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# Book Reviews

Compiled by Susan Savva & Griffith Edwards

## LEAD REVIEW

### The Rise and Fall of Synanon: A California Utopia

ROD JANZEN

The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore and London, 2001, 320 pp, US\$34.95, ISBN 08018 6583 2

It is characteristic of this kind of movement that its aims and premises are boundless. A social struggle is seen not as a struggle for specific, limited objectives, but as an event of unique importance, different in kind from all other struggles known to history, a cataclysm from which the world is to emerge totally transformed and redeemed. (Cohn 1974, p. 281)

Over ten years ago, in 1991, a compound in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada Mountains closed its doors, and its members, many of them by now quite old, dispersed. Synanon, which had first opened its doors in 1958, was no more. It had traveled far, spreading across the California landscape, only to retreat to the Sierra foothills as its activities came under increased scrutiny and its original members peeled away. It had also wandered far from its original mission. What had begun as a revolutionary approach to treating drug addicts had very rapidly evolved into a cipher for California itself. In the end, Synanon's members were running boot camps for juvenile offenders, and its leader was openly espousing the social and economic policies of Ronald Reagan. Over the course of 33 years its members had dabbled and experimented with reckless abandon.

The results were mixed. Many addicts were in fact rehabilitated, only to be told that they could never function in the outside world; a number of worthy groups including, most notably, the United Farm Workers headed by Cesar Chavez, had been helped by volunteers and gifts from Synanon; and the juvenile offenders whom Synanon's members had taken under their wing were on occasion brutalized both physically and psychologically. By the time it was all over, Synanon had tried to pass itself off as a religion, if only to avoid paying taxes; one of its members had placed a live rattlesnake in the mailbox of a lawyer audacious enough to oppose the organization and its megalomaniacal leader; members had been forced to shave their heads and abandon their spouses; and

people who had previously embraced abstinence and voluntary poverty were free to drink and paid to work.

The man behind this remarkable phenomenon was Charles 'Chuck' Dederich. Dederich had a talent for both stating and obfuscating the obvious and this, in turn, resonated with the generation that was then coming of age in California. It was Dederich, for example, who coined the bromide, 'Today is the first day of the rest of your life'. Dederich himself was a reformed drunkard who had flitted from job to job. His big moment came in 1958, when he gathered a group of drug addicts around him and offered them an alternative to Alcoholics Anonymous. Thus began the first therapeutic community, at the heart of which was a ritual known as the 'game'. The game was a sort of glorified encounter group in which members attacked each other's weaknesses, ostensibly to force addicts to take responsibility for their own lives. The game's function, however, started to change as non-addicts joined Synanon, living and working side by side with people whose problems and needs bore very little resemblance to their own. With their coming Synanon underwent a succession of rapid and often contradictory changes, until in the end it resembled nothing so much as California itself.

It is a remarkable and uniquely American story, and it is the subject of Rod Janzen's second book. Janzen, who is the editor of the journal *Communal Societies*, has the right credentials to tell the story. The research is exhaustive, and this by itself makes the book an invaluable resource for anyone interested in learning about the day-to-day workings of Synanon. The primary sources include newspaper and magazine articles, most of them unflattering, and interviews with former members. At no point, however, does Janzen explain his methods; this, in turn, underscores the book's primary failing, and that is the lack of a coherent narrative or underlying analytical framework. At times, Janzen comes very close to the latter, only to be sidetracked by anecdotes and events of only passing relevance. In all fairness, the task is a daunting one, suggesting a variety of approaches that by themselves would only tell part of what is a rich and fascinating tale. A biographer, for example, might focus only on Dederich, overlooking the thousands of people who embraced his vision; and a sociologist might focus only on the organization itself, overlooking variables such

as the culture in which it took root or the highly emotional ways in which members responded to Dederich's personality and presence. Under the circumstances, one wishes that Janzen had given more time and more thought to the telling of his tale. The research, in other words, is impressive, but the book itself fails to use it to best effect.

At times, too, Janzen becomes altogether too involved in his story; this, of course, is what happens in the absence of a larger plan for tackling the sources and framing the narrative. I was, for example, taken aback by the assumption that the only thing really wrong with Synanon was its founder. Obviously, there were many things wrong with Dederich, but surely there was also something just a little wrong with the people who did his bidding. To my mind, at least, there is something not right with people who routinely heap verbal abuse on each other and call it a 'game'.

Nor, with the possible exception of the US Marine Corps, am I inclined to credit people who shave off their hair at someone else's behest. The fact that so many people were prepared to do these things is by itself fascinating and significant; sadly, Janzen misses a golden opportunity to explore the ways in which words and a skillful manipulation of popular culture can be used to control the thoughts and actions of people who are variously bored, befuddled, or otherwise vulnerable.

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## Reference

- Cohn, N. (1974) *The Pursuit of the Millennium. Revolutionary Millenarians and Mystical Anarchists of the Middle Ages*. New York: Oxford University Press.

## FURTHER REVIEWS

### **Absolut: Biography of a Bottle**

CARL HAMILTON

New York, Texere LLC, 2000, 312 pp, US\$24.95, £16.90, ISBN 158799 002 4

*Absolut: Biography of a Bottle* is a story of absolute success. It balances between a biography of the bottle itself and the story of the success of Absolut Country of Sweden Vodka in the United States. In a curious way the book is at the same time also a collection of dozens of short stories more or less linked to the bottle and its content and marketing. These stories are mostly told mainly through different people who are not necessarily

known to people in the alcohol field, or to marketing people.

Sometimes the short stories do not have a clear connection to the success of Absolut vodka. For instance, the 10-page story of the Bratt rationing system is very informative. The Bratt system was, however, abandoned in 1955 and has had hardly any direct effect on the success of Absolut vodka in the United States in the 1980s. The author seems to believe that the Bratt system fitted well the Swedish reality as, on p. 154, he describes the abolition of the Bratt system as a catastrophe. Therefore, it is a little disturbing that throughout the book the author is, as a rule, commenting on the Swedish alcohol control system in such a sarcastic way that even Finnish or Norwegian readers find it unjustified.

On the other hand, many of the short stories fit the theme of the book well. They, for instance, shed light on how thinking and working methods in advertising business have developed during the last decades. We also learn why Absolut vodka had such a high advertising budget.

However, to return to the absolute success: after reading this book do we really understand why Absolut vodka was a success? One answer is completely clear: there were no guarantees for absolute success. In fact, the most crucial fact this book is telling us is that almost nobody believed in the success of the invisible medicine bottle; but it became a success. Therefore, the next question is, can we understand afterwards why this happened?

The book does not really answer this question, or the answer is well hidden between the lines. One difficulty in following the absolute success story is that the short stories are not always dated and that basic statistics are missing. Apart some figures on pp. 276–277 the book lacks information on the sales of Absolut vodka in the United States, in relation to total sales of vodka or distilled spirits or in relation to other imported vodkas.

Finally, Sweden did not apply for membership in the European Union in the late 1980s but in July 1991. Furthermore, Absolut vodka did not destroy the monopoly system in 1995. The destroyer was rather the combination of the Treaty of Rome, the European Economic Area Agreement and the Restamark case in the EFTA Court. Absolut vodka was an absolute success in the United States but it was hardly the absolute destroyer of the traditional Nordic alcohol policy.

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**Adolescents, Alcohol and Substance Abuse:  
Reaching Teens through Brief Interventions**

PETER M. MONTI, SUZANNE M. COLBY &  
TRACY A. O'LEARY (Eds)

New York, The Guilford Press, 2001, 350 pp, US\$37.00  
(hardback), ISBN 1 57230 658 0

Adolescence is a time of rapid development and change. Young people are notoriously impervious to warnings about risk and difficult to reach, motivate and retain in treatment. We cannot simply apply our approaches with adults to this group and assume that they will work. Yet it is crucial we engage young people—early interventions among this group may prevent much future heartache. This book addresses these challenges with a brief intervention approach. As William Miller says in his foreword, it may seem counterintuitive to apply a brief approach to a serious problem. However, the philosophy underlying the approaches described in this persuasive book seem so applicable to young people who may be ambivalent about the role of alcohol and drug use in their lives and the desirability of change.

This thorough book is a combination of theoretical and more practically orientated chapters. While enjoyable, I found the use of jargon in the theoretical chapters made them unnecessarily dense to read in parts. The chapters describing the applications of the brief intervention approach were particularly useful and readable. Two recurrent themes are harm reduction (relatively rare in a North American book) and the transtheoretical model of change (or stages of change model), both of which underpin many of the interventions described. It is refreshing to see this book focus on motivation, demonstrating that innovative approaches applied at 'teachable moments' can reach and engage young people in a meaningful discussion and consideration of their substance use, which may have a significant impact on their subsequent levels of harm if not their use itself.

While alcohol is the most commonly addressed substance, the interventions could be adapted and applied across the substance use spectrum (and beyond—one chapter addresses risky sexual behaviour and HIV prevention). The practical chapters provide rich ideas on the ways in which brief interventions can complement existing approaches in a variety of settings and with numerous target groups. These include young people attending accident and emergency departments with alcohol related injuries, college students, and those with comorbid disorders. The interventions include group-based skills training, individual motivational enhancement therapy, integrative behavioural and family therapy and innovative web-based technologies for targeting young people who may not be attracted to traditional approaches. As this research is still relatively recent, there is limited

empirical evidence for its efficacy with young people, although available data are promising. The authors acknowledge this and describe the potential benefits and limitations of each approach. Given the solid grounding of the book's underlying principles, it offers great promise for engaging diverse groups of young people—as a researcher I found it a valuable resource. The detailed 'how-to' of conducting the interventions described will also appeal to clinicians in a variety of contexts (with a request for some evaluation, please!). While the book has a North American focus and flavour, and there is only brief discussion of cross-cultural issues, its ideas are widely applicable and it deserves a varied readership.

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**Substance Abuse Treatment and the Stages of Change**

GERARD J. CONNORS, DENNIS M. DONOVAN &  
CARLO C. DICLEMENTE

New York, Guilford Publications, 2001, 274 pp,  
US\$35.00 (hardback), ISBN 1 57230 657 2

As indicated by the title, the purpose of this book is to provide an integrated approach to substance abuse treatment that is conceptually linked to the stages of change model originally proposed by Prochaska and DiClemente. In this volume, Carlo DiClemente teams up with two other well-known clinical psychologists in the addictions field, Gerard Connors and Dennis Donovan, to present the latest assessment and treatment recommendations for therapists and counselors. As Barbara McCrady states in her Foreword, this book is more than just a 'how-to-do' manual—readers will find it to be more of a 'how to think' book.

This is the first clinical text to provide a comprehensive coverage of the various assessment and treatment options that are matched to each of the five stages of change: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action and maintenance. After providing an overview of this model in the first two chapters, the remaining chapters are devoted to applications of the model to substance abuse assessment, treatment planning, individual and group treatment, couple treatment and family involvement, populations with special needs (e.g. co-occurring disorders) and relapse. The book is written clearly and provides a valuable sourcebook of diagnostic and intervention strategies. I was impressed with the updated material on clinical assessment methods and the breadth of matched treatment options, ranging from motivational enhancement to relapse prevention. The authors do a good job of referring to key research studies in their review of treatment effectiveness issues (e.g. Project MATCH).

There is a strong intuitive appeal to the stages of change model, particularly given the current interest in motivational issues in substance abuse treatment. It seems more than coincidence that three of the five stages all pertain to motivation for change (precontemplation, contemplation and preparation), leaving just two stages for active behavioral change (action and maintenance). Although it is true that the stages of change model has stimulated considerable interest and enthusiasm in the field, questions continue to arise concerning the validity and scientific integrity of the model. As the authors note in the final chapter, these questions include whether habit change occurs in a linear, progressive manner through five discrete stages, or whether change occurs as a continuous process with multiple cognitive and behavioral changes occurring over time.

Part of the problem with the original stages of change model is that it was not based empirically on a prospective, longitudinal study of a cohort of participants who tried to quit smoking, as they moved from one stage to the next. Rather, it was based on a cross-sectional analysis of smokers who were selected as representative of each stage (but not followed prospectively through a series of sequential stages). As one problematic result, we now have what appears to be an arbitrary definition of the duration of the action stage (6 months) before the maintenance stage is achieved, despite research showing that most relapses occur within 90 days of initiating abstinence. These problems are reflected in the difficulties many researchers have experienced in reliably assessing stages of change for clients in substance abuse treatment. In comparison, self-efficacy and related motivational measures (e.g. commitment to abstinence) appear to be both relatively easy to assess and have established predictive validity for both behavior change and treatment outcome.

Despite these limitations, I recommend this book as a useful, practical and well-written guide for both students and professionals involved in the treatment of alcohol and other drug problems. Therapists will appreciate the many clinical case studies presented throughout the text.

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### **Forces of Habit: Drugs and the Making of the Modern World**

DAVID T. COURTWRIGHT

Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press,  
2001, 277 pp, £16.95, ISBN 067400458 2

### **Dark Paradise: A History of Opiate Addiction in America (enlarged edition)**

DAVID T. COURTWRIGHT

Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press,  
2001, 326 pp, £15.95, ISBN 0674 00585 6

David Courtwright must win a prize for the best opening line to any book on drug history of recent years—'On July 13, 1926, Anthony Colombo, a man of many habits, all of them bad, checked into the Philadelphia General Hospital'. Anthony Burgess may have the edge with the start to his novel *Earthly Powers*. 'It was the afternoon of my eighty-first birthday and I was in bed with my catamite when Ali announced that the Archbishop had come to see me.' But Courtwright tells his history superbly well and *Forces of Habit* is undoubtedly a book readers will enjoy for its stylishness as well as admire for its erudition.

So back to the man with many habits, all of them bad. At the time of his hospitalization, Colombo was drinking a bottle of whisky a day, smoking a quarter ounce of opium, smoking 80 cigarettes and enjoying a little coffee and tea. Courtwright takes this petty bootlegger to illustrate the fact that the western world had at that time come to enjoy a range of psychoactive substances unthinkable some centuries back. Colombo was an anti-hero standing at the intersection of some amazing international trade routes.

A major theme of this work is thus drugs as commodities, a tracing out of how the drugs got there, the supply side, the trade driven by profit and welcomed by the state treasuries which grew rich on the taxes. Alcohol, tobacco and caffeine are identified as, in trade terms, 'the big three', while opium, cannabis and coca are put in a junior league as 'the little three'. Taking an immensely broad approach to the history of mankind's encounter with drugs, Courtwright discerns an overall movement away from free trade to increasingly stringent regulation. There are echoes here with David Musto's analysis in terms of a movement from tolerance to intolerance.

What has been summarized in the preceding paragraph is only the merest outline of the complex arguments expounded in a deeply researched book which never falls victim to its own detail, but instead strives after delineation of the big picture of drug history. Throughout, it gives the history of drugs as caught in the ebb and flow of changing social, economic and cultural context. The attractiveness of the production is enhanced by well-chosen illustrations. There are useful bibliographic notes.

As a footnote to a review which welcomes the publication of Courtwright's major new work, I want also to note the appearance of the second edition of his *Dark*

*Paradise*. This was and is a history specifically of American opiate happenings. Two useful chapters on heroin addiction and its treatment since 1940 have been added to this excellent text.

Poor, sodden, smoke-ridden Colombo, weighing in at 235 pounds, that crossroad he stood at in 1926: where do the roads lead on next? *Forces of Habit* holds back from spuriously easy answers. Let each of us instead read this

remarkably clever book and *Dark Paradise*, each in our way, and find in them our own sense of relevance. First lines, yes, but write your own last lines, although Courtwright offers Adam and Eve eating the forbidden fruit as his end of it all.

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