Savages to the Left of Me, Neurasthenics to the Right, Stuck in the Middle with You: Inebriety and Human Nature in American Society, 1855-1900

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Abstract. In the second half of 19th-century America, inebriety was defined as a disease of “civilized” life that affected the “better” classes of society. This formulation was based on the belief that the use of intoxicating substances was a perennial aspect of human nature that was distorted by the modern environment. Using a variety of medical and popular writings, this article explores the ways in which middle-class interpretations of the use of intoxicating substances were inextricably bound to ideas of human nature. Cravings for alcohol and drugs reflected the toll that progress had presumably wrought upon American minds and bodies even as the effects of intoxication seemingly revealed the primitive nature that remained.

Résumé. Pendant la seconde moitié du 19ème siècle, l’ivresse était décrite en Amérique comme une maladie de la civilisation qui affectait les « meilleures » classes de la société. Cette formulation se basait sur la croyance que la consommation de substances insto xicantes était un aspect persistant de la nature humaine, ayant été déformée par l’environnement moderne. A partir d’écrits médicaux et populaires variés, cet article explore les manières dont des interprétations de classe moyenne de l’utilisation de substances intoxicantes ont été inextricablement liées aux idées de la nature humaine. Bien que les effets de l’intoxication semblent rélever la nature primitive restante, le besoin d’alcool et de drogue était plutôt une manifestation de ce que le progrès avait forgé dans les esprits et les corps des Américains.
“From the day when Adam took the forbidden apple,” surmised an unnamed author in 1855, “his descendents have loved to partake of forbidden pleasures.”\(^1\) The observation was not an uncommon one. Scores of treatises on the use of a variety of intoxicating substances contain at least a brief review of their long history and geographical dispersion. Yet even as the “universal craving” was acknowledged, many believed that such indulgences had become more of a problem in the latter half of 19th-century America than in any other place or time.\(^2\) They had become a necessity, the same author explained: “we live so fast as now—while we burn the candle at both ends—while the mind and body are taxed to their utmost capacities, for a considerable period of time—there are, frequently, conditions which require the temporary use of stimulant tonic.”\(^3\) Many feared this was particularly true in a developing and increasingly urbanized America where “the New York boy works harder in vacation than his Athenian prototype in term time.”\(^4\)

The use of intoxicating substances has been a perennial aspect of human history even as the manner in which it has been understood and interpreted has changed, often in dramatic ways. In the latter half of the 19th century the craving for and effects of alcohol and drugs were intimately tied to perceptions surrounding social and cultural identities. Moreover, such cravings were placed within a specific temporal and geographical framework. Through discussions of various “stimulants,” the idea that the modern environment, and progress itself, was threatening to human bodies and minds was evoked by comparison to a more natural past. Yet there was a highly ambivalent sense of this past, as the primitive was viewed as not only a means by which to evaluate society’s health but also as a disturbingly viable alternative for both the individual and society. Inasmuch as a wide range of substances appeared to affect both body and mind and were understood to have a long history and connection to human nature, the subject resonated within the broader context of 19th-century ideas about health and medicine, science and evolution. The cravings for and effects of alcohol and other drugs were perceived as a part of human history yet somehow perverted by American progress. Focusing on alcohol, Mariana Valverde has suggested “heavy drinking, popularly and medically regarded as a hybrid object—part vice, part disease—was easily assimilated into the theories and schemes of degeneration writers.”\(^5\) In particular, a focus on the disease of inebriety illuminates a variety of social and intellectual currents that continue to influence contemporary understandings of drug and alcohol use.

The debate over the extent to which alcoholism and addiction can be understood as diseases has a long history that continues to the present day. Early references to drunkenness as a disease in America were first expounded by the Revolutionary-era physician Benjamin Rush,
who characterized the “habitual use of ardent spirits” as an “odious disease.” By the middle of the 19th century, a number of prominent physicians extended this definition to include a wider array of intoxicating substances and a variety of terms such as “narcomania,” “morphinism,” and the more generalized “inebriety” became prevalent. Given the palpable concern over alcohol and the prominence of the temperance movement, inebriety was largely understood to be a problem of excessive drinking. Yet it is significant that inebriety often encompassed a broader meaning that included a variety of substances such as opium, tobacco, and coffee. While inebriety certainly holds an important place in this history, it also exists, to utilize Brumberg’s model of anorexia nervosa, as an “historically specific disease.” Inebriety was a disease of “civilized men” unable to bear the effects of alcohol and other types of drugs which had long been utilized by others. It was very much connected to its historical moment, and its etiology was articulated through general beliefs about health, nature, and society. Calling for a scientific distancing from the moralist stance on alcohol, George M. Beard urged the need to recover from the “shock caused by the discovery of the evils of intemperance, to consider the broad subject of stimulants in a calm, candid manner.” Thinking historically about some of the reasons as to how and why the use of certain intoxicating substances was construed as a specific disease provides an avenue for exploring the intersection of scientific knowledge, cultural assumptions, and social concerns. In the 19th century, in particular, that culture’s emphasis on holism and scientific “discovery by analogy” made such connections appear not only metaphorically obvious but scientifically sound.

Medical men already would have been convinced of the general connections between a variety of stimulants and health. Since the early 18th century, physicians had sought to restore a “natural balance” to the diseased body through stimulation or depletion. By the 1850s, therapeutic stimulation was the preferred treatment with physicians dependent on the conviction that they were acting on “universalized norms defined by laboratory science.” Remedies included alcohol as one of a variety of substances all having their “places in the armamento medico—places which the modern practitioner would find it difficult to fill were they removed.” Those who considered such remedies scientifically may have relied on a shared medical understanding, and perhaps even practical experience, for thinking about alcohol more broadly. Alcohol, as it was included with other drugs and therapies, therefore had an ostensibly scientific connection to health in a way that was in some ways distinct from the moral discourse of temperance.

What was new about the “alcohol problem” was not necessarily alcohol, but the problem. The view that intoxicants had been employed for pleasure for a great many years often served as a telling point of contrast...
with the current social problem of alcohol and other substances. A prodig- 
gious amount of scholarship has explored the question as to why the use 
of alcohol and other drugs became a cause for concern and a target for 
moral and legal reform in an age characterized by modernization, indus-
trialization, and urbanization.\textsuperscript{14} Certainly Americans had been consum-
ing large amounts of alcohol since prior to the birth of the republic.\textsuperscript{15} A 
broad historical examination reveals that such indulgences were con-
sidered to have a long history and complex connection to human nature. 
Intoxicating substances themselves, and often even a craving for them, 
were not regarded as products of modern society; rather, it was believed, 
their effects on the bodies and minds of certain Americans were trans-
formed by the rapid pace, the urban and technological characteristics, of 
a modern society.

“MAN, BEING REASONABLE, MUST GET DRUNK”

By mid-century, observations that intoxicating substances formed an 
integral part of human history were ubiquitous in a variety of writings. 
Alonzo Calkins recounts how in 1869, the State Medical Society of Penn-
sylvania unanimously adopted a report that stated, “There are constitu-
tional tendencies inherent in mankind to seek artificial support. In vin-
dication of this statement we find in every soil and under every climate 
some indigenous product, from which man in whatever stage of civi-
lization extracts an intoxicating ingredient.”\textsuperscript{16} Another author writing 
on narcotics introduced his thoughts similarly stating, “(t)he love of nar-
cotics is universal. A survey of the whole world shows that no nation is 
so poor, barbarous, or obscure as not to have found and adopted its 
favorite and peculiar luxury of this sort.”\textsuperscript{17} Observations which con-
nected intoxicants to a universal human nature were utilized to make a 
variety of arguments about the meaning of such substances in modern 
society. Some argued the futility of temperance laws: “nor have warnings 
and instructions ever succeeded in preventing the indulgence of dan-
gerous appetites.”\textsuperscript{18} Legal restrictions on alcohol could even lead to an 
increased use of opium: “The craving for stimulants seems to be natural 
and universal,—and shutting off its indulgence in one direction uni-
formly increases it in another.”\textsuperscript{19} One writer humorously addressed this 
argument by appealing to man’s “mastery of his nature” asking, “If 
Nature kindled in man the appetite for alcohol, why do we not find 
rivers of rum, and brooks of brandy, and springs of spirits, and fountains 
of wine—as we find water—for its gratification?” and “If whisky, like its 
mother’s milk, is the natural drink of infancy, why does the little one 
double up its fists to fight the hand which puts the cup or the spoon to 
its pure and innocent lips?”\textsuperscript{20} References to human nature were even 
employed in some advertisements: “As craving for stimulants has been
and is common to all races of men, both savage and civilized, and as all efforts to suppress this appetite has failed, we can only moderate and divest it.” According to the writer, this could best be accomplished with “Mumm’s Extra Dry Champagne.”

Some writers more closely examined the connections between intoxicants and human nature by arguing that such cravings helped define mankind, that they were somehow an integral part of the advanced brain power that made us human. A writer for the Overland Monthly put it succinctly: “Glancing along the records of humanity, from the days of Noah to these present, it would appear that Byron’s famous line is but the statement of a law of human nature: ‘Man, being reasonable, must get drunk.’” And perhaps, as the nature writer R. A. Proctor suggested, reason itself could not be understood apart from these cravings. He recounted the feats of a cat named Minnie who seemed to show a high degree of intelligence. Upon learning that the cat had a “fondness for a little brandy-and-water,” he questioned “whether this story shows that the fondness for stimulants is associated with an advance in reasoning power, or whether, perhaps, Minnie’s brain was aroused to abnormal activity by the tippling.”

Stories about animals’ indulgences do not reflect a consensus as to whether this was normal or exceptional in the animal kingdom. Rather they suggested, as Darwin had confirmed for some, that a relationship existed between humans and animals. Humans’ relationship to the animal kingdom could be invoked through stories about intoxicants. These ranged from the scientific observation of “insect drunkards,” who discovered their own natural intoxicant in the nectar of a particular flower, to stories of Minnie’s exceptional and perhaps reasonable behavior to anecdotal accounts of “beer-drinking animals.” Even as these writings reflected a recognition that humans were a part of a larger nature, distinctions based on reasoning and moral sense were often maintained.

These attributes, often described as the most recently evolved, were what made one human. A craving for alcohol or drugs could be an indication of the existence of higher reasoning even as their effects could threaten this capability. As one writer maintained, “The ass is a stupid animal, but it is a sober one.” Greater natural associations between humans and animals were suggested even as hierarchical distinctions were maintained.

Just as a craving for intoxicating substances might serve to distinguish humans from animals, these same cravings and the reactions to them also could serve to distinguish certain groups of people, based on race, class, gender, and national origin, from others. Debates on the place of a variety of substances in human development appeared frequently in The Popular Science Monthly under the guidance of editor, Edward L. Youmans between 1872 and 1887. Youmans, who has been described as
“a man engaged in a crusade to promote the values of science and the naturalistic outlook in American public opinion,” was hugely influenced by such figures as Spencer, Buffon, and Lyell. 27 In the pages of this journal and elsewhere, alcohol was often viewed as one mechanism through which the laws of nature worked in ways that were consistent with the ideas of Social Darwinism. Some surmised that “the drunkenness which prevails at the present day is promoting civilization and the general forward progress of the human race.” 28 Civilized members of society would naturally avoid such behavior while those who retained inferior and savage qualities would engage in the “(i)mmoderate use of stimulants” to the point of “self-annihilation.” One author concluded that the function of vice as “remedy of extermination” would remove not only those of weak nature at the bottom, but also those at the top, thereby making room for others to advance. 29 In a particularly American point of view, he revealed suspicion of both the upper and lower classes, comparing society “to a vat of good wine, which is all scum and froth at the top, dregs and sediment at the bottom, and good, pure clear liquor in the middle.” 30 Nature, thus, provides the rationale: “the conclusion follows that any aberration toward vice shows such a discordance in the individual with the laws of his environment as marks him as inferior, weak and obstructive of the race’s development.” 31

For such writers, alcohol and drug use was not only connected to human nature, but could continue to influence society’s development. It is a particular worldview that Mike Hawkins has described as “an abstract configuration of interlinked ideas about time, nature, human nature and social reality…which constitutes Social Darwinism and Darwin himself was a major (though by no means the only) contributor to its elaboration and dissemination.” 32 The general view of human beings within nature had shifted to one of greater inclusiveness. Matt Cartmill argues that Western thought was reinterpreted from a once static view of nature to one in which the natural order, like the social order, could transform itself into something better. American Romantic writers, the Transcendentalists in particular, looked to nature to discover beauty but were often confronted with unexplainable death and suffering. Darwin’s theories provided a solution “by identifying suffering and superfecundity as the twin engines of universal historical progress.” 33 The recognition of a “universal craving” often served more as a way for the most well-placed members of society to voice their concerns over the situation and the fate of the American citizen, one typically and historically defined as a middle-class white male, on a spectrum of humanity. In outlining the “diseases of modern life,” Benjamin Ward Richardson contrasted an unproblematic past history of alcohol use with modern health problems, stating, “To have to speak of diseases originating from the use of a fluid which, next to water, forms a part of the daily beverage of
immense populations of civilized peoples seems a satire on civiliza-
tion.” While health considerations were not a new tool for assessing the
state of society, evolutionary theory helped to forge new connections,
and new anxieties, between bodies and progress.

A “MORE VIVIDLY INTENSE” LIFE

The ways in which physicians (as well as others) believed that the use of
intoxicants was distorted in an increasingly fast-paced world is reflected
in discussions surrounding inebriety. The specific disease of inebriety
was defined by its specialists to address the anxieties and lapses of that
class of white males troubled by the implications of a civilized life. The
American Association for the Cure of Inebriates (AACI) was founded in
1870 by a small group of physicians who believed that inebriety was a
disease that could be cured by treatment in a special hospital. While
their main focus was on alcohol, a general interest in the effects of a
variety of other substances, including opium, hashish, tobacco, coffee
and tea, was reflected in their membership and in the variety of articles
published in the Quarterly Journal of Inebriety. In 1888, the association
would change its name to the American Association for the Study and
Cure of Inebriety and, in 1891, the American Medical Association
included a session on alcoholic and drug inebriety at its annual meeting.

In its journal’s first issue in 1876, AACI president Theodore L. Mason
congratulated his organization on its advancement of the disease concept
of inebriety and strove to separate himself from moral reformers who
claimed that “(t)o speak about inebriety as a disease was represented as
framing an apology for sin and for crime.” Throughout its first decade,
the AACI experienced a degree of conflict between those members who
had more moralistic leanings and those who were more scientifically
motivated. Ultimately, the scientific point of view would dominate.

Inebriety specialists argued that upper and middle-class men suf-
ered more from nervous disorders than those from the lower classes.
Civilized man’s nervous condition meant that he suffered from the dis-
ease of inebriety, while the lower classes, who it was believed were
intemperate due to a moral failing, suffered from the vice of drunken-
ness. Using a somewhat circular form of reasoning, one physician pro-
claimed, “There are many such men who are inebriates—men of learn-
ing, integrity and piety—which is only another proof that inebriety is a
disease.” Drunkenness was defined as that which was more offensive
to the observer as this treatise explained,

The drunkenness of to-day, fortunately, differs from that of the past. It has
greatly diminished among the higher classes of society and prevails most exten-
sively among ignorant, low-born persons—in rude society rather than gen-
tee. The refined, educated, and intelligent men of to-day, seldom drink in
public places, and are rarely seen drunk in public; therefore the habit with them assumes a less revolting character.40

Beard likewise insisted that different causes could apply to different classes of men: “Drunkenness as a vice, among the better classes of civilized lands, is then decreasing, while drunkenness as a disease, inebriety, is increasing,” although “(a)mong the lower grades of social life, the vice of drunkenness abounds in its most revolting aspects.”41

This historical period has frequently been described as one in which there was great anxiety around the transitions occurring in American society, where the “beneficiaries of modern culture began to feel they were its secret victims.”42 In facing the stresses and demands of civilized life, the most advanced members of society often were diagnosed as suffering from neurasthenia or a loss of “nerve force.”43 George Beard, the American popularizer of neurasthenia, commented extensively on inebriety and the use of stimulants and narcotics. His conception of disease resonated with the broader concerns of middle-class Americans. And despite Beard being referred to as the “Barnum of American medicine,” a modern historian has rightly acknowledged that “it was the familiarity, rather than the novelty, of Beard’s theories which made them so easily and rapidly accepted.”44

To Beard, the symptoms of nervous disorders like neurasthenia and inebriety represented physical manifestations of the crisis of the progress of civilization as explained through biology. As the “civilized brain-working order” evolved, both body and mind progressed from a state of “barbarism” to one of “refinement,” while other races remained in a less advanced evolutionary stage.45 In order to sustain themselves, “men resorted not only to a more liberal and abundant variety of food than savages use, but also most employ a wider range of stimulants and narcotics.” Yet man’s higher nervous organization also meant that he was generally less able to withstand the effects of these substances: “Hence results deplorable consequences.”46 In fact, the so-called better classes exhibited increased sensitivity not only to tea, but also to pork and physiology lectures.47

The use of drugs and alcohol was perceived as an effective measuring stick against which the direction of American society could be viewed. Americans have long searched their history and environment for evidence of the myth of American uniqueness. Frederick Jackson Turner lamented the closing of the frontier, expressing fear that America’s character was somehow intrinsically connected to its environment. America’s narrative of progress existed uncomfortably alongside fears of stagnation or even regression.48 Yet from Jefferson’s vision of an agrarian republic to the Jacksonian self-made man to the image of the Western settler, the vision of American character has historically been based on a middle-class white male.
In an article entitled, “American Life as Related to Inebriety,” Edward P. Thwing situated alcohol, as well as other substances such as coffee and tea, in a very specific geographical and historical context:

Although there are abiding factors the world over, in America we have elements to study which are peculiar and unique. By America is meant the American Republic, the States and Territories bounded by the seas, the lakes, and the gulf. It will be my aim to show that the sixty millions of this vast country are placed under those physical, psychic, political, and social conditions which combine to make life more vividly intense and exacting than anywhere else on this planet, and therefore more susceptible to the malady of inebriism. 49

America was portrayed as “peculiar and unique” in both the character of its people and its land. The grandeur and impressiveness of the environment both symbolized and defined the American character: “Dr. Beard says that it is a greater sight than Niagara, which is presented to a European coming to this land, to behold an immense body of intelligent citizens, voluntarily and habitually abstaining from alcoholic beverages.” Yet while the idea of abstaining was compared to a natural wonder, as something to be admired, Thwing also saw a more inauspicious meaning in “that the heightened sensitiveness of Americans forces them to abstain entirely, or to use in incredible and amusing moderation, not only the stronger alcoholic liquors, but the milder wines, ales, and beers, and even tea and coffee.” 50 His characterization changed perceptibly throughout the piece as Americans voluntarily abstaining become forced to abstain, as observers who “behold” American abstinence also find it “amusing.”

American inebriates and neurasthenics seemingly revealed something not just about individual bodies and minds suffering from the forces of civilization but also about the general state and direction of American society. Their physical and mental condition revealed the price of progress: a “vividly intense” life led to disease. Thwing described how “(e)very advance of refinement brings conflict and conquest that are to be paid for in blood and nerve and life.” Technology came with a physiological price: looking at a watch “accelerates the heart’s action and is correlated to a definite loss of nervous energy.” Watches and steam engines, symbols of progress, also could be harmful to human bodies which can “suffer from similar neglect of natural laws.” Civilized man was unlike the barbarian for whom “the shriek of the steam engine does not disturb their mid-day or their midnight sleep.” 51

Alcohol supposedly threatened not only American morality, but also the American character, both in body and mind. Discussing “The Effects of Alcoholic Excess on Character,” one writer feared that “the morale as well as the physique of the masses in large towns is undergoing already retrograde changes; and that the present condition fills the mind of observers of social progress with gloomy forebodings as to the future.” 52
American life, itself more stimulating, threatened the limited stores of nerve energy of its citizens. The toll of such a life was literally measured in the reactions of American bodies: “because of the abnormal nerve sensibility which the feverish rush of life here has developed, a physiological condition, that will not tolerate stimulants.” Thwing described how 19th-century Americans were different not only from “barbarians” but also the English, the Germans, the Scandinavians, the Turks, the Chinese, and perhaps most troubling, from their American ancestors. Thwing observed, “Less than a century ago, a man who could not carry many bottles of wine was thought effeminate.” These changes struck at the very definition of American manhood and character.

The promise of American life was seemingly undermining its future: “The history of the last half century...reads like a romance. But liberty, like beauty, is a perilous possession, and it has been truly said, ‘the experiment attempted on this continent of making every man, every child, every woman an expert in politics and theology is one of the costliest of experiments with living human beings, and has been drawing on our surplus energies for one hundred years.’” Equally disturbing was the sense that while those who seemed to best represent the traditional American character were being depleted, “our cities are massing people by the hundreds of thousands.”

“OUT OF THE BLACKNESS OF AN AFRICAN JUNGLE INTO THE QUIET SUNSHINE OF CENTRAL PARK”

Writers discussed intoxicants and their effects to comment on an emerging problematic modern world that not only disrupted traditional social interaction but also seemingly revealed atavistic strands of human nature. The urban environment, in particular, served as a microcosm of the differences among humans observable in the world at large. Theories about nature and evolution, even as they stressed certain universal features of human development, such as a natural craving for stimulants, did not suggest a monolithic nature for all. As Beard noted, The race does not advance with uniform step, and those that are in the rear are very far in the rear. A great city like New York covers about an equal amount of civilization and semi-barbarism. The so-called lower classes in this country, and in England, are in much the same state as the higher classes a century or more ago. We have therefore right at our very doors material for a study of the effect of modern civilization on the nervous system; it is as though the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were side by side.

As the above quotation suggests, the “semi-barbarism” of the “lower classes” was geographically and historically proximate to the “higher classes.” Degeneration theory provided a scenario of regression to the primitive and the decline of civilization. For a certain class of people,
inebriety was attributed to an overcivilized lifestyle that was taxing to a supposedly advanced nervous system. The past was portrayed as both a natural exemplar and a dangerously primitive state. Exposure to a more natural environment could serve to alleviate some of these ills.

Quite frequently, regimens designed to restore health suggested Americans should seek out nature. One well-known neurologist, Edward Spitzka, commented on the connections between an urban environment and mental illness, “The enlargement of the cities deprived their inhabitants of rustic sports, and led to their seeking in other and more dangerous channels an escape from mental and physical strain, and a variation of routine monotony.”57 Beard similarly suggested that, “The best cure for civilization is barbarism, and the nearest approach to barbarism that is practicable for civilized man is camping out.”58 Inebriety asylums offered at a minimum an opportunity to escape the urban environment in which the inebriate’s condition developed. Cures that suggested turning to pursuits of nature further highlight the extent to which perceptions of the stresses of the urban environment permeated explanations of the rise of inebriety among America’s “better classes.” One physician explained that “the most essential condition of a permanent cure is a liberal allowance of stimulants, in the form of diverting pastimes and out-door exercise.”59 Another recommended “light gymnastic exercises” and the “pure air of dry marine resorts along the Atlantic coast.”60 Yet the “natural” provided a point of contrast more than a legitimate means of retreat. Those writers who appeared mired in doubt about the direction of American society continued to resolutely search for signs to justify their underlying faith in progress. While nature could be idealized, the primitive was tied closely to ideas of inferiority expressed in terms of gender, race, and social class.

Intoxicants often were construed as having the ability to reveal the primitive nature of man. “Through the revelation so made by alcohol we not rarely find that even in staid and proper men the tiger and the ape have not entirely died out. The animal propensities are thus discovered to have been concealed rather than subdued.”61 One writer described his recovery from “the clutch of drink” as a return to his identity as a white man. He stated that he once again had “a man’s strength to do a man’s work among men,” and he felt as if he “had stepped out of the blackness of an African jungle into the quiet sunshine of Central Park.”62 The nature represented by Central Park was healthful in contrast to the regression to a more primitive, racially inferior by implication, existence one experienced while under the influence of alcohol. The so-called “better” class of men believed that they had achieved a state of civilization based on their ability to assert their will in controlling their baser passions.63 Civilization rested on this dual nature of the self, the disjunction between the external civilized world and a primitive internal existence. Even as the Victorians
emphasized self-control and social order, many were particularly intrigued by the study of altered states such as drunkenness, dreams, behaviours in which control was lost and inappropriate displays of emotion. Speaking of his own experience with hashish, Charles Richet described the possibilities: “Every sensation immediately calls for an insane thought, or rather a thousand such thoughts. Hence it really appears as though the veil were rent in twain and that by the use of this drug we are enabled to witness the mind itself at work.” The simultaneous mental and physical changes wrought by such drugs allowed observers to explore connections between mind and body.

The internal character that inebriety revealed threatened individuals’ ability to participate in the “grand masquerade” of modern society. Under the effects of alcohol, “the upper portions of the cerebral mass, or larger brain, become implicated. These are the centres of thought and volition, and as they become unbalanced and thrown into chaos, the mind loses equilibrium, and the rational part of the nature of the man gives way before the emotional, passionate, or mere organic part. The reason now is off duty, or is fooling with duty, and all the mere animal instincts and sentiments are laid atrociously bare.” As intoxication brought out “the true mental and moral characteristics of the man…, there is little except the animal left; not enough often, to make a decent dog.” The user of opium was “the most abject of slaves” and the inebriate was left “effeminate and enervated.” The primitive that existed within oneself was closely connected to fears of degeneration to an inferior status.

CONCLUSION

Despite the anxieties of this period, most writers maintained a robust faith that continued progress would ultimately provide solutions to social problems. One historian has suggested that a “democratization of neurasthenia” occurred by the early 20th century and another has argued that “neurasthenia could also account for the triumph of modernity” as its meaning shifted to include the preservation of energy and the promotion of efficiency. Also primitivism as evidenced by the increasing popularity of G. Stanley Hall and the image of Teddy Roosevelt, would be more easily embraced after the turn of the century. The links between a broad category of intoxicating substances began to make less sense, as perceptions of drugs users ossified and specific legal controls were established.

What emerges from a broad consideration of inebriety is at once both alien and familiar. Even as much as the concept of inebriety cannot be divorced from its unique historical conditions, general issues of addiction and drug or alcohol use continue to be hotly debated. David Courtwright has recently suggested that addiction specialists at the turn of the 21st century are not unlike their counterparts of a hundred years earlier in
being particularly intrigued by the links among a variety of psychoactive drugs.\textsuperscript{72} While no one today speaks of limited “nerve force,” biologists have theorized that the use of the drug Ecstasy can cause long-term reductions in serotonin levels, and at least one philosopher has theorized that addiction stems from the demands of civilization.\textsuperscript{73} Charles Rosenberg has described the particular and consistent critiques of civilization through perceived health consequences as “pathologies of progress.” He has focused on the similarities of these narratives from the mid-19th to the late-20th century even as he recognizes that they were “products of very different intellectual—and demographic—worlds.”\textsuperscript{74} Biological analogies are an appealing tool by which we evaluate our society even as social and cultural assumptions inform our sense of the human body.\textsuperscript{75} The disease of inebriety revealed the threat of progress to the most “advanced” classes. The use of stimulants revealed the threat of the primitive to the most “advanced” part of the individual. In some sense, those who viewed themselves as “civilized” members of American society, may have felt “stuck in the middle” of an uncertain historical process.

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NOTES

1 “The Use and Abuse of Stimulants,” Putnam’s Monthly Magazine of American Literature, Science, and Art, 6, 35 (November 1855): 537. The term “stimulant” in this period was not exact and could refer to a single substance or a broad category that at times included alcohol, opium, hashish, tobacco, coffee, tea, and certain foods. See for example B. W. Richardson, MD, FRS, “The Physiological Position of Alcohol,” The Popular Science Monthly, 1 (June 1872): 225; George M. Beard, Stimulants and Narcotics: Medically, Philosophically, and Morally Considered (New York: G. P. Putnam & Sons, 1871). Writers in this period did not always clearly distinguish between stimulants and depressants or narcotics often arguing for the existence of both properties within a single substance. Alcohol was often considered a stimulant even as its narcotizing effects were recognized. See for example Alonzo Calkins, Opium and the Opium-Appetite (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1871; reprint New York: Arno Press, 1981), p. 27. For the usefulness of this category, see the brief discussion in Wolfgang Schivelbusch, Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants (Vintage Books: New York, 1992), p. xiii-xiv.

“The Use and Abuse of Stimulants,” p. 532.


Beard, Stimulants and Narcotics, p. 3.


17 “Narcotics,” *North American Review*, 95 (1862): 375. Often the use of “milder stimulants” such as tobacco, coffee, etc. was noted. See for example “The Craving for Stimulants,” *The New York Times*, 22 February 1885, p. 9.
19 “Opium Eating” *New York Daily Times*, 16 June 1855, p. 4. For the idea that smoking could prevent drinking, see “Narcotics,” p. 414-45. Of course many argued the opposite as well—that indulgence in one bad habit would lead to another.


Clum, *Inebriety*, p. 22.


Beard, “Causes of the Recent Increase of Inebriety in America,” p. 36-37.


Thwing, “American Life,” p. 44.


Thwing, “American Life,” p. 49.

Beard, “Causes of the Recent Increase of Inebriety in America,” p. 34.


Beard, “Causes of the Recent Increase of Inebriety in America,” p. 46.


See Bederman, *Manliness and Civilization*, p. 84-85; Smith, *Inhibition*, p. 41-44.

Smith, *Inhibition*, p. 41.
69 Prof. C. A. Lee quoted in Calkins, Opium and the Opium-Appetite, p. 76; and Palmer, Inebriety, p. 75.
72 David Courtwright, “Mr. ATOD’s Wild Ride: What do alcohol, tobacco, and other drugs have in common?” Keynote address at the International Conference on Drugs and Alcohol in History, London, Ontario, 14 May 2004.