The Pub, the Street, and the Medicine Cabinet
The 6th Biennial Meeting of the Alcohol and Drug History Society

FRIDAY, JUNE 24th, 2011: 12:30 - 2:00 pm : C3: Regulating the market in intoxicants

The „Alcohol Question" in Central Europe between Science and Civic Religion: Globalization of Moral Standards and Control Measures

Prof. Dr. Hasso Spode, Berlin

Abstract:

In Imperial Germany as well as in Austria and Switzerland the "alcohol question" ranked high among the social problems: the drinking behaviour of the working masses was assumed to be an essential obstacle on the road of integrating the "fourth class", i.e. the workers, into the civil society. By and large the discourse was entrenched in global trends, fuelled by experts from the Anglo-American and Nordic "temperance cultures". However, initially the "dry" stance was discarded: it was widely held that Germany should go its own, "moderate" way, based on "personal freedom". So did the leading anti-alcohol group in Europe, the German Association against the Abuse of Alcoholic Beverages (DVMG), which regarded alcohol politics as part of social politics. Educational campaigns, liquor tax increases, and better living conditions led to a marginalization of drunkenness, and spirits were substituted by beer. However, since around 1900 among the other anti-alcohol associations, like the Good Templars, as well as in the scientific community the radical "abstinent stance" prevailed – defining alcohol politics a centrepiece of eugenics (Rassenhygiene): alcohol was supposed to be a "racial poison"; its prohibition and the isolation if not sterilisation of drunkards were to rescue humankind from "degeneration".

In the Republic after the first world war the anti-alcohol movement lost momentum; but its associations became an integral part of the national health and welfare system. However, shrinking allocations in the wake of the Great Depression led to a revival of the eugenic plannings. They were realized since 1933. The Nazis – following Scandinavian models – practised forced sterilisation of "born" alcoholics on a large scale. In addition moderate control politics were introduced, while at the same time the open struggle between "wet" and "dry" organisations was ended by the government and – last but not least in face of the Repeal in America – prohibition propaganda stopped: Only to genetically vulnerable, if not "inferior" individuals alcohol is truly harmful, not for society or the race as a whole. This was not so far from the notion of the AA at the same time.

After the war the advocates both of prohibition and of eugenics fell silent, even in North America (but not in Scandinavia). However, in the 90s an "Alcohol Action Plan" was adopted from WHO-EURO that followed the "total consumption model" and can be called crypto-prohibitionistic. Since then, the impact of the "temperance cultures" on the global alcohol discourse and control politics is greater than ever – Europe is facing a scandinavization of its prevention morals and politics, be it in the field of alcohol or of tobacco.

Contact and further reading: http://hasso-spode.de/