

A COUNTRY OF DECENT CONSUMERS: THE ROLE OF ALCOHOL IN EVERYDAY FINNISH LIFE IN THE 1950S

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WHY FINNISH ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION DID NOT INCREASE IN THE 1950S?

In the 1950s the yearly consumption of alcohol in Finland remained fixed at just under two litres of pure alcohol per capita. This quite modest level had been typical of Finnish consumers for more than one hundred years, and at least from the middle of the 19th century. At certain times, for example during the First World War, consumption fell even lower – in 1916 to about 0.5 litres per capita (Peltonen 1997, 63). At the present time, the amount of pure alcohol consumption is around 10 litres annually.

It is easy to understand that alcohol consumption in Finland had been lower than in the other Nordic countries because the Finnish standard of living was lower, a circumstance exacerbated by the First and Second World Wars and the Great Depression of the 1930s. But the fact that the level of alcohol consumption remained the same, and even had a tendency to fall in the late 1950s, is peculiar. This contrasts strikingly with the development of alcohol consumption in Sweden, particularly when it could be expected that a parallel change would have characterised Finnish drinking habits. Why Finns were so different from the Swedes in the 1950s? Why were respectability and decency so important to them? Where had the roughness and restlessness of the immediate post-war years disappeared?

CUSTOMER CONTROL

Finnish alcohol policy was reformed after the Second World War. The aim was to exert a measure of control over the customers of the state alcohol monopoly *Alkoholiliiike* (later *Alko*), the only retail outlet in the country besides restaurants where alcohol could be bought legally.¹ The new policy was called ‘customer control’, and was an adaptation of the Swedish *Bratt system* which had been established during the First World War. The Swedish alcohol policy was named after its inventor Dr. Ivan Bratt. All persons who wished to purchase alcoholic beverages had to register at Alko and receive a card, which had to be shown every time they visited *Alko’s* retail shops. Purchases were recorded on the liquor card and on another card that was kept in the shop. This information was transferred to the central database at Alko’s headquarters in Helsinki. A customer could use only one shop, the one nearest to one’s home. Most women could also have a liquor card unlike in Sweden where only unmarried women could apply for the right to be a customer of the Systembolaget alcohol monopoly (Peltonen 2002, 42).

If Alko customers were discovered to have abused their cards by selling alcohol to persons who were minors, did not have the right to buy and consume alcohol, or had bought amounts of alcohol disproportionate to their income and social status, they could be punished. In such cases the customer was at first given a notice that his or her buying habits were not acceptable. The second step was terminating the liquor card. Usually those punished were prohibited from buying alcoholic beverages for a certain period (typically six months). In severe cases the right to be an Alko customer was denied for life. The *Alko* Company employed a special staff with police rights to gather information on suspected customers. These “overseer detectives” contacted local police authorities, authorities in the social services, as well as neighbours and

¹ *Alko*, a state-owned company, had the monopoly to produce, import and sell alcohol in Finland. It could license other companies to produce or import alcoholic beverages, but all retail shops belonged to it. Only *Alko* and licensed producers or import agents could sell alcohol to restaurants, which were monitored by *Alko’s* personnel. *Alko* had been established in 1932 after a referendum concerning the Prohibition Law. In the referendum the majority of voters voted to abolish Prohibition.

Table 1. A Comparison of Alcohol Policy in Finland and Sweden.

	<i>Sweden</i>	<i>Finland</i>
<i>GDP per capita in 1950, 1000 USD</i>	3.9	2.6
<i>Rural population, %</i>	22	46
<i>Number of retail shops for alcohol in 1955</i>	249	96
<i>Number of "liquor card" holders in 1954, mill.</i>	2.0	0.7
<i>Individual rationing in alcohol sales</i>	yes	no
<i>Individual alcohol rationing applied in restaurants</i>	yes	no
<i>Minimum age to apply for liquor card</i>	25	21
<i>Married women allowed to apply for liquor card</i>	no	yes

Source: Peltonen 2001, 361.

family members of customers whose buying habits were irregular or excessive (Peltonen 2001, 361–362).

Compared to the Swedish Bratt system, Finnish customer control was more relaxed. In Sweden, each customer had a specific quota for strong liquor that he or she could buy. The quota was decided by the local alcohol monopoly with regard to the social status and income level of the customer. As well, drinks enjoyed at restaurants were controlled in a similar fashion (Knoblock 1995, Nycander 1996). However, in Sweden individual alcohol quotas were perceived as rights, and consequently the level of alcohol consumption, especially among older and wealthier Swedish males, was quite high. Many experts, particularly in the temperance movement, thought the Finnish system was much better (Peltonen 2001, 364).

Only about a hundred retail shops in Finland sold alcohol in the 1950s, and they all were located in towns, as well as alcohol-licensed restaurants. However, Finnish towns were not so numerous, and consequently many rural customers had difficulties in obtaining alcohol. This led to the widespread practice of using liquids produced for technical and hygienic purposes to obtain alcohol. Such surrogate alcohol, and the illegal production of home-made vodka, was a severe problem during the early 1950s. It is clear that the immediate reason for the astonishingly low level of alcohol consumption in Finland was the restricted supply of alcohol. Hence the main problem is how to explain

Table 2. Data concerning the consumer control system applied in Finnish alcohol policy.

	<i>Cancelled liquor cards</i>	<i>Number of personnel*</i>
1948	43,234	266
1952	15,482	215
1956	17,205	133
1960	13,052	–

*The number of personnel in customer control activities does not include the sales personnel in Alko's retail shops.

Source: Peltonen 2002, 194.

the widespread acceptance of this kind of alcohol policy. Perhaps it was not very popular within all segments of alcohol users – for instance, certain etiquette books, especially those written for “gentlemen” were quite critical of the official alcohol policy and suggested a more liberal alcohol culture, at least for male members of the upper classes. The other classes, farmers in the countryside and workers in towns and cities, were, of course, thought to be not educated enough to consume alcohol in a civilised manner (Peltonen 2002, 101–104). Yet when the writers of these etiquette manuals appeared in public under their own name – and not as columnists under an alias – they supported the official line of strict measures in alcohol policy.

The customer control policy was criticised already in the 1950s. The most severe arguments against the system, however, came from within the system itself. It was seen as ineffective, that its stated goal was not being attained. The bureaucracy required was also expensive and involved a great deal of paperwork to keep its filing system intact. In addition, the methods of punishment for “irregular use of alcohol” were soon discovered to be counterproductive. Cancelling “liquor cards” permanently or even temporarily only created a greater demand for illegal alcohol (Peltonen 2002, 159–160).

The customer control system was discarded in mid-1950s. Personnel were transferred to other jobs and customers’ control was relaxed considerably. However, the liquor card system was maintained until

Table 3. Alcohol Consumption in Finland during the 1950s, absolute alcohol per capita.

	<i>Vodka</i>	<i>Other strong</i>	<i>Wine</i>	<i>Beer</i>	<i>Total</i>
1950	0.729	0.658	0.083	0.257	1.727
1955	0.773	0.525	0.346	0.322	1.966
1960	0.856	0.448	0.194	0.349	1.847

Source: Peltonen 2002, 191.

the beginning of the 1970s. Its purpose by that time was to identify customers and help in monitoring their age. The amounts purchased by customers were no longer recorded on the card. Noteworthy is the fact that, although the regulation of alcohol consumption was relaxed in a significant way, the average amount consumed did not rise. In Sweden a similar relaxing of the liquor card system (*Bratt system*) led to a considerable rise in alcohol consumption. To counteract this, the level of alcohol taxation and, consequently, the retail prices of alcohol were raised dramatically after Sweden's 1955 "October Revolution" (Nycander 1996, 199–200).

The customer control policy of the late 1940s and 1950s was replaced by a new alcohol policy which was supposed to favour "mild" alcohol beverages such as wine and beer. This was a principle that the temperance movement could not object to, even though they sometimes announced that they disagreed with the promotion of even milder drinks because it was often seen as a gateway to more serious drinking. In practice, however, very little was done to make wine or beer drinking more popular. The case of wine was particularly difficult because the state alcohol monopoly did not want to diminish its revenue from taxes on alcohol beverages.

FIGHTING THE HEGEMONY OF THE TEMPERANCE MOVEMENT

An explanation for the stable level of alcohol consumption might be found in the structure of the alcohol discourse in Finland. After the struggle to establish the Prohibition Law which lasted from the late 1890s to the end of the First World War, and especially after the era of the Prohibition Law (1919–1932), the Finnish alcohol discourse had many national peculiarities, which resulted from its rather peculiar situation. One of the most salient characteristics of the Finnish situation was that the Prohibition Law was established in one of the most temperate countries of Europe. The level of alcohol consumption was about 1.5 litres per capita at the beginning of the 20th century (Peltonen 1997). At the same time, the Finnish Parliament voted four times with an overwhelming majority in favour of the Prohibition Law; in the first vote the M. Ps were actually unanimous about the urgent need to implement in Finland the strictest alcohol policy of all Europe. The Russian government, who until Finland's independence in December 1917 had the power to make final decision concerning such legislation, finally relented and approved the Prohibition Law in the spring of 1917.

During and after the Second World War the temperance movement regained the strength it had lost after the Prohibition Law was repealed in 1932. The state alcohol monopoly *Alkoholiliike* had to work in an atmosphere where temperance was still regarded, at least in the public discourse, as something valuable. Many M.P.s presented themselves as teetotallers and formed a special and quite influential temperance group within the Parliament. The ideas and opinions of the temperance movement were also taken into account when planning reforms to the official alcohol policy. The temperance movement was also represented in the governing organs of the state alcohol monopoly.

In the eyes of the *Alko's* leadership, the most difficult remaining aspect of the temperance movement ideology after the Second World War was adherence to the idea of prohibition. It thought this idea was an obstacle to the policy it wanted to promote. The state alcohol monopoly wanted to expand its activities, open new stores to alleviate the inequality between the countryside and the towns, and sell alcoholic

beverages, especially medium-strength beer in all groceries, not merely *Alko*'s own retail shops. Some of the *Alko*'s leaders stated publicly that an increase in alcohol consumption would be no great cause for concern, because the level of consumption was so low that its affects would be harmless. Sometimes Finnish alcohol researchers referred to the level of alcohol consumption in France (about fifteen litres) and joked that Finns still had thirteen litres to consume in order to catch up with the civilised and sophisticated French.

So the state alcohol monopoly in actual fact wanted to increase alcohol consumption and ensure a healthy flow of income from alcohol taxes to finance the state budget. In the late 1940s alcohol taxes comprised about 20 per cent of state revenue and at the end of the 1950s around 15 per cent (Peltonen 2002). If we take the important role of the temperance movement to be a Western characteristic of Finnish alcohol culture, then the considerable contribution of alcohol-related income to the state revenue – and the important effect of the state in alcohol policy – is definitely one of its most conspicuous Eastern characteristics.

Following a schism in the temperance movement in the early post-war years, an interesting development occurred. Many members of the Academic Temperance League felt that the Prohibition Law had failed and thought that prohibition represented something old-fashioned and unattractive for the younger generation who had just witnessed the war. At the forefront of these developments was the young social scientist Pekka Kuusi, a member of a famous family in the temperance movement. Pekka Kuusi's criticism of prohibition ideology received support from *Alko*'s leadership, especially the vice-president of the company, Arvo Linturi (Peltonen 1991, 224–226; Peltonen 2002, 31–35). Linturi had already during the late 1930s studied the alcohol systems of other European countries, and began to pay special attention to the Swedish alcohol policy already described above.

Soon Linturi and Kuusi joined forces and an unusual popular movement was created with the help of members of the Academic Temperance Movement and *Alko*. Its purpose was to promote good manners among citizens and introduce moderation in drinking habits. The role of *Alko* was mostly that of financing the activities of the movement, called *Kansalaisryhti* (Upright Citizens) and later *Suomen*

Kansan Ryhtiliike (The Virtuous of the Finnish People²). Alko's leadership, however, also took part by deciding on the priorities of activities. The state alcohol monopoly tried to take advantage of the Olympic Games that were being held in Helsinki in 1952. Temporary alcohol legislation was established; early August 1952 tourists could buy alcohol without having to register as *Alko* customers for possession of a liquor card, as was otherwise required. Restaurants could serve alcoholic drinks before twelve noon and without obligatory food orders, as was thought customary in "civilised countries".

The Helsinki Olympic Games of 1952 were also used as a pretext for organising specific campaigns to teach the Finnish public to behave in a civilised manner during the great event. These campaigns involved the *Upright Citizen's Movement*, and ideas about proper ways to behave with alcohol were prominent. Specific book of manners was also produced. It was paid for by the state alcohol monopoly and its publishing was organised using the *Upright Citizen's Movement* as a cover (Peltonen 2002, 78–128). The *Upright Citizen's Movement* was a curious mix of popular movement and state control. This can perhaps be understood when considering the fact that many of those active in *Ryhtiliike* had been involved with the controlling and management of public opinion during the Second World War. The movement lost its original purpose in the 1960s and *Alko's* the tight control of it was relaxed.

THE IMAGE OF THE DRUNKEN WORKER

The main problem of the state-sponsored temperance movement was that it was not consistent in its thinking. It wanted to increase alcohol consumption, but at the same time it surrendered to the idea of 'Finnish Boozing', created during the struggle over the Prohibition Law at the beginning of the 20th century. This notion held that although Finland

² The words *Kansalaisryhti* and *Suomen Kansan Ryhtiliike* are almost impossible to translate into English. A similar but older Russian organisation was called The Guardianship of Public Sobriety (Herlihy 2002, 14–35). *Ryhtiliike* was a quite typical organisation for the improvement of manners ("reform of popular culture"). See e.g. Hunt 1999.

Table 4. The frequency of drunken arrests in the Nordic countries in 1969, arrests per 1000 inhabitants over 15 years of age.

Finland	40.0
Sweden	17.5
Norway	12.2
Denmark	5.1

Source: Bruun 1972, 300.

was the most temperate country in Europe, it still needed prohibition because even a very small amount of alcohol could create tremendous problems for Finns. It was thought that a hereditary genetic failure in the Finnish population meant that, while drunk, Finns behaved more violently than any other nationality. This Finnish myth is similar to attitudes towards Irish drinking habits in late 19th and early 20th century America.

Although the temperance movement usually spoke of this problem as common to the entire Finnish-speaking population, most public contributions to the alcohol discourse were from representatives of the middle and upper classes, who either intentionally or not, often conveyed the idea that 'the people' meant only farmers and workers. This fostered *the image of the drunken worker*, which was still very prevalent in the late 1940s and 1950s in the discourse of leading policy-makers. The image of the drunken worker also penetrated into sociological research on alcohol problems and even sociological textbooks of the period (Kuusi 1948; Sariola 1954; Allardt & Littunen 1958).

The image of the drunken worker was given extra credibility by the statistics on drunken arrests. Appearing publicly in a drunken condition had been criminalised in 1733 by the king of Sweden and in Finland it remained classified as a criminal act until 1969. Drunken arrests largely concerned the male working population in the towns. Although numerous, they only involved a limited number of mostly homeless persons who were arrested again and again. So the astonishingly high level of drunken arrests reflects the peculiar history of the legislation and the difficult housing situation in the post-war decades (Taipale 1982). During the General Strike of 1956 the image of the drunken

worker was used by the conservative press to discredit the morality of the protesting workers. This kind of labelling had the desired effect among the working-class activists, who were always eager to emphasise the decent behaviour of the working class.

Developments were significantly different in post-war Sweden, where the temperance movement took the lead in criticising the Swedish liquor-card system. The ideological leadership of the temperance movement materialised in an important parliamentary committee, which conducted several investigations in order to reform Swedish alcohol policy. A favourable picture of the Finnish system was presented in these volumes published in the late 1940s and early 1950s. Swedish alcohol policy was relaxed in 1956, when the Bratt system was finally abandoned. The first consequence was an immediate rise in alcohol consumption which then had to be curtailed by raising alcohol taxes. The fact that the leaders of the temperance movement began to criticise alcohol policy also gave freer hands to the working-class movement, which was encouraged to join or at least support its liberalisation (Peltonen 2001). The case of Finland was different from Sweden because the Finnish temperance movement supported *Alko's* official alcohol policy, although occasional critical voices within the temperance discourse called for developing Finnish alcohol policy more in line with Sweden's Bratt system.

THE LACK OF INTELLECTUAL TOOLS

It is difficult to understand why the class view of alcohol consumption prevailed so strongly among the Finnish intellectual elite in the post-war decades. Perhaps it could be explained by the fears which the more right-wing members of the elite felt after the war, when the banning of the Communist Party had to be lifted on account of the Paris Peace Treaty of 1947. Moreover, political prisoners were released from prisons and were allowed to participate in political life as equal citizens. Under these circumstances Finnish society was expected by many of its elite members to be democratised by "outside forces". This fear of democracy in action created an unhealthy atmosphere towards the end of the 1940s, known as the "years of danger". It is easy to see, however, that this sentiment was not just apprehension about the growing strength of

the Soviet Union, but had as a major ingredient a view of the working class being unable to participate in normal society. It was so ingrained in the tradition of the Finnish elite that the working class should be kept out of political life and effectively ghettoised that the democratisation of political life was seen as a significant threat (Peltonen 1991, 222; Peltonen 2002, 14–18).

The discourse on the drunken worker was part of the more general post-war sentiment, although the image had a long history in European political thought. The attempts by Pekka Kuusi and the *Ryhhtiike* popular movement he founded, to view alcohol problems and temperance in a new way show how strong the traditional image of the drunken worker still was in the late 1940s and in the 1950s. It is clear that Pekka Kuusi and others did not see the situation clearly enough and made no extra effort to change the linguistic expressions they used to describe alcohol problems. Although Kuusi spoke more often than most of his associates of the alcohol abuse being a problem of Finns rather than only of the working class, even he did not clearly and strongly distance himself from the class view of alcohol problems. Even the leading revisionist Kuusi was caught in the web of the hegemonic discourse and ended up repeating the slogans of the most conservative temperance ideologists (Kuusi 1948, *passim.*; see also Verkko 1949). So even those wishing to liberalise Finnish alcohol policy and increase consumption ended up spending their energy and resources on achieving exactly the opposite. They could not say in public what they truly thought.

This situation can also be described in Lucien Febvre's style as a lack of proper intellectual tools for speaking (and thinking) otherwise (Febvre 1982 [1942]). In the same way that it was impossible for Rabelais to be an atheist in sixteenth-century France, so too was it difficult in the 1950s for Finnish intellectuals to speak of alcohol consumption in a neutral way. At the time there were only two alternatives to the image of the drunken worker. Firstly, in the etiquette books of the elite, alcohol could be described in neutral and sometimes even positive terms – particularly when the writers were male – as something relaxing and fun as mentioned above. In some Finnish etiquette books of the period strong drinks were openly admired and the official alcohol policy was ridiculed. Secondly, working-class males themselves could often speak

favourably of vodka and give colourful descriptions of the drunken states and terrible hangovers they had experienced. It is, of course, clear that neither of these discourses could be used in public by those who were responsible for alcohol policy.

It was only in the 1960s that one group managed to create a discourse in which Finns and alcohol were connected in a non-alarmist way (Soikkeli 2003). This was the Finnish Breweries Association which in its massive advertising campaign defending the position of Finnish beer producers after the EFTA free trade treaty from 1961 allowed the import of beer from EFTA-countries in 1964. The campaign lasted from 1964 to 1970 and its main slogan was “Finnish – Of course!” (Turunen 2002, 183). In this campaign, directed mainly against the Danish Carlsberg and Tuborg brands, a new image of the Finnish alcohol consumer was created. And that was, you could leave a Finn alone with a glass of beer without fearing devastating consequences. Finnish consumers of alcohol were no longer described as uncultured, they were no longer seen as brutes seeking only intoxication and were no longer accused of starting fights when enjoying even the smallest drop of alcohol. This campaign by the brewery industry represented a remarkable change in the Finnish alcohol consumption discourse. The new medium of television provided massive support to this new alcohol discourse in the public sphere. Opinion polls showed that the attitudes of citizens during the 1960s also became more liberal (Mäkelä 1979, 176). And finally, by January 1969, instead only of about a hundred Alko retail shops, Finns could purchase medium-strength beer from over 50 000 outlets. At the same time the temperance movement lost its general appeal. But it was not only the temperance movement that lost its almost hegemonic position vis-a-vis alcohol policy at the end of the 1960s – the state’s grip on alcohol policy began to loosen and the role of private enterprise, particularly breweries, began to grow.

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