

David F. Musto (1936–2010)



David F. Musto, a well-known historian of drug policy, died suddenly on 8 October 2010. He suffered an apparent heart attack while disembarking from a plane in Shanghai, a city that hosted the first international opium conference in 1909 and that figured prominently in Musto's own research. He was to have attended a ceremony recognizing the donation of his books and papers to Shanghai University and the establishment there of a Center for International Drug Control Policy Studies.

Trained in classics, history, medicine and psychiatry, Musto began researching drug history in 1968, while working for the Public Health Service in Washington, DC. He used his proximity to the Library of Congress and the National Archives to good effect, mining primary sources that had been largely ignored by previous researchers. In 1973, after years of lonely and sometimes discouraging work, he published *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Control*. His timing could not have been better. The heroin epidemic and youthful marijuana and psychedelic use had made drug control a national priority [1].

Musto patiently disentangled American drug control's roots, which included great-power diplomacy, missionary activism, public health reform, medical and pharmaceutical lobbying, constitutional wrangling, muck-raking journalism, racially tainted fears of drug users and, not least, the machinations of ambitious individuals. His theme was that drug policy had always been a congeries

of rational and irrational elements. He had the historian's nose for complexity, unintended consequences and irony. In his telling, the containment of drug abuse resembled the containment of the Soviet Union—a necessary evil made unnecessarily burdensome by periodic outbursts of hysteria and repression. The difference, apparent in his later editions, was that the drug war had proved intractable while the Cold War had not.

Musto himself became a minor participant in the drug war. He served as a consultant in the Nixon and Carter administrations and on various White House and United Nations committees. He befriended many of the key figures in the drug-policy establishment. In the mid-1980s he briefly administered a methadone clinic for APT, a non-profit foundation in New Haven. 'I made an honest man out of him', recalled Dr Herbert Kleber, who arranged the appointment. 'David had not treated an addict since his residency'.

Musto had, in fact, treated few patients of any variety. He thought of himself as a professor, scholar, mentor and raconteur. He enlivened his popular lecture course, 'Alcohol and Other Drugs in American History' (or 'Slugs and Drugs', as Yale undergraduates affectionately called it) with stories of tipplers and crusaders, but he made sure that, whatever their intentions in taking the course, students went away informed about the risks of drug use and the necessity of responsible control. Skeptical of fads and panaceas, Musto was a rationalist with a streak of Burkean conservatism. 'He loved institutions and was always pushing to make them better', remembered Yale colleague Dr Richard Schottenfeld. The way to make drug control better, Musto thought, was to avoid wild swings of opinion and policy, too much toleration being as bad as too much punishment.

Younger historians extended Musto's critique through social history, ethnography, urban geography, cultural studies and other approaches that went beyond the largely traditional methods of *The American Disease*. They—we—nonetheless owe him a great debt. He not only gave us a reliable scholarly roadmap, he legitimated our enterprise. American drug-policy historiography is 'a.m.' or 'p.m.'—ante- or post-Musto. He chanced upon a field that was marginal and polemical and made it intellectually respectable. He encouraged young researchers, both individually and by organizing landmark conferences. Musto connected people. He lent gravitas to their collective enterprises with his old-school manners, his erudition and his droll charm. He was ever the Yale gentleman, impeccably attired and unfailingly gracious. He was well cast for a founding-father role.

Like many authorities, Musto established his reputation and professional identity by way of a successful first book. His interests, however, were far more catholic, antiquarian and literary than his drug-policy research might suggest. He liked genealogy, old cemeteries, odd facts, Doctor Dolittle stories and practically anything English. A student of astronomy, he was a curator of historical scientific instruments at Yale University's Peabody Museum of Natural History as well as a professor at the Child Study Center and a lecturer in history and American Studies. He was fascinated by John Adams and his descendants, particularly the way in which the family's outlook and values were passed from generation to generation. (There is an echo of this in his drug history, which explores the ways in which knowledge of drug risks was—or, by the 1960s, was not—transmitted to the

young.) Perhaps his best-known avocation was Sherlock Holmes. 'I've found over the years', he wrote to me in 1998, 'that S.H. is a nice balance to addiction, punishment, and AIDS'.

The same might be said of David himself. He brought sanity and balance to an enterprise not over-endowed with either virtue. His presence will be greatly missed.

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Reference

1. Musto D. F. *The American Disease: Origins of Narcotic Control*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press; 1973.