

Dealing with Alcohol

Indigenous Usage in Australia, New Zealand & Canada

by Sherry Saggars and Dennis Gray; Cambridge University Press, Melbourne, 1998; 240 pp; \$29.95, softcover.

There is a danger that a book with this title might perpetuate a view of indigenous people as the 'other' and the 'problem' when it comes to discussing the relationship between indigenous people and alcohol. The authors, I believe, tread a fine line between providing an 'objective' view of the subject (assuming such a thing to be possible), and adding to a discourse in the wider community which allocates the blame for alcohol misuse to indigenous people themselves, and which dislocates wider issues of power and dispossession from the framework of analysis.

Readers will have to judge for themselves whether the authors have achieved an objective view, but I was left with the impression that indigenous communities are themselves still the 'problem', that they require further 'study and treatment', so 'they' may be less of a problem for the rest of the community.

That said, the book provides an overview of the literature on alcohol consumption by indigenous people in Australia, New Zealand and Canada; albeit with the emphasis on materials primarily Australian. In this way it provides a useful primer to the area, documenting empirical research conducted in indigenous communities in the respective countries, including the author's own research in indigenous communities in Western Australia.

Dealing with Alcohol exposes in a very readable way many of the stereotypes that are circulated about alcohol consumption and indigenous people. Here the work is strongest, detailing in a comprehensive manner empirical research which indicates high levels, relative to non-indigenous people, of alcohol abstinence within indigenous communities. This information by itself ought to quash the viewpoint of those in the community whose 'commonsense' tells them that alcohol and indigenous people automatically equals a problem.

Such figures, however, are tempered by the disheartening research that excessive consumption of alcohol is still a serious concern within indigenous communities. Chapter 7, 'The consequences of misuse', provides a useful account not only of the individual consequences of such excessive use (death, illness, morbidity, fetal alcohol syndrome, mental health, crime, employment and so on) but also the deleterious secondary effects on community life and the associated costs borne by families and children.

Also of interest is the overview of the history of liquor licensing laws in Australia which is documented in chapter 4, 'Patterns of indigenous alcohol use'. The denial of alcohol through legitimate means to indigenous people for the majority of this century, unless they revoked their Aboriginality in compliance with statutory provisions in certain jurisdictions, led to the development of an unfortunate nexus between alcohol, indigenous people and citizenship.

In relation to explanations, or the etiology, of indigenous alcohol use, the authors provide in chapter 5, 'Explanation of indigenous alcohol use', an overview of the theories that have been put forward to account for the misuse. The authors detail theories based on biology, disease, culture, psychology and political economy. Earlier within the book, the authors themselves indicate which theory they prefer, when they state they 'come down on the side of *structural* rather than ideational or cultural explanations' (my italics).

What the authors mean by saying they come down on the side of 'structural' factors is not entirely clear. Throughout the book, reference is made to 'dispossession', 'marginalisation', 'political economy of alcohol', 'colonialism' and other terms which suggest a structural causality. However, such concepts are not further developed. As a result, it is hard not to see such causal factors as mere descriptive labels and, therefore,

as possessing limited explanatory power.

A structural factor which is not dealt with in a substantial way (surprising given the title of the book) is that of race. In the index there is a reference to 'racial discrimination' but no entry on race or race relations. Indeed the lack of consideration attributed to race as a structural factor is significant given that the authors favour a structural approach and given that race clearly underpins concepts of 'dispossession', 'colonialism' and 'the political economy of indigenous alcohol use'.

This failure to give due consideration to the issue of race is to consider indigenous alcohol use in a vacuum and to deny the organising power of race in society. The perspective adopted by the authors seems to be that of objective researchers documenting the problem of indigenous alcohol use. They tend to view their role and that of the state in a utilitarian way which posits the state and social scientists as acting in the best interests of indigenous communities and the wider community. In this way no consideration is given to the question of power and who has it and does not have it in this community. The neglect of race and power in contemporary society converts this social problem of indigenous alcohol use from a political one into a technical, preventive health enterprise.

One shortcoming of this type of analysis is that the state's role in the continued domination of indigenous communities is obscured. Crucially, such an approach assumes that our current social, political and legal order is fixed from above and preordained by a rationalist logic that determines in a neutral and value free way what fits best with our true nature. Human communities and ultimately, civil society, are a product of power whether based on economic, racial or gender factors. Any book which considers indigenous usage of alcohol would need, I believe, to problematise the state and thereby make the necessary linkage to structural relations of power and exclusion.

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