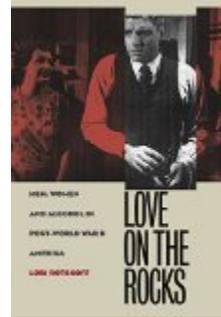


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Lori Rotskoff. *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America.* Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002. xi + 307 pp. \$25.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8078-5402-0; \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8078-2728-4.

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Published on H-Women (January, 2004)



Engendering the Alcoholic

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In her engaging history of alcoholism and the alcoholism movement, Lori Rotskoff explores the gendered history of drinking from the turn of the century to the early 1960s. Rotskoff notes that in the late-nineteenth century alcohol was identified primarily with the saloon. In particular, the saloon was a major site of a larger bachelor subculture where men of various ethnic backgrounds enjoyed the company of other men and scorned the domesticating influence of women. Indeed, the saloon was central to the construction of male identity that was based largely on the values of all-male camaraderie and the rejection of familial obligations. Rotskoff notes that the avid saloon-goer represented “dissolute manhood,” which stood in stark opposition to the other major construction of male identity, “respectable manhood” (p. 18). Respectable manhood, as portrayed by temperance reformers, cherished the man’s role as father and as husband. Respectability required commitment to the breadwinner ethic, but men could also enjoy the fruits of their labor at home. In fact, unlike “dissolute manhood,” which was viewed as a threat to the family’s well being, “respectable manhood” viewed the family as central to a man’s identity and as a source of his pleasure.

Prohibition and then repeal, Rotskoff argues, led to the “normalization” of social drinking, the glamorization of “restrained” drinking among middle-class folk, and the growing popularity of heterosocial drinking. Indeed, Rotskoff argues that after repeal marketing campaigns

reinforced the acceptability of social drinking in polite company, cocktail scenes were often the “rule rather than the exception for many dramas and comedies produced during the 1930s” (p. 45), and “alcohol melded into the dominant culture” (p. 40). Most important of all, Rotskoff notes that during this period various scientific, medical, and other self-credentialed authorities replaced a moralist view of drinking as a sin with a therapeutic conception of drinking as a sickness. Other scholars, Rotskoff explains, have examined the social and political environment in which the development of a new alcoholic identity took shape, but they have not “adequately explored the cultural implications of that identity” (p. 66).

In particular, Rotskoff explores what she calls the “engendering” of alcoholism. She uses the term engender to “denote the formation of new institutions and forms of therapy associated with the alcoholic movement” and to refer to matters of gender and the family (p. 4). Rotskoff, for example, examines the ways in which alcoholism was a manifestation of the anxiety and rootlessness Americans experienced in the 1940s and 1950s. Alcoholism was linked to fears of effeminacy, and alcoholic men who failed to engage in normal heterosexual relationships were even accused of being latent homosexuals. This understanding of the alcoholic, Rotskoff asserts, stood in sharp contrast to the earlier image of the rugged, hard-drinking man who epitomized the masculinity of the saloon era. Yet she argues that alcohol did not prevent men from establishing their own masculine identity. Social drinking, which was identified as a normal

and healthy sign of masculinity, allowed men to further their careers and fulfill their expected roles as breadwinners.

Popular culture also picked up on these changes. According to Rotskoff, films like *The Lost Weekend* helped educate the public about changing conceptions of alcoholism. *The Lost Weekend* was not only the first film that featured a main character who was an alcoholic but also presented alcoholism as a disease. Through the main protagonist, Dan Birnam, the film explores the anxiety associated with the post-World War II period and the role of alcohol. Birnam suffers from a troubled psyche along with bouts of drinking that prevent him from developing a strong commitment to his marriage and from ultimately attaining mature manhood, a representation distinctly different than earlier images of drinking as a common expression of masculinity.

Rotskoff similarly extends a gendered analysis to Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). Besides helping men deal with their alcoholism, AA, Rotskoff argues, was a site for reconstructing manhood. AA was a largely middle-class and male organization that emphasized sociability to help replace the all-male camaraderie associated with male culture and alcohol. The organization also stressed reciprocity through spiritual and therapeutic gift exchange—literally the gift of sobriety that was passed along to new members. In addition, the confessional stories or narratives in which AA members engaged allowed them to confront their days of “dissolute manhood” and in the process to build up their manly esteem through a discussion of their past exploits. Sometimes, Rotskoff notes, these manly tales of bravado could lead to relapse, but they were just as likely to persuade men to discuss the tranquility and peace of mind they eventually found through marriage and a domestic lifestyle. While these different visions of manhood stood in bold contrast to one another, Rotskoff argues that they were essential to the formation of what she calls sober manhood.

Rotskoff also considers the gendered history of the alcoholic’s wife. According to Rotskoff, it was not until after WWII that experts began to stress the need to treat alcoholic marriages. Much of their work blamed wives for their alcoholic husbands. In particular, their research typically argued that a husband’s chronic drunkenness was a sign of a dysfunctional family in which husband and wife deviated from conventional sex roles. While the husband remained sober, the wife deferred to him and allowed him to assume his expected role as head of the household. But with each setback on the part of the

husband, the wife became more frustrated, often feeling insecure and shameful and eventually compelling her to assume the husband’s and father’s role. Not only was the family’s sex-role inversion generally thought to be temporary but recovery from alcoholism was dependent upon the wife relinquishing these duties and the husband once again assuming the role of breadwinner. In short, a healthy family, Rotskoff explains, “required allegiance to traditional sex-role prescriptions” (p. 159).

Alcohol Anonymous and Al-Anon Family Groups were even more important in shaping popular perceptions about women’s expected role. While some men objected to the involvement of their wives because they threatened the masculine culture of AA meetings, AA was soon praising women’s contributions and arguing that its philosophy would “do wonders for domestic relations” (p. 167). While pre-Prohibition narratives about alcohol portrayed women as the victims of hard-drinking men who had abandoned them, AA and Al-Anon depicted wives who supported their husbands through their recovery. In the process, AA and Al-Anon offered wives a program of emotion management and a way to fulfill their own needs. In particular, AA and Al-Anon stressed that an alcoholic’s recovery depended upon his wife’s emotional restraint or a wife who was understanding, patient, and tolerant. The potential conflict and problems associated with such a sacrifice could lead to separation or divorce, but women typically looked for ways to keep the family together. Along the way, they often turned toward their AA and Al-Anon family to fulfill their own emotional needs and hence locate their own sense of fulfillment, which ultimately reinforced traditional gender role expectations.

Rotskoff offers an extraordinarily vigorous examination of the gender dynamics of the alcoholism movement and AA throughout a good portion of the twentieth century. Along the way, she provides insight into the ways in which masculinity and femininity were constructed during this period, how gender identities shaped ideas about domesticity, sexuality, and sobriety, and how these dynamics relate to existing works about Prohibition, the Depression, and the Cold War. In particular, Rotskoff skillfully compares and contrasts how these identities changed over time, paying particular attention to the pre- and post-Prohibition eras and to both masculinity and femininity. Equally impressive is her use of popular culture. Besides using publications from so-called “experts,” from the leaders of the alcoholism movement, and from men and women struggling with alcoholism, Rotskoff routinely examines films throughout the period. In

the process, she shows how the issues/debates surrounding the alcoholism movement affected movies and how movies represented changing ideas about alcohol and the impact of AA.

With these comments in mind, more on the impact of class identities would have been useful. In her introduction, Rotskoff explains that her research focuses primarily on middle-class white Americans, and she effectively shows that middle-class men and women increasingly dominated representations about alcohol and the alcoholism movement. Yet comparing the ways in which middle- and working-class men and women understood alcohol would undoubtedly shed light on many of the changes she discusses, just as looking at both men and women provide insight into the nature and organization of gender identities. How, for example, did different classes of men respond to criticisms of hard drink-

ing and dissolute manhood as well as the growing importance of sobriety to constructions of gender? And to what extent did that version of male identity remain important despite the middle-class preference for sober manhood? Indeed, a more explicit discussion of the class dynamics surrounding alcoholism might illuminate the ways in which men of both classes struggled with sobriety, and it might allow us to get beyond the division between “dissolute manhood” and “respectable manhood” or at least see how various behaviors allowed men to bridge the gap between the two.

These minor comments notwithstanding, Rotskoff offers a provocative analysis of the alcoholism movement, which illuminates the gender and family dynamics surrounding alcoholism and the larger historical context in which these issues took shape.

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Citation: Randy D. McBee. Review of Rotskoff, Lori, *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America*. H-Women, H-Net Reviews. January, 2004.

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