

AN EXTREME CASE OF LIFESTYLE REGULATION

The prohibition of beer in Iceland 1915–1989

ABSTRACT

Beer was prohibited in Iceland from 1915 to 1989, even though all other alcoholic beverages have been available since 1935. Using records of parliamentary debates and other official sources, this chapter explores the main arguments regarding Iceland's beer prohibition in order to gain some understanding of this peculiar piece of legislation. The advocates of prohibition argued that beer posed a threat to the health and well-being of society, primarily to the working class and young people. However there were also other, underlying reasons that contributed to the longevity of beer prohibition. The continued ban was ultimately a triumph of the rural over urban, tradition over modernity, public interest over market logic, and the rural middle class over both the lower and the upper strata.

Political support for the continued prohibition of beer was eventually eroded by changes happening in all fields of society. Yet similar sentiments of the need for lifestyle regulation as were voiced against beer are still echoed today in arguments justifying the prohibition of drugs, particularly cannabis.

KEYWORDS: Lifestyle regulation, beer prohibition, cannabis, modernization, Iceland