



The Political Power of Bad Ideas: Networks, Institutions, and the Global Prohibition Wave

Mark Lawrence Schrad

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In *The Political Power of Bad Ideas*, Mark Schrad uses one of the greatest oddities of modern history--the broad diffusion throughout the Western world of alcohol-control legislation in the early twentieth century--to make a powerful argument about how bad policy ideas achieve international success. How could an idea that was widely recognized by experts as bad before adoption, and which ultimately failed everywhere, come to be adopted throughout the world? To answer the question, Schrad utilizes an institutionalist approach and focuses in particular on the United States, Sweden, and Russia/the USSR.

Conventional wisdom, based largely on the U.S. experience, blames evangelical zealots for the success of the temperance movement. Yet as Schrad shows, ten countries, along with numerous colonial possessions, enacted prohibition laws. In virtually every case, the consequences were disastrous, and in every country the law was ultimately repealed. Schrad concentrates on the dynamic interaction of ideas and political institutions, tracing the process through which concepts of dubious merit gain momentum and achieve credibility as they wend their way through institutional structures. He also shows that national policy and institutional environments count: the policy may have been broadly adopted, but countries dealt with the issue in different ways.

While *The Political Power of Bad Ideas* focuses on one legendary episode, its argument about how and why bad policies achieve legitimacy applies far more broadly. It also extends beyond the simplistic notion that "ideas matter" to show how they influence institutional contexts and interact with a nation's political actors, institutions, and policy dynamics.

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