

Social Transformation, Crime Perceptions and the Role of the Social Sciences

A Personal Account from Iceland

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Abstract

Iceland is in the midst of a radical transformation, both in terms of internal and external changes. On the heels of these changes Iceland has experienced an increase in the level of crime, associated with a deepening crime concern, especially with substance abuse. The social sciences have a decisive role in this process, to broaden the public and political debate on social problems by linking the crime situation to the changing social and economic order. Therefore, it is contended here that social scientists should aim to influence society and make their contribution serve as a basis for informed and sensible social policies. It is a vital role to speak out on public issues, backed up by the best literature with a vision of a better life for all of us.

Keywords: Social transformation, crime, social sciences, social problems, drugs, alcohol, abuse

In the aftermath of WWII, Iceland increasingly came into contact with both European and North American countries after centuries of almost total isolation. The present worldwide process of globalization thus constitutes an even more radical break in Iceland than in most other western countries (Gunnlaugsson and Bjarnason, 1994). Iceland's population has more than tripled since 1910, from about 85,000 to more than 300,00 in 2007. In 1910 two-thirds of the population lived in rural areas, but in 2000 this was true of less than 10 per cent. At the same time the occupational structure of Iceland has also radically changed (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000). This transformation has, therefore, preoccupied a large proportion of the Icelandic social science community. Moreover, in a small society such as Iceland, any academic community is too small to maintain a viable discourse solely within its own ranks. Therefore, owing to the tiny academic audience, social scientists have published some of their work in magazines of more general interest and in the newspapers. Even though this work has to be pitched in both data analysis and theoretical elaboration, this access to the societal discourse has helped the social sciences to gain recognition in the public debate on various social issues, which in turn has strengthened the foothold of sociology in the wider society (Gunnlaugsson and Bjarnason, 1994).

In this chapter, I will address the nature of various social problems associated with the development of Icelandic society and how Icelanders have reacted to these problems. Specifically, the crime situation in Iceland will be evaluated in comparative terms, what crime types are perceived to be most serious and how Icelanders have responded to crime. Finally, we reflect on the public role of sociology and how it has influenced my work as an academician in this small and modern society.

Crime in Iceland: In Comparative Perspective

As with other social data in Iceland, the status of criminological records of crime violations was for a long time relatively primitive compared to most other western societies. Many indicators show however that the official Icelandic crime rate for serious offenses to be lower than in most other modern nations, such as the rate for homicide, armed robberies and serious narcotics offenses (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000).

Marshall Clinard (1978) selected Switzerland as the best candidate of a modern nation with a low crime rate. The Danish criminologist Flemming Balvig (1988) argued that Clinard's focus was mistaken since Switzerland actually had a similar crime rate to other European nations. Perhaps Iceland was a better candidate than Switzerland as a nation without a high rate of serious offenses although Iceland is far from being a crime free paradise. As Durkheim (1893; 1933) pointed out at the turn of the 19th century such a paradise does not exist. Crime is not only inevitable in any society, but is also a necessary social behavior since it causes punishment, which in turn facilitates cohesion and maintains social boundaries. However, the precise nature of the criminal behavior may vary according to the type of society and the type of collective sentiments. At a time of both internal and external changes, as have been occurring in Iceland, crime and punishment have become essential.

Fear with the Influx of Drugs and Alcohol Abuse

Crime concern has indeed deepened considerably in Iceland in recent years, as can be detected in public attitude surveys. The crime type Icelanders appear to be most concerned of involves the influx of drugs into the country (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 1995). A separate drug police was established in the early 1970's under formal supervision of an independent drug court in stark contrast to legal procedures. This court was

not disbanded until 1992, but the drug police still operate as a separate unit. Moreover, the drug police force has grown considerably in recent years, making the drug police the largest specialized police force in the nation (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000).

Despite the firm institutional response in Iceland to the drug problem, which the famous Norwegian criminologist Nils Christie (1996) has described as being the hawks of the Nordic countries, cannabis use among the young increased in the 1990's and has been found to be not very different from the use in Scandinavia. Yet, useage of harder drugs such as heroin or cocaine/crack has been almost non-existent in Iceland (Gunnlaugsson and Thorisdottir, 1999).

The concern for drug use parallels closely with the concern for alcohol use which has a long history in Iceland. For most of the 20th century beer was prohibited in Iceland while all other alcoholic beverages were allowed (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 1986). Moreover, the Reykjavik Police annually arrested during 1990-94 about 2200 persons for public drunkenness in a city with only 100 thousand citizens. On the whole about half of their prison space has been devoted to incarcerating persons whose only offense has involved intoxication (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000).

During 1974-1990 more than 2400 individuals were arrested each year for driving while intoxicated which translates to a staggering one percent of the total population being arrested each year. Not surprisingly this figure is significantly higher than found in other Scandinavian nations. The penalties are not lenient by any means; once arrested for the third time a person has faced a mandatory prison sentence and in the 1990's the number of inmates serving time for DWI routinely surpassed 20 percent of the entire prison population (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000). Yet in the late 1990's this percentage decreased markedly with new developments in prison alternatives, most notably community work instead of confinement.

This focus on alcohol problems certainly seems to suggest that alcohol consumption must be substantial in Iceland. Therefore, it must come as a surprise to learn that according to official information on alcohol consumption, Icelanders consume significantly less alcohol than most other western nations (World Drink Trends, 2000). Still, this category of violations is noteworthy in Iceland and the same can be said about the public debate and continuous measurement of how much Icelanders drink, especially the young generation. Not surprisingly, sociologists have certainly found their role in mapping out the extent and volume of this situation.

Beliefs Regarding the Genesis of Local Criminality

National attitude surveys have repeatedly shown that substance abuse, along with difficult home life, is believed to be central in explaining the genesis of local criminality. Interviews with key people in the criminal justice system and among inmates themselves have also demonstrated the substance abuse and crime link (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000). Moreover, in a government sponsored research on domestic violence, most women victims also explained this violence by mentioning substance abuse as the leading cause of the violence inflicted on them by their spouses (The Justice Minister Report, 1997).

Thus, it appears that substance use is one of the largest offense categories within the criminal justice system and is also believed by most to be central in explaining local criminality. Even though the crime situation has changed and deepened in recent decades associated with industrialization and urbanization, individual and social psychological explanations, such as substance abuse and difficult home life, continue to be dominant. Social factors such as the changing structure of modern society, social class divisions, and unemployment, do not yet seem to significantly enter the picture as factors explaining the local crime situation.

Crime in Iceland: A Social Realist Perspective

It has repeatedly been demonstrated that in relatively small and homogenous nations we could expect low crime rates (Adler, 1983). Iceland's population is very small and homogenous with only a trace of minority ethnic or religious groups. In societies with diverse ethnic and cultural groups social conflict and crime has often been found to be the consequence. Iceland, being a small nation also enables its members to maintain closely knit primary social bonds, which according to many noted criminologists such as Nils Christie (2000), is central in keeping the crime rate down.

Moreover, Iceland has possessed a relatively equalitarian and cohesive social structure, partly because Iceland has never had a monarchy or aristocracy which has in turn intensified the likeness of its people. Slum areas have not become an integral part of Iceland's urbanization and education and health care have for the most part been free of charge further reducing social class disparities and most likely also crime.

Iceland became a fully independent nation in 1944 after a totally peaceful struggle with Denmark for almost a century. No blood was ever shed, no lives had to be sacrificed and no one ever had to serve time in prison. The path to independence was characterized by the use of dialogue; to reason with the Danes and gradually Iceland gained full independence through entirely legalistic means.

Finally, Iceland has never had a standing army of its own and controls of guns have been extensive. The police and prison guards have not carried guns and social conflicts between classes or between the people and the government have for the most part been very peaceful.

Substance Abuse Concern: A Constructionist Perspective

First, it has to be pointed out that many countries, especially Nordic nations, have a similar concern over alcohol use. In Iceland this concern has had many dimensions which can be shown among other things in the peculiar beer ban, while all other alcoholic beverages were allowed. It was argued for instance in Parliament that the drinking habits of Icelanders show that Icelanders are not able to use alcoholic beverages as civilized persons and at times the Viking blood was given the blame (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 1986). Tolerance for alcoholic consumption appears to be at a minimum, perhaps reflecting the Protestant ethic which Weber (1905; 1977) discussed in his famous book on the genesis of capitalism. Icelandic authorities have over time adopted many strict policies to control the availability of alcoholic beverages which in part have helped shaping the local drinking culture (binge drinking). With internal and external changes, the government in Iceland gradually liberalized its alcohol policies and drinking patterns have changed and become more like what is found in other European nations.

In the latter part of the 20th century the influx of drugs became an additional grave concern and an ideal boundary maintenance mechanism in a changing society with increased international air travel (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000). Drugs are generally imported, and are therefore perceived as being a foreign threat to a nation that has for centuries been isolated and small. Consistent with Iceland's cultural aversion to mind-altering substances is that in the Icelandic language the common term for drugs is "eiturflyf" which translates literally as "poison medicine".

Moreover, drugs seem at times to have the tendency to serve as convenient scapegoats for various social and economic problems, i.e. blaming drugs or its alleged effects on its users for a variety of pre-existing social ills that are typically only

indirectly associated with it (Reinarman, 1996). The possibility that abuse of drugs may be an expression of various social ills of a modern and changing society, an expression which certainly might intensify the problem, is seldom seriously considered. Here, the role of sociology becomes crucial; to broaden and enlighten the public discourse on social problems.

The Role of the Public Intellectual

The fear of crime has grown dramatically in the past few years in Iceland even though the crime rate has not changed to the same degree and still is lower compared to many other western nations. Icelanders increasingly believe punishments to be too lenient and they are most concerned about drug use. Moreover, the cause of local criminal behavior has typically been individualized and felt to be substance abuse (Gunnlaugsson and Galliher, 2000).

These findings are not unique to Iceland and not surprisingly similar empirical observations can be found elsewhere (see for example Roberts and Stalans, 1997). Public sentiments towards crime tend to be similar in this modern and globalized world where national boundaries are gradually losing their force. Crime is constantly felt to be more serious and drug crimes the most serious law violations and the causes of crime are typically reduced to individual faults.

Thus, being a social scientist is now even more pressing than ever before and sociology increasingly an international discipline. We are dealing with social forces which are predominantly international in nature, and they can also be manipulative and even repressive, which can be shown in the international war waged against drugs (Nadelmann, 1993). This makes comparisons across nations not only useful but also necessary, we can and should learn from each other. Moreover, the voice of sociology must be heard, not only among sociologists, but also outside the ranks of the discipline itself. Sociology is in

fact the only discipline able to demystify the social forces shaping our existence and in turn gives our profession a vital role in society.

What we do in the social sciences matters, not only to our profession but to a wider audience as well. We can and should participate in the public debate about social issues. And we have some classic examples in our field who have advocated this role like C.W. Mills (1959) and Alfred Lindesmith (1965) who confronted the Drug Control Establishment in the United States as was demonstrated in a recent book by David Keys and John Galliher (2000).

In the spirit of these scholars and others, I early on presented my research findings to the local media in Iceland. In the mid 1980's, when I was still a graduate student, I wrote a lengthy article on the subject in a popular magazine (Mannlif, 1985) and later gave a detailed interview in Iceland's largest daily on the subject (Morgunbladid, 1986a).

The reactions to my surprise were quite dramatic and another daily paper openly criticized the findings (Thjodviljinn, 1986) and the director of the *State Council Against Alcohol* (Afengisvarnarad) also responded with a lengthy article in the paper criticizing the results (Morgunbladid, 1986b). I was accused for failing to see the material benefits of the beer ban to Icelandic people, which I had found to be minimal. As a sociologist I had located the ban in a comparative and socio-historical perspective where the ban was found to serve a vital symbolic function for various social groups in society (Morgunbladid, 1986c). Moreover, I had described the arguments for both the ban and its abolition by citing Parliamentary debates on the subject over time.

Since I became faculty at the University of Iceland in the early 1990's this public role has always been a part of my career. The local media has been quite receptive to what social scientists have to say and that has certainly helped in playing out this role. Moreover, not surprisingly, the subject of crime

and deviance makes it easier to participate in a public dialogue since this topic frequently makes the headlines in the popular media, just as it does in other countries. Here, it is very important for social scientists to step in by not allowing the debate about various social problems to be exploited by sensationalized media and various interest groups who have vested interests to trumpet the crime and drug problem. In Iceland, even to a larger degree than in most countries, we regularly experience moral crime panics, which at times produce public fear and anxieties and at the same time intensify misguided social policies, not the least crime policies.

In the past few years we have seen some instances of this sort in Iceland and I have felt it to be a professional obligation to come out in public to intervene backed up by my own research or by citing relevant literature on the subject. To mention a few of the subjects my public role has involved I can here name a few. For example, it has been incorrectly alleged that youth violence is becoming rampant and more serious (Morgunbladid, 1993). There has been a consequent media and public outcry for stiffer punishments (Morgunbladid, 1996b and Dagur-Timinn, 1997). Public fear of drugs has been heralded (Morgunbladid, 1995; 1998 and 2000), as has the impact of mass media on violence in society (Morgunbladid, 1996a). These topics are familiar which makes it relatively easy to apply the criminological literature to the situation in Iceland. I have written more than 30 articles in the local media about these issues and other crime related issues in the past few years and given dozens of interviews in the local radio and television. Usually, a sensational event triggers my participation in the local media. Here are two examples (Gunnlaugsson, 2001).

Two Examples of Participation in the Public Debate

First, I felt it to be my professional obligation to enter the public debate when the Icelandic Minister of Justice, in a public

address in 1996, urged judges to hand out stiffer penalties for violent offenses. According to the Justice Minister these crimes had increased and were becoming a more serious threat. Apparently the Justice Minister was echoing recent news reports in the local media on this subject and the public mood which often tends to favor harsh penalties.

I responded in a newspaper article in the largest daily paper that the data does not show this crime to be increasing in Iceland (Morgunbladid, 1996b). If anything, police data showed serious cases of violence to be decreasing. Moreover, I argued that stiffer penalties would not solve this problem by citing and discussing various research findings on the subject, in addition to reflecting on the social reality of many violent instances.

It is unknown whether this article had any impact, but not much later I was invited to give a keynote address to a convention held by the *Icelandic Society of Judges* where about 100 local judges, sheriffs and legal experts were gathered together in their bi-annual convention, to discuss the issue of punishments. The audience turned out to be receptive to my arguments and this shows that public participation can open up opportunities for academics. This presentation also led to an invitation to submit an article on the subject to a local journal on legal studies (Gunnlaugsson, 1998).

The second example involves the local drug control policy. Early in 1999, or only a few months before Parliamentary elections, a new drug bill was introduced in the Icelandic Parliament (Parliamentary Files, 1998-99). This bill called for mandatory prison sentences for drug trafficking and drug sales stipulating a minimum of two years in prison, but no such provision existed in the law. In the preamble of this proposal, it was stated that the drug problem was felt by most Icelanders to be the most serious crime problem facing Icelanders and that the public believes penalties to be much too lenient. My crime survey research findings were cited to back up these proposed measures.

Suddenly I found my research to be used to justify a very misguided crime policy and also being used to bolster some political careers just prior to political elections. I felt I had a responsibility to publicly criticize this proposal and I did so in a lengthy article in Iceland's largest daily (Morgunbladid, 1999).

I discussed the horrible situation in the United States with drug incarcerations sky-rocketing without improving the problem of drug abuse. Moreover, I urged MP's to reflect on the issue for a moment; to calculate and estimate how many more people would have been locked up in prison if this bill would have been passed like a decade earlier. What a monster we would have created in our criminal justice system and is that really what our Parliament wants to do? Is this how we want to tackle this social and public health problem we are facing? I did not get any reactions in the paper, but for whatever reason the bill was not passed in Parliament and it did not even make it to the floor debate. In 2001, the maximum penalty for drug offenses was however increased to 12 years in prison instead of the 10 years stipulated in the previous legislation. Yet, the minimum prison sentence of two years was not included in the bill.

Public Role and Academia

As is well known, the public role is not rewarded in academia and this holds also for Iceland. We do not have any academic incentives to carry out this role, we do not get promoted or even a pay raise by submitting articles and giving interviews to the popular media. And this is not the whole story either. By reaching out to play this public role, one runs the risk of stepping on the toes of powerful people and groups who can possibly undermine your career or even the existence of your discipline. Therefore, it is tempting to choose subjects which are not controversial and are relevant to societal and governmental interests and therefore help the discipline to earn credibility in society. Yet, our field must go beyond the immediate social

situation, we must be able to reflect upon alternative ways to handling social issues even though it might run counter to the powers of the present. We are a part of an institution which is accountable to the public which should be reflected in our work.

My experience in Iceland shows that in a small society academics are very likely to become involved in the public discourse which means that a total separation between scholarly work and social policy can be difficult. Moreover, we are a part of a field that not only has as its mission the mapping of social phenomena, but perhaps has its best moments when it elaborates on the liberation of the human spirit, and aims for an emancipation from dominant notions of social reality. Even though we sometimes feel that our input does not have much impact, it should not stop us. In my view, we have no obligation to be successful, only an obligation to try.

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