

# The Necessity of Drink: Alcohol and Politics in Eighteenth-Century Sweden

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### *Introduction*

The first ever decree that has to do with the meetings of the Swedish diet, the Swedish riksdag, came in 1582. It didn't have to do with the order of sessions or regulation of membership, but with intoxication. It stipulated that members of the diet were not to drink so much when at the meetings that they then got into fights with the city guards. This first decree suggests that alcohol could be problematic in political contexts, especially when members got drunk. But it also points to another issue that is equally important, and that is that alcohol was a significant part of Swedish politics throughout the early modern era, because it was such an essential part of everyday life.

My talk is about the absolute necessity of alcohol in politics in early modern Sweden, particularly the eighteenth century. This is not only something that has to do with sociability, although this is a great part, it was also one of the most important political issues at the time. Alcohol played an important part in the political 'coming of age', if you will, of the landowning peasantry. It was also deemed problematic in terms of patriotism. Alcohol in fact fuelled political life in many ways.

The period I will be speaking of is the eighteenth century, when policies were decided by the diet: the Swedish constitution is counted among one of the "free" constitutions at that time. The diet brought together the estates of the realm. The estates included representatives of the nobility, clergy and burghers of the realm, but also representatives of the large portion of the peasantry who were freeholders. The peasantry was in a European perspective a rare inclusion in such a political assembly: this had to do with their great ownership of land. They owned over 1/3 in the mid seventeenth century, and this kept increasing throughout the century. Following the fall of absolutism at the end of the Great Northern War (1721), the Swedish diet established power over war and peace, taxation and occasionally judicial power. The king was reduced to just having ceremonial duties. It was in this environment, that alcohol played such an important role both socially and financially.

### *A household necessity*

Firstly, I'd like to say something about how essential alcohol was in Swedish culture and society. This is before the temperance movement, and also before regulation of alcohol for any reason

related to its damaging effects on public health, or in society. In rural areas as well as in towns, beverages like beer and aquavit were not merely parts of recreational drinking culture and consumption, they were as important as bread in everyday life and had many symbolic meanings. Women's capabilities as housekeepers were measured by the quality of the beer they brewed. Beer was the minimum that a guest would be offered; it was both informal and mundane. Aquavit was served almost like water: it was the major part of the early breakfast working people had at 5 or 6 am (people would have a second breakfast after their first shift of work). It was served at least once or twice during the day. Everyone drank aquavit, the children as well, though presumably in smaller quantities. It was considered a staple in the diet, a way to keep warm in winter and to preserve one's health. Aquavit figures in very many witchcraft spells as well (mix in some of your menstrual blood and serve it to a man and he will fall in love with you, for instance).

Aquavit was also a medicine, used to cure all sorts of ailments, and physicians warned of the dangers of leaving the house on 'a sober stomach.' Pharmacists were also master distillers because so many of their medicines needed to be dissolved in alcohol or were best consumed together with the warming properties of wine. With alcohol in the body, it was less susceptible to all sorts of infectious diseases, and a person would also find it easier to deal with obnoxious people or difficult situations. Alcohol was a preservative from all sorts of unwelcome influences.

The sale and use of alcohol was only barely regulated and seldom prosecuted. Taverns were to close at nine pm in the evenings in winter and ten in summer, they had be closed during the sabbath. But exceptions from this moral regulation were made so that people who were ill could obtain alcohol as medicine, and the higher classes would not be deprived of drink at home on a Saturday evening. Obtaining a tavern license was relatively easy. A license to sell beer was regularly handed out to widows as a form of poor relief and there was a large informal market for alcohol as well, in which married women and labourers would sell beer and aquavit in their homes. The sale of wine and more exclusive types of alcohol was regulated by the guilds to protect the trade, but not for any social reasons. Theoretically, it was illegal to become excessively drunk, which was defined as when it was obvious to others that you were drunk, but, as yet, I have never seen this crime prosecuted. Men's drunkenness was largely tolerated both by courts and in society. Excessive drunkenness could however be grounds for a divorce, if drinking led one of the parties to neglect their share of household labour thereby making it impossible for the rest of the family to support themselves. Also, in the new law of 1734, being very drunk was no longer an extenuating circumstance in criminal trials—whereas it had been previously.

Alcohol was an important political issue in relation to the household and to the country as a

whole. By the eighteenth century aquavit had established its prominence among the lower orders: new techniques for distilling from domestic grain, and later potatoes, led to a great increase in consumption at the expense of beer.

Throughout the eighteenth century the peasant estate fought to keep the right to distil aquavit for household consumption. Apart from its necessity for daily life, members of the peasantry argued for its importance for both agriculture and in raising cattle (cattle were fed the by-products from distilling during winter). Also, peasants argued that as employers, providing aquavit was essential in order to attract skilled servant labourers to their farms. The diet prohibited home distilling intermittently during the eighteenth century. This was during periods of domestic grain shortage and did not result in any protests from the peasantry. The household heads who acted as representatives of the peasant estate were just as eager not to let grain go to waste in times of scarcity, and could very well sell their own grain at higher prices without refining it into aquavit.

Still, these regulations had nothing to do with the damaging effects of alcohol, just the privileging of bread over aquavit in hard times. Simultaneously, however, the Crown was interested in taking over distilling because of the great revenues connected to its sales, and prohibited home distilling late in the century although this soon was revoked.

When it came to alcohol in politics in the eighteenth century, it is striking how much legislation had to do with distilling or financial regulation, in comparison to only a handful of regulations that had to do with excessive drinking. This really was a financial issue related to who would get the profits from sales and revenues as well as economizing with the grain.

The peasant estate was very successful in protecting home distilling throughout the century, and these successes bolstered their political self-confidence and they became much more assertive as a result. It wasn't until around 1850 that home distilling and the relatively free licensing of alcohol sales became a controversial issue. By that time, alcohol was of course being produced also on an industrial level and the temperance movement, inspired by the British example, had made some inroads into policy making.

The peasant estate's high political profile in the issue of distilling branded the consumption of aquavit as distinctly provincial and low-class. Wine functioned as a social contrast to aquavit and in the early eighteenth century sumptuary laws had reserved the drinking of wine to the social elites. When the peasantry put aquavit so prominently on their political agenda, other estates were reluctant to use it. This does not mean, however, that members of the peasantry did not consume wine. Rather, the need for sumptuary laws and luxury debates can be seen as attempts to enforce long established social values and to counteract the slow dissolution of corporate society.

Another reason to oppose wine consumption among the lower orders was patriotic. According to members of the estates and also pamphleteers, only some wines were deemed necessary to society, and they argued that imports of unnecessary wines should be restricted. In a report on 'foreign beverages' in 1727, a diet commission concluded that wines were the drinks that were most detrimental to domestic economy. The committee defined some wines 'necessary' and others 'dispensable'. Necessary wines were those that had been imported for a long time: Rhineland wines, moselle, 'ordinary' French white and Spanish and Portugese red wines. Dispensable wines were Hungarian, Italian or champagne and burgundy or other types of wine and liqueurs imported in bottles rather than in barrels. Carl Linneaus and a member of the peasant estate both shared the opinion that the consumption of wine brought disease to Swedish men, such as gout and digestive disorders. And in line with mercantilist policies promoting the production of luxury goods within the realm, the diet supported experiments in making Swedish wine out of berries and fruit, although this venture, just like similar attempts at making silk and growing domestic tobacco, was never successful.

### *Necessity in politics*

But alcohol was also an essential component of everyday political life, in political sociability at diet meetings. Meetings of the four estate diet brought over 1000 men from all over the realm to Stockholm for months, sometimes years, at a time. Much of their time was taken up by drinking. Toasting or drinking of healths, and singing political songs made social bonds and obligations manifest. Members of the diet met at wine shops, albeit in separate rooms. Peasants, noblemen, burghers, officers, manufacturers, courtiers and others consumed wine and tobacco, drank quite heavily and toasted the constitution and the royal family. Drinking at wine shops was in fact an ultimate occasion for demonstrating one's qualities as a citizen: a man was surrounded by his peers, he professed his political views for all to hear, he drank drinks considered polite, and he became part of a collective of men who felt and acted in the same way.

The drinking of healths in the form of a 'brother toast' or a 'cousin toast', in which the participants decided to forsake social hierarchy and regard one another as brothers or cousins, reinforced political alliances, created temporary egalitarian relations and at the same time, a sense of masculine fellowship. A common form of toast was to the constitution which was highly cherished with its harmonious balance of power between king, council and the *diet*. Toasts hailed the constitution for upholding this balance between law and freedom. Drinking songs said that the world might fall down around the drinkers, but if only the constitution stood, freedom would prevail and men would live in happiness.

The next step in the declarations of loyalty was to the institutions that upheld the constitution and freedom: the king, the estates and sometimes the council. Drinking songs and verse took pains to uphold traditional social division and to portray the harmony of corporate society. In a few short lines drinking songs expressed a form of political 'Lord's prayer', setting down the basic tenets of adhesion to the constitution and the liberty it claimed to protect. Songs however, did not only point to the values that citizens ought to protect, they also created an image of that citizen and an identity drinkers might strive to emulate.

Foremost among political virtues, according to drinking songs and verses, was Swedishness. Men who toasted, it was professed, did so in the often repeated phrase as 'honest Swedish men'. These were men that wished the king and realm well. Their Swedishness was obvious in their way of thinking and behaving, they held liberty above all else and would be slaves to no one. Rather, Swedish men wished for a balance of power between individuals, so that no one could oppress anyone else, and that the law remained impartial and inviolable. If a man shared all these values, he had an honest heart.

Everything good in a Swedish man could be summed up in a short toast. The virtues of honesty, love of liberty, courage, loyalty to the constitution in fact made a Swedish man, according to one verse. A manly, honest patriot was contrasted against an unmanly, ignorant scoundrel who was a danger to society as a whole. Thereby, the honest Swede might raise his voice and shout 'the Swedish realm!' as he emptied his glass, and demonstrate to all onlookers which category of men he was a member of.

### *Conclusion*

Alcohol was a highly political issue in eighteenth and nineteenth century Sweden, although not in the manner we might regard it today. The Swedish state realised that alcohol provided an abundant source of revenue taxes. When it came to the health of the nation, alcohol was indispensable, particularly for digestion. Alcohol was also an issue a whole estate could rally around and defend free access to, thereby boosting the confidence of the weakest of the estates. In these situations, it might be considered a moral obligation to drink, even in excess, so that you were not shunned from political connections completely. It was the social lubricant that gave men the opportunity to evolve into patriotic citizens.