

Book Reviews

Global Anti-Vice Activism, 1890-1950: Fighting Drinks, Drugs, and “Immorality”

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As this edited volume makes clear, vice makes the world go round. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a variety of people from across the globe were linked through the underworld of international trade and through efforts to contain it. From communes to colonies, from West Africa to China, people with different motivations and working in diverse contexts consumed and combated drink, drugs, and sex trafficking. Finding a common theme in a book of this scope is a daunting task, but David Courtwright’s conclusion hints at one, even if the individual articles could have gravitated around it more—that perceptions of, and practices around, vice have to do with the goals of the entities that control the global political economy.

The aim of *Global Anti-Vice Activism* is to show the role that anti-vice activism played in building a global community in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In an age of trains and steamships, the authors show how vice became “steam-propelled” and a source of concern for states looking to impose morality on their populations and generate revenue from commercialized vice, as well as for global civil society organizations that often wished to re-legitimize empire, not overthrow it. Taken individually, however, the individual articles fall short of this goal. Instead of focusing on the emergence of a global community through international forums—for example, the international anti-alcohol congresses, the International Opium Conference, or the League of Nations—most of the articles show instead how vice, although constructed internationally, was mediated locally.

The individual essays in this volume have their merits, but collectively three points should be of interest to world historians. First, the articles pose an important question: why did people from around the world express so much concern for vice in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century? The global anti-vice movement was connected to industrialization, to imperial expansion, to developments in the international scientific community, to the work of Protestant missionaries, and to the causes of feminism and anti-colonialism. Still, questions remain about the timing of anti-vice activism. What makes the period from 1890 to 1950 unique? How new was the global concern about vice to the late nineteenth century? The stated focus of this volume is on the social and cultural history of anti-vice activism, but more problematizing of the emergence of vice at a time when political and economic liberalism was conquering and winning over the world might also be illuminating. Is the construction of vice inherently tied to ideas about, and anxieties over, individual

freedom? What does the construction of vice say about the construction of global markets and the related need to develop forms of governance that transcended the nation-state?

Second, the articles illustrate the variety of actors that contributed to anti-vice campaigns. A motley group of anarchists, doctors, eugenicists, feminists, fitness gurus, missionaries, nudists, temperance activists, police, politicians of various stripes, and scientists came together to address the consequences of vice at different scales: local, regional, national, imperial, and international. Highlighting this diversity of actors allows the authors to challenge the fixed givens that some scholars assume existed in struggles against vice. Anti-vice campaigns could inspire social conservatives and progressives, imperialists and colonial revolutionaries, religious zealots and scientists, and civil society and states.

Third, the articles reinforce the idea that discussions of the “global” are largely Euro-, if not Anglo-American-, centric. Most of the articles have a strong American or West European dimension, which suggests that the emergence of vice as a global problem was linked to the making of a European or Anglo-American worldview; other world regions made use of this problem according to their own context and needs. For example, campaigns against smoking in Buenos Aires responded to the American model, as examined by Diego Armus, and the regulation of prostitution in China followed French and European precedents, as shown by Elizabeth J. Remick. The question arises do societies that industrialize and urbanize inevitably seek to tackle vice? Is the regulation of vice intrinsic to capitalist development? Are there ways in which non-Europeans, beyond elites like Gandhi, influenced global understandings of vice?

Global Anti-Vice Activism raises many stimulating questions and succeeds in highlighting the importance of taking a global

perspective to the history of vice. Still too few studies of this topic have transcended the nation-state all the while emphasizing its continued importance. This volume rightly moves us in that direction. Given the topic, articles from this book could be used in courses on the history of capitalism, the history of commodities, the history of medicine, and women's history. It should also be of interest to anyone who wants an historical perspective on our own global age, reminding us all too well that markets are nothing if not human.