

Dry manhattan: prohibition in new york city



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Dry Manhattan gives an overview of Prohibition's rise and fall in New York, predominately in the City. The relationship of this reform to the broader spirit of the Progressive Generation can be argued in two ways. Resistance to prohibition can be considered progressive behavior or it was a signal that the progressive spirit had died. In making this decision it is important to recall what the Progressives goals were. They wanted to make sense of change in a way that best advanced American ideals and resulted in a powerful, modern nation.

Progressives believed in the power of government to help achieve those goals and expertise to improve the quality of life and increase opportunities for all. In reviewing the the progressive elements listed above I believe that the opposition to Prohibition shown in the " Nobel Experiment" was a symbol of the decline of Progressivism. The expectations of Progressives and what actually occurred represented the failure of the reform. The Progressive era was a time in which bettering one's self, community and country were the foundation of continuing prosperity.

This movement was concerned with the moral fabric of society; it was supported primarily by the middle classes. Prohibition provided a response to the vast changes brought by modernization, such as the growth of large corporations and railroads, and fears of corruption in American politics. Anderson stated that it would be an era of clean thinking and clean living" (Lerner, 40). His crusade was aimed at controlling the " interests" and their connections with bribe-able and corrupt politicians in city, state, and national governments.

But as liberalized ideas about drinking, sex, and leisure bred in Middle America, Anderson soon found that concept of Prohibition, thought to foster true American values, was not going to be accepted without opposition. The progressive spirit was evident in government reform and the expansion of its role. Believing in this Anderson relied on governmental action to help promote his crusade, “ the Prohibition of alcohol and the elimination of the saloon would morally uplift the people of the United States, ultimately creating a healthier citizenry, safer cities and workplaces, and a more efficient society” (Lerner, 2).

At first everything seemed to be moving in the right direction with the passage of the 18th Amendment, the government was taking a more active role in the personal realm of citizens lives, specifically in the areas of: Health & safety, Business growth and activity and Social programs. These aspects in which government were supposed to be helping soon began crumbling creating the opposite effect the supporters intended to establish. This caused business and politics to suffer.

Many jobs were lost and businesses were forced to close; owners could no longer afford their rent and saloons. All across the city people were struggling with the thought of staying open (breaking the law) or altering/shutting down. Immigrants and Americans resisted in great numbers by distilling their own alcohol and frequenting speakeasies. Terms as " bootlegger" or " bath tub gin," became household words and illegal alcohol fostered graft, organized crime, and violence. Gangs of hoodlums became more powerful as they trafficked in alcohol.

Even law enforcement became involved, bartenders claimed that agents had often been their best clients. Since many of them did not believe in the cause they were looking for personal gain and participated in the corruption by selling tips, taking bribes and leaking information. Leaders had concluded the experiment was a dismal failure, “ State prohibition Director Frank L. Banks resigned his position in frustration, telling reporters that prohibition enforcement in New York was “ a hopeless and thankless task”” (Lerner, 71).

Progressives had thought they could get rid of corruption with government action but this behavior demonstrates the contradictions and diminishing the progressive attitude due to the results of Prohibition. It was soon recognized that the people were almost making a mockery of the progressivism, “ public defiance of Prohibition was undermining the rule of law in the city and creating a national culture of hypocrisy” (Lerner, 228).

This resistance and deliberate defiance broke down many of the beliefs the era before had stood for. Anderson and the Progressives approach to Prohibition attempted to embrace expertise in order to improve the quality of life and increase opportunities for all but these beneficial aspects never appeared. By the 1930s, a majority of Americans had tired of the “ Noble Experiment”, and the 18th Amendment was repealed marking the end of the Progressive morale.