

**DRUGS, PROSTITUTION AND THE SWEDISH WELFARE STATE:
Modernist morality in a postmodern world**

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Introduction

In the last 15 years Sweden has introduced policies in the fields of drugs and prostitution which many Swedes claim are a model for other countries to follow. Since the same claim was often – and in my view, rightly - made for the Swedish welfare state, it is worthy of some critical attention. For many decades following the Second World War, Swedes were admired for creating a system of state welfare which provided all its citizens with a high degree of social security, health and social services of a high quality, and high standards of public housing and education (Furniss and Tilton 1974). Indeed, it is precisely because of my interest in and admiration for the Swedish welfare state, that I became interested in these ‘side issues’ in the first place. It was Richard Titmuss who argued that the study of one small aspect of social policy (in his case blood donation) may throw light on the nature of a country’s welfare system (Titmuss 1970). The issues of, and debates

around, drugs and prostitution in Swedish society tell us something of significance about the Swedish welfare state, the way in which many Swedes think of their country, the problems they face and their relationship with and perception of the outside world. In a broader sense, the findings presented here illustrate the need to examine social policies in the wider context of a society's structure, culture and historical development.

This paper will begin with a discussion of the nature of and debates around contemporary drug and prostitution issues. It will continue with an outline of the way in which Swedish policies in these areas have developed. This will be followed by a comparison of the similarities between the two policies. The paper will conclude with an explanation for Sweden's *restrictive line*¹ in areas where much of Europe is becoming more pragmatic and liberal.

Much of the detailed evidence upon which this paper is based can be found in my previously published papers which have treated drug and prostitution policies separately (see bibliography for details). This conference has been the first opportunity for me to make a more thorough comparison between them.

Drugs and prostitution in a globalised world

People in every society have taken drugs to alter their mental states. Throughout history, people have bought and sold sexual services. Reactions to both these social phenomena have varied over time between tolerance and repression. There has always been a concern that some people use drugs to excess. There has always been a concern about the acceptability of prostitution. What gives these issues contemporary significance is that in an increasingly globalised world, it is not only the trade in

consumer goods and financial services which has increased. The trade in illegal drugs and in sexual services has also grown. We even give it a different name. It is called 'trafficking'. Indeed, it is the very lack of international control over this trade that often makes it seem so threatening. Because in so many countries drugs and prostitution have become, in part or totally, prohibited by law, the international dimension to their control is fraught with problems. We still exist in national states with national systems of law and order. Organised crime, at the international level, is difficult to combat.

A globalised world is increasingly multi-cultural. Economic and political migration are on the increase. However this does not simply mean that we have greater access to each other's traditions of dance, music, art and literature. It does not simply mean that we become exposed to different people's beliefs and religions. People take their drug and sexual habits with them wherever they go. They also take their criminal tendencies. This is not to suggest that immigrants are drug addicts, prostitutes and criminals but rather that globalisation has many facets - negative as well as positive, unacceptable as well as acceptable. How national governments react to these new problems and issues is what makes cross-national policy analysis interesting.

It is not possible in this paper to do justice to the variety of responses of different governments to the issues of drugs and prostitution. What can be done is to indicate the range of possible options illustrated by contemporary debates. A common response to drugs and prostitution has been to make them illegal. Drugs have been prohibited by International Conventions since the early part of the 20th Century. The US in particular has played a dominant role in encouraging other countries to engage in a war against drugs. As a result, most countries have legislation which makes the

production, sale and possession of specific drugs a criminal offence (Hartnoll 1989). In the last decade, there have been a number of attempts to raise the possibility of international control and regulation of prostitution² but as Nadelman said in 1990 “In the case of prostitution... the existence of a near universal moral notion that [it] is wrong has not translated into the evolution of a global regime to prohibit it” (Nadelman 1990 p 516). Individual countries have not acted on prostitution to the same extent as on drugs, but nonetheless, there is a growing awareness of the international dimension of some of the problems associated with prostitution and the need for an international response. Certainly there are individual countries where prostitution is a clear criminal offence.

To many observers attempts to control drug use and people’s sexual habits by law is counterproductive. Prohibition, it is argued, makes the problems worse. They are driven underground. Their very illegality encourages the involvement of criminal elements. Once organised crime has established a vested interest in these activities, it becomes difficult for the authorities to exert any influence over them. In some countries prohibition has led to considerable corruption in police forces, the judiciary and the political system.

One alternative to prohibition is to argue that the drug trade and prostitution should be legalised. It is suggested that in this way they would be purged of their criminal associations. To the extent that both activities are ‘victimless’ (drug users and those who buy and sell sexual services only harm themselves), society has no right to interfere with them. Others have argued for a more pragmatic approach, arguing that it is important that we should be able to help people at risk and that prohibition makes this very difficult by driving the trade in drugs and sexual services underground.

Moreover, by decriminalising these activities, we prevent ordinary people from being made into criminals unnecessarily.

Recent developments in Swedish policy

It is interesting therefore that Sweden – a European country with a reputation for being liberal and pragmatic on a range of social issues should have chosen a prohibitive or ‘restrictive’ approach to drugs and prostitution in the last 15 years.

In 1988 two laws were introduced to make drug policy more restrictive (Gould 1989). The ‘use’ of illegal substances was made a criminal offence by a Social Democratic government. While many countries prohibit the sale, production and possession of drugs is illegal, use for one’s own purposes is not. The logic behind this is that the user is damaging only him- or herself. Against this it was argued that there was no difference between a person having drugs in their possession one minute and inside their bodies the next. Initially, this offence was punishable only by a fine. In 1993 however – under a Centre-right coalition – it was made an imprisonable offence (1994a). Users could be sent to prison for up to six months. Also in 1988, a law which made it possible to take adult alcoholics and drug addicts into care compulsorily, was amended to lengthen the maximum period from 2 to 6 months. The following year a proposal by the National Board for Health and Welfare to encourage the adoption of syringe exchange schemes (SES) was rejected. SES had been widely adopted by other European countries in the fight against AIDS (Gould 1994b). They were seen as a means to prevent the spread of HIV. HIV was seen as a more dangerous threat to public health than drug misuse. In Sweden, drug misuse

was seen as just as threatening as HIV. SES were seen as likely to encourage the use of drugs.

The change in the law concerning prostitution came into being in 1998 (Gould 2001a). Previously a government Commission had investigated the prostitution problem and recommended that both the prostitute and the client should be punished. The new law, however, accepted the argument that prostitutes themselves were innocent victims and that only their male clients should be prosecuted.

Comparing similarities

Within a short space of time – 10 years – Sweden had enacted a restrictive approach to both drugs and prostitution. Superficially, the two issues and the two sets of policies had little to do with each other. They did not seem to arise from the same circumstance or pressures. They did not involve the same advocates and opponents. However, a closer look suggests a wide range of similarities which themselves indicate a common explanation.

Folk movement pressure

Many social and penal policies have a complex origin. Problems and issues may be highlighted by the mass media, major institutions of the state – including the civil service – may play an important role. Political parties, business and trade unions may bring pressure to bear on parliament and government. In the changes to Swedish laws on drugs and prostitution it was interest groups that were particularly influential in agitating for change. In Sweden, interest groups with shared values are often referred to as ‘popular movements’ (folk Rörelser). Swedish social democracy has been very

influenced by the *labour movement*. The *temperance movement* – itself closely allied to the labour movement – had a considerable impact upon alcohol policy in the 20th century. While there are some today that argue that the popular movement tradition is in decline, the issues of drugs and prostitution would suggest otherwise. The *anti-drugs movement* and the *women's movement* played a significant role in each respectively.

Two organisations that argued in favour of a restrictive line on drugs were *The National Association for a Drug-free Society* (RNS) and *Parents Against Drugs* (FMN). Throughout the 1980s they kept up a relentless pressure on ministers and members of parliament. They also gained considerable attention by the mass media. Together with like-minded organisations, they constituted a contemporary version of the temperance movement referred to above. They believed that drug use, if unchecked, would spread through society like an epidemic. It was necessary to focus on drug users since without them there would be no market in drugs. The slogans of the anti-drugs movement provide a brief guide to its rationale: 'all use is misuse', 'there is no difference between cannabis and heroin'. The aim of the movement was to achieve a drug-free society. Anything less implied 'capitulation'. At the height of their influence FMN and RNS had only to label a person or policy proposal as being 'liberal' on drugs for them to be regarded as 'traitorous' or 'un-Swedish'. No political party opposed them. Those individual politicians and academics who tried to, did so at their cost. Their campaigns had something of the evangelical about them.

In the debate about prostitution it was the women's movement that played a pivotal role. The source of the idea to criminalise those who bought the sexual services of prostitutes originally came from *The National Association for Battered Women's Shelters* (ROKS) but once the proposal became identified with the issue of domestic

violence, a wide range of women's groups joined the campaign. Sweden was late to recognise the issue of domestic violence – believing that it was a problem experienced more in other countries and by the immigrant population than by native Swedish men. Given that gender equality is something that Swedes claim to lead the rest of the world in, it was important to introduce tough domestic legislation to deal with the problem. This was passed in 1998 together with the law on the purchase of sexual services (sexköpslagen). Although the Liberal and Conservative parties were opposed to the new prostitution law, many of their female members sympathised with it. In the Swedish parliament there are regular cross-party meetings of women MPs in which matters of common interest are discussed. The consensus on prostitution was not as total as on drugs but it was widespread. It did become difficult to oppose the reform without appearing to condone violence towards women. Again the campaign had an evangelical air which made pragmatic argument difficult to advance. Prostitution was incompatible with the aim of a gender equal society.

In both campaigns there was a moral absolutism which insisted that no compromise was possible.

Prostitutes and drugs

There is of course a more direct link between prostitution and drugs. It is often said that prostitutes use drugs in order to cope with the risky business in which they are involved. It is also known to be the case that many women who become dependent on drugs choose to be prostitutes as a way of paying for their habit. These connections would obviously assume importance in a country like Sweden where the aim is to become a drug-free society. A social democratic member of the Riksdag (the Swedish parliament) expressed the concern clearly when she said:

We know that half the prostitutes on the streets do it to finance their drug misuse. We know through in-depth interviews that many of them are at risk. It is our duty to intervene (Dagens Nyheter 1998).

In the Riksdag debate, a spokesperson for the Environment party, challenged the argument that prostitutes had a right to choose what to do with their own bodies by asking whether someone had a right to destroy themselves with drugs. Since Sweden has a law which prohibits the consumption of drugs, the answer was obviously, no. A social work journal drew another analogy between the two issues when it stated

Experience shows that prostitution is a form of *misuse* with a similar negative *dependence* and the way back is often laborious with unavoidable *relapses*

(Martinelli 1995 p9. My italics)

Foreign links

There are many indirect parallels between the two phenomena and the language used in policy debates. A particular concern was with the foreignness of drugs and prostitutes. Both were often described in the press as *flooding* into the country, implying that Sweden was somehow being swamped and polluted. This was corroborated by the fact that the countries of origin – Poland, Russia, Estonia, ‘the East’ - conjured up images of decay and corruption. Other countries had serious drug problems that were being exported to Sweden. The cover of an RNS journal showed a cartoon of a Swedish cottage on an island surrounded by rats bearing syringes. An

official report, on the restrictive line on drugs, with the title “We will never surrender” was illustrated by a photograph of the Swedish coastline.

One newspaper talked about:

an invasion of foreign girls... from the East [who] have no tradition of using protection. They are used to unprotected sex and bring this habit further into Sweden (Expressen 1998).

Månsson, one of the country’s experts on prostitution, in his concern about the “increased flood of pimp-managed prostitutes from the Baltic countries, Poland and Russia” claimed that few Swedish men used prostitutes. However 80% of those that did so, he claimed, went abroad and half of them became infected with HIV (Svenska Dagbladet 1999).

Liberal ideas

It was not simply drugs and prostitutes themselves that presented a foreign threat. The liberal ideas coming from countries like the Netherlands and Britain were also dangerous. In the field of drugs, ideas such as *harm reduction* and *decriminalisation* represented a drift towards legalisation. They were a sign that these societies had *capitulated* to the problem. Policies to decriminalise or legalise prostitution were also seen as foreign to the Swedish tradition. The Dutch acceptance of prostitution was attributed by a Swedish female politician to their history of colonial exploitation

Choice and force

It was in connection with Dutch policies that a Conservative MP in Sweden said:

We don't discuss whether or not people want to be prostitutes. What sort of freedom is it to choose to sell your body? (Gould 2001a p 445)

The basis for the liberal argument on prostitution is that many prostitutes choose to sell their bodies. As sex workers, they are entitled like other workers to reasonable working conditions and social security benefits. It is important therefore for those advocating a restrictive line that prostitutes are shown to be victims -- people who are forced into what they do. It was argued that most prostitutes had been victims of violence (Martinelli 1995 p7). Women, it was said, were forced into prostitution either by pimps and those dealing in the contemporary slave trade in women, or by poverty, or because they were powerless as in the case of minors and the mentally disturbed, or because of their dependence upon illegal drugs. How could one speak of choice when women were forced by circumstances to be prostitutes?

Similarly those who took illegal drugs did not do so out of choice. They were said to be dependent upon their drugs. They were compelled to take them. Once people became addicted, they had no control over their lives. The restrictive drugs discourse admits of no distinction between 'soft drugs' and 'hard drugs'. Nor is there any recognition of recreational, occasional or non-problematic use. All use is misuse!

In the two debates, both prostitutes and drug users were defined as vulnerable. They were at risk, in need of protection by the authorities.

The focus on the 'consumer'

Although an earlier proposal on prostitution had suggested that both prostitutes and the client should be prosecuted, in the end it was the purchaser of sexual services who

was deemed to be the guilty partner. The focus in Swedish drug policy was also on the consumer. It was argued that the trade in drugs was so lucrative that one supplier could be replaced by another. What drove the drug trade was the consumer's habit. If you could stop people consuming, there would be no market.

Sweden as a model, Sweden as unique

Throughout these policy debates, it was often suggested that Sweden's restrictive line was a model for other countries to follow. This is odd when you consider that most European countries are becoming more liberal on the issues of drugs and prostitution. Nonetheless, there can be little doubt that Swedish representatives on the European Union Commission and in the European Parliament are determined to prevent or influence any attempt to harmonise drug and prostitution policies across member states (Gould 1999a).

It was claimed in the debates that Sweden was unique. In 1994, the then deputy prime minister, Mona Sahlin, discussing drugs policy said "We are unique and successful in so many areas" (Thorgren 1994 p 92). An academic expert claimed that Sweden's law on prostitution was seen by organisations throughout Europe as "overwhelmingly positive ... revolutionary ... and radical" (Månsson 1998). In the post-war decades, Sweden had indeed been seen as a model welfare state, as having a model economy and a model labour market policy. Whenever Swedes identify good practice – it often happens in local authorities for example - there is a tendency to want to learn from it and promote it. In the postmodern era, there has been little mention of the Swedish model. The attempt to claim the mantle for drug and prostitution policies does not carry the same conviction. It is interesting however, to examine what it is about a country that its inhabitants choose to describe as unique.

Moral panic

I intend to argue that the policies referred to above are an example of moral panic. To qualify as moral panic, it is necessary to demonstrate that social reaction to an issue is exaggerated, that opponents are vilified and that there is a broad elite consensus behind the reaction which is amplified by the mass media (Goode and Ben-Yehuda 1994). For the reaction in Sweden to be deemed reasonable, one would expect there to be evidence of widespread drug misuse and a large growth in prostitution. Official evidence, on the contrary, suggests that drugtaking in Sweden is much lower than other European countries and that there are few prostitutes. Annual self-report surveys of 16 year old school students and military conscripts in the 1980s and 1990s show that the percentages of those who have ever used an illegal drug were ranged from 3% and 8% (CAN 1999). In some European countries the percentages are much higher. The number of prostitutes estimated to be active in Sweden in the early 1990s - when the government Commission was carrying out its investigation - was a mere 2,500, only 650 of whom were on the streets (SOU 1995:15). I would argue that the principle reason for these low figures is that the basic security provided by the Swedish economy, the welfare state and labour market measures prevents the very social exclusion that drives some to take drugs and others to resort to selling their bodies.

In previous papers a number of examples have already been cited to demonstrate that the Swedish press has amplified the amount of drug use and the numbers of prostitutes in Sweden. The consensus referred to above coupled with the ostracism shown to opponents further demonstrate that the reaction to these issues is an example

of moral panic. The questions then become – why Sweden, why in the last 15 years and why these particular issues?

An explanation

There are a number of factors which would help explain why Sweden has adopted restrictive policies in the fields of prostitution and drugs since 1988. The Swedish economy has faced serious problems, Swedish living standards have declined in comparison with other similar countries and unemployment rose considerably in the 1990. People can afford to be much more liberal when their economy is growing; social attitudes may become much more restrictive in bad times. Moreover, there can be little doubt that there has always been a paternalistic, almost authoritarian, aspect to Swedish welfare throughout the last century (Holgersson 1977)³. Indeed Tham has argued that the liberal tradition in Sweden is weak (Tham 1998). While each of these lines of explanation is worth developing further, I want to concentrate upon the issues of national identity and culture – partly because the evidence lends itself to such an analysis and partly because issues of culture and identity have been neglected in social policy analysis in the past..

In describing the similarities in the debates surrounding drug and prostitution policy in Sweden above, there was a dominant theme of nationalism. Not the kind of nationalism academics discuss when referring to fascist parties and liberation campaigns but what Mick Billig calls ‘banal nationalism’ – the constant flagging up of national sentiments in daily life (Billig 1995). This occurs literally in Scandinavian countries with many people hoisting the national flag outside their homes but it also occurs metaphorically whenever one’s nation is discussed in relationship to the

outside world. In many of the examples cited above, it is clear that there were fears about drugs and prostitutes coming into the country with the further threat of the spread of HIV and other sexually-transmitted diseases. The 'contamination' was seen as coming largely from the poorer countries of Eastern Europe. Developed countries with a more liberal approach to drugs and prostitution were also seen as a threat and were accordingly disparaged. Individual Swedes who disagreed with the official line were regarded as traitors or somehow un-Swedish. The behaviour of immigrants was also associated with un-Swedish values. Sweden was seen as having the right approach to social problems. Sweden had been a model in the past and was creating model solutions in the present.

It would seem that the reaction of Sweden to some contemporary social problems, is in part a fear of Swedish society becoming an indistinct part of a globalised society. Many Swedes feel they are losing not only their national identity and culture but also their place in the world. It was a remarkable achievement for a country of a few million people in the post-war years to be seen as the exemplar of modernity. Sweden at one time was seen as the 'prototype' of a modern society (Tomasson 1970). Through rational organisation and planning, it exploited the best features of capitalism and socialism to create what some thought a 'paradise'. The mass of Swedish people enjoyed a standard of living, a quality of life and a degree of social security that were the envy of other countries. Although many features of the Swedish welfare state continue to be admired, there can be little doubt that Sweden's pre-eminence is no longer. In a postmodern world, US free market capitalism has become the dominant ideological force. The degree of control that national governments can exert over their own countries' affairs has become more limited. National states have become less able to manipulate their economies, their taxation systems and their public

expenditure budgets than before. Politically and economically we are part of a wider world order. Culturally we have to accept that well-defined national cultures and identities are giving ways to less distinct mixes of multi-culturalism.

Sweden itself has allowed many immigrants and refugees to live there since the 1960s. Indeed, the authorities would claim that enormous efforts have been made to ensure that its ethnic minorities are treated no differently to indigenous Swedes. Ethnic equality and multi-culturalism are certainly the principles upon which official policies are based. However, recent reports have claimed that there is widespread discrimination against non-European ethnic groups. One suggested that there is a real danger of the emergence of “class stratification along ethnic and cultural lines” (*Rapport integration* 2001). Far from there being integration, there is considerable segregation and a “concealed” policy of assimilation (Westin 2000). The Integration Board – *Integrationsverket* - worried that perhaps Swedes found it difficult to live alongside people whose behaviour and attitudes were markedly different from their own (*Rapport integration*, 2001). While overt racism is frowned upon officially, there can be little doubt that Swedes have found it difficult to accept that their population has become heterogeneous.

In these circumstances it is not surprising that some social developments are seen as more threatening than others. Sobriety – in its narrow and broad sense – has been an important part of Swedish social and cultural development. The capitalist work ethic and the discipline of the labour movement both depended upon the sobriety of the workforce. In Sweden a powerful temperance movement allied with social democracy defended temperance values and promoted a restrictive alcohol policy. That tradition has been succeeded in our time by an anti-drugs movement endorsing the same values. It is not hard to see why a society based upon sobriety should take

alarm at the prospect of widening drug use. In recent years the issue has been given added significance by the demand by the European Union that Sweden give up 4 of its 5 state alcohol monopolies (Ugland 1997).

Similarly, it is not difficult to understand why the women's movement should feel threatened by the growth in prostitution and trafficking in migrant women. Sweden has prided itself on being the most gender-equal society in the world. But gender equality in Sweden is very much linked to the importance and size of the public sector. Again, entry into the EU and the wider effects of the globalised economy have both led to a reduction in social and public expenditure in Sweden with the consequent threat to women's jobs, their status and the degree of equality they have achieved. In these circumstances, prostitution – the selling of sexual services – has become symbolic of women's subordination generally.

In many respects Sweden would like to embrace the difference and diversity celebrated by postmodernists. But postmodernity has also introduced a greater degree of instability into people's daily existence than was evident in the modernist era. An economy based upon the predominance of the market, social policies dominated by welfare pluralism, the increase in labour migration and the decline of the nation state are all developments that stand in great contrast to the condition of modernity in which the Swedish welfare state thrived. Swedish culture emphasised the Apollonian values of order, control, sobriety and rationality. Our postmodern world thrives on the Dionysian values of disorder, spontaneity, excess and irrationality⁴.

Conclusion

The Swedish welfare state has been under threat for the last two decades. The culture and values which sustain it are also felt to be under threat. Much of this threat is seen to emanate from developments in the outside world. It is however not possible for a country which prides itself on its internationalism and its tolerance of ethnic minorities to direct its hostility to 'foreigners'. Instead, popular discontent, has become focussed upon moral issues which are seen to symbolise the crisis faced by the exemplar of modernity in a postmodern age. The rhetoric used in debates about drugs and prostitution has been decidedly nationalistic. The reaction can be described as a form of moral panic. The restrictive policies that have emerged are not models for other countries to follow. That status, in my view, still belongs to the welfare state itself. It is through its comprehensive and universalist social policies that Sweden manages to prevent the worst excesses of Dionysian postmodernity not by unrealistic moral expectations and goals.

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Notes

¹ The term 'restrictive line' is used officially in Sweden to distinguish Swedish policies on drugs and alcohol from those liberal approaches. It is a useful term which I shall employ to describe the Swedish approach to prostitution as well.

² The 1993 Vienna Human Rights conference, the 1995 Beijing Women's conference and, in 1998, a joint conference in Brussels held by End Child Prostitution, Pornography and Trafficking groups in Europe and Defence for Children International.

³ Holgersson identified a repressive and authoritarian tradition in the early stages of welfare development and argued that it had continued in social services into the 1970s. There is no reason to suppose that the tradition suddenly ceased at that point in time – on the contrary.

⁴ This argument is developed more fully in chapter 10 of my book on Swedish social policy in the 1990s (Gould 2001b)