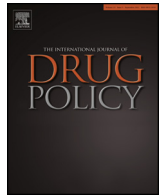




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Research paper

# A dawning demand for a new cannabis policy: A study of Swedish online drug discussions

Josefin Månsson\*

Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs (SoRAD), Stockholm University, SE-10691 Stockholm, Sweden

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** This study examines how online discussions on drug policy are formulating an oppositional cannabis discourse in an otherwise prohibitionist country like Sweden. The focus of the paper is to identify demands for an alternative cannabis policy as well as analysing how these demands are linked to governance.

**Methods:** The empirical material is 56 discussion-threads from the online message-board Flashback Forum that were active during the first eight months of 2012. Discourse theory was used to locate the discourse, and governmentality theory was used to locate the political belonging of the discourse.

**Results:** On Flashback Forum demands for a new cannabis policy are articulated in opposition to Swedish prohibitionist discourse. The oppositional discourse is constructed around the nodal points cannabis, harm, state and freedom that fill legalisation/decriminalisation/liberalisation with meaning. The nodal points are surrounded by policy demands that get their meaning through the particular nodal. These demands originate from neo-liberal and welfarist political rationalities. Neo-liberal and welfarist demands are mixed, and participants are simultaneously asking for state and individual approaches to handle the cannabis issue.

**Conclusion:** Swedish online discourse on cannabis widens the scope beyond the confines of drug policy to broader demands such as social justice, individual choice and increased welfare. These demands are not essentially linked together and many are politically contradictory. This is also significant for the discourse; it is not hegemonised by a political ideology. The discourse is negotiated between the neo-liberal version of an alternative policy demanding individual freedom, and the welfarist version demanding social responsibility. This implies the influence of the heritage from the social-democratic discourse, centred on state responsibility, which have been dominating Swedish politics in modern times. Consequently, this study refutes that the demand for a new cannabis policy is strictly neo-liberal.

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### Introduction

In 2009, a publisher, a PhD student in economic history and a professor in sociology published a polemic article on Swedish drug policy on the social media platform Newsmill (Berg, Edenborg, & Goldberg, 2009). They claimed that as the prohibitionist drug war had failed and drug liberalism does not handle injustices produced by drug markets, there is a need to move beyond such opposite political positions. Thus, the authors were formulating another way of thinking about drug policy in Sweden – drug socialism – based on the ideals of collective responsibility and international solidarity. Their article poses questions on how we talk about drugs, i.e. what discourses on drug policy that are available in Sweden. Sweden has

traditionally been a prohibitionist country, but this study examines how online discussions on drug policy contribute to formulate an oppositional cannabis discourse demanding legalisation, decriminalisation or liberalisation. The focus of the paper is to identify these demands for a new cannabis policy as well as analysing how they are linked to governance. As will be seen, oppositional demands are sparked by both international influences along with specific traces of traditional Swedish politics such as social-democracy. And although movements opposing prohibition are commonly believed to be neo-liberal this study will present a more nuanced analysis of demands for new cannabis policies.

In Sweden, there has been political consensus that all drugs should be criminalised. No political party is actively propagating legalisation, and prohibition has been the hegemonic discourse in politics, media and cultural life (Gould, 1996; Törnqvist, 2009). However, contemporary drug policy is being increasingly criticised on grounds of control damages, inability to diminish drug use and

\* Tel.: +46 8 674 77 88; fax: +46 8 674 76 86.  
E-mail address: [josefin.mansson@sorad.su.se](mailto:josefin.mansson@sorad.su.se)

lack of humanitarianism, and claims are made about the need for a new drug policy in Sweden (e.g. Federley, Stålenkrantz, Askeljung, & Jämtved, 2011; Goldberg, 2011; Linton, 2012). Internationally, a legalisation movement is growing and the failure of the war on drugs is one of its main arguments as to why drug use should no longer result in punitive actions. The failure is associated with harm, social division, extreme state expenses and an increase in organised crime (Goldberg, 2011; Inciardi, 1991; Miron & Zwiebel, 1995; Stares, 1996). Consequently, alternative drug policy discussions draw on demands related to economy (Acevedo, 2007; Becker, Murphy, & Grossman, 2006; Bretteville-Jensen, 2006; Caulkins, Kilmer, MacCoun, Pacula, & Reuter, 2011; Pacula, 2010; Patton, 2010; Shepard & Blackley, 2007; Trevino & Richard, 2002), medical advantages (Joffe & Yancy, 2004), harm reduction (Acevedo, 2007; Miron & Zwiebel, 1995; Moore & Fraser, 2006) and user perspectives (Williams, van Ours, & Grossman, 2011).

In Latin America, state leaders question the effectiveness of warfare and ask for a paradigm shift focusing on harm reduction rather than prohibition. In Europe, countries have decriminalised all drugs (Portugal) or de-facto legalised cannabis (the Netherlands). In the US, California has been at the forefront of the cannabis legalisation movement (Gunnlaugsson & Galliher, 2010, p. 129; Nadelmann, Gutwillig, & Davies, 2012; Patton, 2010, p. 169). In the 2010 vote for cannabis legalisation in California one of the main arguments was economical; emphasising that legalisation would bring billions of dollars to the state (Patton, 2010, p. 164). Different social demands were also articulated through the cannabis issue (more jobs, less discrimination, and better use of police resources), which together created a common political demand for legalisation connected to civil rights and labour movements (Doherty, 2011).

It also seems as if drug legalisation/decriminalisation/liberalisation is more than just a pragmatic policy question; it is associated with ideology (Goode, 1998). Several researchers agree that neo-liberal rhetoric is a common denominator in discourses opposing drug prohibition, and have played a crucial part in reconstructing drug use in international contexts from a structural to an individual issue (Barratt, 2011; Moore & Fraser, 2006; O'Malley, 2002; Riley, Thompson, & Griffin, 2010; Trevino & Richard, 2002). However, in the US, differing political ideologies seems to be able to gather around a legalisation demand (Goode, 1998), and internationally this demand seem to be associated with both left-wing (e.g. Copenhagen, Denmark), liberal (e.g. the Netherlands), and conservative regimes (e.g. Colombia). The issue appears to lack natural political habitat (Goode, 1998).

In Sweden, it is not until recently that a discussion on political alternatives to drug prohibition has begun to slowly dawn. There are attempts to establish networks among cannabis activists (e.g. *Swedish NORMAL*), small political parties are adding the question of cannabis decriminalisation to their manifesto (e.g. *Piratpartiet*) and there have been a few political manifestations for cannabis legalisation (e.g. *Gröna Brevet*, 2012). These attempts have yet to reach public attention and put the cannabis issue on the political agenda. However, in one arena demands for change in cannabis policy are definitely present – on the internet. Under the cloak of anonymity, individuals are allowed to give voice to alternative views on drugs despite their stigmatising position (Crispino, 2007, p. 87f; Gould, 1996, p. 91). Vivid online discussions allow for anti-prohibition activists to cultivate their arguments, as there seems to be a widespread discontent with Swedish drug policy. Thus, prohibition is getting politicised and we are, online and at present time, witnessing a new discourse on drug policy taking shape in Sweden. Since young people turn to internet forums as reliable sources of knowledge about drugs, oppositional cannabis discourses can disseminate quickly (Boyer, Shannon, & Hibberd, 2005; Skärner & Månsson, 2008; Tackett-Gibson, 2007, 2008; Walsh, 2011; Wax, 2002). From a prevention perspective this makes an online study of

the Swedish cannabis debate important. Although internet research on drug related issues is getting increasingly noticeable (e.g. Barratt, 2011; Månsson & Ekendahl, 2013; Murguía, Tackett-Gibson, & Lessem, 2007; Rantala, 2005), research focusing specifically on attitudes towards cannabis policy seems to be scarce.

The polemic Newsmill article made it visible that the political direction of an oppositional cannabis discourse is not settled; will it be mainly leftist, liberal or conservative? Or will it gather different political viewpoints? Drawing on poststructuralist theories of politics in general and the work of Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) in particular, I hope to disclose how political demands are linked together online to form an oppositional discourse on cannabis policy. The focus of the article is on the cannabis issue; one of the main topics in both international political contexts and Swedish online discussions. Consequently, I do not discuss drug policy in general. I examine different strategies of discursive articulation by which forum participants try to construct a new discourse opposing cannabis prohibition, asking what political demands that are underpinning this discourse, and how they are linked together. Further, I locate the political belonging of the demands using governmentality theory as developed by Rose and Miller (1992). The aim of this study is thus to describe and analyse how oppositional cannabis discourse is constructed online, with focus on its political belonging.

## Theory and method

The empirical material for this article is discussion-threads from Sweden's currently largest online message board *Flashback Forum* (from now on *Flashback*) (<https://www.flashback.org/>). Discussion-threads on *Flashback* vary in length and intensity, and participants can be both active contributors and sporadic visitors. *Flashback* is a public and anonymous forum providing no background information about the participants (sex, gender, race, occupation etc.) besides nickname, avatar, duration of membership and number of posts. The forum is diverse in topics and based on the idea of freedom of speech. There are several sub-sections discussing topics that might seem offensive elsewhere; e.g. prostitution, drug use, and illegal file sharing. Due to this topical spread and the volume of posts (about 40 million in August 2012), I have analysed discussions on cannabis from a sub-section targeting drug policy (<https://www.flashback.org/f14>).

To localise discussions touching on cannabis, I used the website search tool. In August 2012, I made a search for “cannabis” at the “Drug policy”-section which resulted in 165 threads (containing over 11,000 posts) where cannabis was mentioned. These were saved as pdf-files. To make the material manageable, I analysed discussion-threads that were active during 2012, up until August when I started gathering the data. This resulted in a final sample of 56 threads (containing 3652 posts).

The quotes from the material included in this text are extracts from longer posts and threads, and they often refer (directly or indirectly) to previous comments or discussions. It would have been too space-consuming to include the full discussion-thread. Arguments are however developed in the progress of discussion. It is therefore by reading the full discussion that it becomes visual what arguments that are taken for granted and which ones are controversial within the discourse; e.g. controversial arguments generate many answers and extreme case formulations such as “never”, “not even one” and “nobody” to challenge or legitimise a certain viewpoint (Pomerantz, 1986). In the results section I therefore describe the context of the included quote.

I have edited included quotes as little as possible, and tried to follow the original style of expression closely (even when grammatically or linguistically faulty) while translating

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