

Research paper

A dawning demand for a new cannabis policy: A study of Swedish online drug discussions



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ABSTRACT

Background: This study examines how online discussions on drug policy are formulating an oppositional cannabis discourse in an otherwise prohibitionist country like Sweden. The focus of the paper is to identify demands for an alternative cannabis policy as well as analysing how these demands are linked to governance.

Methods: The empirical material is 56 discussion-threads from the online message-board Flashback Forum that were active during the first eight months of 2012. Discourse theory was used to locate the discourse, and governmentality theory was used to locate the political belonging of the discourse.

Results: On Flashback Forum demands for a new cannabis policy are articulated in opposition to Swedish prohibitionist discourse. The oppositional discourse is constructed around the nodal points cannabis, harm, state and freedom that fill legalisation/decriminalisation/liberalisation with meaning. The nodal points are surrounded by policy demands that get their meaning through the particular nodal. These demands originate from neo-liberal and welfarist political rationalities. Neo-liberal and welfarist demands are mixed, and participants are simultaneously asking for state and individual approaches to handle the cannabis issue.

Conclusion: Swedish online discourse on cannabis widens the scope beyond the confines of drug policy to broader demands such as social justice, individual choice and increased welfare. These demands are not essentially linked together and many are politically contradictory. This is also significant for the discourse; it is not hegemonised by a political ideology. The discourse is negotiated between the neo-liberal version of an alternative policy demanding individual freedom, and the welfarist version demanding social responsibility. This implies the influence of the heritage from the social-democratic discourse, centred on state responsibility, which have been dominating Swedish politics in modern times. Consequently, this study refutes that the demand for a new cannabis policy is strictly neo-liberal.

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Introduction

In 2009, a publisher, a PhD student in economic history and a professor in sociology published a polemic article on Swedish drug policy on the social media platform Newsmill (Berg, Edenberg, & Goldberg, 2009). They claimed that as the prohibitionist drug war had failed and drug liberalism does not handle injustices produced by drug markets, there is a need to move beyond such opposite political positions. Thus, the authors were formulating another way of thinking about drug policy in Sweden – drug socialism – based on the ideals of collective responsibility and international solidarity. Their article poses questions on how we talk about drugs, i.e. what discourses on drug policy that are available in Sweden. Sweden has

traditionally been a prohibitionist country, but this study examines how online discussions on drug policy contribute to formulate an oppositional cannabis discourse demanding legalisation, decriminalisation or liberalisation. The focus of the paper is to identify these demands for a new cannabis policy as well as analysing how they are linked to governance. As will be seen, oppositional demands are sparked by both international influences along with specific traces of traditional Swedish politics such as social-democracy. And although movements opposing prohibition are commonly believed to be neo-liberal this study will present a more nuanced analysis of demands for new cannabis policies.

In Sweden, there has been political consensus that all drugs should be criminalised. No political party is actively propagating legalisation, and prohibition has been the hegemonic discourse in politics, media and cultural life (Gould, 1996; Törnqvist, 2009). However, contemporary drug policy is being increasingly criticised on grounds of control damages, inability to diminish drug use and

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lack of humanitarianism, and claims are made about the need for a new drug policy in Sweden (e.g. Federley, Stålenkrantz, Askeljung, & Jämtsved, 2011; Goldberg, 2011; Linton, 2012). Internationally, a legalisation movement is growing and the failure of the war on drugs is one of its main arguments as to why drug use should no longer result in punitive actions. The failure is associated with harm, social division, extreme state expenses and an increase in organised crime (Goldberg, 2011; Inciardi, 1991; Miron & Zwiebel, 1995; Stares, 1996). Consequently, alternative drug policy discussions draw on demands related to economy (Acevedo, 2007; Becker, Murphy, & Grossman, 2006; Bretteville-Jensen, 2006; Caulkins, Kilmer, MacCoun, Pacula, & Reuter, 2011; Pacula, 2010; Patton, 2010; Shepard & Blackley, 2007; Trevino & Richard, 2002), medical advantages (Joffe & Yancy, 2004), harm reduction (Acevedo, 2007; Miron & Zwiebel, 1995; Moore & Fraser, 2006) and user perspectives (Williams, van Ours, & Grossman, 2011).

In Latin America, state leaders question the effectiveness of warfare and ask for a paradigm shift focusing on harm reduction rather than prohibition. In Europe, countries have decriminalised all drugs (Portugal) or de-facto legalised cannabis (the Netherlands). In the US, California has been at the forefront of the cannabis legalisation movement (Gunnlaugsson & Galliher, 2010, p. 129; Nadelmann, Gutwillig, & Davies, 2012; Patton, 2010, p. 169). In the 2010 vote for cannabis legalisation in California one of the main arguments was economical; emphasising that legalisation would bring billions of dollars to the state (Patton, 2010, p. 164). Different social demands were also articulated through the cannabis issue (more jobs, less discrimination, and better use of police resources), which together created a common political demand for legalisation connected to civil rights and labour movements (Doherty, 2011).

It also seems as if drug legalisation/decriminalisation/liberalisation is more than just a pragmatic policy question; it is associated with ideology (Goode, 1998). Several researchers agree that neo-liberal rhetoric is a common denominator in discourses opposing drug prohibition, and have played a crucial part in reconstructing drug use in international contexts from a structural to an individual issue (Barratt, 2011; Moore & Fraser, 2006; O'Malley, 2002; Riley, Thompson, & Griffin, 2010; Trevino & Richard, 2002). However, in the US, differing political ideologies seems to be able to gather around a legalisation demand (Goode, 1998), and internationally this demand seem to be associated with both left-wing (e.g. Copenhagen, Denmark), liberal (e.g. the Netherlands), and conservative regimes (e.g. Colombia). The issue appears to lack natural political habitat (Goode, 1998).

In Sweden, it is not until recently that a discussion on political alternatives to drug prohibition has begun to slowly dawn. There are attempts to establish networks among cannabis activists (e.g. *Swedish NORMAL*), small political parties are adding the question of cannabis decriminalisation to their manifesto (e.g. *Piratpartiet*) and there have been a few political manifestations for cannabis legalisation (e.g. *Gröna Brevet*, 2012). These attempts have yet to reach public attention and put the cannabis issue on the political agenda. However, in one arena demands for change in cannabis policy are definitely present – on the internet. Under the cloak of anonymity, individuals are allowed to give voice to alternative views on drugs despite their stigmatising position (Crispino, 2007, p. 87f; Gould, 1996, p. 91). Vivid online discussions allow for anti-prohibition activists to cultivate their arguments, as there seems to be a widespread discontent with Swedish drug policy. Thus, prohibition is getting politicised and we are, online and at present time, witnessing a new discourse on drug policy taking shape in Sweden. Since young people turn to internet forums as reliable sources of knowledge about drugs, oppositional cannabis discourses can disseminate quickly (Boyer, Shannon, & Hibberd, 2005; Skärner & Månsson, 2008; Tackett-Gibson, 2007, 2008; Walsh, 2011; Wax, 2002). From a prevention perspective this makes an online study of

the Swedish cannabis debate important. Although internet research on drug related issues is getting increasingly noticeable (e.g. Barratt, 2011; Månsson & Ekendahl, 2013; Murguía, Tackett-Gibson, & Lessem, 2007; Rantala, 2005), research focusing specifically on attitudes towards cannabis policy seems to be scarce.

The polemic Newsmill article made it visible that the political direction of an oppositional cannabis discourse is not settled; will it be mainly leftist, liberal or conservative? Or will it gather different political viewpoints? Drawing on poststructuralist theories of politics in general and the work of Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985) in particular, I hope to disclose how political demands are linked together online to form an oppositional discourse on cannabis policy. The focus of the article is on the cannabis issue; one of the main topics in both international political contexts and Swedish online discussions. Consequently, I do not discuss drug policy in general. I examine different strategies of discursive articulation by which forum participants try to construct a new discourse opposing cannabis prohibition, asking what political demands that are underpinning this discourse, and how they are linked together. Further, I locate the political belonging of the demands using governmentality theory as developed by Rose and Miller (1992). The aim of this study is thus to describe and analyse how oppositional cannabis discourse is constructed online, with focus on its political belonging.

Theory and method

The empirical material for this article is discussion-threads from Sweden's currently largest online message board *Flashback Forum* (from now on *Flashback*) (<https://www.flashback.org/>). Discussion-threads on *Flashback* vary in length and intensity, and participants can be both active contributors and sporadic visitors. *Flashback* is a public and anonymous forum providing no background information about the participants (sex, gender, race, occupation etc.) besides nickname, avatar, duration of membership and number of posts. The forum is diverse in topics and based on the idea of freedom of speech. There are several sub-sections discussing topics that might seem offensive elsewhere; e.g. prostitution, drug use, and illegal file sharing. Due to this topical spread and the volume of posts (about 40 million in August 2012), I have analysed discussions on cannabis from a sub-section targeting drug policy (<https://www.flashback.org/f14>).

To localise discussions touching on cannabis, I used the website search tool. In August 2012, I made a search for “cannabis” at the “Drug policy”-section which resulted in 165 threads (containing over 11,000 posts) where cannabis was mentioned. These were saved as pdf-files. To make the material manageable, I analysed discussion-threads that were active during 2012, up until August when I started gathering the data. This resulted in a final sample of 56 threads (containing 3652 posts).

The quotes from the material included in this text are extracts from longer posts and threads, and they often refer (directly or indirectly) to previous comments or discussions. It would have been too space-consuming to include the full discussion-thread. Arguments are however developed in the progress of discussion. It is therefore by reading the full discussion that it becomes visual what arguments that are taken for granted and which ones are controversial within the discourse; e.g. controversial arguments generate many answers and extreme case formulations such as “never”, “not even one” and “nobody” to challenge or legitimise a certain viewpoint (Pomerantz, 1986). In the results section I therefore describe the context of the included quote.

I have edited included quotes as little as possible, and tried to follow the original style of expression closely (even when grammatically or linguistically faulty) while translating

them from Swedish to English. When editing and clarifying comments have been necessary I indicate this with square brackets.

At Flashback, participants use the terms legalisation, decriminalisation and liberalisation as ways to describe reformation away from prohibition. And although the terms refer to diverse policy systems, this difference is not clear and explicit in the Flashback discussions. Therefore I have chosen not to consider the different political implications between these policy systems and I will refer to this as alternative or oppositional. This may simplify the discussions as I construct one frame around a multitude of diverse political claims. Mapping and presenting a discourse is however always simultaneously producing and reproducing it, and according to Burr (1995, p. 160) “researchers must view the research as necessarily a co-production between themselves and the people they research”.

To render the character of the discussions more intelligible, I draw on discourse theory as developed by Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and the material is analysed using some of their key concepts. The concept of discourse in discourse theory comprises the idea that actions, words and objects are meaningful and that their identity is produced by historically specific systems of meaning (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985, p. 107). A point of departure in this theory is that we understand and interact with the world according to a set of meaningful discourses. And whenever meaning is fixated and conventionalised in a discourse it is contingent; it is possible but not necessary and in constant flux due to social movement. A discourse is a relational configuration, meaning that the identity of a discourse is developed by its relation to and difference from other discourses (Laclau, 2005, p. 68).

To analyse Flashback discussions, I read and re-read discussion-threads to search for coherent sets of statements, posts or threads demanding alternative drug policy (Burr, 1995, p. 168). Recurrent sets of statements were turned into codes. This resulted in 61 codes which could be refined into 29 demands for an alternative cannabis policy, circulating around four main themes; cannabis (e.g. the harmless nature of cannabis makes prohibition unreasonable), harm (e.g. prohibition produces violence), state (e.g. the state should regulate cannabis sales) and freedom (e.g. prohibition obstructs freedom). These main themes are classified as nodal points, key signs around which demands get their meaning (Laclau, 2005, p. 80f). For example, the demand to consider cannabis use as an “individual choice” gets its meaning in relation to the nodal point “freedom”.

In discourse, nodal points can function as a representation of other demands; this is called ‘empty signifiers’. The empty signifier can be seen as an empty vessel in the sense that any demands can be symbolically represented by it (Laclau, 2005, pp. 70, 97f and 133). The participants at Flashback are in the midst of attributing meaning to “legalisation”, “decriminalisation” and “liberalisation”, and thus fixating these concepts as empty signifiers. This organises a political frontier against prohibition behind which an oppositional discourse is structured and political demands are gathered. A political discourse is formed by forging links between demands which are not necessarily connected. As such, there is nothing intrinsic in this chain of demands that predisposes them to be linked together – it is the result of historical and contingent articulation (Laclau, 2005; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). By linking different demands together they can be brought together into a totality, and be defined against something they are not (prohibition discourse). Laclau (2005) uses the example of the common enemy that unifies different sectors of society since they share the position of the oppressed. Prohibition can thus be described as an enemy that produces discontent with Swedish cannabis policy among discussion participants, and against which an oppositional movement articulates its demands (Griggs & Howarth, 2008, p. 128; Laclau, 2005,

p. 73). Political differences can thus be made equivalent by the common goal of an alternative cannabis policy.

Nodal points might also be up for contestation by other discourses. They are called ‘floating signifiers’ and highlight controversies between discourses trying to hegemonise a certain field (Laclau & Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 2005, p. 131f). In my analysis, I identified cannabis as such a controversial nodal point that both prohibitionists and oppositionals are trying to attribute with specific meaning.

As will be seen, Flashback participants mainly discuss alternative cannabis policies as part of a neo-liberal outlook, but some of their demands fit poorly with fundamental ideas of this ideology; e.g. demands referring to “state regulation”. To illustrate such different perspectives on how the demanded governing of cannabis is formulated and problematised, I analysed the material using the theoretical concepts of political rationalities (Rose & Miller, 1992). Political rationalities can be described as shared problematisations and ways of thinking that identify how government can be enacted and what techniques it uses; the art of governing and the ideals of government (Rose, O’Malley, & Valverde, 2006). As such, these concepts belong to the theoretical approach of governmentality that was introduced by Michel Foucault during his investigations of political power in the 1970s (Foucault, 1997). Governmentality has since developed in different directions (O’Malley & Valverde, 2004). However, according to Rose and Miller (1992) political rationalities include political ideals (freedom, justice, equality etc.), distribution of tasks between societal institutions (political, familial, spiritual etc.), and the nature of what is governed and the persons governed. In the analysis of an alternative cannabis discourse, I have therefore looked at how cannabis and cannabis users are problematised and what demands for policy change that are enabled, what governmental techniques become fitting and what authorities are essential. For example, governmental techniques may encompass control through government institutions or freedom from state interference depending on how the issue is problematised.

Welfarism and neo-liberalism are two examples of political rationalities. Welfarism is based on the conception that the state should care for its citizens through social responsibility and mutuality of social risk. This political rationality is based on centralised resources and services, such as social insurance systems and nationalised health service (Rose & Miller, 1992; Rose et al., 2006). Neo-liberalism on the other hand is based on “scepticism over the capacities of political authorities to govern everything for the best” (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 198) and seeks to govern through experts at a distance. This political rationality is thus based on individual entrepreneurship and market regulated economic activity where individuals are responsible to optimise their own life (Rose, 1996b). These two political rationalities are useful in identifying how cannabis is linked to governance in the empirical material. As discourse analysis allowed a mapping of the structures of the discourse, political rationalities allowed a mapping of shared problematisations of governance and ideals of government. It contributes in identifying what arts of governing that are desirable within the discourse, and thus to see beyond neo-liberalism that otherwise tend to become a master category (Rose et al., 2006).

Results

The character of Swedish oppositional online cannabis discourse

The oppositional cannabis discourse is constructed by participants at Flashback through the forging of disparate demands into nodal points. Analysing the online material with discourse theory resulted in a model inspired by Laclau (2005, p. 130f), illustrated in Diagram 1.

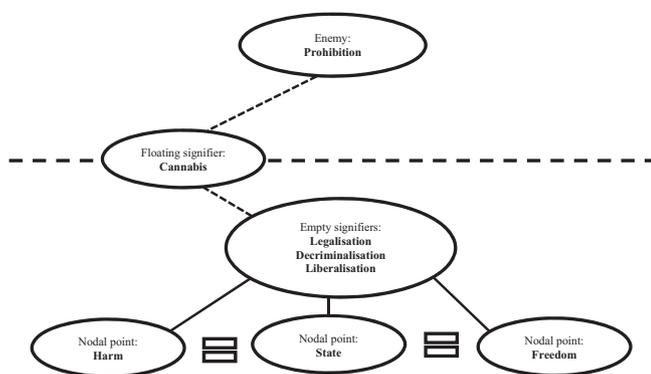


Diagram 1. Oppositional online cannabis discourse.

The discourse takes shape in opposition to the Swedish prohibitionist discourse on drugs in general and cannabis in particular. This political frontier is illustrated by the horizontal broken line in [Diagram 1](#). Prohibition, and thus present drug policy, is made the common enemy against which an oppositional movement is forged. Below the line, we see nodal points that in their particularity are different from each other (harm, freedom, state and legalisation/decriminalisation/liberalisation). All nodal points are however equivalent to each other in their shared opposition to prohibition. Legalisation, decriminalisation and liberalisation are identified as empty signifiers; they signify all nodal points identified here and functions to gather them in a discourse. As a result, the discourse has annulled the differences between the nodal points. In a more developed discourse three different diagrams focusing on legalisation, decriminalisation and liberalisation separately could probably be presented here. However, as discussion participants themselves many times do not differentiate between these concepts the empirical material does not hold for such an elaborated model.

The nodal “cannabis” is placed on the broken line, which illustrates that its meaning is negotiated by both sides of the political frontier. Cannabis is thus a floating signifier and how it will be fixated depends on the result of the hegemonic struggle between the discourses. The nodal points are also surrounded by demands which get their meaning through the particular nodal. These demands are not included in [Diagram 1](#).

Nodal points and surrounding demands describe different ways of organising society and “techniques [...] for directing human behaviour”; different political rationalities ([Rose et al., 2006](#), p. 83). In the material I found that demands reached from welfarist to neo-liberalist rationalities ([Rose & Miller, 1992](#)). A tenet in neo-liberalism is its non-collective philosophy and that the state is organised through the disposition of individual citizens rather than society as a whole ([Rose, 1996a](#)). Hence, demands focusing on cannabis use as a private matter, such as the ones surrounding the freedom nodal, adhere to neo-liberalism. Within welfarism, the social and the collective are fundamental, and the state is organised through the promotion of mutual social responsibility ([Rose, 1996a](#); [Rose & Miller, 1992](#)). For example, demands focusing on social responsibility and public good, such as demands for reduced social and individual problems related to the harm nodal, adhere to welfarism. This is illustrated in [Diagram 2](#).

[Diagram 2](#) illustrates how oppositional demands spread out on a continuum reaching from welfarist to neo-liberal arts of government. On the left side of the continuum welfarist demands are gathered, and on the right side neo-liberal demands. In between are demands that can be motivated on both welfarist and neo-liberal grounds. These two political rationalities that normally counter each other are here incorporated within the same discourse. The

horizontal positioning of the nodal points harm and freedom is based on their main political belonging; most harm demands appear welfarist and most freedom demands appear neo-liberal. As the state demands spread over the continuum (some are welfarist, some are neo-liberal, and some can be used by both rationalities) it is placed in the middle. Also, as visible in [Diagram 1](#), there is a struggle between prohibition and the oppositional discourse on how cannabis should be constructed. I have tried to illustrate this in [Diagram 2](#) by placing the floating signifier cannabis vertically above the other nodal points.

The governance aspect of [Diagram 2](#) is further developed below and illustrated with quotes representing typical demands.

Floating signifier: cannabis

“Quote 1: The truth is that there is not even one documented death caused by cannabis use (or misuse). And many many millions smoke cannabis. It is the third largest drug in our society after alcohol and tobacco. Cannabis has a calming effect too, unlike alcohol, and doesn’t increase the risk for violence. Cannabis misuse is certainly less dangerous than misuse of alcohol.”

This quote comes from a discussion on the harms of cannabis. In previous posts participants claim that alcohol and tobacco causes more deaths than illegal drugs because they are legal, and thus more common. As an answer to this, quote 1 illustrates a basic construction that dominates at Flashback; cannabis is relatively harmless if handled correctly. No one dies, no one starts fights using it, and it is not as harmful as the legal substance alcohol (cf. [Månsson & Ekendahl, 2013](#)). This construction makes many of the other demands in the discourse meaningful and understandable; if cannabis is not dangerous there is no point in keeping it illegal. Consequently, the construction of cannabis as harmless can be considered as a point of departure in both neo-liberal and welfarist versions of oppositional cannabis policies.

Nodal point: harm

Demands for alternative cannabis policies articulated via the harm nodal centre on public good and health. The basic problem with cannabis according to these demands is that it can cause harm if not handled responsibly. Flashback participants can thus construct legalisation/decriminalisation/liberalisation as social responsibility. In the quote below, coming from a discussion on how cannabis consumers should be treated by society, the discussion participant answers a previous post claiming that it is sadistic to advocate man’s right to “dope himself to death”.

“Quote 2: I would say that you are the sadist. Partly because you don’t want people to use a drug that suits them better than the legal option. And not just that, you also want to punish them for it. And partly because the politics you advocate have led to more drug-related deaths in Sweden than in other more liberal countries. Nobody is saying that drugs should be legal so that people can use it. Most of us want it to be legal since it leads to more positive things for society than prohibition. Criminality is reduced, it is easier to get treatment, money is saved and earned, less availability for the youth and a decrease in future misuse etc. Not to mention how it affects people to be classified as “criminals” just because they smoke weed. It really affects the self-esteem not having to be criminal and sneak around, to be open about your use of a drug that is less harmful than a cup of coffee.”

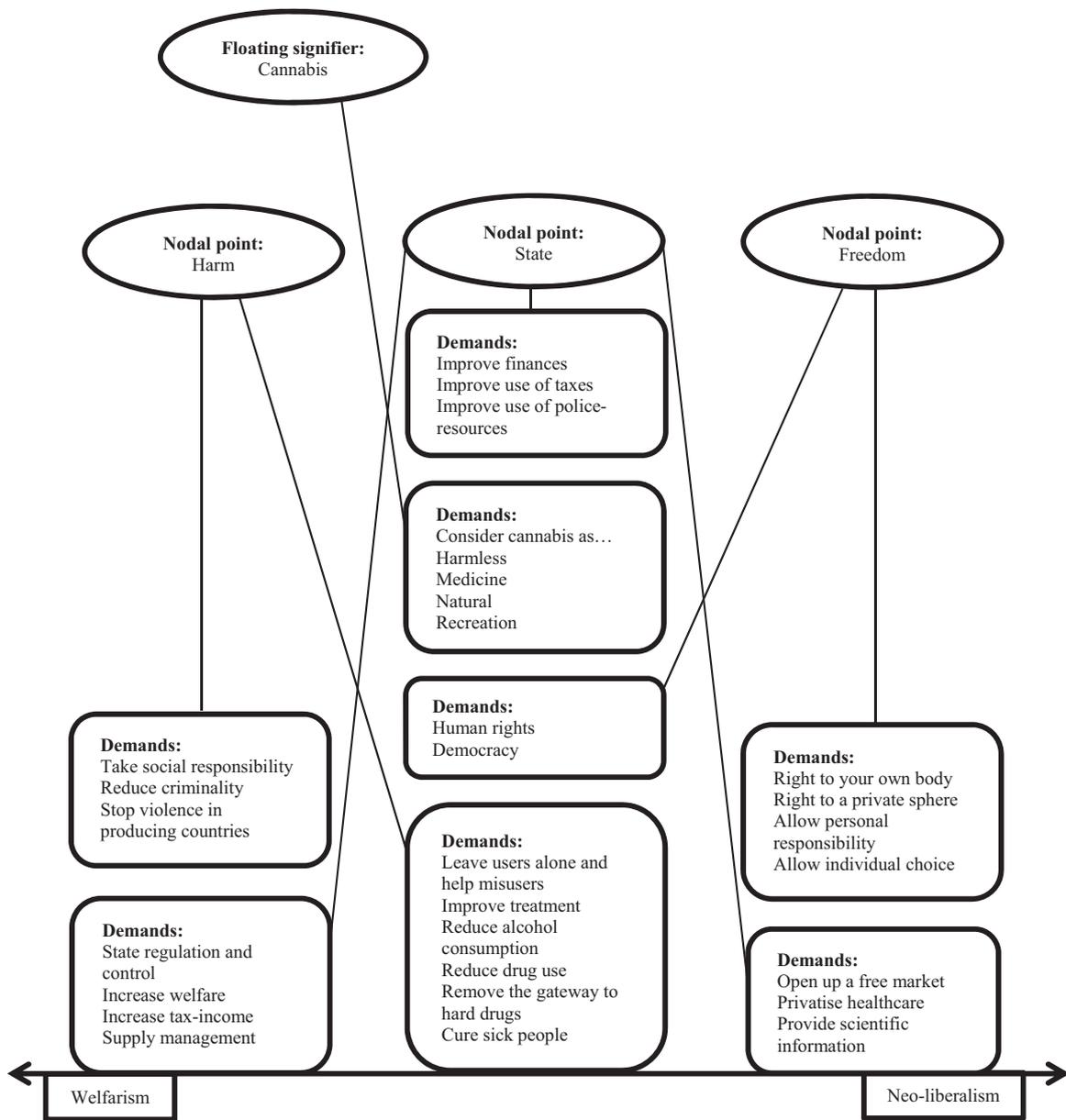


Diagram 2. Continuum of nodal points and related demands in an oppositional online cannabis discourse.

Here, prohibition and prohibitionists are constructed as irresponsible and “sadist” due to the harms they cause. This is pitted against legalisation which accentuates how this policy would take care of society and its citizens by reducing criminality, making treatment more available, reducing misuse, and accepting cannabis smokers in society. If a basic assumption is that cannabis “is less harmful than a cup of coffee” society needs to make sure that its citizens are not stigmatised for using it, since stigmatisation could lead to harmful consequences. According to this reasoning, the participant claims that drugs should not be legalised to increase use. Rather, it would enable the state to manage risks for vulnerable groups and prevent social exclusion.

Participants also ask for an expanded social responsibility beyond Swedish borders, and demand that war and violence come to an end in cannabis producing countries. It is a dominant assumption on Flashback, and in earlier research, that cannabis is produced and sold by violent drug cartels in Latin America that would be substantially weakened once their main income, drug sales, would

no longer be illegal (e.g. [Doherty, 2011](#), p. 36; [Goldberg, 2011](#), pp. 96–99; [Goode, 1998](#), p. 25; [Miron & Zwiebel, 1995](#), p. 178f).

“Quote 3: People like you who want the war on drugs to continue are responsible for all the people dying in the drug war in Mexico and other countries. I guess there is nothing wrong with all the dead bodies found every now and then in Mexico according to you, as long as drugs are illegal. At any cost right?”

In a discussion on organised crime and cannabis this participant replies to a post advocating prohibition. By blaming prohibition/prohibitionists for drug-related deaths quote 3 encourages solidarity with people in countries suffering from the war on drugs. It is also implied that prohibitionists are callous (“people dying”, “all the dead bodies”), and oppositional demands come to represent social rights and peace. Such demands reflect a welfarist perspective with its focus on international social responsibility and harms to society.

However, there are also demands with a neo-liberal angle that get their meaning in relation to the harm nodal. These are mainly public health demands emanating from an individualised perspective on cannabis harm, and a differentiation between cannabis use and misuse. As most participants agree that cannabis use is relatively harmless, they think that drug policy should focus on users with problems; misusers.

“Quote 4: If you become a misuser you have a bloody disease, and sick people need CARE, it is totally fucking absurd, they shouldn't be thrown in jail or get a fine, that's what this is about.”

This quote is reacting to a post claiming that addiction is a societal problem, best solved by criminalisation. Quote 4 opposes this and constructs misuse as a disease. It is therefore considered absurd that misusers go to prison instead of receiving care; misusers should be treated just like other sick persons. Thus, both the problem and the solution are located within the individual and the governing of the problem is located within medicine, echoing a basic tenet in neo-liberalism.

Nodal point: state

Several demands related to the state nodal are of collective character and argue for governing based on social responsibility. An illustration is the vision of a society where cannabis is legalised through government regulation and control as can be seen in quotes 5 and 6. These quotes, along with quote 7, come from discussions on what would happen if cannabis consumption was legalised.

“Quote 5: If cannabis was legal: Cannabis is no longer the income for criminals but an income for the STATE, many millions can be spent on schools, roads, hospitals etc.”

“Quote 6: But we can make it more difficult for kids to come in contact with drugs. If drug purchases were only available through state facilities it would be more difficult for them to obtain the substances. We could then combat misuse among young people and create a healthy outlook on drugs. [...] I would always buy from the state instead of criminal gangs. I think most “users” are with me on this. [...] Not only would a state drug sale make it more difficult for children to get hold of drugs it would be easier to control the adult users too. Drug stores can be open during controlled hours (just like systembolaget) and thus the use will decrease.”

Inspired by the Swedish alcohol monopoly regulated by “Systembolaget”, quote 6 suggests that a state cannabis monopoly would suit the Swedish market. The participant defends a strong and present welfare state and social strategies to regulate cannabis use (cf. Fraser, 2004, pp. 215–218). The state monopoly is constructed as a way to control consumption for both vulnerable groups (“youth”, “children”) as well as general public (“adult users”) through mechanisms such as opening hours and age-limits. Within this construction, consumers are portrayed as citizens that need to be controlled and protected from harms of both the drug and criminal dealers. In such rhetoric, cannabis should be a government concern and the government should be a “guarantor of the well-being of society and those who inhabit it” (Rose et al., 2006, p. 91).

Legalisation is also constructed as solidarity where tax income from cannabis sales should be redistributed to “schools, roads, hospitals etc”. The consumer is thus constructed as a socially responsible citizen who wants to pay tax and contribute to social welfare.

But the state nodal also draws upon a neo-liberal version of legalisation. Some participants reject the thought of a state monopoly and argue for a free cannabis market. In such arguments, the duty of the state is to leave the market to itself and supply citizens with scientific information about the drug to facilitate rational choice.

“Quote 7: Most of us would not use something that we knew was extremely harmful to the body. The information/knowledge about these substances would also be much better and lead to a decrease in use. We could give everyone a chance to think one last time before using the substance and external elements such as peer pressure would be minimised. The individuals would be both responsible for and live with their choices. This is the only way we can actually combat drugs.”

In the above quote the participant places the responsibility for healthy living in the individual. Both use and misuse are predicted to decrease if rational choices were facilitated by scientific information. This quote is replying a post claiming that legalisation would increase cannabis use and damages of use. Thus, by opposing this and claiming that individuals would not make the thoughtless choice of using a substance that harms the body, a neo-liberal subject is constructed – rational, autonomous and calculating – a subject of choice (Rose, 1996b, p. 41). Similar constructions of neo-liberal subjects have been noted in other contexts by previous research (Barratt, 2011; Fraser, 2004, p. 200; Goode, 1998; Miron & Zwiebel, 1995, p. 183; Moore & Fraser, 2006, p. 3036). Within this construction, science also plays a crucial role. Discussion participants ask for, present and relate to scientific reports, and they use liberal policy changes in other countries as scientific proof.

“Quote 8: I have been smoking cannabis more or less every week for more than 10 years. Long periods I smoke every day. I am productive and very well liked at my job where I have a managerial position and I still get over 140 on any Mensa-quiz. That said, if people want to hang around and be “slack stoners” that is their business as long as I don't have to finance their lifestyles through obligatory governmental redistribution.”

This quote is a response to a thread starter that asked why people want to legalise cannabis and if they really want a world populated by “slack stoners” (lazy cannabis consumers). This participant uses his/her own cannabis experience to respond and construct a responsible user and neo-liberal subject in opposition to this using positive concepts such as “productive”, “liked”, “job”, “managerial”, and “140 on any Mensa-quiz”. The quote also exemplifies another common demand on Flashback: people should have the freedom to do what they want with their bodies; if they end up like “slack stoners” it is their own responsibility. As such, this quote illustrates the neo-liberal position that individuals have to provide security for themselves through private purchase of healthcare. The collective should not take responsibility for individuals through taxes (“obligatory governmental redistribution”). The state nodal is in this aspect “de-socialized in the name of maximizing the entrepreneurial comportment of the individual” in the free market economy (Rose, 1996a, p. 340).

Nodal point: freedom

The focus on individual choice, the right to decide over one's own body and the right to exercise personal freedom is visible throughout all discussions. All these demands, which clearly relate to the freedom nodal, construct cannabis use as a private matter.

“Quote 9: Why do you want to tyrannise free people and their free decisions regarding their own bodies? [...] Why are you pro a policy that prioritises a “crime” without victims over a crime with victims? Do you think that all people are too stupid to make their own decisions, and that you should be their personal dictator, or does this only apply for things that you don’t have any knowledge about? I hope that you at least understand that the burden of proof is not on those who want to spread freedom, but on those who want to oppress it. It is you that have to justify your oppression, not the other way around! Personally I wonder what right you have to stick your nose in other individuals’ personal behaviour that takes place in their own homes, which never affects you, not even indirectly. I hope you understand what historical persons you should compare yourself with, who have the same authoritarian mentality. . .”

Quote 9 is a response to a thread starter who asks why people want to legalise cannabis. Here, the participant constructs legalisation demands by asking counter questions on why the thread starter wants to prohibit cannabis, and by pitting legalisation against the common enemy of prohibitionist cannabis policy. While prohibition is connected with “tyrannise”, “oppression”, “dictator” and “authoritarian”, legalisation is constructed by connecting it with aspects of freedom such as “free decision”, “own bodies”, “personal behaviour” and “own homes”. The participant thus accentuates that cannabis use should be an individual choice and that government decisions trying to restrict this freedom are oppressive and illegitimate. The basic problem with cannabis use is consequently that it is not possible for citizens to decide themselves whether or not to use it. With such scepticism over the ability of political authorities to rule for the best of the individual the participant relates to freedom in a neo-liberal way: individuals should be “governed through their freedom” (Rose, 1996b, p. 41). The duty of the government is not to get involved in individual decisions but to enable them and render disturbance of private spheres impossible. Similar rhetoric is common across the Flashback discussions and has also been recognised and discussed in previous research (Barratt, 2011; Moore, 2010; O’Malley & Valverde, 2004; O’Malley, 2002; Riley et al., 2010; Sandberg, 2012).

As is also implied in the above quote the responsible cannabis user consume the substance in private spaces, does not bother anyone and can be trusted to make smart decisions. The individual is thus constructed as an autonomous agent, responsible for making the “right” decision in the pursuit of personal fulfilment (cf. Fraser, 2004). The image of the out of control misuser, constructed by the prohibition discourse, is rejected and replaced with the responsible neo-liberal subject. The participant is trying to de-stigmatise cannabis users by linking them with active and positive capacities, and prohibition is deemed responsible for blocking such a neo-liberal identity by constructing them as criminals and outcasts (cf. Howarth, 2000, pp. 101–125). In this way, and in accordance with earlier research (Barratt, 2011, p. 212; Goode, 1998; Riley et al., 2010), the participants at Flashback incorporate cannabis use in a more general societal movement towards individualism, responsibility and control.

Conclusion

My reading of the Flashback discussions emphasise possible ways in which an oppositional cannabis movement might be articulated via the creation of a political frontier separating it from prohibition. Demands are linked together under the nodal points cannabis, harm, state and freedom and associated with legalisation/decriminalisation/liberalisation. The participants widen the scope of a struggle for alternative cannabis policy beyond

the confines of the cannabis issue to broader demands such as social justice, individual choice and increased welfare (cf. Griggs & Howarth, 2008, p. 136). None of these demands are essentially linked together, and many of them are politically contradictory; e.g. state regulation and liberal freedom is usually not compatible. This is also what signifies the oppositional cannabis discourse in Sweden; it is not yet hegemonised by a specific political party or ideology but negotiated between opposing political positions. These differences seem to be temporarily annulled by the common enemy of prohibition, which is seen to be based in moralism and unscientific thinking.

On Flashback, it seems as if the cannabis discourse is mostly influenced by what can be classified as neo-liberal demands. This mirrors the cultural development in Western society, the political belonging of a legalisation/decriminalisation movement globally and earlier research findings (Fraser, 2004; Moore & Fraser, 2006; Riley et al., 2010). The discourse is thus located in a wider social context with an increasingly individualistic view on society, regarding citizens as autonomous and free to make rational decisions. This reflects that cannabis discussions online are not primarily based on pathology and deviance, but rather on consumers with strengths and competence, which has also been noted in previous research on harm reduction (Moore & Fraser, 2006, p. 3037; O’Malley & Valverde, 2004). Consequently, cannabis use is constructed as a private matter that should not be governed by the state, and citizens as neo-liberal subjects with rights to do what they want (as long as nobody else gets hurt). The only state duty is to make a free cannabis market possible and provide scientific evidence about the substance to enable rational choices.

The neo-liberal view on rational subjects does not acknowledge that unequal and problematic circumstances can obstruct rational decisions (cf. Moore & Fraser, 2006, p. 3037). Possible differences in gender, class and ethnicity are thus kept in hiding by the rhetoric of neo-liberal subjectivity. However, some participants are also concerned with social and environmental issues connected to cannabis use such as violence, war and social exclusion. The state is constructed as a primary actor in controlling cannabis use and sales through state monopoly institutions, economic redistribution and international solidarity. Both vulnerable groups and the general public are constructed as in need of help with restrictions and control to avoid cannabis use problems. This could be interpreted as traces of a social-democratic discourse that has been dominating Swedish politics in modern times (for further information on Swedish social-democracy see e.g. Esping-Andersen, 1985; Rothstein, 1998). Solidarity, internationalism and distribution of incomes are traditional social-democratic values. Thus, based on the common demand to see cannabis as a harmless substance, there are two tracks in oppositional cannabis discourse: a neo-liberal demanding governance through individual freedom, a free market and medical experts, and a welfarist demanding governance through state regulation and social responsibility. Consequently, this study refutes the common conception that oppositional cannabis discourse, at least in Sweden, is neo-liberal.

There are discussion participants adhering strictly to one of these tracks. For example, returning to the Newsmill article mentioned in the introduction, these authors disregarded neo-liberal demands when propagating for drug-socialism. However, what stands out empirically is that although neo-liberal demands are most visible in the discussions, many participants combine neo-liberal and welfarist demands. These participants request both state and individual solutions; they ask for personal responsibility while at the same time suggesting state cannabis monopoly sales. They present such combined governing perspectives as reasonable and evidence-based. Hence, to demand that cannabis use should be both a private and a state matter does not seem complicated in

this discourse. This reasoning is clearly influenced by how Swedish alcohol policy is organised, with state monopoly alongside group and individual level prevention and treatment solutions. Reducing the total consumption by state monopoly has been one main social-democratic response to misuse and medicinal and social damages of alcohol in Sweden. That “Systembolaget” is a policy solution suggested by participants adhering to both neo-liberalism and welfarism thus indicate the social-democratic heritage of state responsibility. However, it also seems as if each demand can be used separately for pragmatic reasons; e.g. the demand for state monopoly can be used to convince prohibitionists that legalisation is rational.

The discussions analysed in this study can be viewed as snapshots of Swedish cannabis discourse on Flashback during 2012. However, quotes presented in this article might seem disconnected since they are fragments of longer discussions, and the analysis may be criticised for interpreting separate statements as evidence of a multi-ideological discourse. In the same manner, the analysis can be criticised for making too much of what seems as everyday “chit-chat”. Nevertheless, it is in the tangible use of language that discourses are created, reproduced and changed. Discussions on Flashback are not just disparate reflections of an already existing “reality”, but challenge prevailing understandings of cannabis. The discourse is developed between participants, where some might challenge it while others reinforce it. Analysing discussions and arguments that are negotiated within them provide important information about conditions and boundaries for the discourse. It enabled me to read the discussions as representations of what can and cannot be said about cannabis policy. Although other results might have emerged if different, and perhaps less liberal, forums had been analysed, this material was chosen since it seems to contain the currently most oppositional and extensive debate on cannabis in Sweden. Hence, the discursive patterns I have located at Flashback tell us something about how cannabis is constructed in Sweden today. With this relatively comprehensive mapping of an oppositional cannabis discourse I was able to pan out a wide variety of demands, not just the most obvious ones that are striking at a more shallow and limited reading.

Discussion participants might not agree with my analysis of the political belonging of their statements. As a researcher I have however taken the liberty of mapping what they say with the help of discourse analysis and interpreted what they write from this theoretical perspective. I have incorporated statements in the discourse based on them being common and recurring arguments from the full scope of a large empirical material. From a discourse theoretic viewpoint this does however mean that I as a researcher am contributing to the construction of an oppositional discourse, especially since I have introduced theoretical concepts from a discursive “outside” to classify demands. Usually, the participants themselves are not claiming their demands to be neo-liberal or welfarist. Naming and categorising is however part of the discourse theoretic method and these concepts provided a useful framework to strengthen my observations. Since the political demand for alternative cannabis policies is yet to reach public attention, the discourse might however change radically during the years to come, as it might have to be modified to fit more public discussions.

Despite these limitations, it can be concluded that the usual political range is difficult to use when mapping oppositional cannabis discourse (cf. Goode, 1998, p. 18). The issue of legal/decriminalised cannabis can attract persons from the entire political spectrum. If the discourse is too broad it might have problems growing; a political movement might have trouble putting the question on the agenda if it does not fit the existing political landscape. However, a broad discourse also means that a movement has potential to grow and continue to form outside of anonymous forums such as Flashback. As this study has shown,

there is a wide variety of demands for a new cannabis policy. And at this point, when this issue is still in its infancy in Sweden, political actors can claim these demands and use them in a more public debate. As the majority of demands adhere to a political middle way they are open to be more explicitly politicised and associated to neo-liberalism, welfarism or other political rationalities. This could possibly give the demands more political cogency. Since there have been a trend towards liberal politics in Sweden this might indicate that neo-liberal demands could get a foothold. However, with the social-democratic history in Sweden and an election coming up in the fall of 2014 that might change the direction of Swedish politics it is difficult to predict the political development. Either way, Flashback discussions on oppositional cannabis policies cannot be disregarded simply because they are held in a context that may be viewed as marginal. Many discussion participants are well versed with science and international politics and as cannabis use may be less stigmatised in the years to come this discourse can become increasingly present in other contexts.

Further research might benefit from studying how oppositional claims are presented in traditional Swedish media, political debates and by non-governmental organisations (if presented at all), and how this is articulated in relation to the prohibition discourse. It will be interesting to see how arguments will be constructed to fit the political context and when a legalisation movement will start gaining influence in Sweden. Certainly, Swedish politics will have to answer to demands for a new cannabis policy in due time.

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Conflict of interest

The author reports no conflict of interest. The author alone is responsible for the content and writing of the article.

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