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A Benefit of Prohibition

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By Bertrand Russell

LONDON—Quite apart from the particular question of the consumption of alcoholic beverages, the end of prohibition is important as marking the defeat of a certain kind of morality. Broadly speaking, morality is of two sorts: The first wishes to make others happy, the second wishes to make them unhappy—of course for the sake of their true welfare. Social reformers have been of both types; some wished the poor to have more to eat, others wished them to have less to drink. The psychological root of the reformer's sentiment is, in the one case, sympathy; in the other, envy. It is a good thing when the restrictive morality inspired by envy suffers a resounding defeat, as it has done in the failure of prohibition. Many men desire the glow of self-satisfaction, and such men may be forced, when restrictions on freedom fail, to fall back upon behavior which might have been inspired by kindly feelings. For this reason I am glad that prohibition has been judged a failure.

The distinction between the two types of morality is, however, by no means clear-cut, because very often what people wish to do is genuinely harmful to themselves and others, and may be prohibited from entirely benevolent motives. Few reformers have been more wholly of the sympathetic type than Jefferson, yet he frequently deplored the excessive drinking of his time. Among the pioneers of Lincoln's youth whiskey-drinking was an appalling evil, which inflicted untold suffering upon their wives and children. The evils due to alcohol are very real. But the reformer who is unconsciously actuated by envy of the drunkard will not stop to inquire whether worse evils may not result from his methods of taking drink from those who want it. In the case of prohibition, as every one knows, the evils were very serious; above all a weakening of self-control and self-respect. In Paris, on the Atlantic, at Tia Juana one saw behavior which caused Americans to be less respected by other nations than they ought to be.

The evils brought about by prohibition will not cease suddenly. Bootlegers will no doubt still find scope for their activities, and speakeasies will survive as night clubs do in London, but gradually these evasions of the law will probably come to assume manageable dimensions. It may be expected that, at first, those who can still afford it will become intoxicated somewhat more openly than at present, but this also will in all likelihood be only a passing phase. In the end, the evils due to the state of mind fostered by prohibition will disappear, and America will be the better for the abandonment of an attempt which could not succeed.

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THERE is one incidental good effect which has resulted from the era of prohibition. In the nineteenth century women everywhere, but most emphatically in America, were considered morally superior to men; this was not only claimed by themselves but conceded by their husbands. The effect of prohibition, among the richer classes, was to bring drink into the home, with the result that women shared in it.

In the days of women's moral superiority there was little companionship or real intimacy between men and women. Men felt constrained in the presence of women, and women regarded men as coarse brutes whose behavior was uncivilized and unrefined. The modern relation of equality between men and women is more wholesome, more honest and more companionable. The change is due to many causes, but among them prohibition has borne a part.