

PROHIBITION OF BEER IN ICELAND: AN INTERNATIONAL TEST OF SYMBOLIC POLITICS

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Beer has been prohibited in Iceland since 1915, but wine has been legally imported since 1922, as have all other alcoholic beverages since 1934. Since 1932, ten unsuccessful attempts have been made to repeal the beer prohibition. Using the records of parliamentary debates, newspaper reports, opinion poll results, and interviews, we examine the degree of fit between this legislation and Gusfield's model of linkage between status politics and symbolic legislation (Gusfield, 1955, 1963, 1967). We also identify the type of demographic and economic settings that appear to create an environment that encourages symbolic politics.

I. INTRODUCTION

In a study of the Woman's Christian Temperance Union (WCTU), Gusfield (1963) observed that in the early 1900s national prohibition of alcohol in the United States was largely the result of the efforts of middle class, rural Protestants who felt they were losing their position of dominance in American society. As America was becoming more urban, more Catholic, and more secular, the prohibition law "established the victory of Protestant over Catholic, rural over urban, tradition over modernity, the middle class over both the lower and upper strata" (Gusfield, 1963: 7). Total abstinence was seen by the rural Protestants as the solution to lower class poverty so common, for example, among the urban European-Catholic immigrants in the early 1900s. Much of the motivation claimed by those supporting Prohibition was an "attempt to alleviate suffering through humanitarian actions by those in advantageous positions or to reform the habits of the suffering as a way to the improvement of both their character *and* their material situation" (Gusfield, 1955: 223). The significance of Prohibition was

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that "it marked the public affirmation of the abstemious, ascetic qualities of American Protestantism" (Gusfield, 1963: 8). Gusfield (*ibid.*, pp. 16–19) observed that status politics typically involve a struggle over symbols to secure deference, while class politics are usually characterized by a conflict over material issues.

Even though the prohibition law in America was widely violated and only grudgingly and selectively enforced, its mere existence demonstrated the superiority of the rural Protestant way of life. Symbolic legislation does not depend upon law enforcement for its effect, unlike what Gusfield (1967) calls instrumental legislation, which actually attempts to control human behavior. Signs of symbolic legislation are found when there is a law that is obviously unenforced and even unenforceable or that appears on its face to make no real difference in the lives of those it is supposed to benefit (*ibid.*).

Even in the case of America's alcohol prohibition, some of the law's middle class supporters hoped that it would serve the instrumental purpose of controlling worker behavior (Timberlake, 1966: 80). Contrary to Gusfield's claims, however, in using the illustration of America's alcohol prohibition it is difficult to see a clear distinction between class conflict and status conflict for both types of conflict involve the domination of the working class by higher social strata. Furthermore, in both the United States and the United Kingdom there is some evidence that allegedly symbolic legislation also has instrumental qualities, and that in the United States class and class conflict seem to infect even alcohol, opium, and marihuana prohibitions, situations in which one might imagine that class interests would be minimal, at least when compared to laws involving such issues as anti-trust violations, legal control of factories, and other property rights.

Like Gusfield, Edelman (1964) found a symbolic role for law in American antitrust legislation. The mere passage of these laws in the late nineteenth century appeased Americans who were greatly concerned over the rapidly growing power and abuses of American corporations, even though these laws have in fact almost never been used to control business. Nevertheless, Gusfield's distinction between instrumental and symbolic legislation seems inadequate to describe the legislative events taking place in antitrust legislation, since these unenforced, or symbolic, laws served the instrumental purpose of reassuring an angry public that past abuses of business leaders were no longer possible. Similarly, Carson's (1975) study of the origins of the United Kingdom's Factories Regulation Act of

1833 found both instrumental and symbolic origins of this legislation. Leading manufacturers had instrumental reasons for supporting this attempt to improve factory working conditions, including the fact that these new requirements might have forced many smaller manufacturers out of business, thereby reducing competition. Yet initially these manufacturers were not enthusiastic about the legislation because of its symbolic significance, which appeared to condemn all manufacturers. Thus, Carson claims, "An exclusive empirical dichotomy between the two [instrumental and symbolic] is likely to be misleading . . . [since] most attempts to make law probably contain elements of both" (*ibid.*, p. 136).

A parallel development was found in California's first opium law, passed in 1875, which used the symbol of moral inferiority as an instrument to divide the working class (Morgan, 1978). White workers were coopted when convinced of their superiority to the Chinese. Once the labor market could no longer absorb both white and Chinese workers, the latter were accused of being immoral opium users who required stern criminal penalties to control their corrupt appetites. The 1875 law was aimed at removing the Chinese from the labor force and is associated historically with strict controls on Chinese immigration. Once the Chinese laborers were no longer needed, they lost the protection they had received earlier from members of the business community. Other researchers have found that a symbolic role of law likewise applies to American marijuana prohibitions, which are routinely defended by legislators but, like alcohol prohibition laws before them, almost never enforced (Himmelstein, 1983). Still, Himmelstein observes, "Symbolic politics may also affirm domination of various kinds—economic, political, and ideological" (*ibid.*, p. 17). Galliher and Cross (1982; 1983) found, for example, that in the state of Nevada, where gambling and prostitution are legal—the penalties for the possession of marijuana were the highest in the United States. While these high penalties were almost never enforced, local observers claimed the law was an effort of lawmakers to demonstrate, or *symbolize*, to others that, even with legal prostitution and gambling, Nevadans were not without some moral values. The state feared that federal interference could threaten the gambling industry on which its economy depends. Nevada's marijuana penalties, while seldom enforced, were thus seen as instrumental in protecting the state's reputation and hence its economy.

In sum, then, existing evidence of symbolic law is confounded by evidence of instrumentalism, perhaps because of

the facts of social stratification in the societies thus far studied. If we are to locate an environment where purely symbolic legislation is enacted, it perhaps would have to be a society where social class is not so pervasively important as it is in the United States or the United Kingdom. In the Western world, it is impossible to locate a better candidate for this study than Iceland. This is the only European nation never to have had a nobility. All citizens are white, totally literate, and over 95 percent Lutheran; there is total government financing for all education and virtually all medical care. Among these people social or economic stratification is seen as being of relatively little importance (Grimsson and Broddason, 1977).

There is evidence that unenforced, symbolic legislation exists in Iceland in the form of beer prohibition, which has been in effect since 1915. The prohibition of all other alcoholic drinks has been abolished (wine in 1922 and other beverages in 1934). Moreover, "near beer" of 2¹/₄ percent alcohol is legal, but on ten occasions since 1932, proposals to increase the percentage to between 3.5 percent and 4.5 percent have been defeated. The differences between the law and suggested alternatives are so modest that the continuing debate seems to reflect the operation of symbolic concerns rather than material interests.

Among the questions that can be raised about Iceland's beer prohibition are what possible effect can such an isolated and minute prohibition have on material well-being when all other alcoholic beverages have been legally available for over 50 years, and what does this law indicate about Icelandic cultural and social systems? More specifically, we will explore the question of whether this legislation represents purely symbolic politics, such as described by Gusfield, or whether it also contains instrumental qualities. In addition, we will examine the degree to which this legislation is a reflection of status or class conflict.

II. DATA TYPES

Interviews were conducted by Helgi Gunnlaugsson with past and present members of Iceland's Parliament during the summer of 1984, and records of Parliament were collected from the beginning of the national debate on alcoholic beverages in 1909. A review was made of newspaper reports of sessions of Parliament in 1934, 1953, 1960, 1965, and 1984 during which major discussions of beer proposals developed. Data from surveys on citizen attitudes to various issues related to beer prohibition were also reviewed.

III. THE HISTORY OF PROHIBITIONIST SENTIMENT

Based on the results of a national poll in 1908, the Parliament of Iceland voted in 1909 to cease the importation of all alcoholic beverages. At the time, this small nation had no domestic commercial brewing. Lawmakers believed that their actions made them the first nation in the Western world to pass such prohibition legislation. But it was not until 1915 that a ban on sales went into effect, and this grace period between 1909 and 1915 was designed to enable alcohol distributors to dispose of their remaining stocks. Complete prohibition remained in effect for only seven years, from 1915 until 1922. Even so, some discussion later arose in Parliament over the fact that alcohol consumption during this period was obvious and was presumed to be from illegal home-brewed beverages.

After only a seven-year attempt at total prohibition, the law was modified as a result of economic pressures from the Spanish, who demanded that Iceland resume the importation of Spanish wine in return for the continued Spanish importation of Icelandic fish. Under such economic pressure, the Icelandic Parliament agreed to this exception to its prohibition law.

Perhaps feeling uncomfortable with such a gerrymandered law, in 1928 Parliament decided that a national poll should determine the future of prohibition, just as was done in 1908. A poll was finally conducted in 1933, and the majority of those surveyed supported the repeal of prohibition. Given the exception already provided for Spanish wine, it seemed reasonable, at least to some members of Parliament, that other exceptions were plausible. Thus in 1932 and 1933 two proposals were introduced in the lower house of Parliament to allow the brewing of beer with up to 4 percent alcohol. They were justified as attempts to abolish illegally brewed liquor, which was characterized as very harmful, especially when compared to beer, which was thought to be the least harmful of all alcoholic beverages. Local beer brewing, it was also argued, could prevent the loss of foreign exchange caused by importing Spanish wine.

However, neither proposal succeeded because the opposition was formidable. For example, the chief physician of Iceland vigorously opposed the measures, arguing that beer would be especially harmful to the working class and to the young since "many workers and even children would tend to abuse beer because it's a relatively cheap substance" (*Iceland Parliamentary Documents of the Hearings*, Vol. A (1932), at 1290). The prime minister also opposed this legislation, saying, "I totally disagree that consumption of beer is harmless, beer inevi-

tably will evoke longing for alcohol, especially among youngsters, the working class and students. It would even be more useful to allow importation of heavy liquor to Iceland than allow brewing of beer" (ibid., pp. 1280–1281). Over the next fifty years these same arguments involving the defense of the young and workers would appear again and again.

A. *The End of Prohibition and the Beginning of the Beer Battles*

In 1934 legislation was introduced in Parliament to allow the importation of all alcoholic beverages. But the ban on local production of alcoholic beverages would remain in effect, with a separate provision, however, to allow the local brewing of beer if Parliament should approve it in a later separate vote. Proponents argued that beer brewing would both increase revenues to the state and create a successful profession for many Icelanders (*Morgunbladið*, 1934). The opponents of the repeal of prohibition countered by saying that this argument revealed a serious inconsistency in the 1934 proposed bill, which in one place stated that the production of alcohol was prohibited but in another indicated the possibility of brewing beer. With the law's opponents capitalizing on this alleged inconsistency, the provision allowing for a later vote on beer brewing was expelled from the legislation. Beer was thus singled out for special consideration almost by chance, first by pro-beer members of Parliament (MPs) and then by those opposed to alcohol, who seized on the alleged inconsistency to prevent a complete loss of prohibition. The final version of the bill, which was ultimately passed, allowed the importation of all alcoholic beverages except beer, which was still prohibited unless it contained less than $2\frac{1}{4}$ percent alcohol. One of the first, and certainly one of the most influential, to speak against ending the prohibition on beer was an MP who was both a farmer and a temperance leader. His argument that beer is an especially dangerous alcoholic beverage because it is used as a stepping stone to harder liquor has been used repeatedly over the past 50 years:

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, which leads to drinking strong liquor. But it is evident that beer evokes the longing for drinking alcohol. . . . Although we may allow the importation of strong liquor to Iceland, it is important to prohibit beer. . . . It's very important to prevent such a disaster, especially a disaster to the young people (*Iceland Parliamentary*

Documents of the Hearings, Vol. B, No. 7 (1934) at 2110–2111).

A socialist member of Parliament also argued that working people in Iceland would be those most injured by beer and that they were especially vulnerable to its effects 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. . . . But why is alcohol legal? It is because alcohol production is a big profession, controlled by powerful capitalists and can't therefore be easily abolished. . . . 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. The Parliament should be like a father to a child, knowing what is best for its welfare. . . . Poor people will start to drink beer, because it's the cheapest alcohol. But when beer has been consumed for a while, it leads to the consumption of hard liquor (*ibid.*, pp. 2157–2158, 2226).

A supporter of beer importation observed that it would be very strange to prohibit beer while allowing the importation of liquor since beer is less harmful than other, stronger alcoholic beverages. This argument has been used repeatedly by proponents of the end of beer prohibition for fifty years, but to no avail. In 1934 the new prime minister recalled that he had been the sheriff of Reykjavik, the capital of Iceland, when the importation of Spanish wine was resumed, and noticed no increase in the amount of drunkenness compared to the period before total prohibition, when all types of alcoholic beverages had been available. He added that "it's a strange regulation to prohibit brewing of beer, when importation of strong liquor has been allowed" (*ibid.*, p. 2093). However, during the debate the prime minister switched his position and soon spoke against legalized beer (*ibid.*, pp. 2237–2238). Paralleling his change of heart, the votes on the bill repealing prohibition in both houses were very lopsided, thirteen to three in the upper house and twenty-four to eight in the lower house. It appears that the willingness of almost all in Parliament to exclude beer from the bill helped its passage, for this provision was used as a bargaining point between the opposing sides. The supporters of repeal apparently decided to compromise on the issue of beer to help ensure the passage of the rest of the bill.

The largest daily newspaper in Iceland, the *Morgunbladid* in Reykjavik, strongly supported the repeal of prohibition, including the repeal of beer prohibition. There were forty-three press reports on prohibition during the year prior to its partial

repeal, many of which (37 percent) described home brewing and the accidents it caused. Some also described the total failure of prohibition in the United States. An article in the late fall of 1934 concluded that it made no sense to ban beer: "The ban of beer is ridiculous, everyone should understand that dangerousness of alcohol increases with alcohol content" (*Morgunbladid*, 1934).

In 1947 the beer issue surfaced again. A member of the lower house of Parliament introduced legislation to allow the local brewing of 4 percent beer as a means to decrease the consumption of hard liquor and to raise new tax revenues for building hospitals from domestic and export beer sales. The proposal was not taken seriously by most members of Parliament and it did not come to a vote. Opponents capitalized on an apparent contradiction in the bill's objectives: to decrease alcohol consumption and at the same time to increase tax revenues from alcohol sales (*Iceland Parliamentary Documents of the Hearings*, Vol. A, Nos. 69–71 (1947), at 196, 198).

Undaunted, in 1952 the proponents of beer were back again, in the upper house with a proposal for a national referendum on beer. However, this proposal was removed from suggested legislation by the minister of justice. It was at this time that opposition to a national referendum as a means of settling the beer issue first appeared. In 1953, as an indirect method of repealing the prohibition of beer, there was an effort in the upper house to limit the legal definition of alcohol to include only beverages with over 3.5 percent alcohol. There was considerable dispute as to how the bill, as worded, proposed to measure the percent of alcohol in beer. Opponents claimed that the law proposed a new method of measuring alcohol content, whereas if the traditional method were used the actual alcohol level would be closer to 4.4 percent than 3.5 percent. This alleged attempt was seen as a subterfuge and angered many members of Parliament, especially in the lower house. It did not pass.

During the same session another bill was introduced in the lower house, this one to allow local brewing of 4.4 percent beer. The opponents of beer again capitalized on the apparent subterfuge in the earlier bill, and it was also defeated. Parliament did, however, pass legislation allowing alcohol to be brewed for export and for use on the NATO air force base in Keflavik, after it was argued that beer exports would help the economy, as had happened in Denmark and Holland, which were famous for their beers. There was apparently no moral concern about brewing beer for the consumption of others, only concern about the effect on Icelanders. The newspaper published thirty-two

articles on the beer issue in the year prior to the introduction of these two proposals and endorsed the suggestion of a national referendum (*Morgunbladid*, 1953).

In 1954 a new government agency was created called the Council of the Government Against Alcohol (CGAA). This agency is financed through taxes on alcohol sales and its purpose is "to fight against abuse of alcohol and abolish the misfortune which follows abuse of alcohol" (Alcohol Law, *Laws of Iceland* (1954); Alcohol Law, *Laws of Iceland* (1969)). In an interview with Helgi Gunnlaugsson in 1984, the manager of the CGAA explained the agency's opposition to allowance of beer:

There are several reasons why we oppose allowance of beer in Iceland. The most important one, however, is that experience in Iceland and other countries shows that any lenience of the alcohol law increases alcohol consumption in general. Thus, it is very likely, that allowance of beer, will not only be an addition to the present types of alcohol consumption in Iceland, but will also lead to an increased consumption on the whole. . . . We're no amateurs, we only provide scientific facts, based on reliable sources from different countries.

Over the years the CGAA has continued this line of reasoning, and its position has had a major impact on members of Parliament who in recent years have frequently used this argument against the allowance of beer.

In 1960 another proposal for brewing beer with up to 3.5 percent alcohol was introduced in the upper house with the rationale that the beer ban "was an insult to the Icelandic peoples' sense of liberty and civilization" (*Iceland Parliamentary Documents of the Hearings*, Vol. C, No. 1 (1960), at 443). The bill's sponsor argued that brewing could help the economy through domestic beer sales and exportation, and also claimed that "people don't perceive they are violating the law [by making home-brewed beer] because prohibition of beer does not coincide with their sense of justice" (*ibid.*, p. 410). These arguments notwithstanding, the proposal was again defeated. The stepping-stone argument surfaced again, as did the notion that beer is a special threat to workers. Another agreed, citing the horrible situation in the United Kingdom: "All factories and dock yards have to lock up their workers during working hours and especially take care to not let anyone out until the pubs are closed" (*ibid.*, p. 447). Yet another opponent told the following tale of woe: "A few days ago I witnessed a thirteen-year-old school boy 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 didn't have to bother about preparing coffee or tea, just grab the beer from the kitchen shelves" (ibid., p. 438). Perhaps wearying some of this issue, the *Morgunbladid* devoted only twenty-five articles to the topic during the year prior to Parliament's deliberations. But the paper did editorialize, citing majority opinion and chemical reality: "It is a common fact that most people want to use alcohol, thus one immediately realizes how ridiculous it is to allow liquor but ban beer, which is healthier than liquor" (*Morgunbladid*, 1960).

In 1965 a bill was introduced in the lower house to allow the brewing of 4.5 percent beer. The proposal was defeated, however, as was a proposal for a national referendum on beer. During the year prior, the *Morgunbladid* had published twenty-three articles on beer, but seems to have given up on this issue and did not take an aggressive editorial position, as it had previously. Still, the paper did observe that "allowance of beer could become a major source of income for the state" (*Morgunbladid*, 1965b). The paper also described a new brewery in northern Iceland with "perfect natural conditions for brewing beer" (*Morgunbladid*, 1965a), and a Danish brewery that was very profitable and paid considerable taxes to the state (*Morgunbladid*, 1966b). Three articles questioned a regulation instituted by the minister of financial affairs in December 1965 that allowed ship and airplane crews to bring beer back to Iceland for their private use, asking "Why are seamen allowed to bring in beer, when it's not allowed here in Iceland?" (*Morgunbladid*, 1966a). These crews could bring in up to twenty-four bottles of beer if they had been out of the country for less than twenty days, and forty-eight bottles if gone for over twenty days. Before the decision, this had been the informal practice for a number of years.

Three years later, in 1968, another national referendum was proposed, again in the lower house, but again also defeated. In 1977 a national referendum was proposed in the lower house and then defeated once again. (One member of Parliament later claimed that the beer issue was a "petty issue" and that it was therefore ridiculous to waste a national referendum on this proposition (*Iceland Parliamentary Documents of the Hearings*, No. 27 (1983–84), at 6387).

In parliamentary hearings during the late fall of 1983 a proposal for a national referendum on beer was introduced one more time, with the following preamble: "It sounds awfully strange to ban the sale of the weakest substance of all alcohol beverages, but allow sales of hard liquor. It sounds similar to a

ban of aspirin, but allowance of morphine" (Preamble to Proposal Number 138, *Iceland Parliament*, (1983)). This time the bill was introduced in both houses (*Iceland Parliamentary Documents of the Hearings*, No. 17 (1983–84), at 3335). In spite of these pleadings, the bill never came to a vote. Opponents argued that surveys were better measures of public opinion, and one said: "I doubt the usefulness of direct democracy like a national referendum and I believe they don't have any future. In the western world, a much better choice has appeared, attitude surveys, which are utilized to reveal the will of the people" (*ibid.*, p. 3338). During these same hearings in the early spring of 1984, a proposal was introduced in the lower house to allow the local brewing and importation of beer, but the proposal was not discussed. Fifty-five articles on this issue had appeared in the *Morgunbladid* during the prior year, with the newspaper supporting a national referendum. When it became apparent that the national referendum was to be defeated, a headline in the paper called it "Perfunctory Work in Parliament" (*Morgunbladid*, 1984b).

IV. PUBLIC OPINION AND PARTY POLITICS

Nationwide surveys on the beer issue in Iceland have indeed become increasingly common in recent years, and there has been a steady increase in support for beer sales. In 1977, 57 percent opposed beer sales in Iceland (Hagvangur, 1977); in the summer of 1983, 53 percent wanted beer sales (Hardarson, 1983); and by the fall of 1983 the figure had risen to 63.5 percent (Hagvangur, 1983). Those most supportive of beer have been the young and urban, with approximately 83 percent of those between the ages of twenty and twenty-nine and 68 percent of those in the Reykjavik area supporting legal beer by 1983. In March 1984, 74 percent of all Icelanders surveyed supported the idea of a national referendum on the beer issue (DV, 1984).

Opponents of beer sales clearly distrust direct democracy through referendums or even survey results. In our interviews in 1984, one member of Parliament complained about the press, perhaps thinking of Iceland's largest paper, which has always supported the repeal of beer prohibition, for its distortion and manipulation of public opinion: "Nowadays, it is nothing but pure propaganda in newspapers that heavily influences people's minds. That's why so many support allowance of beer in these surveys, because papers carry so much propaganda for alcohol consumption. I believe therefore, we should not take these

surveys too seriously.” Another added: “Propaganda of newspapers for increased consumption of alcohol has affected the public’s mind. But I still believe that the majority of the public is against beer, surveys that indicate the opposite are most likely false.” He said this even though he was the MP who had been quoted several months earlier during parliamentary debate as favoring surveys over a national referendum. One member of Parliament complained: “If a referendum is to be conducted, how should we protect the rights of the minority?”

An MP who was a supporter of a national referendum and legalized beer observed: “Opponents believe such direct democracy threatens their interests. There is also a strong distrust of voters, especially among MPs who come from rural areas.” Proponents of legal beer cited the hypocrisy of allowing those who go abroad to bring in twelve half-liter cans of foreign beer or to purchase twenty-four bottles of Icelandic beer through the duty-free store upon reentering Iceland. The first privilege was allowed by the minister of financial affairs in 1979 and the second in 1984 after complaints were made about the unfair privileges of airplane and ship crews. Moreover, a “beer” is sold in Iceland’s bars, which is made by mixing the legal 2¼ percent “near beer” with liquor. A few years ago this practice was started in several Reykjavik bars, and the government prosecutor has held this to be legal since both the 2¼ percent near beer and the whiskey are legal substances (*Morgunbladið*, 1984a). The decision of the minister of financial affairs to allow travelers to bring in foreign beers or to purchase one case of Icelandic beer at the duty-free store for their personal use is nicely suited to permit the relatively affluent middle classes, who have the finances to travel abroad frequently, to have a steady supply of beer while denying it to the less affluent. This policy is consistent with the professed fear of the effect of beer upon workers. The deputy sheriff of Reykjavik discussed the impossibility of controlling beer consumption: “The police occasionally arrest people for brewing beer in their households. We find these people mostly through drunk drivers who maintain they’ve been drinking beer. But on the whole, we can do very little against this. Materials for brewing beer are sold everywhere legally.”

From the various parliamentary votes on the prohibition of beer over the years, it is clear that the Progressive Party, which is predominantly rural, and the two socialist parties (Socialist Democratic Party and People’s Alliance), which traditionally represent workers, have provided most of the opposition to beer proposals. Most of the support for beer has come from the

largest single political party, the Independence Party; with 38 percent to 42 percent of the vote, it represents the urban middle class and is endorsed by the *Morgunbladid*. In the three actual votes on the issue of beer that have taken place, the Independence Party provided 73 percent of the support for beer proposals, and the socialists and the Progressives provided 80 percent of the opposition.

V. ECONOMIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC FOUNDATIONS OF ICELANDIC LAW

The population of Iceland increased nearly threefold in the sixty years from 1910 to 1970, with farming and the rural areas of the country experiencing rapidly declining numbers as approximately half of the rural population was lost in those years (see Table 1). All these figures demonstrate that although the urbanization process in Iceland began later than in the United States, it has been more rapid (Table 2).

Table 1 also shows that in 1910 the area around the capital of Reykjavik represented only approximately one-fifth of the nation's population, while in 1970 it represented over half of the total population. One reflection of how different the Reykjavik area is from the rest of the nation is that the next largest city has less than a tenth of that region's population. This is an important distinction because, as we noted above, it is predominantly in the capital area that a majority desires to end beer prohibition.

The reapportionment of Parliament to reflect these remarkable population shifts has, however, been slow in coming. In 1934 and again in 1959 Parliament reapportioned itself. But even so the votes in rural Iceland currently clearly count for

Table 1. Demographic and Economic Characteristics of Iceland, 1910-70

	1910	1930	1950	1970
Total population	85,183	108,861	143,973	204,578
Reykjavik area population*	17,595	37,188	70,648	119,822
Rural population	54,141	44,952	33,453	28,739
Percent rural	63	42	23	14
Percent agricultural	48	35	24	12
Percent fishing	15	15	11	6
Percent industrial workers	12	20	32	37

Source: Grimsson and Broddason, 1977, pp. 153 and 170.

* Includes Reykjanes

Table 2. Demographic and Economic Characteristics of the United States, 1910–70

	1910	1930	1950	1970
Percent rural	54	44	36	27
Percent agricultural	31	21	11	4
Percent industrial workers	28	24	29	27

Source: United States Department of Commerce, 1975: 11, 126–127, 137.

more than those in urban areas. This is especially true in the capital, for while only 25 percent of Parliament is from the Reykjavik city proper, approximately 40 percent of the total population lives there. In 1908 and 1933 there were national referendums on alcohol, but not later. The unrepresentative nature of Parliament explains the growing reluctance of this body to rely on a direct referendum to settle the issue of beer or anything else. Thus even in such a small, ethnically, racially, and religiously homogeneous nation there is still opposition to direct democracy.

VI. CONCLUSION

It is curious that for all the appeal and apparent utility of the analysis of symbolic laws, there have been only a few attempts to determine whether or how such ideas are applicable in other nations besides the United States (for example, see Carson, 1975). The implication of much of this research is that only Americans are so fundamentalist, puritanical, and shallow as to be pacified by such symbolic drug or alcohol legislation; certainly the generally more secular and sophisticated Europeans would not be so submissive. The goal of the present research has been to see if such an analysis could be useful in understanding legislative action in other than an American setting.

This case of beer prohibition in Iceland is especially interesting because among alcoholic beverages, beer is less widely prohibited than whiskey. This distinction is a result of the general recognition that beer is not as potent as other alcoholic beverages. Just as beer was claimed to be a stepping stone to hard liquor and therefore especially dangerous to young people just beginning to drink, marihuana has often been alleged to be particularly dangerous as a stepping stone to the use of harder drugs among the young (Kaplan, 1970: 232; Himmelstein, 1983). The special irony is that in Iceland beer has been routinely as-

sociated with hard liquor, which has not been prohibited by law for over fifty years.

According to Gusfield's reasoning, it is very clear that the Icelandic law is an instance of symbolic legislation because the difference in the alcohol content of legal near beer, compared to the proposed changes, ranges from only 1 percent to 2 percent alcohol. Moreover, beer is already widely available in Iceland—ban or no ban. Those citizens who travel abroad are allowed to bring in beer for their personal use; a "beer" composed of liquor and near beer is sold in some Reykjavik bars; and home-brewed beer is widely made with no limitations on the percent of alcohol except the preferences of the brewer. This is largely an unenforceable law, which Gusfield (1967) has indicated to be a sure indication of symbolic legislation, even though the proponents of the law are certain that it serves to control drinking behavior.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the United States was experiencing the rapid industrial expansion that would occur in Iceland approximately fifty years later. During this rapid American industrial development, national prohibition of alcohol was enacted, as were special laws and special courts to deal with the problems of young people—the juvenile codes and the juvenile courts. These laws were a consequence of what has been called the "child-saving movement" (Platt, 1977). Although cloaked in the language of helping and protecting lower class youth, such legislation was ideally suited to ensure that developing capitalism would in the future have the type of disciplined work force that it required. This same rationale was used in the United States for the defense of alcohol prohibition.

In the United States ethnic conflict has been related to class conflict, and both have been associated with alcohol prohibition, which was opposed by labor unions. By comparison the temperance position of the socialist parties and the Labor Union of Iceland, which represents workers in all industries, has its roots in the rapid industrialization of Iceland. Most Icelandic workers and union leaders have relatively recent rural origins and thus have been opposed to alcohol. Moreover, some union leaders received their initial experience in political organizations through participation in the temperance movement (Einarsson, 1970). In Iceland there are no ethnic groups and there has been little economic stratification and class conflict. The country's labor unions have their origins more in an attempt to imitate similar movements in Western Europe and North America rather than in local class conflict (*ibid.*; Krist-

jansson, 1977). Since Iceland's labor unions were essentially borrowed from abroad rather than being created by local class conflict, these organizations came closer to representing status groups rather than class interests.

Like the "child savers" and prohibitionists in early twentieth-century America, the opponents of beer in Iceland have continued to base their opposition to this substance for almost 60 years on its dreaded effects upon workers and young people, the workers of the future. Even though economic stratification and class conflict have not been pronounced in Iceland, one might get the impression that they were from the seemingly paternalistic references to the workers' special weaknesses and needs. In Iceland, however, even the representatives of labor unions and the socialist parties have repeatedly emphasized the weakness of the workers, the very people they represent, apparently because of Icelanders' "Viking blood." This has given an unexpected strength to the last vestiges of Icelandic prohibition. In contrast to the unions, the representatives of the urban middle classes have always seen beer and other alcohol as simply commodities to be exploited for the income they can generate for industry, employment, and tax revenues for the state.

Rural Icelanders are losing their numerical strength, just as rural American Protestants did earlier. Yet rural Icelanders maintain some sense of power through the law in an unrepresentative parliament, and, in the instance of beer prohibition, they have had the support of the political parties of the workers and unions. Beer prohibition is thus a means of demonstrating rural domination in the face of population odds attendant to the rapid changes that have occurred in Iceland's economic and social system. Such a protracted conflict in Icelandic politics has obscured class, or material, interests because during most of this century there has been only the most rudimentary class system in the country (Grimsson and Broddason, 1977). Since economic stratification developed much later in Iceland compared with other Western democracies, in the past its parliament has been easily deflected from material issues to status conflicts. Industrialization likewise came later than in other Western countries, and developed much more rapidly due to the influence of these other nations. The rural domination of parliament, its beer prohibition, and the contemporary prohibitionist sentiment of labor unions are dramatic reflections of the resulting cultural lag.

The ambiguous mixture of class and status conflict that existed in the American prohibition movement, in which the alco-

hol-status conflict seemed closely aligned with the class conflict between capitalists and workers, is absent in beer prohibition in Iceland. Unlike the case of American prohibition, in Iceland the middle classes clearly want no prohibition laws forced upon workers and do not accept the logic of workers' special vulnerability to alcohol. Thus Iceland's beer prohibition has its foundations in the local social structure that created the conditions for social conflict between rural citizens and workers on the one hand and the urban middle class on the other. This particular conflict differs from conventional class conflict because in Iceland a rural, working class coalition controls the urban middle class. This suggests an urban-rural status conflict unlikely to be found in most other Western nations.

Most of the studies of symbolic law reviewed above recognized the importance of the perception of actors involved in these legislative events. There were discussions of the perceptions of Nevada lawmakers, English manufacturers, American corporate leaders, and white workers and business leaders in California during the late nineteenth century. All of these studies, to some degree, show a business group operating according to class interests. While Timberlake (1966) found influential business interests in the case of American prohibition, Gusfield (1955, 1963, 1967) missed any instrumental qualities in the perceptions of the WCTU members he interviewed. But just as surely as American prohibitionists believed in the positive effects of the law they advocated, proponents of beer prohibition in Iceland remain firmly convinced of its instrumental qualities in controlling drinking behavior and thus struggle unceasingly on its behalf. Surely social scientists can all agree with the time-honored dictum that if people believe a thing to be true, it is real in its consequences. And so it is with alcohol prohibition in both the United States and Iceland.

Moreover, Icelandic beer prohibition probably does make the substance more difficult to secure, for beer must either be home-brewed or imported in small amounts. Prohibition supporters understandably believe that Icelanders drink less because of beer prohibition. Therefore, even in the extreme case of beer prohibition in Iceland, while it is clearly not the result of class conflict, it is still something other than a totally symbolic law. Making the distinction between the instrumental and symbolic origins of law, as Gusfield (1955, 1963, 1967) has done, seems inadequate, because no laws appear to have totally symbolic origins, even in Iceland where status conflict rather than class conflict has been the norm.

VII. POSTSCRIPT

The beer prohibition in Iceland shows no sign of ending. During the summer of 1985 a bill to allow the importation and brewing of beer and one to authorize a national referendum on the prohibition were introduced. As with all earlier bills of these types, both were defeated.

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