the abolition of child labor, were predominantly led and spearheaded by women, some of whom were social workers (Wikipedia, 2007). Groups and organizations opposed to temperance provided a steadily growing barrage of anti-temperance activity such as public speakers, pamphlets, newspaper editorials, allegedly "scientific" studies, and public demonstrations directed against the temperance campaign in the early years of the last century (Kerr, 1973).

Although it is unknown exactly how many frontline social workers were involved in temperance work, it is clear from the available evidence that a number of private charitable organizations employing social workers supported temperance activities, as did settlement house agencies, and social work professional organizations (Timberlake, 1970). One could surmise that frontline social workers, being mostly woman, would be particularly attracted to the temperance movement, as it focused on correcting the injustices forced on women and families by the deleterious effects of alcohol abuse, effects that such social workers increasingly experienced on a daily basis in their work.

It is certain, however, that the leadership of social work in the early 19th century became increasingly committed to the temperance movement as new findings of the extent of what was then called "the liquor problem" became evident and as the fervor for temperance became an integral part of the Progressive Movement, a nationwide drive for social betterment that social work leaders championed and, in some cases, directed in the early years of the 20th century (Timberlake, 1970). This concern was illustrated by the growth of articles in social work

journals of the time plus the increasing frequency of special sessions and meetings at social work conferences that dealt with alcohol-related issues. A leading organization in this effort was Boston Associated Charities, which, beginning in 1911, distributed literature and thousands of posters labeling alcohol as "narcotic poison" and linking it as a direct cause to such social evils as "insanity, poverty, crime, disease, and...prostitution" (Timberlake, 1970, p. 64). Another powerful temperance organization that boasted many social work members and worked closely with the field in temperance efforts was the Women's Christian Temperance Union, generally known by its acronym as the WCTU, which became a major force for temperance activity throughout the country prior to the 1920s (Gusfield, 1986).

The culmination of the temperance campaign was the ratification in 1919 of the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution, prohibiting the manufacture, sale, transportation, importation, and exportation of alcoholic beverages within the United States. The prohibition amendment took effect in January 1920, thus making this country one of the first nations in the world to go dry by public fiat (Canada had gone dry in 1919 but the law was quickly repealed). The profession of social work had gone on record two years previously as enthusiastically endorsing this effort at their annual national conference in June 1917 (Timberlake, 1970).

In the eyes of many social workers of that time, prohibition appeared to be, in the phrase of the day, a "noble experiment," that would finally eliminate a multitude of grave social ills (Chambers, 1963). After the passage of the Eighteenth Amendment by the United States Congress in 1917, Robert A. Woods addressed a crowd of cheering social workers and told them that this act was "certainly one of the greatest and best events in history" (Timberlake, 1970, p. 66). Woods, a strong proponent of temperance until his death in 1925, reflected in his comments the opinion of the still strongly influential settlement house wing of the social work profession. Indeed, the National Federation of Settlements heartily backed the ratification of the Eighteenth Amendment in 1919 and called for its strong enforcement, which it saw as "vital to the safety and well-being of the nation" (Chambers, 1963, p. 138).

However, as the decade of the 1920s wore on, effective nationwide enforcement of prohibition proved to be impossible and eventually led to its un-

doing (Aaron & Musto, 1988), as also now seems to be happening in the current War on Drugs (Baum, 1997). The lack of effective enforcement of national prohibition also led to a serious stock-taking by the social work proponents of such measures. Some, such as Lillian Wald and Graham Taylor, even decided to abandon the temperance movement altogether as they probably ruefully reflected on the responses of prohibition's enemies, who were now accusing social workers, among others, of trying to control private morality by legislation and therefore of being blue noses and hypocritical kill joys (Chambers, 1963; Kerr, 1973). Writing in 1929 about her experiences with prohibition in Chicago, Jane Addams sadly detailed the causes of lax public enforcement of prohibition, such as police corruption, official greed, propaganda by the liquor industry, bootlegging, gangster activity, public apathy, and the widespread tolerance of lawbreakers (Addams, 1930). Still, noting that the whole world was watching to see whether prohibition succeeded in the United States, Addams remained a firm supporter of the law and hoped for its reform and improvement instead of its repeal: "To give it up now, or to modify seriously the Eighteenth Amendment, would be to obtain not even a negative result, and would mean that we never could be clear as to the real effect of national prohibition" (Addams, 1930, p. 259).

SOCIAL WORK'S RESPONSE TO REPEAL

Despite such reservations among social work supporters of prohibition and documented evidence that in many areas it had been successful in reducing alcoholism, poverty, crime, and unemployment, the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed by Congress in 1933, an event that sparked widespread popular acclaim for the new Roosevelt administration. The temperance movement, as a nationwide cause, was dead. Even today, although there remains controversy about the reasons for its failure (Aaron & Musto, 1988), no group or individual seems eager to once again make the case for the national prohibition of alcohol, despite strong current efforts toward this goal involving other substances, such as pollution, tobacco, and illegal drugs.

In the aftermath of prohibition's collapse, the former supporters of temperance and prohibition, including social workers, were routinely portrayed in the media as blue noses and kill joys (Aaron & Musto, 1988; Sinclair, 1964). Given this climate

of public opinion, social work leaders wanted to quickly move beyond the derisive taunts of the anti-dry forces and the "I told you so" accusations of the liquor industry. Porter R. Lee, in an influential 1929 address to social work leaders, reflected the professional mood of the time when he insisted that social work must decrease its fascination with "causes" such as temperance and assume instead its role as a "function" of ordinary social welfare organization, in which it would be "incorporated into the machinery of community life...in which the support of the entire community is assumed" (Lee, 1939/1929, p. 23). The key phrase in Lee's comment is "support of the entire community." He and many other social work leaders of the time felt that social work could no longer afford to embark on moral campaigns like temperance, which antagonized large proportions of the citizenry, as did national prohibition. Instead, he urged, the profession must now move on to gain the technical competence to support and sustain social change efforts that rested on the broadest possible public support.

The profession of social work dutifully complied with Lee's urgings and gained more social acceptance. As recommended by Lee, the field steadily gained in stronger organization, technical efficiency, expert status, research respectability, more accurate measurement of results, improved accountability, increasingly accurate cost-benefit analysis, and better program evaluation. By the end of the 1930s, the field had fully adopted all the time-tested methods of scientific management, once the province of industry and now also the pride of social work and social welfare. Responding to such developments, social reformers in social welfare and elsewhere, now sensing defeat, looked back regretfully on their passionate, enthusiastic, and idealistic early days in the service of social causes and decried the former naivety and lack of "realism" involved in their former social reform efforts (Chamberlain, 1965/1932).

LESSONS FOR TODAY

Amidst all these developments there remained a nagging awareness in the profession that something was missing. "We have no confidence any more," the former social reformer John Haynes Holmes complained, just before prohibition's repeal, that he had "no confidence that we were ever justified in having confidence!" (Chambers, 1963, p. x). Today, inspired by the results of social reform that

have taken hold since the 1960s, social workers are recovering the confidence to once again urge involvement in social causes that cry out for fulfillment in our own era. Given these developments, it is important to recognize that it is precisely in this area, that of professional confidence and direction, that the study of social work's involvement in the temperance movement can provide us with at least two valuable lessons.

The first lesson is the significance of *moral vision*, which can be defined as a social framework that inspires and promotes "right and good behavior" (Manning, 1997, p. 224), but that collectively can bring about both desirable and undesirable results. This double-edged quality of moral vision can sometimes be self-defeating for, as some have noted, it was the temperance movement's stress upon its moral vision of the importance of a sober, responsible, and productive citizenry that led to the failure of prohibition. Yet this observation is only half right. The moral vision of a just, equitable, and productive citizenry did indeed drive the temperance movement but did not in itself lead to its failure. That result was caused by the government's faulty execution of the goals of temperance, as illustrated by its failure to both effectively promote and to enforce the laws (Aaron & Musto, 1988). Essentially, prohibition's failure provides a cautionary tale, not about moral vision but about the limitations of all national governmental action. Some commentators have noted that prohibition efforts in this country might have continued to be successful if kept confined to local, state, and regional efforts, all of which offered more manageable areas and better opportunities for enforcement than was possible in a national program (Engelman, 1979).

The moral drive associated with the temperance movement was viewed by many social workers who were involved in the campaign as extremely valuable (Addams, 1930). In essence it provided them with a mission, a transcendent set of goals and objectives that could be used to inform, guide, and shape all forms of practice (Addams, 1930). Some commentators have asserted that now it may once more be the duty of the profession to make the value base of the profession clear through its social interventions and in this way "to make the invisible visible" (Manning, 1997), and that this will only be possible if social workers once more become so imbued with humanitarian values that they can hope to serve as, in Charlotte Towle's phrase, "the

conscience of the community..." (Manning, 1997, p. 225).

The second lesson noted by temperance advocates was the existence of a "moral link" between the results of social work intervention and improvements in the broader human community (Goldstein, 1987). Social work learned from the effects of social reforms such as the temperance movement that the beneficial effects of helping individuals and groups to change constructively did not end with the individuals or groups alone, but could radiate out through families, groups, and neighborhoods until these efforts and their benefits gradually helped to improve an entire community. In other words, such interventions could have the effect of positively affecting the thoughts and behaviors of others besides the clients initially involved. Robert A. Woods once observed that this process, which he called the *social method* of helping, resulted in a "softening and moralizing (of) human nature" which was "so great as to affect the larger social life" (Woods, 1970/1898, p. 297). It was through this process that helping influences "poured into the lives of individuals (and)... spread through the neighborhoods..." all of which resulted in "widening ripples...coalescing with one another" (Woods, 1970/1898, p. 297). Woods concluded that it was therefore only "with man's (sic) social bonds in mind (that) one can come to terms with the complete personal life" (Woods, 1970/1898, p. 298). It is this "moral link" among forms of social intervention that Goldstein had in mind when he stressed the fact that "students and seasoned [social work] professionals... [must] be helped to appreciate that they themselves are bearers of significant moral, value, and spiritual beliefs that are bound to find expression in work with individuals, families, and communities..." (Goldstein, 1987, p. 186). Even the eventual failures of the temperance movement in realizing its goal of national abstinence did not dim this vision of mass betterment among convinced temperance advocates (Peabody, 1973/1926). Indeed, it is this hope for universal social uplift, initially inspired by social work's experience with the temperance movement, that still animates some of social work's best community improvement efforts today.

CONCLUSION

This article is an attempt to reexamine the participation of social work in the temperance movement and to draw lessons from this experience as the

field once again gears up to engage in social causes as diverse as health care reform, the fight against global warming, and numerous other campaigns that emphasize the moral importance of the "public good" (Jenson, 2006) and "civic responsibility" (Manning, 1997). The temperance movement was not only once an all encompassing and extremely significant issue for the profession, it was also a campaign that was initially highly successful and productive (Addams, 1930).

The crusade against alcohol was also, along with the drive for women's suffrage, one of the first national moral campaigns in our history (here the phrase, *moral campaign*, describes a mobilized effort to right a perceived fundamental social wrong) in which social work was heavily involved as a profession. Other early causes, such as immigrant rights, child labor, and the improvement of tenement and working conditions, were more the province of individual social work leaders or organized groups than of the profession as a whole (Lubove, 1969). More recent nationwide campaigns, such as the movements for civil rights, fair housing, immigration reform, and world peace, have also been characterized by strong moral leaders. However, although these causes have certainly involved and continue to involve many social workers and are strongly backed by the profession, such efforts have not appeared to have engaged the profession as a whole on as visceral a level as did the fight for temperance in the early 20th century. Sadly, the eventual collapse and failure of the temperance movement has resulted in its current neglect in the historical record of social work.

Nevertheless, it should be clear that social work's experience with the temperance movement leaves a decidedly mixed legacy. Because of the vast changes society, and the social work profession, has undergone since the early part of the 20th century, our world today is a much different place than the one that existed in the early 20th century. Despite the appeal of social movements, could a renewed drive to promote a moral cause invigorate and unify the profession or lead to further fragmentation and even possible public ridicule? As mentioned at the beginning of this article, moral campaigns often carry the risk of offending and alienating others by causing some of their advocates to indulge in moralizing and judgmental behavior. Indeed, in today's political climate, with its multitude of causes and concerns, it is possible that no single moral issue such as

temperance can fruitfully galvanize social work or any other professional group to embark on unified action without posing substantial social risks. Rather, moral imperatives may have to be expressed by the profession not in one gigantic social movement, but in numerous different, smaller scale, and more localized activities and campaigns by members of the profession. The current social work literature urging increased attention by the profession to what is somewhat vaguely called "social justice" issues indicates that this is already happening. For example, the editor of *Social Work Today* recently surveyed its advisors and contributors to determine which social justice issues, if any, actually now demanded priority social work attention. She found that only five issues qualified at this time: diversity, child welfare, health care reform, poverty and economic injustice, and affordable housing (Mallon, 2007). It is striking that compared with the rhetoric of the temperance reformers, none of these current issues (with the possible exception of health care reform) is now being portrayed by social work advocates as a moral battlefield in which virtue must triumph or suffer ignominious defeat by the forces of evil and darkness. Instead, the approaches urged and the solutions suggested, although earnest and compassionate in tone, are basically practical, bureaucratic, incremental, and administrative in nature (Mallon, 2007).

Such an attitude does not, however, negate the importance of social causes for the profession. Indeed, in response to those in the field who say that the passion and commitment associated with such efforts runs counter to the scientific and objective mandates of professional social work behavior, Towle (1969) once answered that she had "small faith in an intellectual concept as a driving force when it is not infused with the emotionally meaningful purposes that constitute a cause" (pp. 279–280). Hence a reexamination of social work's involvement in the temperance movement demonstrates that while it is important to realize the risks and limitations of large-scale social and moral reform efforts, it is also essential that the field not lose sight of its potential for "moral power," an ideal that has been the driving force behind many cause-related activities in the profession, such as temperance, and which may need to be expressed again in the future in different ways as social work moves beyond an obsession with technical proficiency and professional advancement to become once again a cause- and community-oriented endeavor in its search for community

improvement and restoration (Specht & Courtney, 1994; Towle, 1969). **SW**

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