

Pekka Sulkunen:

Arithmetic utopias

Comments on P.Anderson & Baumberg, B.: *Alcohol in Europe*. London: Institute of Alcohol Studies.

Sociologists now discuss the dissolution of society – both the idea and reality. We live in a global yet fragmented world. At national, international, regional and community levels social problems are looked at from isolated points of view, be they defined by the profession, the particular business interest, the bureaucratic logic of different ministries, or by multifarious other concerns of individuals and groups. So it is refreshing to read a report starting with the bold declaration that “Alcohol policy is everybody’s business”, as Anderson and Baumberg define their mission. What kind of business is it, then?

One cannot but marvel at the richness and quality of the data and research on which they build their construction. When the self-declared progenitor of this report, “Alcohol Control Policy in Public Health Perspective” (Bruun et al. 1975) was written, not even national data on consumption trends to rely on were available, to say nothing about statistics on production, trade or the economy of the industry. Today comparable surveys on drinking patterns, policy opinions, cultural conceptions and many kinds of experiences of alcohol consumption exist across countries, and even through time. Epidemiological data as well as detailed information on policy can be matched to these across Europe and in the wider world. The economic and political contexts are quite accurately known, for estimating the feasibility factors related to alcohol policy.

It is striking, therefore, how very little has changed in the conclusions. National drinking patterns are still converging. Besides the considerations accorded to possible but minor health benefits, the problem list is the same as before, only longer. Price policy, physical availability, traffic safety enforcement and maybe advertising regulations are still the top priorities whereas scepticism prevails on information and education. In fact, the report, detailed and bulky as it is, adds nothing to the recommendations of the predecessors, including more recently “*Alcohol and the Public Good*” under Griffith Edwards (1994), and “*No Ordinary Commodity*” by Thomas Babor et al. (2003).

Yet something has changed. First, the attraction of global policy indicators that already was strong in *No Ordinary Commodity*, has become even more outspoken and unreserved. Beginning with global cost estimates, going on with DALYs and QUALYs, ending up with ECAS scales of policy strictness, Anderson and Baumberg make it clear that their business is to persuade rather than to understand. Global indicators are good for that. It is clear language that after blood pressure and tobacco alcohol is the third cause of DALYs lost in Europe; it is easily understood that that the total tangible cost of alcohol at 125 bn euros is a lot of money compared to the 25 bn euros of tax returns (which could easily be raised by higher rates), and that the Greek 5.5, even the European average of 10.1, in policy strictness is low compared to the Norwegian 17.7. Everybody knows, and this is not belied by the text, that such arithmetic stands poorly for a reality which is far beyond the grasp of numeric scales, especially as the base-line of the calculation often is a utopia of a Europe without alcohol. Everybody knows also that causal chains and historical realities go in ways that are more complex than the impact of policy on outcome.

Often the arithmetic representation works anyway. It is important to know that the relative health burden of alcohol is close to tobacco, and from that perspective the policy issues should be seen in a similar light in these two areas. And that is no minor point.

There is nothing wrong with persuasion. That is what Anderson and Baumberg were invited to do by the Commission. That is also what the predecessors of their report attempted to do.

But there is an interesting evolution in what the persuasion is about. *Alcohol Control Policy in Public Health Perspective* (1975) presented the total consumption model as a public health alternative to the then prevalent control systems that selectively picked “alcoholics” as the targets of control mainly for *social* reasons. It was an attempt to liberate the social alcohol question from the barmy post-war moralities and to transform it into an issue of rational social engineering. The emphasis on universality (controls should bear on everybody the same way) and solidarity (everybody should sacrifice a crumb of their convenience for the benefit of the weak) was the new morality of the recommendations. The “*public good*” in Edwards et al. already is more explicitly contrasted with the private good of the alcohol industries. As I read it, the *public policy* in the title of Babor et al. was a contrast to *private policy*, a reclaim of the responsibility of the state instead of voluntary partnerships and networks. Anderson and Baumberg reiterate and amplify the call for state regulation, with arguments against self-regulation by the industries that hardly go beyond suspicion and general mistrust.

The authors of the present report are not alone in this mission, as evidenced by their reliance not only on “No Ordinary Community” but also on a wider community of experts commissioned and published by the WHO. It seems that the alcohol issue is fast moving in the direction of the tobacco policy, with a deep and hostile divide between “the industry” and the public health lobby, the latter appealing to the public interest represented by the state, its legislation and the courts, the former fighting back by codes of conduct, self-regulation and counter-persuasion.

I think this a very unhappy situation for alcohol policy. First, the utopia of an alcohol-free world is too far-fetched compared to the utopia of a tobacco-free (sub-)world, which actually is gaining ground in many European countries, even in Ireland (which fares so badly in alcohol terms). Whereas the use of tobacco can be circumscribed and its suppliers are identifiable, alcohol is everywhere in European society, and “the industry” is only one albeit powerful element in a web of actors. The public health battle on alcohol resembles the frontless combats of contemporary wars, instead of lined-up adversaries headed by Philip Morris et al. on one side and WHO et al. on the other. Legitimacy may be hard to gain with enemies and friends mixed everywhere. Secondly, the state is not of one piece. It never was, but now the divisions of power are deeper than ever, finance ministries pursuing their own agendas, the social and health ministries struggling with theirs. A good example of this was the 40 per cent tax cut on distilled alcohol in Finland in 2004, implemented by the finance ministry against the great majority of experts, professionals and politicians voicing their feeble protests in vain. Thirdly, a bipolar world view blindfolds experts and policy-makers from seeing that alcohol has many contrasting places in contemporary life, partly ritual, partly luxury, partly ordinary consumption, and partly connected to illicit drugs. Drinking alcohol and using other drugs are sometimes competing, sometimes complementing activities. This question is not properly addressed in the present report. Still it has immense implications for rational alcohol and drug policies now and in the future.

Besides the new polarity between public health advocacy and industry, another major change has occurred in the field since the earlier reports and especially Bruun et al. (1975). Whereas European alcohol consumption was rising in the post-war decades (with one exception, France), it now has been on a downward slope for more than two decades (with exceptions like Ireland and Finland). Given the report’s policy optimism, its conclusions on the impact of control measures on the master trend are feeble and the evidence to support the view that control policy would have caused the decline is weak. Even on smaller temporary changes the authors’ treatment of the data is quite selective. While numerous cases of upward push by liberal policy can be observed even in the recent history, evidence on even small policy effects to drive consumption downwards is still scanty. Still the conviction is strong that policy could be used to repress consumption levels in a population. Also the effects of harm-specific measures are treated arbitrarily. For example, education and information simply get a poor rating rather than any advice on how to implement such programmes. Community based interventions are given a much easier

ride despite the much smaller number of cases evaluated. With this I am not saying that education and information would be the solution instead of taxes, availability controls and community interventions; my argument is that with the richness of now available data one could expect a more sociological analysis of the consumption trends, of images governing alcohol use, and how these are related to policy. Images are not separate from practices, they are an integral element of behaviour even when we are not aware of them. It is a dangerous over-simplification to see alcohol use only as a function of policy, and the need for policy only as a function of the severity and cost of alcohol-related harm. The historical fact is rather that stricter policy tends to *follow declines in consumption*, not cause them. Images govern not only behaviours but also the acceptability of policy.

The best part of the Anderson and Baumberg report is that it looks at alcohol from many policy sides. The authors are probably correct that anyone who seriously wants to implement a policy to reduce alcohol-related harm, in a small community or in a larger society, would do well to address the problem from all sides: awareness raising among consumers, regulating price, marketing and availability, targeting most harmful drinking, and making sure that the policy has sufficient population support. I do very much hope that the report succeeds in persuading at least some authorities that the effort is worth while. At the same time I suspect that a simplified view of alcohol only as a cause of harm may obscure rather than help to grasp the historical possibilities of a less drink-ridden Europe. A wise policy needs also understanding, not only persuasion.

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