International Journal of Drug Policy xxx (2014) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

International Journal of Drug Policy

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/drugpo

Research paper

The Italian politics of alcohol: The creation of a public arena at the end of the 20th century

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 13 August 2014
Received in revised form 21 October 2014
Accepted 29 October 2014

Keywords:
Alcohol policy
Social constructionism
Public arena theory
Stakeholders
Italy

ABSTRACT

Background: Political concern with alcohol as a social problem arose in Italy only at the end of last century, when consumption and the death rate from alcohol-related causes had both been trending down for decades. The main aim of this case study is to investigate – applying Wiener's theoretical framework – the role of different stakeholders in the process that led to the approval of the first alcohol framework law in 2001.
Methods: Fourteen individual interviews with stakeholders were conducted, covering all the main topics involved in Italian alcohol policies. In addition, 19 bills introduced in the Italian parliament were analysed to reconstruct the legislative process. Stakeholders' role was analysed, assessing their positions, contrasts and coalitions. The rhetoric employed in the course of public debate was also deciphered.
Results: All three of the main processes used by Wiener to describe the building of a public arena around alcohol – animating the problem, legitimizing it and demonstrating it – were found. The Club of Alcoholics in Treatment and professionals working with alcoholics in Local Addiction Services appeared to be the most active groups in supporting the law. They did so by establishing a strong alliance, even if their visions about the problem and how to solve it differed.
Conclusions: The study showed that a shared vision is not as essential as 'combining for strength' in order to create a public arena around a social problem. Furthermore, not even scientific data are essential for demonstrating a problem, as the use of rhetoric seems to be more effective in building ideologies.
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Introduction

Any attempt to gauge the effectiveness of alcohol policies should consider Italy (Allamani, Beccaria, & Voller, 2010; Allamani, Voller, Baccini, Massini, & Pepe, 2014), where alcohol consumption started to decrease in the 1970s, before any alcohol policy measures were enacted (Allamani, Cipriani, & Prina, 1996; Beccaria & Allamani, 2007). As a result of the decrease in consumption, the rate of deaths from chronic liver disease and cirrhosis has also fallen steadily since the 1980s (European Health for All Database, HFA-DB). Similarly, deaths on Italian roads – a typical indicator of acute drinking problems – dropped from 9275 deaths in 1970 to 3653 in 2012 (ACI-ISTAT, 2013). For the better part of a century, the alcohol question was considered from the politicalstandpoint mainly in terms of the consequences of drunkenness and its impact on public order, and was thus included in the two Penal Codes (1919–1931) (Cottino & Morgan, 1985). Basically, it was during the Fascist period (1921–1943) that the majority of alcohol control legislation was introduced, with laws that put limits on the production and distribution of alcoholic beverages. Alcohol then disappeared from the public arena for almost forty years, not to re-emerge until 1988, when the introduction of blood alcohol concentration (BAC) limits was approved (Anav, 2007). Quite strikingly, political concern with alcohol-related problems became increasingly apparent somewhat later, at the end of last century, as testified by the growing number of bills on this issue presented in the Italian Parliament – 10 between 1996 and 1997 alone – that culminated in the enactment of the first framework law. The 2001 law on alcohol and alcohol-related problems aimed to increase the number of alcoholic treatment programmes, in part by supporting non-governmental and voluntary organisations. This legislation prohibited the consumption of alcoholic beverages in certain working environments, lowered the BAC level from 0.8 to 0.5 g/l, and tightened regulations on alcohol advertising.

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.10.008
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Please cite this article in press as: Beccaria, F., & Rolando, S. The Italian politics of alcohol: The creation of a public arena at the end of the 20th century. *International Journal of Drug Policy* (2014), http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2014.10.008

Political interest arose in parallel with a number of changes in the conceptualization of the problem. Among professionals, the concept of alcoholism has gradually changed, and now more frequently embraces acute intoxication as well as addiction (Rolando, Beccaria, Consoli, & Scaroina, 2010). The media helped stir up confusion, often mixing up alcoholism with single occasions of excessive drinking and associating such use with road accidents or violence (Beccaria, Rolando, Hellman, Bujalski, & Lemmens, in press). The shift in the mass media's focus from individual health to road accidents and public order problems, which are mainly attributed to binge drinking among young people, has made alcoholism more likely to be viewed as a deviant behaviour, reducing the attention given to the wider phenomenon. Furthermore, public guidelines on low-risk alcohol consumption have steadily restricted the limits, lowering the "safe threshold" for different targets and thus increasing the number of people considered to be at-risk drinkers. According to the Italian National Health Institute, this number rose to about 8.6 million out of a total population of about 60 million in 2010, and dropped to 7.5 million in 2012.[1]

Given this situation, it is natural to ask how it was that public concern emerged precisely in a period when data were much less negative than in the past, and what events and actors pushed decision-makers to recognize the need for a framework law on alcohol. This study investigates what role the different stakeholders had, and which of them took "ownership of the social problem" (Gusfield, 1975).

To contribute to an understanding of the factors and forces that direct attention to the alcohol issue, we apply the theoretical framework based on Wiener's work (1981). The way alcohol entered the political agenda during the 1990 after many decades of marginalization could be seen as a social construction of a real problem. Without denying the magnitude of health consequences and alcohol-related deaths in Italy, still estimated at around 18,000 in 2008 (Ministero della Salute, 2012), it is legitimate to wonder why politicians took action only during a period when both consumption and alcohol-related problems were in clear decline. Actually, in terms of public discourse and media attention, it is not the extent of the harm that explains why some problems become more "important" than others (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). There are several constraints that a social problem has to face in the struggle for recognition. According to Blumer (1971), social problems are defined through a process of recognition of the emergence of the problem, its legitimization, the mobilization of action, the formation of an official plan of action and its empirical implementation. Following Blumer's lead, Wiener (1981) identified the constituents of the collective definition of the social problem: *animating* the problem, *legitimizing* it and *demonstrating* it. These key processes are broken down into sub-processes. Wiener achieved her theory through a "process analysis" based on a larger theoretical perspective that includes the symbolic interactionist traditions and the "social worlds in a social arena" concept (Wiener, 1981, p. 11). Processes described by Wiener must not be regarded as separate but rather as overlapping and not sequential. Besides, they are not necessarily employed consciously by the social actors.

According to Wiener's theory, *animating* the problem includes understanding how participants establish turf rights (e.g., the growth of associations and the burgeoning of the research world), developing constituencies (e.g., the growth of an ideology of "citizen participation" and the distribution of funds), and funnelling advice and imparting skills and information (e.g., the expansion of training, schools, and courses imparting information and skills). As having created a ground for the problem is not enough, the problem needs then to be *legitimized* by "borrowing prestige and expertise from other arenas", "lessening the attached stigma", "building respectability in the eyes of those outside the area", and differentiating alcohol problems from other drug and mental health problems (Wiener, 1981, p. 73). Finally, "constituents of the alcohol use arena have a *demonstrating* job to perform" (Wiener, 1981, p. 156), a process that requires competing for attention, selecting supportive data, enlarging the bounds of respectability and convincing opposing ideologists.

Embracing Gieryn's (1983, 1999) suggestions, we consider 'ideologies' as expressed in the rhetoric underlying the debate to be particularly important to an understanding of the 'boundary work' done by stakeholders to gain and protect their territory. According to this perspective, ideologies are here regarded as affected both by interests and strains, or ambivalences, which provide alternative repertoires to be exploited for public description of phenomena depending on the circumstance.

In this theoretical framework, the study presented here is an attempt to understand the role of different stakeholders in the process that led to Italy's first framework alcohol law, approved by Parliament in 2001 (Law No. 125). The main aim of this case study is to clarify the process and the factors that led to the major change in national alcohol policies, i.e., to highlight how "the arena built around the social problem of alcohol use has grown from an invisible to a visible state" (Wiener, 1981, p. 251). This means identifying main stakeholders (public and private treatment services, research institutes, NGOs, self-help groups, consumers' associations, alcohol producers), and analysing what role they played in the shift, assessing their positions, contrasts and coalitions, and deciphering the rhetoric applied in the course of public debate, including moral, social, scientific, and economic arguments, the latter being quite important on the Italian scene. Following Wiener's suggestion (1981, p. 22) we move "gingerly" in such labelling of action, keeping the focus on the whole process, since "tactics, conditions, consequences are of interest as they contribute to the larger flow".

Methods and sample

Findings are based on documentary analysis and open-ended interviews. Methods were shared and agreed upon with the international research group (AU, DK, IT, PL, UK) involved in work package 2 of the EU-funded ALICE RAP project, which adopted a stakeholder perspective in studying major policy changes in the field of addiction.

The legislative proceedings leading to Law 125/01 were retraced, and bills and Parliamentary debates concerning the alcohol issue discussed in the period 1990–2001 were taken into consideration. Content and discourse analyses were carried out on the bills, with special attention to the introductory sections, which contain the speeches made by the bills' sponsors in presenting them to Parliament.

Fourteen individual interviews of key informants representing different categories of stakeholders were then conducted between 24 July and 20 November 2013. Individuals to interview were selected on the basis of the role they played in the alcohol policy arena in the decade before the alcohol law was introduced. These roles included professionals, researchers, representatives of scientific societies, leaders of self-help groups and NGO's, alcohol industry representatives and politicians (Table 1).

A semi-structured guideline was used to identify the main actors and factors contributing to the approval of Law 125/01, how the different stakeholders played their role, and what consequences

[1] This number includes those Italians who drink more than 2–3 daily alcohol units for men, 1–2 for women, 1 unit for people over 65, and any daily quantity for youths under 17, as well as those who had drunk 6 or more units in one occasion last year (binge drinking), and any kind of consumption among 11–15 year olds.

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