Drug Globalization: Eventual Legalization of Beer in Iceland and Marihuana Decriminalization in the USA

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Abstract

Beer was banned in Iceland for the most part of the twentieth century, 1915–1989. Using records of parliamentary debates, law enforcement records, surveys of public attitudes, and census data, the main arguments used for and against the law in Parliament show that it was largely unenforced, or symbolic law. An attempt will be made to illustrate why beer prohibition was abolished in 1989 and what effects liberalized alcohol policies have had on the consumption of alcohol in society. Finally, similarities of prohibition of alcohol and the current prohibition of drugs will be deliberated.

The main arguments for the prohibition of beer were that beer was particularly hazardous to young people and workers. However, advocates of legal beer believed it to be a peculiar arrangement to ban beer while allowing hard liquor. External and internal changes, opening of the society and its changed conditions, gradually led to liberal views regarding alcohol policies which eventually led to the abolition of the beer prohibition in 1989.

The past and current challenges in the USA, with both alcohol and marihuana, will be compared to Iceland in the current economic crisis. Evidence of policy change towards use of drugs can be detected in Europe, surprisingly led by Portugal, which decriminalized all drug use in 2001, which might suggest a possible policy shift in the future. Globalization and economic interests provide a significant basis for legal change in Iceland and the USA.

KEY WORDS: Adolescent substance use, Alcohol consumption, Carrying capacity, Globalization, Prohibition of beer, Prohibition of cannabis

Introduction

The prohibition of beer was without any doubt one of the most controversial issues in Iceland in the twentieth century, and this is not a surprise. Nowhere in the Western world are all alcoholic beverages allowed, except its weakest form, beer. In most other nations, it is believed that the harmfulness of alcohol increases with its strength, and therefore stronger drinks, rather than weaker ones, have been frowned upon by ruling elites. There is therefore ample reason to critically evaluate the objectives of this law; what arguments were used for and against the law in the Icelandic Parliament (Alþingi). It is also interesting to deliberate how the struggle against beer in the past resembles the campaign against drugs today. We will show that as soon as beer was legalized in Iceland the seemingly never-ending battle against drugs took on an escalating turn.

History of prohibitionist sentiment

Beer was first prohibited in Iceland when the ban of all alcoholic beverages came into
effect in 1915 (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000). However, in 1922, the Icelandic Parliament made an exception to the laws and decided to allow Spanish wines only. Behind this change of the law we find mainly political manoeuvring and politicians with a keen sense of economic interests rather than a benevolent policy on alcohol issues (Þorleifsson 1973). Similar economic interests were also found in the origins of Finland’s prohibition (Kallenaautio 1981). Therefore, substance control laws seem to concern not only questions of ethics or morals, but also economic considerations. Following a national referendum on the prohibition in 1933, where Icelanders by a close margin voted against it, the Alþingi decided in 1935 to allow importation and sale of all alcoholic beverages except beer over 2.25% alcohol. Beer prohibition lasted until the year 1988 when the brewing, importation, and selling of beer was finally allowed by Alþingi. Proposals demanding legalization of beer had then been put to the Parliament around twenty times before this prohibition was finally repealed.

**Origins and characteristics of the prohibition of beer**

If the history of beer in the Alþingi is scrutinized as a whole (see Gunnlaugsson and Galliher 2000:29–47), observers quickly notice how moderate most of the reform proposals were. They would usually only propose domestic beer production, not importation, and only allow beer that was no more than 1–2.5% stronger than the one legally allowed. Despite this moderation, the bills came up against furious opposition in the Alþingi and in the community, which suggests a battle more symbolic than truly instrumental, although all alcohol was more difficult to secure during beer prohibition.

To support this argument we can point out the well known fact that in Iceland beer was commonly available despite the ban. Home brewing was for a long period of time a favourite pastime of the nation. Seamen and later flight crews were allowed to import beer for personal use upon entering the country. ‘Near Beer’ or synthesized beer, made from pilsner and hard liquor, was sold in all pubs during the last years before the ban was lifted. From 1979, tourists could import beer via the duty-free store in Keflavík. Therefore it can be argued that this was largely a symbolic legislation, similar to the prohibition in the United States, as the laws do not rest on sound instrumental premises (Gusfield 1963). The same can also be argued about the banning of cannabis, which seems to be easily accessible to those interested despite the ban.

In this context, it seems ironic that the beginning of the beer prohibition was quite accidental. Beer was most likely sacrificed in a compromise between conflicting factions in Parliament to clear the passage for the annulment of the prohibition of all other alcoholic beverages in 1934. The supporters of the ban were promised that beer would not be legalized, and its detractors were allowed to consume hard liquor again. Both factions thus got something and could be relatively satisfied with the outcome. To confirm this compromise, it can be mentioned that the then Prime Minister, Hermann Jónasson, in the beginning of the debates proclaimed that it was peculiar to ban beer when hard liquor was to be legal. During the course of the debates, he did, however, change his mind.
and vehemently spoke for the continued prohibition of beer and thus made sure that the bill went through Parliament without a hitch. In addition, there was already a tradition of discrimination between wine and other alcoholic beverages, exemplified by the special arrangement regarding Spanish wines mentioned above.

Parliamentary debates

The main arguments for the prohibition of beer in Alþingi during the debates in 1934 were that beer imposed a threat to society, especially to young people and manual workers. It was also believed that with legal beer the total consumption of the average citizen would increase, accompanied by multiple problems resulting from drinking. In the following paragraphs we offer a glimpse into a few statements made by parliamentarians supporting prohibition of beer. They are classic examples of the type of pleading employed by the supporters of the prohibition and echo arguments that subsequently were made in many years to come:

The youth starts to drink beer and gets acquainted with the influence of alcohol. This develops step by step, the influence of beer becomes not enough, one wants to enjoy the influence of alcohol immediately, which leads to drinking strong liquor. But it is evident that beer evokes the longing for drinking alcohol. In regard to this fact, temperance movements, both in Iceland and elsewhere, have been against allowing beer. Although we may allow the importation of hard liquor to Iceland, it is very important to prohibit beer, otherwise it would be floating all around us. Many people are worried about the consequences of allowing beer, it is very important to prevent such a disaster, especially a disaster to young people. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1934:2110–2111)

A socialist member of Parliament also argued that working-class people in Iceland would be those most injured by beer and that they were especially vulnerable to its effect due to their Viking blood:

Those with the lowest income, living under poor social conditions, have a great tendency to soothe their pain with alcohol drinking ... Icelanders are not able to use alcohol as civilized persons, their nature is still too much of the Viking kind, they get too excited and brutal, with alcohol usage. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1934:2157–2158, 2226)

These statements above became very influential and were used unsparingly in various forms in the following decades. Young people get to know alcohol through beer, which gradually leads them to hard liquor. The advocates of beer did, however, believe it to be a very strange measure to ban beer when hard liquor was legal. They also pointed out that it was precisely beer, rather than hard liquor, that could improve drinking habits of not only teenagers, but the whole nation as well. However, their arguments fell on deaf ears in Parliament. One beer supporter stated his case in the following way:

... when people get used to beer drinking they do not get drunk from beer [sic] ... it may be possible to find people who have started out drinking beer, leading them to wine and finally liquor but only in exceptional cases ...
MPs must realize what kind of nonsense they are about to pass and change their mind accordingly. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1934:2216)

In 1947 a beer supporter stated the following about the positive consequences of beer legalization:

... beer brewing has led to moderation and less consumption of strong liquor. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1947:188)

Now let us examine the case parliamentarians made for the prohibition in the year 1960:

A few days ago I witnessed a 13-year-old schoolboy saying that kids his age really needed this beer to get up in the morning to go to school. This boy also believed it to be handy for the homes, because then they did not have to bother about preparing coffee or tea, just grab the beer from the kitchen shelves. Thus it is apparent that propaganda for beer has had some effects on young peoples’ minds. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1960a:438)

It can be handy for workers to have a beer for their refreshment, especially if it will be pointed out to them that it is healthy, rich in vitamins and nutritious. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1960a:439)

... in economic terms beer will make workers suffer because they need all their salaries to cover life expenses for themselves and their families. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1960a:462, repeated from the former chairman of Dagsbrún, a worker’s union)

On the other hand, a supporter of beer stated his case bluntly in the following way:

The ban of beer is an insult to the Icelandic peoples’ sense of liberty and civilization ... and I strongly oppose the notion that the working-class is more sensitive to temptations of beer than other social groups in society. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1960b:587)

In 1965 another proponent of beer stated the following about the positive effects of beer compared to strong liquor:

Beer is relatively harmless. Beer has a very different influence on people compared to strong liquor. Liquor is stimulating ... people become all crazed and stupefied. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1965:29, 30–31)

In 1968 one MP put forward his thoughts about those parliamentarians who wanted to let the nation vote on the prohibition of beer, in the following way:

They are most likely thirsty with a sense of inferiority complex, because they do not look the way they want to look like. They believe they will gain respect from the public if they have a big beer belly. I propose they spend their vacation in Copenhagen, visiting pubs to let their belly grow bigger from drinking beer. This will at least be much less costly than a national referendum. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1968:1727)

In 1983–1984, in a preamble to a proposal in Parliament to letting a national referendum settle the issue of beer, the following was stated:

It sounds awfully strange to ban the sale of the weakest substance of all alcoholic
beverages but allow sales of hard liquor. It sounds similar to a ban of aspirin and allowance of morphine. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1983–1984a:743)

By the 1980s, references to poor social conditions of workers and their special vulnerability to beer had diminished. Yet, another MP in 1984 opposed legalization of beer due to the risk to workers and stepping-stone effects of beer:

... risk of easy access to beer will result in increased drunkenness in work places ... igniting consumption of stronger alcohol. (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1983–1984b:6389)

Beer prohibition was finally abolished by Parliament in May of 1988, and the new law allowing beer sales took effect in March 1989. Prior to the passage of the new law, proposals to allow beer brewing and sales or to let a public referendum settle the issue had been introduced in Parliament each year since the parliamentary session of 1983–1984. The proposals were always hotly debated but were postponed, ending in a committee or defeated in a vote in Parliament, before finally being passed in 1988 by a close margin.

Patterns of political conflict

What political forces were behind the legislation banning beer? Can a certain pattern be detected or did it cut across all political parties? It was rather rare, at least to begin with, that proposals concerning legalization of beer would lead to a vote in Alþingi. Most of the bills died in committee, or were left stranded on other parliamentary reefs. If we examine the pattern in those votes that did take place during the first half of the prohibition of beer era (Gunnlaugsson 2008), we see that its detractors had a tendency to come from the Sjálfstæðisflokkur (Independence Party), the largest party which largely bases itself on free market rhetoric. The supporters of the prohibition were more closely aligned with Fransóknarflokkurinn (Progressive Party), a traditional farmers’ and rural area party. The blue-collar or workers’ parties for quite some time adhered more to prohibition, supporting it, but just as with prohibition itself, they no longer exist. The political fault lines were, however, never quite obvious. One of the early avid supporters of the prohibition of beer was without a doubt Pétur Ottesen, a parliamentarian for the Sjálfstæðisflokkur and a farmer from Borgarfjörður, a fjord in the western part of Iceland. Much in the same way Guðrún Helgadóttir, a parliamentarian for Alþyðubandalagið (People’s Alliance, Socialist) in Reykjavík, was the prohibition’s most vocal opponent in its final years.

Opposition to alcoholic beverages stemming from the country-side is a well known phenomenon in other countries. Experience from the United States is an example where it was first and foremost rural populations that were the driving force behind prohibition in the early part of the twentieth century (Gusfield 1963). The prohibition also reflected deep conflicts between various societal groups in times of profound social transformation. The advent of the prohibition was symbolic in the sense it revealed status differences in society, namely the rural population and their Protestant ethic, as opposed to the new societal forces and urbanization, which for the moment were subdued.
The adherence of the working-class parties to the prohibition is a more of a surprise, although Finland’s prohibition law was also supported by working-class interests (Kallenaatio 1981). The explanations can be argued to be historical, but the history of the trade unions in Iceland is considerably interwoven with the history of groups advocating sobriety (Einarsson 1970). The parliamentarians for these parties routinely pointed out that the prohibition protected their voters especially, and that if beer was legalized the weakness of workers would show through their daily drinking, during working-hours, and leisure. The parliamentarians for the working-class parties therefore seem to have underrated their own voters and thought them to be a different breed from other people. Their stance was, however, not only that of working-class representatives, as it was also observed among parliamentarians in other political parties. In the United States it was quite different (Timberlake 1966). Prohibition of alcohol did not receive much support from the unions which believed that prohibition was first and foremost enforced against them and not much or indirectly against other classes.

Abolition of beer prohibition

Why was the prohibition abolished in the year 1989, not sooner or even later? There are several reasons. Polls of public opinion were not a common thing in Iceland until after 1980, and therefore it is rather difficult to gauge the general stance of the nation before that time. However, there is one poll released in March of 1977 which a private firm Hagvangur did for the daily newspaper Visir. The sample was small, but the poll showed a majority supporting prohibition (DV 1977). The numbers of those in Iceland against the prohibition did nevertheless rise during the 1980s, both in the capital Reykjavik and in the rural areas, which inevitably put some pressure on Alþingi to abolish prohibition. Many also believed it to be an inappropriate discrimination that only those with better means to go abroad could purchase beer and import it (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher 2000). The ‘Near Beer’, made from hard liquor and pilsner, served in many local bars, also illustrated the ineffectiveness and absurdity of the laws.

The supporters of prohibition were overwhelmingly made up of people from rural areas, their representatives, as well as the parliamentarians for the working-class parties. A large section of the supporters of prohibition also consisted of women and the elderly. With increased support in the community for the abolition of the prohibition, and the increasing urbanization, these clear lines of factions soon started to blur. Icelandic society was radically transformed in the twentieth century by urbanization and more division of labour (Gunnlaugsson and Bjarnason 1994). In 1910 more than two-thirds of the population lived in rural areas, and most of the population was involved in either farming or fishing. At the same time Iceland’s population exploded from about 85,000 in 1910 to more than 300,000 in the new millennium. In 1989, when prohibition was finally abolished, almost 90% of the nation lived in urban areas, and the occupational structure had become similar to most other Western countries.

The re-apportionment of Parliament to reflect these remarkable population shifts was, however, slow in coming. It is very
likely that this played a decisive role in extending the prohibition of beer. When beer was finally legalized in 1988, about 38% of the nation lived in Reykjavík, but only 29% of parliamentarians represented them, which was the highest percentage Reykjavík had in a long time. As stated before most of the opponents of prohibition came from the Independence Party. In retrospect, the most surprising thing was how many parliamentarians from the Progressive Party supported abolition of the prohibition. Although proportionately more parliamentarians from the capital supported abolition than from the rural areas, a small majority of rural representatives also supported abolition. The majority of the People’s Alliance (Socialist) did, however, support prohibition until 1988 (Gunnaugsson 2008). An interesting development was an outcry from 15 medical doctors teaching in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of Iceland, asking parliamentarians to not abolish the prohibition because it would add to the total consumption of alcohol in Iceland and increase health problems of the nation. Following that outburst, 133 medical doctors wrote another letter to Alþingi claiming there was no correlation between total consumption of alcohol and the number of alcoholics and recommended that beer be legalized: ‘It is likely that consumption of alcoholic beverages (with allowance of beer) would be geared more towards weaker alcoholic beverages instead of stronger ones’ (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 1987–1988:4777). The medical profession therefore claimed the matter of beer to be their speciality.

More factors than increasing urbanization and changed constituencies in the Alþingi were behind the abolition. Iceland has in recent decades become ever more integrated into the international community. In 1950 when Icelanders totalled about 150,000, only 4,300 Icelanders went abroad, with only 4,400 tourists visiting the country. By 1970 there had been an important change. That year around 27,000 Icelanders went abroad, and over 53,000 tourists came to Iceland. In the year 1988, when the ban was eventually abolished, around 150,000 Icelanders went abroad, or almost two out of every three, and over 130,000 tourists visited the country (Icelandic Tourist Board 1990). This development is a clear indication that the geographical isolation of Iceland had been ended and that a large part of the nation was getting acquainted with the cultures of other Western countries, including beer customs. In other words, processes of modernization and globalization gradually paved the way to legal beer. Abolition of the beer ban can be seen as an example of how the local and the global come together producing a specific social practice associated with law. The opening of the country, both internally and externally, therefore gradually undercut the underlying elements of prohibition of beer.

The development of Icelandic society towards modernity also included other features, in particular social and economic interests. The government policy on alcohol has become more liberalized and market-oriented in recent years. In 1954 there was only one restaurant in Iceland licensed to sell alcohol. In 1980 there were 37, in 1988 their numbers had increased to 148, and in 1994 they numbered 322. In the year 2001 the number of alcohol licences was up to 512, and the growth was mostly in rural areas. The same trend can also be
observed in the number of stores selling alcohol. The government has a monopoly of selling alcoholic beverages in Iceland. Their numbers have also increased, from 7 stores in the whole of Iceland in 1962, to 24 in 1994, and 49 in 2009 (Iceland Statistics 2009).

Impact of beer on total alcohol consumption and patterns of consumption

What effects did liberalized alcohol policies have on the total consumption of alcohol in Iceland? If we look at the statistics, an increase in the total alcohol consumption in Iceland in recent decades can easily be detected. In 1966 for instance, the total amount of alcohol consumed per capita was 2.33 litres, but in 1978 it was up to 2.88. Therefore, it can be argued that the increase had started before prohibition of beer was lifted. In the year 1988, the year the ban was abolished, the amount per capita was up to 3.39 litres (Figure 1). In 1990, the first whole year that beer had been readily available, it went up to 3.93 litres and in 1995 back down to 3.6 litres, which was not far off from where it was before the ban was abolished (Iceland Statistics 2009).

However, more liberal alcohol policies have indisputably increased the total amount of alcohol sales in Iceland. In 2007, it was up to 5.95 litres of pure alcohol per capita. We can safely state that the abolition of prohibition of beer is only one of many explanations for this increase over time. Still, Icelanders drink less than most Western nations, but the gap between Iceland and others is steadily shrinking (OECD 2009). Preliminary findings show a reduction of sales in 2009, most likely due to the bank crisis (visir.is 2009b).

The pattern of consumption has also changed since eventual legalization of beer (Figure 2). The amount of hard liquor sales has gone down by almost half. Consumption of wines has almost doubled, and beer sales increased even more. On the whole, Icelanders consume more alcohol than before legalization of beer, but their drinking habits have been geared more towards weaker alcoholic beverages, a trend detected early on (Ólafsdóttir 1998). It might be argued that people’s behaviour with alcohol has generally improved (Morgunblaðið 2009); yet problems related to alcoholism have not subsided, as can be shown in admittance rates to local rehabilitation centres (SÁA 2009).

Figure 1. Total consumption of pure alcohol per capita 1980–2007, Iceland. Source: Statistics Iceland.
What about alcohol consumption among adolescents? Research on drinking among students in Iceland has been extensive in recent years. A long-term ESPAD (The European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs) research project on drinking among 15–16-year-old school students in Iceland shows that the number of students who have used alcohol significantly dropped during 1995–2007 (Bjarnason 2009). However, some evidence suggests that those youth who actually use alcohol consume more than before (Bjarnason 2006). The advent of beer shows few signs of resulting in alcohol being consumed in work-places or increased levels of drinking on the job by blue-collar workers like those supporting the prohibition feared. However, it is likely that alcohol is consumed more often in Iceland with legalization of beer, but possibly in smaller quantities each time. Opponents to beer rightfully predicted increased alcohol sales with legalization of beer, but proponents also had a point in arguing that alcohol consumption would be steered more towards weaker alcoholic beverages. A useful summary of these developments has been provided by Ólafsdóttir and Leifman (2002).

A different societal structure in Iceland and the opening up of the community to the outside world has paved the way for increased purchasing power and more spare time for Icelanders. Attitudes towards alcoholic beverages have become more like what we find in most other places in Western societies, and thus consumption of alcohol has also grown to a similar degree. So the mixed message is that with legal beer Iceland at least has not been traumatized.

**Similarities to control of marihuana in the USA**

Recent movement from local moral and economic issues toward global economic problems has been observed by Jenness (2004). As shown above, the most influential argument put forward against legalization of beer over time involved the notion that adolescents are somewhat more sensitive to temptations of beer than are other social groups. That is, if beer was to be allowed, adolescents would have a strong tendency to abuse it with consequent drunkenness and disorder. Thus, the ban of beer was for a long time justified by the idea that it served the function of protecting youth from misconduct which would inevitably follow legalization of beer.
The concern for the well-being of youth has also been found to be of central importance in controlling various drugs in the USA, especially marihuana. Himmelstein (1983) argues that the first federal attempt to control marihuana in the USA, the Marihuana Tax Act of 1937, was justified primarily as a way of saving youth. Concern focused on what the drug did to the youth; its alleged spread to youth was regarded as an infection, which could ultimately ruin their lives. In this respect, youth was seen as more vulnerable to the danger of this drug than were other social groups. Thus, similar to the reasoning behind the ban of beer in Iceland, the prohibition of marihuana in 1937 had the same objective to save youth from what was perceived as a major threat to their well-being. No such concerns for workers can be detected in the origins of marihuana prohibitions as was found in the arguments against beer in Iceland over time.

In addition to the notion that legalization of beer hurts the well-being of youth, another idea is embedded into this argument, namely that use of beer will serve as a stepping-stone to hard liquor. This idea, clearly formulated by Ottesen back in 1934, was indeed the most effective argument convincing other MPs to oppose legalization of beer. This argument involves the notion that youth will start out by drinking beer and thus get acquainted with the influence of alcohol. Gradually, however, the intoxication from beer becomes not enough which leads step by step to drinking hard liquor. This formulation became very influential when proposals of allowing beer were discussed later in Parliament. Sentiment of this sort was echoed once again in Alþingi in 2006 when actions against drug use were discussed: ‘emphasizing the role of beer in getting children and adolescents addicted to drugs ... alcohol does in fact play a major role in having young kids, even as young as 10 year olds, starting out experimenting with alcohol, with one thing leading to another’ (Iceland Parliamentary Debates 2005–2006:4332). This theme has also been found to be of vital importance when prohibition of marihuana has been justified. The argument involves the notion that marihuana use is a stepping-stone to heroin addiction (Kaplan 1970). When the thrills of marihuana are gone, it leads the user gradually to use of heroin. This claim became central to American discussions of marihuana control policy in the 1950s (Himmelstein 1983).

The emphasis on a causal link between different substances has been an important factor in both Iceland and in the USA when prohibition of beer and marihuana has been justified. The underlying theme behind this argument derives most likely from a certain scepticism that the substance per se is dangerous; rather the danger is what the substance will lead the user to: beer will lead the user to usage of hard liquor, marihuana will lead the user to heroin. Yet, here the uniqueness of Iceland appears, banning beer but not liquor which presumably is more dangerous. The underlying assumption is that youth will not be as easily turned into usage of alcohol by liquor alone; beer, however, would make the transition to liquor much easier—i.e. introduce the user to alcohol.

The similarities between control of beer in Iceland and marihuana in the USA do not only appear in the arguments of those who justify the ban of these substances.
In 1965, as shown above, one of the sponsors of a proposal allowing beer argued in Alþingi that it was very strange to ban beer, because it calms people down, while liquor can easily drive people crazy. The same argument has been put forward by those who want to legalize marihuana in the USA, i.e. justified in that the drug makes people relax, makes them tolerant and less aggressive and should thus not be prohibited (Kaplan 1970). Thus apparently, both supporters and opponents of these substances use very similar arguments when justifying their case. Supporters of allowance of beer and marihuana argue that the substance will help people to relax. Opponents, on the other hand, argue that the substance will hurt youth, even ultimately ruin their lives and eventually lead them to use of harder substances.

Beer, marihuana and economic crises in the USA

In the US, beer, along with other alcohol types, was prohibited in 1920 and especially attacked by the Anti-Saloon League because it was typically consumed in taverns and thus associated with illegal gambling and prostitution (Zahniser 2005). All alcohol was legalized in 1933 in the midst of the Great Depression. This legislation was widely described as symbolic or unenforced law (Gusfield 1963) and arguably was repealed due to the fiscal crisis of the Depression. The nation simply could not afford unenforced law, with economic interests playing a decisive role.

Unlike single malt whiskey or Chardonnay wine, beer is the choice of the working-class and the very young. And experience clearly proves that age limits placed on the purchase of beer are impossible to enforce. On most college campuses the majority of both students and drinkers are under 21. Whatever the drawbacks of current age restrictions it is clear that under-age beer drinking on college campuses generates massive tax revenues to the state. It has been recommended that honest education of the young may be the only alternative to failed efforts at legal control of alcohol (McCardell 2009).

Marihuana controls present a similar problem. Marihuana was criminalized under US federal law in 1937, seemingly replacing alcohol prohibition. Like beer, marihuana is associated with young people. Given the current American economic crisis, suggestions are being raised to legalize marihuana. Among US states California is not only the largest but also has the most severe fiscal problems, with a large budget gap that must be closed in the near future (Abramsky 2009). So what is California to do? Just as Iceland did in the early 1920s with its changed alcohol policy due to economic pressure from Spain, California might respond in a similar fashion. Legalization of marihuana is expected to provide massive sales tax revenues as well as saving many millions from expenditures for police, probation, parole, and prisons. Remembering the American experience with alcohol, age limits on legal marihuana possession seem unworkable in spite of legalization.

Prohibition of beer and the current campaign against drugs

Carrying capacity is a concept used in the biological sciences to indicate the level of a species that can be sustained in a given organic environment. It also can be used to
indicate the level of law enforcement created to sustain a given amount of effort to control proscribed substances. The New York Times (2009) recently noted that to deal with its current economic crisis Iceland must ‘sacrifice’. The sacrifice may well include downplaying its campaign on drugs which has escalated in recent years. California, the US, and Iceland must begin to think differently on these issues and be prepared to sacrifice. If drug use is decriminalized and sentencing policies for drug importation and sales are scaled down, more prison space will be opened up which in turn can be used on other types of serious offences, such as violence and property crimes.

Predictably, the abolition of the prohibition of beer in 1988 did not signify the end of the struggle against intoxicating substances. Shortly thereafter, a new-found and rejuvenated rigour was put into Icelanders’ opposition to drugs that has not yet faded. How has the situation of drugs developed in Iceland in the past two decades?

During 1987–1994, on average about 500 persons were arrested each year suspected of drug violations, when the total population of Iceland was about 250,000 citizens (Gunnlaugsson 2004). Most involved private use of drugs (about 75%), the remainder involved sales and importation. Figures of police drug seizures during 1985–1995 showed that most involved cannabis (about 147 kilos) and amphetamines and cocaine (about 20 kilos) (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher 2000). In the past few years the drug situation has escalated. The total number of drug cases in 2007 was close to 2,000, involving about three-quarters for private use only. In the time-period 2002–2007, more than 200 kilos of cannabis were seized by police, more than 100 kilos of amphetamines, and about 30 kilos of cocaine. Doses of Ecstasy and LSD seized were also in the tens of thousands during the same time-period. Heroin was virtually non-existent (National Commissioner of the Icelandic Police 2008).

In 2007 (Fréttablaðið 2007) and 2009 (visir.is 2009a), two boats were caught on the east coast of Iceland where the total amount of drugs seized exceeded all the drugs seized by police during the whole time-period of 2002–2007. On top of this, hundreds have recently been arrested for home-grown marihuana (ruv.is 2009a), many involved in mass production of hundreds of kilos of marihuana. Thus, drugs seem to be wide-spread in Iceland as in other Western countries, despite stiff legal efforts to curb this problem. A population survey of drug use among 16–75-year-olds in Iceland showed that about 25% admitted to have used cannabis at least once during their lifetime (IMG Gallup 2003).

The drug problem manifests itself also in Iceland’s prison system. In the early 1990s the number of drug inmates typically amounted to less than 10% of the prison population (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher 2000). In most recent years this figure has risen dramatically. In 2008, close to one-third of all prisoners served time for drug offences (Iceland Prison Statistics 2009)—a figure bound to increase given the pressure from most recent drug developments. The drug situation in Iceland’s prisons seems to gradually show resemblance to the prison situation during prohibition of alcohol in Iceland. During the period 1929–1938 about half of the prison population served time for various alcohol-related offences.
such as illegal brewing and alcohol sales (Heiðdal 1957), reflecting the continuity of concern with substance abuse in Iceland. The present prison situation of accumulating ‘waiting lists’ of sentenced individuals awaiting serving as Iceland’s prison capacity is full (ruv.is 2009b) puts ever more pressure on authorities to seek policy alternatives.

Compared to California, Iceland has the relative luxury of making future distinctions in law enforcement. California is on the brink of economic collapse due in no small part to its draconian three-strikes legislation and its obscenely bloated prison system. While Iceland also faces economic hardship, its drug enforcement may seem less perilous and easier to amend. In this small Nordic nation, law enforcement distinctions between possession and sale of drugs show that only sale can result in imprisonment while possession only results in arrest and conviction minus the threat of prison. Yet the requisite law enforcement machinery is still considerable (Gunnlaugsson 2008).

Just as processes of globalization pushed Iceland to legalize beer, globalization and economic interests seem to have pressured the USA to minimize its marihuana punishments. A recent book (Greenwald 2009) notes that in 2001 Portugal decriminalized possession of all drugs. Traffickers are still prosecuted as criminal offenders, while possession of drugs is merely an administrative matter. With its three-strikes mania California’s drug control system has not only tyrannized its citizens but has created massive fiscal costs. One possible ‘sacrifice’ for California and Iceland would be to downplay their war on drugs, as comforting as symbolic law may be. Neither state can afford it. Yet, at present no signs of such critical reflection can be detected in regard to drug control policies in Iceland, whether it be political, economic, or social. A restrictive drug control system still prevails in Iceland, receiving strong support from the population (Gunnlaugsson 2008), whatever the future will hold.

In Portugal police are not allowed to make arrests but rather issue citations and thus suspects are freed from the stigma of arrest. Before decriminalization, addicts’ fears of arrest prevented them from seeking treatment. Anonymous questionnaires show that the prevalence of illegal drug use and drug-related deaths have decreased since decriminalization. Currently Portugal has one of the lowest levels of cannabis use in the EU and is near the bottom for use of cocaine (Greenwald 2009; Hibell et al. 2009).

Only a few far-right-wing politicians argue for the repeal of the 2001 law. Paulo Portas, leader of the conservative Popular Party said: ‘There will be plane-loads of students heading for Portugal to smoke marihuana and take a lot worse, knowing that we won’t put them in jail. We promise sun, beaches, and any drug you like’ (Greenwald 2009:6). Contrary to conservative predictions the law has not spurred drug tourism from other EU nations. Since the law was passed, drug usage has decreased in Portugal, as has transmission of HIV due to drug usage.

Conclusion
As time passes the relationship between the prohibition of alcohol and the current ban on drugs may become clearer and more apparent. During prohibition of beer and other types of alcohol in Iceland and the
USA, we can detect similar consequences to the on-going campaign against drugs. Smuggling, home-brewed and dangerous alcohol, specialized police forces to eradicate the handling and consumption of alcohol by methods of mass arrests and imprisonments, violence in the underworld, brutish drinking habits, and a deep alcohol problem; all have a clear parallel in modern society in the war on drugs with these known and other similar effects. At the same time it is likely that increased liberalization in regards to intoxicating substances, whether it be alcohol or drugs, leads to more consumption in society.

As for future policy developments, lessons from beer and other alcohol prohibitions in Iceland and the United States, for the current campaign waged against drugs with its fiscal pressure and questionable outcome, might suggest policy shifts towards decriminalization of drug use and reduction of punitive measures for other drug offences. Surprisingly, Portugal appears to be leading the way. At present, however, no signs of such a policy change can be detected in Iceland. Given its recent legalization of beer, Iceland seems an unlikely candidate to becoming a pioneer in enacting alternative drug policies—in spite of its current fiscal crisis. Such a policy change is probably more likely to take place in the wake of a broader international shift towards a different drug policy. Processes of globalization and economic interests in both Iceland and the USA might therefore in the future turn these governments to more balanced substance control policies. Not because of ethics or moral considerations—but due to fiscal and new globalized pressure.

References


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