

The Autonomous Finnish Man Against the Nanny State in the Age of Online Outrage

The State and the Citizen in the “Whiskygate” Alcohol Policy Debate

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Abstract

The article examines the relationship between the citizen and the state as conceptualized in the online indignation over authorities' interference in the use of the word “whisky” in relation to the Beer Expo fair in Helsinki in October 2014. The episode, dubbed “Whiskygate” by Finnish media, exposes value struggles regarding the legitimacy of regulatory state agencies, citizens' spontaneous reactions to restrictions of the symbolic sphere, and the individual alcohol consumer's identity constructs in relation to a collective identity of the Finnish people as a nation. The metanarrative that unfolds in the online discussions is one of a great suppression of competent male citizens. Essentially, the online outrage represented a defence of citizen autonomy, of individuals who claimed a moral right to lead their lives according to their own preferences without interference by authorities. In the discussion threads, the female gender, left-wing and Centre Party supporters, as well as state bureaucrats were claimed to infringe upon the freedom of the people. The outrage can be interpreted against the backdrop of current Finnish populist discourses.

KEYWORDS: Alcohol policy, autonomy, citizenship, collective identity, Finland, gender, social media.

Introduction

When sociologist Pekka Sulkunen studied normative framings of alcohol use among the Finnish middle class in the late 1980s and early 1990s, he suggested that the aversion of the new urbanized middle class to restrictive state interventions origi-

nated in a view of alcohol policy as identity policy, in which even the smallest restrictions are viewed as violations of individual integrity (Sulkunen 1992). The middle class men in Sulkunen's study saw alcohol policy as a private vertical relationship between the consumer-citizen and the state. The

men considered all restrictions and prohibitions to undermine the consumer's competence and decision-making capacity. In this study we revisit the identity constructs of the Finnish alcohol consumer in relation to state interference 30 years on. Based on current public discussion, it seems that alcohol policy is still largely conceptualized as a private vertical relationship between the consumer and the state. However, this relationship and related actor positions are now articulated through new fora and in new formats. The main arena for alcohol policy discussions and related identity constructs is now provided by the internet.

In Sulkunen's study, middle class men took the view that a more liberal alcohol policy would steer Finns away from binge drinking to more civilized drinking habits. The liberalistic ideals of individual autonomy were expressed by constructing a strict distinction between the competent "us" and the non-competent "them". Alcoholics and other non-competent alcohol consumers needed to be separately governed by alcohol policy measures, whereas the competent "us" could control their alcohol use without outside interference. Thirty years on, these conceptualizations still have a strong presence in the morally charged discussions on Finnish alcohol policy, an arena of heated debate over citizens' rights and responsibilities (see also Törrönen 2001). Who, then, are the "us" and "them" in today's alcohol policy discussions? In this study we inquire into contemporary conceptualizations of the relationship between the citizen/alcohol consumer and state alcohol policy interference by scrutinizing a case that the Finnish media dubbed "Whiskygate".

The events began to unfold in October 2014 when Finnish Beer and Whisky Expo¹ submitted

its application for a permit to serve alcoholic beverages to the Regional State Administrative Agency (AVI). In response, AVI required that the word "whisky" be dropped from the name of the fair, which should simply be called the Beer Expo 2014, because of the legal ban on advertising spirits. In addition, and for the same reason, AVI ordered the organizers to remove all whisky brand logos from the event hall's interior. The organizers, on their part, requested that professional bloggers covering the event would remove all references to whisky brands from their blogs. "Whiskygate" refers to the outrage that this interference by the state authorities prompted in social and traditional media in autumn 2014.

The public debate intensified when Finland's leading daily *Helsingin Sanomat* picked up on the story (HS 11 Oct 2014). The news item included some inaccuracies, such as a claim that independent bloggers had been told by AVI (rather than by the organizers) to avoid using the word whisky. News of this intervention spread rapidly through Finland's leading news agency STT (*Suomen Tietotoimisto*) to other media platforms, and in a couple of hours it was a trending topic on Twitter.

Facebook, Twitter and Instagram quickly overflowed with updates by indignant private citizens and industry representatives using the hashtag #viski (whisky in Finnish) and names and images of other alcoholic drinks. According to *Helsingin Sanomat* (12 Oct 2014), the hashtag #viski was used on Twitter at least every four seconds once the news began to spread. Other hashtags used terms connoting a disapproval of public sector control over citizens' actions, such as #byroslavia (combining the words *bureaucracy* and the suffix *slavia*, referring to former East European communist regimes) and #holhousyhiteiskunta (nanny state). The dissatisfaction mostly concerned the absurdity of a state agency prohibiting the use of

1 Finland's largest brewery and distillery event, intended for both consumers and HoReCa industry professionals (Beer Expo 2014).

a word for an alcoholic beverage, but also alcohol control policy in general. Even Prime Minister Alexander Stubb was quoted in online media as saying: “If this [banning the use of the word whisky in blog postings] is true, then it is unbelievable. This is really turning into a rather tasteless exercise of state guardianship.” (Iltalehti.fi 12 Oct 2014. All translations from Finnish by authors.)

The symbolic struggles over the identity of Finnish citizens in relation to the public sector is an ongoing negotiation over a national ethos (e.g. Koivunen & Lehtonen 2011) of which alcohol policy has long been both an important and special thematic path (e.g. Holmila 1981; Mäkelä 1976). Alcohol is historically a controversial subject in the Nordic countries, where drinking to intoxication is commonplace and where, starting in the first half of the 20th century, a strong temperance movement came to inscribe a paternalistic and moralizing aspect on alcohol use (Johansson 2001). This morally anchored understanding of alcohol use and its restrictions would survive until contemporary times, and alcohol policy is still seen as a matter of “personal conscience” among politicians in the Finnish parliament (in contrast to party adherence or ideologically fixed positions, see Karlsson 2014).

The outrage surrounding Beer Expo 2014 exposes important value struggles in the Finnish society regarding the legitimacy of regulatory and supervisory state agencies, citizens’ spontaneous reactions to restrictions of the symbolic sphere (such as art, media texts and other cultural products), and the individual alcohol consumer’s identity in relation to a collective identity of the people as a nation. The meaning-making surrounding the event thus serves not only as an interesting case study of the contemporary political climate surrounding alcohol policy, but also of systems of policy and governance. Next we will present the historical and theoretical background necessary

for understanding the event as a phenomenon in the Finnish society.

Background: Alcohol Policy and Online Outrage

Finland introduced a restrictive alcohol policy and a strict state monopoly system in the first half of the 20th century, but membership in the European Union in 1995 brought about a change in direction (Karlsson 2014). During the period of liberalization that has followed, popular understandings of alcohol use have moved towards more individualized framings (Hellman 2010), and tabloids and business magazines in particular have severely questioned the policies of price and tax hikes by which the state has attempted to curb consumption (Hellman & Karlsson 2012). An important social imaginary underpinning the advocacy of liberalized alcohol policy is one that pictures the Finnish nation developing into a society where alcoholic beverages are relieved of their symbolic burden and where they have become an everyday cultural commodity. This vision of a more “civilized” or “continental” drinking culture, a “dream of a better society” goes back a long way (Mäkelä 2011).

Alcohol consumption and alcohol control policy are questions that significantly influence and shape the self-image of Finnish people. The more liberal approach taken to alcohol since the EU membership has come to symbolize a modernized, unchained, Europeanized, competent people that need not be externally controlled. As recently as in February 2015, when the Centre Party called for the removal of beverages of over 4.7 % abv from grocery stores, the rest of the political field denounced this as a “blast from the past”, conflicting with views on Finnish citizens as competent individuals (Pietiläinen 2015). Alcohol control policies have served as convenient targets for expressions of distrust in bureaucratic

state interference in citizens' private lives – a root story for a country that was part of first Sweden and then Russia for centuries before becoming an independent nation. This highlights how the official intervention to change the name of the Beer and Whisky Expo prompted such lively public debate that touched upon the very foundations of contemporary Finnish society.

It is well known that concepts of worth – in this case channelled through constructs of citizens' autonomy and competence – become particularly salient at moments of political conflict and dispute (Boltanski & Thévenot 2006). Current Finnish research on political activism and the public sphere has emphasized that political action and influence cannot be reduced to struggles between interest groups and stakeholders but rather should be seen as a constant process of discussion and debate, aimed at transforming the moral orders of society (Luhtakallio & Ylä-Anttila 2011a, see also e.g. Eranti 2014; Luhtakallio 2012; Ylä-Anttila 2010). Similarly, scholars concerned with lifestyle governance have shown that in today's saturated and individualized societies citizens are increasingly separated from traditional bases of social and political solidarity mobilization and instead tend to engage with multiple causes which are filtered in relation to personal lifestyles (Hellman 2015; Sulkunen 2009). Lifestyle issues and lifestyle politics have thus become a thematic field with great relevance for political and civic engagement. Meanings assigned to lifestyles constitute impetus and personal contact surfaces for activism in overarching political issues related to questions such as climate change, sexual rights and quality of food.

At the same time, new modes of digitalized civic action tend to work through new types of communication and interaction – like “*clicktivism*” (Halupka 2014) – allowing personalized engagement through narratives relevant for citizens' self-un-

derstanding and desire for authenticity (Chouliraki 2010; Yerbury 2010). This circumstance has been suggested to contribute to a public experience of the self rather than to one of collective solidarity (McDonald 2002). Whiskygate cannot be seen as organized political action or a social movement in the word's strictest sense, but as our analysis later shows, it represents a public protest with a clear moral motive to strive towards free economy and individual (male) autonomy.

When it comes to contemporary meaning-making of a collective self in relation to “politics of lifestyles”, we find an interpretive framework outlined by Jukka Törrönen (1999; 2001) of great relevance. According to Törrönen, lay definitions of societal problems in public debates become questions of identity: people tend to draw lines between the categories of “our values” and “others' values” (*a spatial dimension of identity*); they connect these values to different cultural traditions and constructs of historical trajectories (*the temporal dimension of identity construction*); and they do so by expressions of who they are as speakers (*the positional aspect of identity construction*). Törrönen argues that speech on alcohol policy (*interpretive framings*) will inevitably include these three aspects of identity construction. With their help, the speakers will position alcohol socio-culturally and by doing so, they simultaneously define the freedoms and responsibilities assigned to individuals.

When it comes to the relationship between the citizen and the state, what, then, is the cultural symbolic/political content that negotiators of identity constructs are expected to draw upon in contemporary Finland? Anu Koivunen and Mikko Lehtonen (2011) have proposed a rough distinction between three ideological groupings based on the extent to which they emphasize the common good, freedom of markets and national romanticism. Firstly, the (often right wing) neo-liberalist globalizers speak of a competitive Finn-

ish society with a dynamic economy and modern public sector. They are often opponents of a large – what they consider to be an oversized – public sector and underline the importance of having a strong economy in order to keep the welfare state ticking over. Secondly, the defenders of traditional welfare state values are concerned that service provision and the universalistic aims of the welfare state will be undermined by adverse political developments. This group is typically represented by the political left, the Social Democrats, and some Green Party supporters. Thirdly, the neo-nationalists are nostalgic about the pre-EU Finnish identity and pre-urbanized patriarchy and order. They are predominantly represented by the Finns Party (previously the True Finns) that positions itself against immigration, minority exemptions and environmental politics. Koivunen and Lehtonen (2011) see that these traits translate into divisions in political life, popular discourse and public debate in the Finnish value climate.

The short news item in *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS) on the Beer Expo served as an entry point to a discussion where propositions were made for a reorganization of society on a grand scale, and thus provided an opportunity to interact not only with other readers, but with the system itself (Jensen 2010, 45, 53). Such online discussions have shown to give an excellent opportunity for studying expressions and experiences of inequality and power relations (Shaw 2012). Participation in online political debate can be seen as a form of discursive activism, in which collective identities are constructed and transformed, and which is formulated in terms of the norms and ideals that ultimately form the premises of how societies hold together. In fact, the online outrage embodies and channels the same vertical relationship that Sulkunen (1992) identified between the drinker and the state. The discussions that we analyse in the next section can be seen as underpinned by larger questions of identity formation.

Their format takes on a performative mode of outrage, and they express views on fundamental questions regarding how people are, and particularly, should be governed.

Data and Analysis

The most popular news websites in Finland during the week 42/2014 were *Iltalehti.fi*, *Iltasanomat.fi*, *MTV.fi* and *HS.fi*. Originally these were online editions of daily newspapers and a TV channel (MTV), but they have since come to serve as their own independent platforms alongside the original media formats. The material we collected consists of discussion threads in these four online media related to news items on the ban of the word whisky (see Table 1). In all, these sites received more than 10 million visits and three billion page-views during the week 42/2014 (TNS Metrix 2014).

Three of the news texts listed in table 1 (namely those in *Ilta-Sanomat*, *Iltalehti* and *MTV*) were identical short newswires from the news agency STT that used the original item in *Helsingin Sanomat* as their main source. The identity of the participants in the discussion threads was revealed only on the *Iltalehti* website, which automatically links the participants' Facebook profile (name and picture) to the web page. In this discussion 104 of the 123 commentators were men. Based on commentators' aliases and the content of the other threads, they too seemed to be dominated by men. Another indicator of this topic especially engaging men were certain side stunts in social media. For instance, a Facebook page was created that ironically claimed that the name of the Finlandia concert hall in Helsinki should be changed – because *Finlandia* of course is also a vodka brand. The vast majority of those who "Liked" the page on Facebook were men.²

2 <https://www.facebook.com/finlandia pois/likes>

TABLE 1. OVERVIEW OF THE MATERIAL

ID	WEBSITE	NEWS ITEM 11 OCT 2014	COMMENTS RETRIEVED 27 OCT 2014	INFORMATION ON PARTICIPANTS
P1	Iltasanomat.fi	“Hs: Aluehallintovirasto kielsi bloggaajilta viski-sanan käytön” (AVI tells bloggers not to use the word whisky)	242	Most pseudonyms are male.
P2	Iltasanomat.fi	“Seuraavaksi liköörikarkkien myynti Alkoon?” (What next? State alcohol monopoly to control the sale of liqueur-filled sweets?)	80	Unknown, but male majority, based on utterances.
P3	hs.fi	“Aluehallintovirasto kielsi viski-sanan käytön yksityisissä blogeissa” (AVI prohibits using the word whisky in private blogs)	156	Unknown, but male majority, based on utterances.
P4	Iltalehti.fi	“Hs: Aluehallintovirasto kielsi viski-sanan yksityisblogeissa” (AVI prohibits use of the word whisky in private blogs)	186	Facebook profiles synchronized: 104 men, 18 women, 1 unclear. Total: 123.
P5	MTV.fi	“Hs: Aluehallintovirasto kielsi yllättäen viski-sanan käytön blogeissa” (AVI in surprise move to prohibit use of the word whisky in blogs)	47	Unknown, but male majority, based on utterances.

P1 <http://www.iltasanomat.fi/kotimaa/art-1288749811607.html>

P2 <http://www.iltasanomat.fi/kotimaa/art-1288749656364.html>

P3 <http://www.hs.fi/kotimaa/a1412992673442>

P4 http://www.iltalehti.fi/uutiset/2014101118737946_uu.shtml

P5 <http://www.mtv.fi/uutiset/kotimaa/artikkeli/>

[hs-aluehallintovirasto-kielsi-yllattaen-viski-sanan-kiellon-blogeissa/4401484](http://www.mtv.fi/uutiset/kotimaa/artikkeli/hs-aluehallintovirasto-kielsi-yllattaen-viski-sanan-kiellon-blogeissa/4401484)

In order to explore the ways in which meanings were created and shared in the online discussions, we set out to analyse the constructs in which the participants made sense of and explained the unfolding events. The narrative of the prohibition of the word whisky in the Expo name varies according to the speaker's values vis-à-vis state interference in freedom of speech and alcohol policy. The emphasis of our analysis focuses

therefore on the identity work that the utterances serve when speakers make sense of the events under study, particularly when sense-making takes place through coherent narratives that make up meaningful entities (see Bruner 1990).

We first categorized the data thematically in order to elaborate the perceived threats that the participants expressed and associated with the ban on

the word whisky, and in order to identify the instances they blamed. At the centre of our analysis are the divisions between us and them (*the spatial dimension of identity construction*), the speaker images that are expressed (*positional dimension of identity construction*) and the (historical) storylines the commentators associate or dissociate themselves with (*temporal dimension of identity construction*) (Törrönen 2001).

Democracy, Economy and Citizens' Well-Being Under Threat

Well done, Finland. We're the laughing stock of the whole world. (P1: 1S)

The whisky debate was ignited by inaccurate news reporting in *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS 11 Oct 2014), which claimed that AVI had attempted to ban the use of the word whisky in private blog posts. The people reacting to the news on discussion forums were taken aback by the absurdity of this action. There were only a few comments that questioned the truthfulness of the story and for the most part the commentators' first reaction was anger and disbelief:

Someone pinch me, I must be sleeping. (P4: 1L)

Whisky whisky whisky whisky. Whisky Expo Whisky Expo Whisky Expo Whisky Expo Whisky Expo Whisky Expo (P4: 1L)

I'm laughing so hard that I'm beginning to get really pissed off... I have my big axe behind the sauna. (P4: 1L)

The anger and rage was channelled through messages insulting "useless" and "senseless" civil servants and repeating the word whisky as a way of protesting. However, it was evident from the

start that the rage grew out of not just this one news story, but rather that this particular story hit an already sensitive nerve in a heated debate over public sector expenditure in times of recession, and how a "constantly expanding"³ state administration is damaging the economy. The Whiskygate outrage specifically criticized restrictive alcohol policy, which was seen as a manifestation of Finnish practices of state governance as a whole. The debate concerned not only practical questions of governance but the focus was rather on the identity of the Finnish nation, and alcohol policy controls together with the broader public sector were seen as threats to its future. As in previous studies on lay views of alcohol policy in Finland, the issue was framed as a question of individual freedom (Törrönen 2003).

In the debate, the central line of argumentation against restrictive alcohol policy was to relate it to different kinds of threats. Three entities of common good were considered to be under threat: liberal democracy, economy and citizens' well-being.

Firstly, the participants positioned themselves as advocates of liberal democracy. Finland was compared with other Western states in order to question whether Finland belonged in this bloc in the first place. In fact, given its moralistic and bureaucratic alcohol policy, the country was paralleled with non-democratic states, such as China:

Can this be true? I was so naïve I actually thought that censorship is alive and well in countries such as China, but it seems that Finland has sunk to the same level. Our freedom of speech should be intact! (P3: HS)

3 Right-wing commentators in particular often argue that state administration in Finland is expanding, even though the number of civil servants working for central and local government has in fact remained more or less unchanged for the past 20 years.

Parallels were also drawn with North Korea, Russia and the former Soviet Union. The image of Finland as an authoritarian state was used as a representation of what one does not want to see in this country. State administration was portrayed as a dictatorship that infringes upon freedom of speech, a central human right in all civilized democratic states:

This is a blatant violation of freedom of speech. We keep saying here how the governments in North Korea and Russia and other countries are restricting freedom of speech. This absurdity must be stopped as soon as possible. It's as if we were living in a dictatorship. (P3: HS)

Interestingly, the debaters refer to the European Union to remind that Finland is a Western liberal democracy where alcohol restrictions are seen as a violation of individual rights. The EU is presented as a saviour, not as a bureaucratic monster that undermines Finnish democracy and sovereignty – a popular portrayal of the EU in other public debates:

It's about time for Finnish people to complain about this Soviet-style authority to those responsible for human rights within the EU. (P1: IS)

Do we have freedom of speech in Finland? No. Is our alcohol policy in line with EU policies? No. According to the EU, there can be no state monopolies, but does this apply to Finland? No. (P2: IS)

Freedom of speech appears in the online discussions as the single most important human right, and AVI's interference is thought to illustrate the poor state of democracy in Finland. The commentators do not elaborate what they consider to represent the ideal state of democracy; it is just the opposite of the situation in North Korea and China. In this sense, the debate is framed by the assumption that all the commentators and read-

ers share the same basic values and ideas of democracy.

Secondly, the commentators consider the actions taken by AVI to present a threat to the economy, and as such, an example of a more general tendency in Finland towards an overly centralized approach to economic policy making:

It is about time to stop and take stock of what's happening in this country... The economy is permanently damaged, but we still can afford censorship. We should follow the example set by the French Revolution. It's time to call those responsible to account. (P1: IS)

It doesn't cost all that much to make these decisions, but the consequences... I wonder how many companies will go out of business because of this invasion, and how many future entrepreneurs won't even bother to start up, or take their companies abroad instead. In any case, the costs are tremendous and people are fed up with this kind of patronizing. We must also ask, do we really need to have 20 bosses in every bureau. (P4: IL)

As in the case of their ideas of democracy, the debaters share the view that regulations are detrimental to economic growth. Arguments against the rationale of a restrictive alcohol policy refer to its adverse effect on the economy and the prolongation of recession. Not only do the regulations hinder growth, but they also require an extensive and expensive administrative system. The political ideology expressed by the debaters is thus strongly related to neo-liberal ideas of economy and governance.

The third threat raised in the debate concerns people's well-being. The central assumption is that excessive regulation inhibits not only democracy and the economy, but also Finnish culture and the Finnish people:

Finland is the only place in the world where the authorities can impose this kind of absurdity on the people. And still we wonder why Finnish people have such a low self-esteem and no spirit of entrepreneurship. (P1: 1s)

My suggestion is that let's bring alcohol taxes closer to the level in Germany, France, Italy or Spain. This would eliminate the forbidden fruit element, and the people who are now calling for the removal of certain words or imposing import restrictions could start to do something useful that would actually benefit our society. (P3: 8s)

Restrictive alcohol policy is construed as a governmental tactic that prevents people from fully realizing themselves as autonomous individuals. Restrictions turn alcohol into a "forbidden fruit", thus upholding a harmful, intoxication-oriented drinking culture. Törrönen (1999) calls this discourse utopian liberalism, according to which restrictive alcohol policy as an external control mechanism prevents a civilization process, whereas consumer freedom would increase citizens' competence to control their own actions. Even though the opposition towards restrictions is justified by reference to the common good – liberal alcohol policy leads to less harmful drinking patterns – the emphasis is on the individual's moral right to consume alcohol as s/he wishes.

Who Is To Be Blamed?

The commentators describe Finland as a nanny state where bureaucrats effectively limit the possibilities of individuals to flourish and prosper. Assumptions are also put forward as to why, how and for what purpose Finland became this way. Three guilty parties are named: *civil servants*, *Finnish political history* (especially left-wing parties), and, somewhat surprisingly, *women*.

Firstly, civil servants are said to be steering Finland towards a dictatorship: their goal must be to hinder the lives of autonomous citizens and to keep themselves employed by applying irrational restrictions. The system is presented as serving only itself, not the citizens:

They should fire all civil servants who spend taxpayers' money on this kind of nonsense! (P1: 1s)

Finland wants its citizens out of the way so that the system can concentrate on living its own life. This present jungle of civil servants is preventing all intelligent activity and destroying culture. So let's just leave Finland to our civil servants and let them have it their way. Without a salary, though. (P1: 1s)

This patronizing is unbelievable!!!! Weren't they supposed to get rid of these stupid provisions and bans during this parliamentary term!!! Fortunately elections are soon coming up, so we'll have an excellent platform for a political party showing some wisdom: stop patronizing! Presumably most people would stand behind this. (P1: 1s)

Expressions of anger towards civil servants form the single largest group of comments in the debate. This is hardly surprising since the size of the state administration has been a topic of ongoing debate for long. It was also a central theme in current Prime Minister Juha Sipilä's electoral campaign for the Centre Party in spring 2015. The Centre Party's electoral victory hints at the existence of wider public agreement on the need to prune the public sector. Interestingly, in the context of Whiskygate, abstract political questions and system errors were personalized to civil servants. Some commentators asked for the names and addresses of those responsible, evoking rage against government institutions and those who support restrictive alcohol policy. News stories "revealing" absurd central or local government decisions added fuel to the flames. According to off-the-re-

cord discussions with second hand sources, civil servants at AVI reported that when they returned to work the following Monday morning, they had death threats in their email inboxes. Some angry senders had not even tried to hide their identities, but had signed their messages with their full names and contact information.

Secondly, the commentators find the roots of the Finnish “affection” for bureaucracy and restrictive policies in the country’s political history:

Our insane alcohol policy can be traced back to the Centre Party [former Agrarian Party]. It derives from the days of the agrarian society, where every Finn was considered – and apparently still is considered – a potential *Ryysyrannan Jooseppi* [a fictional character of a poor alcoholic]. This kind of politics comes from where you weren’t allowed to have a bottle on the table, but it had to be hidden under the table, next to the farmer’s chair, or behind the sauna. I probably don’t need to tell you which of the genders came up with all this. The Social Democrats are keen to support these kinds of restrictions of individual freedom, as the party takes the view that individual citizens can’t decide about anything for themselves. (P3: HS)

In this comment, the roots of Finnish alcohol policy lie in the country’s poor agrarian history, in its traditional practices of political decision-making, and the leftist and centrist parties’ inherent tendency to authoritarian leadership, which does not respect individual freedom. Although all Finnish political parties get their share of the blame, the left wing and the so-called red-green alliance in particular are accused of being the main culprits behind the repressiveness of Finnish society:

If you think Finnish alcohol policy today is completely absurd, remember the indisputable fact of how we actually got here: for decades, left-centre coalition governments stacked the Ministry of

Social Affairs and Health with their own people. Social Democrats and other left-wing supporters of course have an innate passion for inventing trivial rules and restrictions, as if people themselves didn’t know how to live. (P3: HS)

Left-wing parties stand out as a never-ending source of new restrictions. Being politically on the left is equated with an authority-driven personality inclined to support strong centralized government with little space for personal freedom. Leftist parties thus become representatives of what the debaters are opposed to: rules, restrictions and regulation. Individual citizens are oppressed by these state mechanisms. Citizens would have the capacity to lead their lives in a meaningful way, but the state, ruled by left-wing parties and the yoke of stiff governance, will not let them do that.

Thirdly, the leftist “authoritarian” ideology that lies behind the restrictive policies is defined in terms of gender. The comment *I probably don’t need to tell you which of the genders came up with all this* in the citation earlier refers to the kind of historical demands that originally the temperance movement and later the welfare state put on men, and thus implies a desire for a supposedly more simple and “natural” patriarchal order before such demands. Moreover, many commentators use the term *kukkahattutäti* – literally, “flower hat lady” – a sexist expression to describe a middle aged or older woman who is morally resentful, conservative and a firm believer in rules and regulation. Other terms the commentators used to describe the enemies of free citizens are *hyysäri* and *hyysätä*, best translated as nanny and nanny-ing, excessive care-taking of other people’s private matters, which diminishes their own sense of responsibility and obligation.

For as long as the nannying flower hat ladies continue to try and wrench the bottle from the peo-

ple, the drunkard will remain the greatest hero. If alcohol weren't put on a pedestal by restrictions and nanny rules, the drunkard would become the biggest loser, as has happened in Central and Southern Europe. This will never change if people are swamped with senseless regulations. (P2: 1s)

Go to the AVI website and look at how many men have been involved in this decision. Ladies win 12 – 2. This means the organizers made a mistake. They should have held a Cider & Sparkling Wine Expo! With salad. (P3: HS)

For the most part this alcohol and other forms of nihilism hails from the social democrats and other red-greens. At the moment, the main representative of this ideology is the Social Democrat Minister "Huovilainen". It was also promoted by her predecessor Guzenina, as well as by every single red woman who has ever been in any position of power. Green women have mostly concentrated on the faeces of flying squirrels and running down industries so that we can get back to living in caves. (P3: HS)

The term "flower hat lady" is often used in public debates also in a non-gender-specified way to refer to all kinds of moralists and conservative views. In the Whiskygate discussions, however, women are expressly and explicitly blamed for opposing liberal economy and democracy. Flower hat ladies and left-wing women politicians specifically, but also women in general, are seen as a repressive force. The event concerned, the Beer and Whisky Expo, is mainly targeted at men, thus allowing for an anti-feminist narrative of "free men" and "subordinating women". Bearing in mind that most of the participants in the debate were men, the basic storyline behind Whiskygate can be outlined as follows: The hero of the story is the debater himself, a male protagonist fighting in the name of freedom against a matriarchal nanny state.

"Us" and "Them"

In this study, we have analysed the logics underpinning online outrage in the Whiskygate case and mapped underlying constructs of the relationship between the citizen and state. The unfolding metanarrative of a great suppression of competent male citizens mixes images and metaphors from a large set of material (local and global political history, economy, gender differences etc.). In Table 2 we present the *spatial, positional* and *temporal dimensions of identity construction* (Törrönen 2001) that emerged in the debate. The spatial dimension involves the division between us and them, whereas the positional dimension brings out the ways in which the commentators locate themselves in the debate. Lastly, the temporal dimension refers to the storylines constructed in the debate.

Sulkunen (1992) made a distinction between the competent "us", who can handle drinking, and an incompetent "them", who are unable to control their urges and for whom drinking easily becomes a problem. Our analysis shows that in the Whiskygate debate, "the other" is not the alcoholic struggling to control his or her behaviour, but the state, or more specifically the people who represent, execute and support state control: civil servants, left-wing supporters and women.

Nevertheless, some rather clear-cut positions can be discerned from the material. Of the three groups identified by Koivunen and Lehtonen (2011) – neoliberalist globalizers, defenders of the welfare state, and neo-nationalists – the debaters seem to relate mostly to the neoliberalist globalizers, with an emphasis on economic liberalism and internationality, while defenders of the welfare state are their number one enemy. Interestingly enough, the references to women as the source of Finnish cultural degradation are more in sync with the argumentation of neo-nationalists, represented in contemporary Finnish politics by the

TABLE 2. THE MEANINGS AND IMPLICATIONS OF THE BAN OF THE WORD WHISKY, AS CONSTRUED BY THE DISCUSSION THREADS IN A VERTICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CITIZEN AND STATE.

DIMENSION	MEANING-MAKING LOGIC
SPATIAL: Constructions of us and them	US: Free consumers; neo-liberal market economy; EU; Western liberal democracies; the male gender THEM: State and administration; civil servants; restrictive alcohol policy; left, green and centre parties; “nannies”; “flower hat ladies”
POSITIONAL: Speaker image	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocates of liberal democracy, free market economy, and citizens’ rights to a realization of distinctness and freedom (“utopian liberalism”) • Autonomous men-in-control
TEMPORAL: The storyline	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Traditions that the speakers reject and detach themselves from: Civil servants of a large state-sector “dictatorship”; a political history of temperance moralism, left-wing and social democratic bureaucracy that aims at restricting the freedom of the individual; an irrational and freedom-suppressing “feminine” ideology, a matriarchal order that moralizes alcohol use.

populist Finns Party. The debate thus conflates two rather particular traits of current political discourse; neoliberal argumentation for individual freedom, on the one hand, and a longing for a traditional patriarchal order, on the other.

Conclusions

The online outrage stirred up by Whiskygate essentially constitutes a defence of citizen autonomy: the message is that individuals have the moral right to lead their lives according to their own preferences and convictions, rather than having to accommodate themselves to bureaucracy-imposed obstruction of freedom and outdated moralism (see Christman 2011). This kind of claim on the relationship between man and state can be identified to have great political relevance in contemporary Finnish society.

To begin with, it relates to the value struggles by capitalist subjects concerning *autonomy* and *intimacy*. According to Sulkunen (2009), the value climate in today’s capitalist consumer societies dictates that everyone is entitled and obliged to be free, and at the same time unique. The Finnish debate surrounding alcohol policy and its legitimacy has long been grounded on this basic constellation; regulations and restrictions are often interpreted as violations against individual autonomy and rights. Themes of autonomy and intimacy are intertwined in the Whiskygate discussions. The value of citizens’ autonomy is especially channelled through claims of freedom to consume alcohol without experiencing a feeling of personal wrongdoing, or interference by authorities. The theme of uniqueness (intimacy) is channelled through discourses on the citizens’ right to be their true selves, to speak their opinion, and to use any words that they like.

What makes the Whiskygate debate particularly noteworthy and significant is that it conveys a rather peculiar combination of general and restricted claims. The debate appealed strongly to certain basic conceptions of human rights, and it took over the most popular online platforms, reaching out to large audiences during the course of several days. At the same time its messages remained politically rather narrow and exclusionary, and at times even hostile. While the commentators appealed to a common good in terms of dismissing outdated moralistic tensions surrounding alcohol use, and by doing so reducing (societal) alcohol-related harm in the long run, the emphasis still remained firmly on the individual's perspective and the citizens' private right to consume alcohol without restrictions. The logic of argumentation implies that the regulation of alcohol consumption is to be a concern of the individual. By doing so, the debate confirms an individualistic view of alcohol use typical for Finland, and well documented in previous studies of popular mass media portrayals (e.g. Hellman 2010; 2012; Hellman & Room 2014) and surveys among the Finnish general public (e.g. Hirschovits-Gerz et al. 2011). Still, this individualistic framing has been shown to mostly concern the freedom to drink and to avoid *preventive* policy interventions that interfere with drinking, such as restrictions on opening hours, marketing, availability etc. The individualist perspective has been less frequent in popular views regarding the responsibility to actually deal with alcohol-related problems once they have occurred. In such popular discourse, references are frequently made to the responsibility of the welfare society, to a "system" that should handle the problems and treat "dysfunctional" and "costly" addicts and substance abusers (see Hellman 2012; Hellman & Room 2014). Keeping in mind the positional speaker image of the free and autonomous men (Table 2), and also the fact that middle-aged men consume the most alcohol and cause most alcohol-related harm in Finland

(Mäkelä et al. 2010), the Whiskygate discussion can even be interpreted as an interest struggle of the (male) alcohol consumers that are the most costly to the welfare state.

This leads us to another significant feature of the Whiskygate debate, namely the way questions concerning the welfare state, alcohol policy and state interventions were gendered. The agenda of free citizens was positioned in contrast to the symbolic "flower hat lady", but also the female gender in general. The commentators took a doubly gendered position: they articulated a gendered construct of an autonomous alcohol consumer, and positioned this stance in opposition to the public sector, which employs mostly women – and which was partly built with the specific egalitarian aim of enabling women to partake in occupational life. The gender issue in the Whiskygate debate appears against the backdrop of current Finnish populist discourses, in which both implicit and explicit misogynist tones arise side by side with anti-immigration and homophobic attitudes (Lähdesmäki & Saresma 2014). Also, considering that online discussions tend to slide into an intensified aggressive tone and to employ dichotomies, overgeneralizations and sensationalisms (Sobieraj & Berry 2011), we see that Whiskygate also serves as an example of general anti-feminist tendencies in current populist web discourse (Saresma 2012).

What, then, are the long-term implications of such an incident of online outrage for the political and democratic order? High hopes have at times been expressed about the potential of online discussions to expand the public sphere, democracy and political activism, making the political system more sensitive to the people's voice, in terms of both coverage and heterogeneity. Nevertheless, some scholars have suggested that the anti-social nature of online interactions *per se* renders such optimism unfounded (Stromer-Galley &

Wichowski 2011), and that the online format may not allow for an anchorage in actual policy making structures (see Kaun 2015). While online discussions do not necessarily represent the opinions of the majority, but rather a logic of the loudest voices, they are still increasingly influential in shaping political climate (Halupka 2014). One implication of populist online outrage may be an increasing political intolerance and a decline in people's trust in politics, authorities and societal institutions. On the other hand, and as Sarah Sobieraj & Jeffrey M. Berry (2011) have noted, participation as a commentator or as member of an audience in an outrage may also increase the level of interest in public affairs and politics, as well as the sense of belonging to imagined communities that share the same values and virtues. Either way, online outrage with its varying occurrences and effects should be a priority focus of research on political activism.

The debate over freedom of speech, and on public expressions of concern and outrage over restrictions on the symbolic domain (language use, culture, media), is bound to continue. Finland's revised alcohol law took effect on 1 January 2015, and it is particularly designed to target alcohol marketing in social media: producers, importers and distributors of alcoholic beverages are not, for example, allowed to invite people to share their messages in social media. At the time of writing, new, similar cases touching upon the issues of freedom and control have already appeared in the media (see e.g. HS 18 Nov 2014; Hufvudstadsbladet 18 Nov 2014).

The heated Whiskygate debate only lasted for a few days. On the very next day after the first news release by *Helsingin Sanomat*, AVI announced it had in fact never ordered bloggers to remove the word whisky from their posts (Iltalehti 12 Oct 2014). On the following day (13 Oct 2014), *Ilta-Sanomat* reported that the Expo organizers thought

the whole fuss had been a misunderstanding. In its absurdity, however, Whiskygate offered a rare opportunity to examine some discursive traits in the contemporary Finnish public sphere: liberalistic claims for citizen autonomy, channelled through the theme of freedom of speech, on the one hand, and protection of consumers' private relationship to alcohol, on the other. It provides a window into a neo-liberal discourse in which individual liberty of action is pitted against state control, and against the mandate and legitimacy of the welfare state.

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