

Alkoholkontroll i brytningstid

– ett kultursociologiskt perspektiv

Cultural Studies of Alcohol Control in Times of Transition

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Abstract

The dissertation is a product of four separate cultural studies, intended to throw light on the changes in Swedish alcohol policy taking place in recent years.

Paper 1 discusses factors contributing to the rapid proliferation of restaurants in Sweden in the 1980's and the subsequent tensions arising from a restrictive legislation, an increasingly liberal legal praxis and the new, public alcohol culture. Urban transformations and changes in public life, the transition from modern to late modernism, the emergence of a new middle class and the redefinition of women's use of alcohol were among the crucial developments. Beginning in the late 1950's and early 1960's, important steps away from the traditionally strict control of restaurants stimulated competition and led to a loosening up of Swedish restaurant culture. By the 1980's, the restrictive laws governing restaurants had begun to lose legitimacy as legal praxis was applied in an increasingly liberal spirit. The establishment of the Stockholm Water Festival, which allowed central parts of the city to be transformed into a gigantic beer hall, is one example of this. As in many other countries, age limits have now become almost the only actual restriction on the availability of alcohol. Today, rather than protection, the aim of alcohol policy—especially with regard to restaurants—is keeping damage to a minimum.

Paper 2 is based on participant observation in three types of restaurants in Stockholm's city centre. These are characterised as 'the fashionable bar', 'the folksy bar', and 'the ethnic bar'. The study takes its starting point in Goffman's (1956) concepts of 'performance', 'setting' and 'personal front', and how people consciously or unconsciously choose different milieus as a way of controlling the impression of themselves they wish to project. The fashionable bar clearly functioned as an arena for demonstrating professional and social success. The folksy bar could be used as the setting for a form of play in which company colleagues could temporarily set aside their differences in status. The closed room of the ethnic bar encouraged 'time-out' behaviour—seeming to serve as a second home, but also as a sex market for contacts between African men and Nordic women.

Paper 3 presents an analysis of how five different occupational groups discuss their alcohol habits in serious compared to humorous speech. The occupational areas are media, politics, business, culture and civil service. In serious speech, the speakers tended to value cautious drinking, setting sharp limits as to how and when use of alcohol is appropriate. In humorous speech, the situation was largely the opposite – the interviewees often presenting themselves as being under external constraints with regard to alcohol. The situations that provoked humour are also where we find controversy in serious speech. Discrepancies between alcohol habits and the role model one represents as a parent gave rise to a number of jokes. The parts of serious discourse that concerned other people displayed a very different content, dealing with excessive drinking, not being able to handle alcohol and not being permit-

ted to drink alcohol – a content reflected in humorous form when the interviewees talked about themselves.

Paper 4, based on the same interview data as Paper 3, examines the issue of youth and alcohol. Common dividing lines between the groups could be observed, such as describing the problem as an individual, personal or family affair versus seeing it as a problem for the society, or placing responsibility for problem control on the individual as opposed to placing responsibility on the society. Those active in cultural pursuits viewed teenage use and abuse of alcohol as a social problem, but placed responsibility for its solution on a private, individual level. Journalists saw the problem as belonging within the family, which is also where they placed responsibility for the solution. The politicians clearly perceived teenage drinking as a problem for the society and placed responsibility for solutions on outer agents, such as legislation and extensive information campaigns. Civil servants described the problem both in terms of belonging within the family and as a problem for the society. Business executives varied between the level on which they described the problem and the level on which they sought solutions. In considering the problem from the point of view of the consumer, they stressed individual responsibility. But as the discussion progressed, they came to see teenage drinking both as a family problem and a problem for the society and to place responsibility on outer authorities.

The four studies are linked together in an introductory chapter within the common framework of Swedish alcohol control policy.

Key words: Cultural studies, Alcohol Policy, Transition, Sweden