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Alcohol policies fin de siècle

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Summary

The article discusses the possibilities for rational and consistent alcohol policies towards the end of this century. It takes two countries, Finland and Sweden, as examples, and examines their experiences from a historical perspective.

Finland and Sweden are countries that very early developed alcohol control systems that were aimed at eliminating private profit from all alcohol trade. Finland had a Prohibition whereas Sweden adopted the so called Bratt system. The latter consisted of a public monopoly on alcohol retail plus strict individual control of purchases.

Although the historical experiences are thus different, the anti-alcohol sentiment was common to both countries in the end of the last century and in the first half of this century. In Sweden the temperance movement was stronger and independent, whereas in Finland it adopted the function of almost any kind of social movement (nationalist movement, political labour movement, women's movement, youth movement). Thus the Finnish temperance movement became integrated with the basic structures of the system of popular organizations.

Towards the end of this century, it is to be expected that the political influence of the temperance movement will become essentially weaker, and especially so in Finland. In Sweden, it will partially be replaced by professional anti-alcohol movements (doctors, social workers etc.), whereas in Finland there is little sign of this either.

On the contrary, new social meanings that are becoming attached to drinking in these countries (drinking as a sign of cultural competence, as a form of sociability etc.), are likely to arouse anti-control sentiments. Thus alcohol control policies will face a serious credibility problem, which it can only overcome by careful adjustments to local needs. It is essential that alcohol control serves a symbolic function as a remainder of the risks of drinking. This symbolic function should be underlined in all possible ways.

Alcohol control policies; Prohibition; Monopoly

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Introduction

It seems that as the end of this century approaches, a long tradition of alcohol policies in many countries will go to history with it. These countries in North America and Europe, especially in Scandinavia, have a strong temperance tradition dating from the middle of the nineteenth century. This tradition led, towards the turn of the century, to strong anti-alcohol legislation and in many cases to elaborate public control systems, which aimed at eliminating not only the harm wrought by drinking but in many cases drinking itself. The approaching *fin de siècle*, so it seems, threatens to put an end to something that the preceding one started.

Finland and Sweden are archetypical cases of this development. In these countries lie the origins of not only Scandinavian but also North American thinking about alcohol control. Especially the idea of eliminating private profit from alcohol trade through a public monopoly was first elaborated in Sweden and then very strictly applied in Finland. In less rigid form the same approach has been adopted not only in the eighteen monopoly states in the U.S.A. and the ten monopoly provinces in Canada but also in many other countries with less visible public regulations on alcohol trade.

In order to understand developments in alcohol policy toward the end of this century, we should take careful account of the control systems' historical background. This article purports to create a synthetic view of the social context of alcohol control systems today by looking back at their historical roots and by pointing out what has changed and in what way.

The monopoly system

The Finnish monopoly system was established in 1933 to replace a 13-year Prohibition, then considered a failure. The goals and purposes of the monopoly system remained, however, remarkably similar to the prohibition. The 1932 law, which created the monopoly, stipulated that its primary goal was to reduce alcohol consumption to the minimum. In fact the Prohibition was repealed only partially, because no liquor stores or licenced restaurants were allowed in rural areas. The principal difference between the monopoly and prohibition was, originally, conceived to be of fiscal nature. Whereas prohibition channeled alcohol revenues to private (and illegal) hands, the monopoly turned them to the state treasury that was desperately in need of funds for social security and industrialization purposes.

The same goals are also evident in the Swedish system. Already in 1855 the Gothenburg system played the role of eliminating private profit from all alcohol trade, only it gave the monopoly rights to local communities. At the turn of the century it was felt that undesirable competition between communities developed and the goal of reducing alcohol consumption to the minimum was thus partially sacrificed to local fiscal interests. Therefore the so called "Bratt system" [1] established a strong central control board to direct local monopolies under common rules.

The Bratt system also consisted of strict individual control of alcohol use by means of quotas and detailed registration of all purchases. A similar system of individual control was later also applied in Finland (between 1943 and 1957).

In Sweden these arrangements were an alternative to Prohibition, rejected by a referendum very marginally with only 51% votes for the Bratt system as against 49% for Prohibition [2]. Thus also in Sweden the social context of the monopoly system was a serious anti-alcohol sentiment that permeated the whole society. Bruun writes: "In the 1920's there was a strong concern among the leading social groups about the risks involved in drugs. In great parts of Sweden there long remained an overwhelming majority of people who felt that the drug alcohol could not be accepted. Many were ready to sacrifice a great deal for an alcohol-free Sweden" [3].

From the present-day perspective one of the most intriguing points of comparison to Finland is perhaps not so much the absence of Prohibition in Sweden but the composition of the social forces that were in favour of the strict control systems in both countries. In Finland, the temperance sentiment towards the end of the 19th century was visible, strong and well organized. However, the number involved in the temperance organizations never reached the same dimensions as in Sweden. In Finland the total membership of temperance organizations reached its peak, 40 000 persons or about 1.5% of the total population, in 1905. In Sweden about 5% of the population belonged to temperance organizations and in many regions the proportion was much higher [4].

Furthermore, in Finland the temperance movement became from its very beginning tightly integrated with the political organization of the young nation. In fact, it can be said that temperance was the very first social issue around which the population became organized. Thus all political parties had their own temperance lobbies or clubs. Temperance was at the turn of the century part and parcel of almost any social movement: women's movement, youth movement and especially the nationalist movement [5].

In Sweden, on the other hand, the temperance organizations remained independent – they could concentrate on one moral and ideological issue and their fate was not tied as closely to that of other forms of social and political organization as was the case in Finland.

In addition to the temperance lobbies, the support for the Swedish control system came from two other directions. First of all, the role of the medical profession seems to have been very important. Ivan Bratt, for example, was a physician. Secondly, the strong state bureaucracy itself was an important force behind the "Bratt system". So great was the burden of administrative work involved in registering and regulating each individual's purchases, in verifying the qualifications required for the possession of a licence etc. that nothing of the kind could be imagined in the much poorer Finland of the time.

The post-war period: gradual liberalization

In Finland, as in Sweden, the social meanings and functions of alcohol have in the past mainly been those of a drug. Alcoholic beverages have not been used as parts of a meal, and public drinking places have not until recently, been important places for sociability. Despite the relatively high standard of living in these countries, alcoholic beverages have not been part of the distinction system of status-oriented consumption.

The public acceptance of state control of alcohol use is mainly based on the use of alcohol as a drug. Intoxication in whatever form is always an object of social control, and in societies where informal rituals lose ground, this control evidently takes an official and bureaucratic form. Any drug use arouses moral and social conflicts, not only between social groups but also between deviant individuals and the official society. To this fact is added that drug conflicts are overlapping with class contradictions. In Finland, the post-prohibition control system was explicitly directed towards the lower classes: the peasants and industrial workers. The same was true also in Sweden [6].

Therefore, although alcohol's role as a drug legitimates a relatively strict control by the official society, the issues of equality and liberty easily arise. In particular the control history in Finland has plenty of examples of this. The prohibition in rural areas implied that for many people legal alcohol was not available until the reform of 1968. Women faced a discrimination that was incongruent with their otherwise relatively equal social position in these countries. These were the basic reasons for the collapse of the pre-war control systems in the course of the 1950's. In Sweden the so-called "anti-motboksrörelsen" that opposed individual control was likewise based on a concern about individual liberty and equality.

Furthermore, soon after the war the Finnish monopoly itself began to define the "liquor question" as one of social conflict that was related to the drug-oriented drinking practices. It was felt that the problem could only be solved by an introduction of new and civilized drinking practices to the entire population, not only to the upper classes but to workers and peasants alike [7].

Thus the originally Swedish model of individual control was gradually relaxed in Finland. The personal purchasing permission, which had become only a token means to control each individual's purchases because no records were any longer kept on them, was finally abolished altogether in 1971. In restaurant policies new approaches were adopted, experimentally first and then permanently. To the exclusively upper class restaurants new beer houses were added, and the licencing restrictions were gradually relaxed. Mild beverages were favoured in both pricing and retail distribution arrangements, and even fortified wines were exempted from the purchasing licence requirement between 1952 and 1958. An experiment was made in some rural communities where monopoly shops were temporarily opened to see what effects this might have in reducing illicit production and trade and the use of non-potable alcohol as drinks [8].

In Sweden the Bratt system was rejected in 1955, medium beer was introduced to general grocery stores in 1965 and advertising was allowed. In Finland the lib-

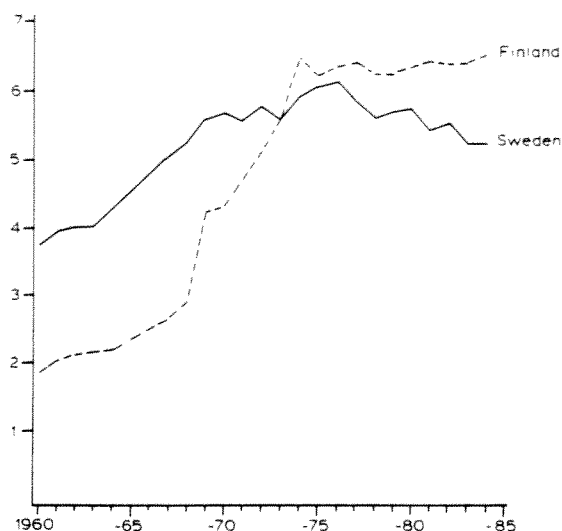


Fig. 1 Total alcohol consumption per capita in Finland and Sweden 1960–1984 (100% alcohol).

eralization trend culminated in 1968. Medium beer was introduced and made available in general grocery stores and in non-licensed cafés. Rural prohibition was repealed and restrictions on monopoly shops and licensed restaurants were liberalized. Advertising was allowed, with restrictions, between 1969 and 1977 [9].

The most visible consequence of the liberalization was an increase in alcohol consumption. In Sweden, the per capita consumption level in 100% alcohol increased from about four to six litres between 1960 and 1976. Since then, the Swedish consumption level has been decreasing slowly. In Finland, the consumption level rose gradually until 1969, when it jumped by about 50% in one year and continued to increase until 1975 (Fig. 1).

Public health perspective

It was partly as a result of current research that official policies were again re-defined in the mid-1970's. Evidence accumulated in support of the hypothesis that increasing consumption levels imply increasing problems and higher costs to the society [10]. This was soon also seen in Finnish statistics, which showed for example that cases of public drunkenness and deaths from cirrhosis of the liver doubled between 1968 and 1974 (Fig. 2).

Both in Finland and in Sweden state committees considered the need for new legislation [11,12], and although no major changes in the system were proposed, the aims of the monopolies were fixed so that alcohol consumption level should no longer be allowed to increase. In Sweden, medium beer was withdrawn in 1977. Advertising was banned in 1978, as in Finland. In addition, in both countries' price policies were given high priority in preventing further consumption increases, but

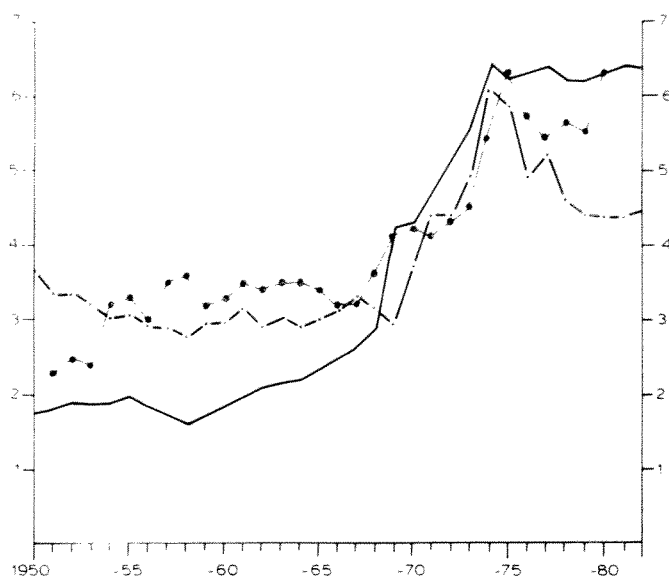


Fig. 2 The per capita consumption of alcoholic beverages in litres, the number of arrests of drunkenness per 1000 inhabitants and the number of fatalities due to cirrhosis of the liver per 100 000 inhabitants. —, consumption of alcohol; - - -, arrests for drunkenness; •—•, cirrhosis of the liver.

in practice anti-inflationary fiscal policies have placed constraints on their implementation. In both countries extensive public persuasion campaigns against excessive alcohol use have been undertaken, both by the state alcohol monopolies and other state organizations.

It is difficult to say to what extent the public health oriented control policies are responsible for the levelling in the rate of alcohol since 1974 in Finland and since 1976 in Sweden. In Finland it has been pointed out, however, that the consumption trends can be linked to certain generations. The post-war generations in Finland have been the wettest ever in terms of low proportions of abstainers and frequent heavy drinkers [13,14]. The generation born after 1960, on the other hand, is again going dry, and relatively fast. Whereas 83% of the 15-year-old boys in 1976 were drinkers, in 1984 only 67% drank. The respective figures for girls are 80% and 46% [15]. Thus it is likely that something has happened in the role of alcohol for the younger generation to make it less important, and this may imply that no great consumption increases could be expected in the future, no matter what kind of control policies are to be implemented.

There are problems, however, that make it necessary to reconsider the role of alcohol control in the near future. These problems relate to three factors:

- the social meanings and functions of alcohol;
- peoples' attitudes towards control in general;
- the social forces in support of the present control systems.

Social meanings and functions of alcohol

First of all, it is a significant fact that attitudes towards alcohol have become linearly more accepting and permissive over a long period. In the Finnish series of surveys from 1968, 1976 and 1984 for example the following findings (Table 1) are noted.

The same result is found when people are asked their opinions on whether it is appropriate to serve alcohol in certain specific occasions like weddings, when friends are visiting, having a sauna, at a May 1st party, Christmas party, or at a 50-year anniversary reception.

Furthermore, in Finland a highly visible and strongly held public opinion has been formed to demand better services and less "bureaucracy" and control in the alcohol distribution system. The press demands earlier licencing hours in the morning, better and cheaper wines, less taxation on high quality international products, more and better furnished liquor stores, less restrictions on the restaurant trade etc. In fact, in many newspaper articles the whole monopoly system has been criticised for being both inconsequent in preventing any alcohol problems and a nuisance to non-problem drinkers.

These attitudes and opinions are class-based. In a Gallup poll in 1979, Marja Holmila found that liberalist tendencies were more outstanding among the higher socio-economic groups than in the lower ones [17]. Similar results are evident in more recent surveys as well [18].

Finland is experiencing a phase in the social development where the new urban middle classes are gradually acquiring a dominant cultural position. In their world cultural competence is of crucial importance. They have a vision of progress about their life. Progress means not only advancement in work but also a certain *savoir vivre*, a cultured competence also in consumption [19]. Alcoholic beverages are perfect means to demonstrate this competence, and this requires increased possibilities for making a choice. To this is added the new forms of sociability in an urban environment, where the family is no longer the only or even the most important nexus of informal social relationships. Again, drinking and especially drinking in public places serves this function perfectly well.

In Sweden this development is at a more advanced stage. In the class structure the educated middle strata are relatively larger (males belonging to white collar

Table 1

Attitudes toward alcohol: percentage of respondents accepting statement

		1968	1976	1984
Moderate alcohol use belongs to ordinary everyday life	women	42	52	60
	men	69	69	78
Alcohol gives no real pleasure to anyone	women	72	64	62
	men	49	50	44

Source: Ref. 16.

Table 2

Distribution of total per capita alcohol consumption between different beverages and between retail sales and consumption on premises in Sweden and Finland in 1985

	Sweden	Finland
total (litres)	4.96	6.46
thereof (%)		
distilled	41.5	43.1
wine	28.6	13.6
beer	43.3	29.8
retail	91.1	76.0
on-premises	8.9	24.1

Sources: Refs. 22 and 23.

occupational groups comprise about 50% of the labour force, in Finland only 37%). Secondly, they are less predominantly recruited from among workers' and farmers' families. And thirdly, they consist of a significant number of persons belonging to "old" middle classes, such as independent entrepreneurs and professionals [20]. In short, Sweden is an older urban educated society than Finland.

This difference is reflected to some extent also in drinking patterns. In Sweden, the role of wine is more important than in Finland relative to the total consumption (Table 2), the variety of different wines consumed is greater and the average wine buyer's interest in quality is more pronounced. On the other hand, the Swedes drink less than 10% of all alcohol in restaurants and pubs. This is partly due to the Swedish temperance tradition: when the alcohol issue arose at the turn of the century, the anti-alcohol movement turned most strongly against public drinking [21]. Still today the regulations on the use of alcohol in restaurants are restrictive and the state controlled price level is extremely high.

Cultural entropy and camouflage effect

The outcome of the new or emerging social meanings of drinking as a sign of civilization, cultural competence or *savoir vivre* is complicated with the fact that these meanings are mixed with the stronger and older meanings of alcohol as a drug. Alcohol as a drug is legitimately controlled by the state and this was, almost a century ago, the basis of the establishment of the still existing control structures.

The mixture of very contradictory social meanings of drinking is probably the most challenging obstacle to rational and consistent public policy on alcohol today and towards the end of this century in these two countries. It has led to something that can be called *cultural chaos* or *cultural entropy* [24]. The role of alcohol in everyday life is ill defined, the norms governing its use are contradictory and always disputable. In whatever way one uses alcohol, it is always susceptible of critique and ridicule from one perspective or another. Drinking a little wine with a meal is a waste of good drink as it does not have any "effect". On the other hand,

a bottle of vodka consumed at one sitting is banal and uncivilized as this behaviour is not a sign of culture but rather of a brutal desire to get drunk.

What is worse, the same lack of common norms also works the other way. There is always a cultural justification to drinking, in whatever way one does it. A beer or two after work with colleagues is part of modern urban sociability. A cocktail at home is a sign of wealth, as in old American movies. A glass of wine with a meal is certainly not "drinking". Going to the pub in the evening with friends often is, particularly for men, but then that is what male friends and pubs are for. The basic problem of alcohol control in such a situation lies in the fact that the several contradictory social meanings of alcohol use make it very easy to *camouflage* or *disguise* one form of drinking as another. When alcohol is clearly used as a drug, its control is legitimate and usually accepted. When this drug is disguised as a symbol of good taste, civilization and cultural competence or, in general, part of "modern life", any such control is much more difficult to justify.

From external to internal control

This is only one aspect of the fact that the new middle classes host an entirely different view of control of one's life than was customary in the earlier working-class and peasant society. In the past, drinking was controlled by ritual and myth in close social and familial networks. The diversity of measures by the official society to restrict drinking to specific situations and places symbolized what can be called *external control*. Presently, the tendency is towards *internal control*, based less on the quasi-religious social meanings attached to being drunk than to rational considerations of the hazardous effects of alcohol.

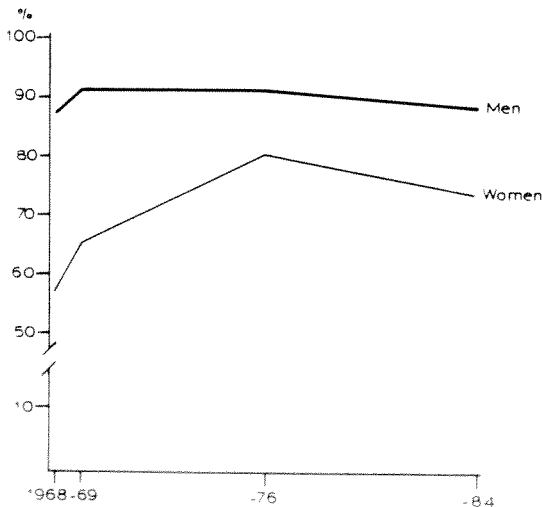


Fig. 3 Proportion of drinkers in the general population 1968, 1969, 1976 and 1984 (Finland).

A few further observations from the Finnish drinking surveys demonstrate this. Fig. 3 shows the proportion of drinkers in 1968–1976 among men and women. It can be seen that the number of non-drinkers (abstaining one year or more preceding the interview) decreased, particularly among women until 1976, but increased again by 1984. Mostly, this reduction of drinkers (who have drunk at least some alcohol within the year preceding the interview) results from occasional drinkers giving up their “experimental” use of alcoholic beverages occasionally, which was common in the early 1970’s when alcohol was introduced to many peoples’ environment for the first time.

However, especially among men, an increasing percentage of abstainers is recruited from among those who earlier have drunk regularly (40% of male abstainers in 1984 have earlier drunk at least once a month). Furthermore, when asked about their reasons for abstaining, people are much more inclined to mention rational reasons like health, money and difficulties with their social environment, whereas earlier they tended to give moral reasons for not using alcoholic beverages [25].

A similar response is common when asked about efforts to control one’s drinking. An increasing number of people are worried about their own drinking, and the reasons they give for controlling it are of the same type as reasons for abstaining [26].

Also the efforts to control one’s own alcohol use are class-based. Rational reasons are more common among the high socio-economic groups than among low socio-economic groups [27].

On the other hand, peoples’ faith in public control measures is staggering. Opinions concerning the free sale of medium beer indicate accurately peoples’ opinions of alcohol control in general. In Figure 4 we can see that in 1968–1969 almost everybody agreed to the free sale of medium beer. A temporary backlash

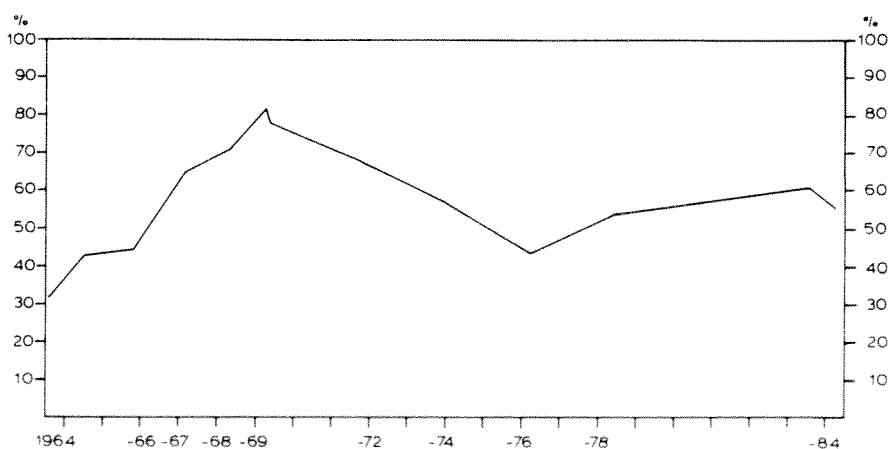


Fig. 4 Percentages of respondents favoring free sale of medium beer in survey polls 1964–1984 (Finland).

followed in the mid-seventies, but the long-term trend towards more liberal control opinions is still continuing (the figures are from different polls and not fully comparable: this probably explains the drop in the end). In 1984 approximately twice as many people agreed to the free sale of medium beer as in 1964.

All in all, we get the picture that at least in one part of the population there is an increased awareness of the risks involved in drinking and consequently a willingness to control it on rational grounds. At the same time there is a growing acceptance of alcohol as part of normal respectable life. Although these perspectives may not encourage daily use of alcohol for instance in the context of everyday casual family dinners, they may encourage drinking in occasions of sociability and common consumption. Alcoholic beverages are acquiring a role in the competence game in social life. In contrast to the growing willingness of internal self-control there is a growing dissentiment of control by outsiders, by the "system" and especially by the state.

Declining support for public control

Finally, in order to consider the outlook for alcohol control in the current epoch, we should take a look at the social forces that support it. In principle, these forces can be of two kinds. Either they consist of those who have vested interests in preventing alcoholism such as certain professional groups. Or the support for public alcohol control will be mobilized on ideological grounds.

It is here that the points about Sweden and Finland made earlier are most relevant. In Finland the main force behind public alcohol control has been the temperance movement. Few professional groups have been active, as compared to the medical doctors' movements in Swedish history. The temperance movement in Finland has only of late accepted the fact that alcohol is and will remain part of modern consumption patterns. Until about 1966 it considered the monopoly system as only a means of and a step towards a totally alcohol-free society. Since then, it has taken in practice much the same position as the monopoly itself: the role of alcohol policy is not to exclude alcohol totally but to minimize the harm wrought by it.

Nevertheless, the temperance movement has acted as an effective counterweight to social forces that have aimed at a liberalization of the control system. The social weight of the Finnish temperance movement, however, has not rested with its size or in the activities of its followers. More importantly, the political influence of Finnish temperance movement has been the result of its integration with the political party system. Until quite recently, a large proportion of members of parliament have begun their public and political career in temperance clubs. The reason for this is that a significant part of state funding to civil organizations such as sport clubs, youth clubs etc. which have been politically affiliated, has come through the so-called Parliamentary temperance allowances. Also at the community level the temperance boards have been very close to all sorts of quasi-political organizations and their activities.

Although the Parliamentary temperance allowances were increased substantially a few years ago, there is no way to turn back the wheel of history. The whole party system is becoming weaker election after election, and with that all old organizations attached to it. Considering that the temperance organizations have for a long time had difficulties in finding messages and activities that might mobilize any large numbers, it is quite difficult to see in what way they could for long serve their important function as a social force to defend public alcohol control.

To complete the picture, we should be reminded that the social forces – the “Greens”, the womens’ movement, the local movements and especially trade unions – that partly replace the old political structures have so far shown very little interest in alcohol control. Nor are they likely to do so in the near future.

In Finland, therefore we have very few social forces to defend public alcohol control. In fact, the most interested defendant of the system is the system itself. The monopoly has no intention of being discontinued, and large parts of the state administration have vested interest in the present control system. In any case, the pressures towards liberalization seem to be especially hard to outweigh today. This places the most serious challenge to the monopoly in its history: its survival depends on its ability to prove its efficacy, to legitimate the restrictions in alcohol sales and to make understood that these restrictions do have a public health function.

Sweden is in a different situation. Temperance groups are still much stronger there, there is a very active civil movement against alcohol and drugs, and in particular Sweden has a highly visible doctors’ movement against drinking. For these reasons it can be expected that the Swedish monopoly will in the future remain stronger than its counterpart in Finland. In Finland the system’s future will greatly depend on the possible emergence of new anti-alcohol pressure groups, probably professional ones, to counterweigh the current heyday of freedom, quality and individualism in drinking issues.

Lessons

This comparison of Swedish and Finnish experiences in alcohol control offers us three major lessons.

First, the way a society controls the use of alcohol depends neither exclusively on scientific evidence on the various harmful effects of drinking nor only on the proven effects of different control measures to eliminate these effects. In addition, the social meanings and cultural definitions of drinking are crucial, maybe even more relevant. Wherever alcohol has mainly the role of a drug, it is usually surrounded by various forms of control. These can have the nature of rituals, but also public controls such as restrictions of availability can then be justified. On the other hand, if the use of alcohol is part of everyday life, acceptance of such control is more difficult to obtain.

Furthermore, alcohol control depends on the kind of political support that can be mobilized behind it. In Sweden, this support has come from an independent

temperance movement, whereas in Finland the temperance movement is more closely connected with the whole political structure.

Secondly, new social meanings of alcohol are emerging. As a result, we are living in what can be called cultural entropy: different definitions of drinking are mixed and confused with each other. This entropy leads to a camouflage effect: different forms of even problematic drinking can easily be disguised as something that is culturally accepted. This is the most challenging obstacle to rational and consistent alcohol control policy in today's world.

Thirdly, new forms of rational self-control are appearing, combined with the emerging social definitions of drinking. These are not an alternative to public restrictions of alcohol availability. On the contrary, like in the case of tobacco, these new forms of internal control require the support of public control measures in order to be effective.

The implications for policy of these conclusions are complicated. They are creating a serious credibility problem everywhere, but especially in the traditional control countries like Sweden and Finland. The control structures have been formed at a historical period very different from ours. The social meanings of alcohol have changed, but so has the political function of the anti-alcohol sentiment on which the control structures were built.

To increase their credibility, alcohol control policies should have very specific goals. Of these, the reduction of overall consumption is in almost any circumstance the most advisable. But in each society one should also aim to identify the most harmful drinking patterns and find means to influence them directly, not only as functions of the overall consumption level.

Towards the end of the century, the potential for successful alcohol control depends largely on the amount of professional interest that can be mobilized to support it. In Sweden, the professional interest is stronger in this regard than in Finland. Even so, it is likely that all interventions should be seen not only as means of directly minimizing alcohol problems but also as educational measures. Their symbolic function as reminders of the risk involved in drinking should be underlined in all possible ways.

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