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Medicalization and Regulation of Alcohol and Alcoholism: The Professions and Disciplinary Measures

Mimi Ajzenstadt and Brian E. Burtch*

Human nature in many things has not yet reached that moral elevation, and so, evil things which endanger the public welfare, have to be kept down by law, that is prohibition. (Editor of *The Western Methodist Recorder*, Canada, 1920.)

Introduction

Professional knowledge, including medical discourse¹, is essential in the current campaign of the Government of British Columbia that addresses alcohol-related problems. This centrality of professional knowledge is not a new phenomenon in British Columbia, in Canada, or elsewhere. Indeed, it became well-established in previous campaigns and legislation regarding drinking behaviors.

The central function of medical discourse in the process of shaping public and official attitudes towards alcohol consumption is rooted in broad transformations and developments in the notions of responsibility, causes of criminal and deviant behaviors, and relations between the individual and society. These developments and transformations occurred in Europe and America during the 18th and 19th centuries. In this article, we review medical discourse concerning alcohol consumption as well as its relation to legal discourse, thereby tracing two significant aspects of 19th and 20th century thinking and practice. The first aspect concerns an *epistemological approach* that diluted the concept of free will with regard to alcohol consumption, substituting an emergent doctrine based on "social problems" generated by difficulties in social milieux. The second aspect is the *increasing role of the State* in addressing these social problems, relying on an array of disciplinary institutions to detect, monitor, treat, and regulate patterns of problem drinking.² Both aspects are centred around the growing power and impact of professional knowledge.

Through a review of critical work on these shifting aspects, as well as critical

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¹McLaren & Lowman (1989) define discourse as: "a means of characterizing the issue in terms of the scientific, social moral or psychological significance attached to it".

²Held (1983), for example, points out that the State has become pervasive in private and public life.

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