



## Research Paper

## Drug use and the constitution of homo politicus in Swedish politics 1966–1979

Filip Roumeliotis

Department of Criminology, Stockholm University, Frescativägen 10, 11418 Stockholm, Sweden

## ARTICLE INFO

## Keywords:

Drugs  
Democracy  
Recognition  
Homo politicus  
Sweden

## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The emergence of the drug user as a political problem in Sweden during the 1960s presented politicians with the problem of how to fit this new character into the existing democratic order. The aim of this article is to examine how Swedish politics sought to regulate democratic participation by establishing norms that conditioned who is recognized as a political subject as well as what counts as political speech and action.

**Methods:** The analysis is based on a close reading of parliamentary debates, political motions, and public reports and covers the period 1966–1979.

**Results:** During the examined period, Swedish politics constituted the ideal subject of democratic politics, homo politicus, as a subject embedded in a community of active and politically conscious citizens endowed with the capacity to cooperate and engage in the collective formulation of the common good. Drug use therefore posed a threat to the democratic order due to its passivizing effects that inhibited the cooperation needed to uphold the democratic polity.

**Conclusion:** The perceived individualism, passivity, and inability of the drug user to engage in cooperation within a politically conscious community of citizens positioned the drug user as a threat to the democratic order. The drug user thereby became a useful figure in the political regulation of the democratic sphere and the constitution of homo politicus, the ideal subject of democratic politics.

## Introduction

Although sporadically discussed during the 1950s, narcotic drugs and the drug user gained status as a major political problem in Sweden during the 1960s (Olsson, 1994). This new political problem was intertwined with multiple other issues from the start, not least the issue of democratic governance and democratic participation – issues that were at the center of the political debate during this period. The drug user presented politicians with the problem of how to fit this new character into the existing political order. Furthermore, during this decade, several national associations representing various marginalized communities such as drug users, prisoners, and clients with mental health issues emerged in Sweden. These associations were deeply engaged in the public debate on democracy and raised demands for political recognition for the groups they represented. In 1970 these associations launched a joint publication that was to be published bi-monthly, called *Pockettidningen R* (eng. the R-journal). The title of the first issue was telling of the problem that these associations wanted to address: “Why the hell don’t we have a say? Views on institutional

democracy” (*Pockettidningen R*, 1970). While drug users have rarely been formally excluded from the public political sphere (i.e. denied their right to vote), the problem that these associations were addressing points to other, informal kinds of exclusions related to the ways that individuals and collectives are denied political recognition.

The focus of this article is on informal exclusionary mechanisms that take part in the denial of political recognition for drug users. As Fraser (1997) has argued, the public sphere has historically been constituted by several informal exclusions such as norms of rationality that regulate public speech and behavior. Similarly, many commentators have argued that political speech and action are always conditioned (cf. Olsson, 2002; Butler, 1990). To be recognized as a political subject with the right to speak and act in political terms, individuals and collectives need to adhere to specific, most often implicit, conditions that define the appropriate positions within which it is possible to speak and act, as well as conditions adhering to the very form and matter of political speech and action. This means that the norms that condition political subjectivity, speech, and action are central in the constitution of the ideal subject of democratic politics, homo politicus.

E-mail address: [filip.roumeliotis@criminology.su.se](mailto:filip.roumeliotis@criminology.su.se).

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.drugpo.2024.104357>

This article aims to examine the underlying rules that regulate three dimensions of democratic politics: the political subject, political speech, and political action. The analysis seeks to unearth the criteria that need to be fulfilled for an individual or a collective to gain recognition as a political subject within the political sphere, and for their speech and actions to be accepted as political.

The questions asked are: what criteria do individuals and collectives need to fulfill to gain recognition as political subjects, as members of a democratic polity engaged in political deliberation? What criteria does the speech of the subject need to fulfill for that speech to be recognized as political? Finally, what criteria do a subject's actions need to fulfill to be deemed political? These are issues relating to how the figure of *homo politicus* is constituted within the political field and how the boundaries that distinguish it from its Other are drawn.

Political philosophy has provided an understanding of the long history and above all the underlying “rules” according to which *homo politicus* has been constituted in political-philosophical discourse. This figure has taken different forms throughout history, ranging from Aristotle’s “political animal” that was intended to live “together in a deliberately governed fashion, to self-rule in a settled association that comprises yet exceeds basic needs, and to the location of human freedom and human perfectibility in political life” (Brown, 2015, p. 87), to the “reason-oriented, self-controlled, responsible, moral and, ideally, mature subject with a singular, consistent and stable identity and character” of liberal democratic theory (Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2020, p. 376).

The following analysis is concerned with the much more local and mundane ways in which Swedish politics has construed *homo politicus* in relation to a then newly emerging problem: the use of narcotic drugs, the drug user, and its relation to the democratic polity. By analyzing the ways through which politics construed this new political problem it will be possible to gain an understanding of how politicians of this time reflected and acted upon drugs and the drug user in relation to the problem of democratic governance, political participation, and the constitution of *homo politicus*. Although based on the case of Swedish drug politics, the following analysis seeks to demonstrate more general processes through which political structures partake in the regulation of political subjectivities. As political subjects are not ontologically stable entities existing before acts of political recognition, in line with Lancaster et al. (2018), this article seeks to question uncritical calls for the recognition of marginalized communities as such recognition is always conditioned.

The analysis will be based on a close reading of transcribed parliamentary debates, political motions, and public reports published between 1966 and 1979. The empirical material covers the first formative decades after the drug issue entered the political sphere during which drug use and the drug user were first given shape as a political problem. The way drugs and the drug user were discussed during these formative decades thus laid the foundation for later developments in Swedish drug policy. These documents are seen as taking part in a wider discourse that serves to regulate political speech and ways of being and to mark the limits of democratic life and participation. I argue that the emergence of drugs and the drug user as a political problem actualized a need to define and mark the limits of democracy, to mark out the contours of the subject of democratic politics – *homo politicus* – and it enabled the formulation of the conditions for political speech and action.

Previous research on drug users’ political participation has mostly focused on examining the possibility for organizations representing drug users to engage in formal political processes. For instance, Johnson (2006) has provided a historical examination of how such client organizations have been included in political processes by analyzing the works of politically appointed committees and whether the client organizations have been formally included in the political process. This analysis showed that their influence has been limited, both in terms of processual influence (participation and influence on political processes) as well as substantial influence (producing results in the interests of drug users).

Asmussen Frank et al. (2012) have examined contemporary political opportunity structures in which Nordic drug user organizations are embedded in order to identify the factors that are important for their possibility to act politically. They argue that the repressive policies adopted by most Nordic countries, including an emphasis on abstinence as the only solution to the drug issue, make it difficult for drug-user organizations to engage in political processes. This is partly because Nordic drug user organizations are to a large extent advocates for harm reduction measures, something which, according to the authors, has been extremely difficult to even speak about until quite recently. Similarly, Anker (2007) has argued that the illegal character of drug use poses a challenge to drug user organizations since these might be considered as consisting of criminals. As a result of this, the organizations might become considered illegitimate.

Within the context of substance use treatment services in the 1960s and 70s, Edman (2012) has argued that the drug user was seen as lacking a sense of responsibility that was required of democratic citizens. Treatment during this period, therefore, involved the activation of the patient in order to shape the drug user into a democratically capable citizen. The issues of democracy and responsibility were thus intertwined during this period.

In the United Kingdom, the 1960s saw the rise of organizations such as Release that campaigned for the rights of drug users in addition to providing street-based advice (Mold & Berridge, 2008). Release protested the legal system’s injustices against drug users and balanced between a “new” form of politics concerned with questions of identity, lifestyle, and human rights and “old” party politics, both forms involved in the formation of the organization (Mold, 2006). As Mold and Berridge have argued, such organizations did include users although these were hidden from public view, working in the organizations but rarely given a public voice. The organization was thereby an “organization for drug users rather than of drug users” (Mold & Berridge, 2008, p. 454).

The current analysis seeks to expand on these insights through a broader examination of how the political subject has been constituted in relation to the general political framework within which democratic governance was formulated. As will be discussed below, this includes an examination of the ontological foundation upon which democratic governance rests and its consequences for the possibility of constituting political subjects.

The current analysis also contributes a slightly different perspective on how drug users’ informal relation to democratic politics can be understood. Client organizations cannot, as Johnson (2006) acknowledges, be equated with the actual participation of drug users but rather as organizations that represent interests that it might be reasonable to assume that drug users hold. In part due to the problem of establishing what interests a heterogeneous group labeled as “drug users” might have, the current analysis will not be concerned with the issue of “user interests”. Instead, the analysis will focus on the constitution of the normative boundaries that act to exclude some individuals and collectives from the political sphere while including others. Furthermore, rather than examining the collective practices of client organizations, this article is concerned with how political subjects and the normative figure of *homo politicus* have been shaped within Swedish political discourses and how these norms regulate the possibility of political recognition.

### Political subjectivity, democratic foundations and the order of political discourse

As I seek to demonstrate in the following analysis, during the first two decades after the entrance of the drug user into the political arena, its status as a political subject and its relation to the democratic community were examined and debated at length. This indeterminacy of the political status of the drug user illustrates the fact that political subjecthood is never given in advance. The issue is rather how the political subject and the democratic community are constituted, and how it

is possible for individuals and collectives to gain recognition as political subjects (Krause & Schramm, 2011, p. 127). As several authors have argued, one needs to be recognized as a political subject in order to gain access to the political arena, become a part of the democratic polity, and acquire a political voice (Butler, 1990; Clifford, 2001; Blühdorn & Butzlaff, 2020; Krause & Schramm, 2011). This recognition is in turn conditioned by the political structures that produce and regulate the political subject itself (Butler, 1990). This means that the political subject is constituted as a position that can be inhabited by those individuals or collectives that are accorded legitimacy within the dominant political structures that regulate it. This also means that the political subject does not precede the acts through which it is constituted. The task of a critical examination of the political status of the drug user, therefore, necessitates an inquiry into the ways that political structures constitute and regulate political subjects, as well as the exclusionary mechanisms that come into play in the constitution of homo politicus and the democratic community. This last point is important since the constitution of subjects and collectives is always relational and dependent upon exclusionary practices, by setting up a “constitutive outside” against which the political subject or collective is defined (cf. Mouffe, 2005a). This can take the shape of what Judith Butler (2020, p. xix) has described as the ascription to some individuals or groups of an “uninhabitable identification”, with the effect of stigmatizing those affected and “producing what will and will not count as a viable speaking subject and a reasonable opinion within the public domain”.

To analyze the structures that constitute and regulate political subjectivity, I have found it useful to draw upon the writings of the post-foundationalist philosopher Claude Lefort (1986, 1988) who is famous for his articulation of political power in democratic societies as being characterized by an empty space. Whereas political power in monarchical society was grounded in the dual body of the king – the physical, mortal body that ensured the succession of the throne as well as the immortal body that mediated between mortals and god – after the democratic revolution the king’s throne became an empty space. The absence of a body in which political power could be grounded simultaneously meant the elimination of a transcendental authority that could act as a final guarantee or legitimation for that power (Mouffe 2005b, p. 64). However, as Marchart (2007) points out, the term “post-foundationalism” that characterizes this style of thought does not indicate the total erasure of an ontological foundation for political power but rather that such foundations are contingent and always open for revision – they are in short what is at stake in political, ideological debate (Lefort 1988, cf. Rancière 1999). This enables an analysis of how Swedish politicians sought to provide an ontological foundation for democratic, political power and how this foundation in turn structures and regulates the democratic polity, the figure of homo politicus, and its constitutive outside.

In addition to the constitution and regulation of the political subject, there is a regulation of political speech. Here I have found it useful to draw on Foucault’s (1981) notion of “discursive order” which consists of a number of procedures and rules that act to regulate political discourse. These rules make possible the constitution of a number of divisions that act to exclude some speech acts while making others legitimate, for instance through the distinction between rational and irrational or true and false speech acts. It, therefore, becomes important to discern what conditions speech needs to fulfill for it to be accepted as political.

## Method

The analyzed material consists of parliamentary debates (below referred to as “prot.”), parliamentary motions (“mot.”), and public reports (“SOU”) covering the period between 1966 and 1979. All this material has been digitalized and made available on the web pages of the Swedish Parliament and the National Library of Sweden, with the former providing a search engine that makes it possible to search for specific keywords, types of documents, and time periods. For this study, the

keyword *narko\** was used to identify all political motions and parliamentary debates on drugs during the period 1960–1980. This resulted in 693 political motions and 750 debates of varying lengths. The material was read in its entirety, dismissing irrelevant documents such as debates and motions concerning the need to train more anesthesiologists (sw. *narkosläkare*) and the regulation of the use of horse sedatives, as well as those that only mentioned the word *narcotics* in passing. This resulted in a total of 153 parliamentary debates and 171 parliamentary motions that were kept for analysis. As the period 1960–1965 did not yield much material (the debates intensified during the second half of the 1960s), the starting point of the analyzed period was adjusted to 1966 to better reflect the temporal focus of the analysis. The analyzed public reports were selected according to their relevance, based on the inquiries analyzed in prior research (e.g. Edman 2012, Edman & Blomqvist 2011).

This article is part of a larger historical study on drug users’ struggle to gain recognition in the political sphere. Therefore, the coding strategy was inspired by Grounded theory and consisted of an initial coding (Charmaz 2006), paying close attention to reoccurring themes related to democratic issues and drug users. This approach is exploratory, open-ended, and based on the analyzed empirical material while acknowledging that the analyst holds prior ideas that influence the coding, in part through the reading of earlier research and theory, the disciplinary background of the analyst as well as the interests guiding the research project (Charmaz 2006, p. 48). This means that the analyst does not “discover” the meaning inherent in the material but is rather active in constructing this meaning.

The initial coding process was followed by focused coding in which the most significant codes for the current analysis were selected for close analysis. The selection of codes followed the tripartite structure of the analysis, examining the regulation of the political subject, the speech of this subject, and its actions.

The first analytic section included the main code “democratic foundations” and focused on the sub-code “popular movements” together with sub-codes at a lower level such as “community”, “solidarity”, “norms” and “active participation”. The code “Orientalism” was included in the first analytic section as it connected to the sub-code “active participation” as well as codes used in the second analytic section. The second analytic section was based on the main code “Psychedelic philosophy” and the sub-codes “Subjectivism” and “Transcendentalism”, the latter capturing a specific epistemological position construed in the analyzed texts. Finally, the third analytic section was based on the main code “Opposition & revolt” and the sub-codes “passive/active” and “psychoanalysis”.

In the following section, a brief description of Swedish politics during the examined period is given to provide some context to the analysis.

## Background

The parties that held positions in parliament during the examined period consisted of the Social Democrats and the Communists, representing the left-wing block, and the Conservatives, Social Liberals, and the Agrarian Centre Party making up the right-wing block. The Social Democrats were in government during most of the examined period with a change in government taking place in 1976 when they were replaced by a right-wing government that governed until 1982 when the Social Democrats returned to power.

It has been suggested that the drug issue became a central political problem in the 1960s because criminalized sub-cultures began injecting amphetamines. In addition to this, ordinary young people started to be depicted by the media as a group at risk of being recruited into the ranks of drug users even though actual drug use was relatively limited at the time (Olsson 2011).

The political debate on the drug issue intensified from the mid-1960s in the parliament as well as in Swedish media and there was soon established a political consensus around the view that drugs constituted one of the most serious problems society faced. This consensus led to the

criminalization and increase in penalties for a growing number of drug-related acts from the late 1960s (Edman 2013).

This intensification of political debate and criminalization in part reflects the development of drug policies in other Western countries. In the USA, for instance, federal government actions on drugs were rather limited until 1969 and it was in 1971 that President Nixon declared a “war on drugs” (Reuter 2013). It should be noted, however, that drug consumption was not criminalized in Sweden during the examined period as this did not come into effect until 1988 with the sanction being limited to a fine, followed by the imposition of prison sentences of up to six months in 1993. Also, during this period it was still possible to make a distinction between the “pitiful drug user” and the “ruthless drug dealer”, the former being subjected to treatment while the latter was to be punished hard (Edman 2013, p. 465). Nevertheless, the consensus established during the examined period laid the foundation for the developments that would follow in the coming decades.

For a long time in Sweden, a close relationship has existed between democratic politics, popular movements, and civil associations. During the examined period, there was a widespread conception of the popular movements and civil associations as constituting the foundation of democratic politics (prot. 1973:16, p. 128; prot. 1973:56, p. 79; prot. 1973:57, p. 153; prot. 1976/77:38, p. 176; prot. 1976:31, p. 39; prot. 1977:139, p. 158; mot. 1973:454; mot. 1973:679; mot. 1976/77:1000; mot. 1978/79:600).

Among some politicians, it was thought that the popular movements enabled the reproduction of a community of politically active citizens by providing them with “democratic training” that in turn led to a sense of “collective responsibility”, as social democratic politician Lena Hjelm-Wallén claimed in 1973 (prot. 1973:16, p. 128, see also mot. 1973:679).

The first analytical section will examine such attempts to ground democratic politics on a firm foundation. The following analysis is divided into three parts, covering the three dimensions of democratic politics discussed in the introduction: the constitution of the political subject, the conditions that regulate political speech, and the conditions that regulate political action.

## Analysis

### *Homo politicus and the foundations of democratic politics*

In what could be called an egalitarian, democratic discourse, a politically active and ideologically informed community – here identified as the popular movement – constituted the necessary foundation that made possible the very existence of democratic politics. This was most poignantly formulated by social democrat Hans Gustafsson in a parliamentary debate in 1977 when he insisted that the “Swedish democratic tradition is, in essence, a tradition of the popular movement” (prot. 1976/77:38, p. 176, see also prot. 1973:56, p. 79; prot. 1977:139, p. 158; mot. 1973:454; mot. 1973:679; mot. 1976/77:1000). Gustafsson argued that “the future development, stability and strength of Swedish democracy are dependent upon if the popular movements are able to maintain their vitality and upon their possibilities to engage new people and new generations in the ideal every day work which gives democracy a tangible and self-experienced content” (prot. 1976/77:38, p. 176).

This view on the importance of community was shared by politicians of other parties as well. For instance, in a political motion, twelve politicians of the Agrarian Party would claim that the “democratic welfare society is built upon a will to solidarity and community.” (mot. 1971:246, p. 8). There were, however, fears that the formation of a cooperative and active political community of ideologically informed citizens, enabled by the popular movement and the civil associations, was threatened by the passivizing effects of drug use which made impossible the cooperation needed to uphold the political community. The minister of social affairs Rune Gustavsson, representing the Agrarian Party, therefore saw drug use as a major threat against the foundations of democratic society itself:

Society can, for several reasons, not accept the existence of widespread misuse of narcotic drugs. Firstly, drug misuse makes impossible political, idealistic, and social work through its passivizing effects, and it hollows out the cooperation among people, which is the foundation for the whole of the democratic society (prot. 1976:31).

According to Gustavsson, drug use gave rise to an increasingly larger group of socially marginalized people who were unable to participate in social life (ibid.). This view was shared by Olof Palme and sixteen other social democrats who in a political motion wrote that drugs “constitute a threat to the solidarity in society” (mot. 1978/79:600, p. 3).

This was discussed in similar terms in public inquiry reports during this period. The Narcotics Care Committee was appointed to conduct the first Swedish large-scale inquiry on drugs and worked during the years 1965–1969, producing several public reports on this issue. According to this committee, a defining characteristic of drug users was their lack of affinity with any ideological stance and sense of community. This was because there was neither a common goal apart from drug use itself nor any feelings of community within this group, explained by the “extremely egocentric” pleasure of drug use (SOU 1969:52, p. 182f). The individualism, passivity, and inability of drug users to commit to a community and an ideological stance, therefore, put them at odds with democratic society itself.

The Social Services Committee, established in 1967, was given a massive mission to redraft the entire legislation surrounding Social Services. This meant that a part of this committee’s work overlapped with that of the Narcotic Care Committee’s work, although the drug issue was somewhat marginal in the former committee’s work (Edman 2012). Nevertheless, in the mission of the Social Services Committee, drug policy, and social policy overlapped in the sense that drug users constituted a part of the clients of the social services. In one of its reports, this committee (SOU 1974:39) discussed the historical development of social policies and services in Sweden in terms of their effects on the democratization of society. The aim to improve the conditions for marginalized groups was thought to bring increased solidarity between social groups:

Class solidarity should turn into social solidarity and the individual’s self-assertion replaced by cooperation and consideration. Such values, inspired by utopian socialism, are part of the idea of the “people’s home”, reformist ideological intentions about solidarity and brotherhood. (SOU 1974:39, p. 53f).

For this committee, social policies aimed to enable the formation of an egalitarian universal community rather than a particular community (e.g. working class or ethnic communities) or an individualistic, libertarian society. The rights and responsibilities of the political subject were thereby formulated in relation to the political collective and the right to political participation was discussed in terms of a collective praxis seeking to formulate the common good. However, the committee identified a democratic problem in that the clients of social services, such as drug users, lacked a common cause and had a problem achieving the feeling of affinity required to organize in order to influence social services and policies:

The usual route of organizing to gain influence has not been particularly easy for the clients of the social services. This may be a matter of difficulties experiencing having a common cause to gather around, to achieve the sense of belonging that such an organization requires, etc. (SOU 1974:39, p. 63).

Despite the aspiration to create a universal community, the community that constituted the foundation of democratic politics was in fact defined through geographic or national divisions. As Tham (1992) has demonstrated, drugs have historically been construed as something foreign to Swedish culture. Political discourse on the drug user during this time frequently drew on what Edward Said (2004) would call



“orientalist” tropes (prot. 1970 AK 18, p. 34; prot. 1971:47, p. 111; prot. 1971:136, p. 65; mot. 1974:932; mot. 1978/79:434; mot. 1978/79:1843; mot. 1978/79:2106). For instance, in a parliamentary debate, Anders Gernandt of the Agrarian Party claimed that “the older generation remembers well from the school books of their youth pictures of the East, picturing an opium den somewhere, where people were lying and smoking opium” (prot. 1971:136, p. 65). According to Gernandt, his generation was taught that this was something alien and frightening for “us Westerners” (ibid.).

In the context of democratic politics, this geographical division between Swedish culture and its Other became significant in relation to several issues central to the constitution of homo politicus. One of these issues was framed in terms of a dichotomy between active and passive subjects. Presenting “the East” as something alien to Swedish culture made it possible for the Narcotics Care Committee to establish a norm for desirable political conduct by emphasizing the “correct” relation that political subjects should have toward it. To do so, the committee construed a dichotomy between the active and “politically conscious Swedish youth” and a passive, drug-using youth:

While Asia, especially India, for many politically conscious Swedish young people foremost symbolizes world problems that require commitment and active work, for some of the passive, escapist young people with an interest in opium and cannabis it, above all, symbolizes an existence without demands for adaptation and work, and with complete tolerance for the use of drugs. A lot of young people dream of this junkie’s dream of Schlaraffenland, and some of these have also drifted off to India, Nepal, etc. For some young people with active interests in the religious or pseudo-religious elements of the psychedelic philosophy, India also symbolizes an opportunity to completely embrace a life turned to contemplation and turned away from the active world, with or without drugs.” (SOU 1969:52, p. 175).

The politically conscious individual was construed as an active subject in relation to a passive Asia which was reduced to an object for Western interventions. The drug user was positioned within the same passive, objectified space inhabited by Asia. Through these distinctions, the Narcotics Care Committee was able to constitute homo politicus as a Western subject and the drug user as its foreign Other.

#### *The epistemological foundations of political discourse*

Apart from the positioning of the ideal political subject, political discourse during this period sought to define the limits of political speech. The political discursive order (Foucault 1981) regulates what counts as legitimate political speech through a series of distinctions such as that of what constitutes true and false propositions.

An important issue of relevance to drug users and democratic politics concerned the epistemological foundation of democratic, political discourse. Political discourse during the 1960s and 70s depicted drug users as representatives of a certain philosophical discourse founded upon a specific epistemology. In parliamentary debates and political motions, this was sometimes described as a “junkie philosophy” that prescribed specific norms and rules for living life that deviated from those held by society in general (prot. 1971:47, p. 111; mot. 1968 AK:953; mot. 1968 FK:749; mot. 1968 FK:750; mot. 1969 AK:251; mot. 1969 FK:222; mot. 1971:356; mot. 1972:126).

Politicians of the Agrarian Party would construe this philosophy as lacking a unitary system of beliefs, ideas, and attitudes and as borrowing traits from “old eastern mysticism” and “modern, Western teenage revolt” (prot. 1971:47, p. 111). Some of the politicians of the Agrarian Party sought to combat this philosophy and called on “medical, sociological and other expertise”, to come together to “clear up in the thicket of quasi-philosophy that is growing rampant in this field” (mot. 1969 AK 630, p. 6). Rejecting any political potential of this philosophy, they would also call for a counter philosophy able to show that “the world’s

problems cannot be solved by a group of poison-dependent day-dreamers” since “no one has the right to withdraw from this struggle for a better world by escaping from the current [world]” (mot. 1969 AK:251, p. 14).

Dreams, transcendentalism, alternative worlds, and inner experiences were reoccurring themes in discussions about this philosophy, and several of these were discussed by the Narcotics Care Committee. Partly returning to the use of “orientalist” tropes, the committee explained that

Narcotics in the true sense bring about a tendency to passivity with pleasant reveries. The visitors of the opium dens who, in a lying position, are completely trapped in their lust-oriented dream world are examples of this. (SOU 1967:25, p. 247).

The Narcotics Care Committee provided a detailed description of what they chose to term the “psychedelic philosophy”. They granted that this philosophical discourse contained a form of “social critique” and even went so far as to acknowledge the “optimism and radical idealism” inherent in it (SOU 1969:52, p. 174). It was construed as a philosophy that celebrates transgression, alterity, and resistance to conventional norms and forms of life. According to the Narcotics Care Committee, this philosophy adhered to

a valorization of religious-transcendental experiences as opposed to the conventional materialism and narrow, rational attitude in society; of revolt against conventional demands on the identification with one’s occupational role and against social conformism, against the valorization of intellectual pursuits and of academic education, against puritan, or rather, Calvinist morals which suppress spontaneous sensuality, etc. (SOU 1969:52, p. 173).

The committee construed this philosophical discourse as posing a challenge to the democratic system and viewed the opposition between this philosophy and the existing system in ideological-political terms, stating that “‘psychedelic’ values are often combined with a critique of the common democratic or pseudo-democratic system” (SOU 1969:52, p. 175).

A central problem that the committee identified was the epistemological assumptions underpinning this philosophy. This was formulated in terms of a series of distinctions between materialist-realist/transcendental-idealistic and subjectivist/objectivist epistemological principles. The emphasis placed by the committee on “religious-transcendental”, or sometimes “inner” experiences enabled the committee to ascribe a certain epistemology to this philosophy. The committee questioned the valorization of the individual’s “expanded consciousness” within this philosophy both on an “epistemological as well as neurophysiological” level stating that:

One may, with due respect for the value of “inner experiences” ask whether adherents of a philosophy that so categorically prescribes the renunciation of available paths to knowledge and to influencing the state of the world can really advance their development of the world. (SOU 1969:52, p. 176, see also p. 188).

The valorization of transcendental experiences within this philosophy led the committee to describe it as “an extreme subjectivism”. This was seen as highly problematic since this subjectivism turned against the political ideals of the politically active community and its ability to cooperate and thereby threatened the very foundations of democratic politics:

The philosophy takes on a strongly cynical character through the dogma of the absolute priority of the immediate and overpowering experiences in the individual way of life, and through the pronounced indifference to social responsibility that the preaching of one’s salvation implies. It can also be said to express a total pessimism about the possibility of improving social conditions in cooperation with others. (SOU 1969:52, p. 174).

The attribution of these characteristics to the psychedelic philosophy

enabled the committee to construe this form of discourse as the constitutive outside of the political discursive order. This discursive order was, in contrast to the subjectivism of psychedelic discourse, founded upon the common (as opposed to private) experiences of the collective. Objectivity, in this case, came to stand for the adoption of a realist epistemology directed to the external rather than “inner” world, and the values of the collective such as social responsibility and the need to “work and commit to duties towards family and society” (SOU 1969:52, p. 175). Furthermore, this distinction enabled the formulation of a principle for establishing true political speech. The attribution of subjectivism and transcendental-idealist epistemology to the drug user’s discourse therefore acted to disqualify this discourse from the political discursive order in terms of its inability to produce true statements regarding social reality.

### *Opposition and revolt: defining political action*

The 1960s and 70s witnessed the emergence of what has variously been called counter-cultures, contra cultures, or youth revolts all through the Western world with young people gathering together in demonstrations criticizing modern capitalism, established societal norms, and the politics of their day. This youthful movement rejected authority and insisted on the autonomy of the individual and freedom from traditions (Nelson 1989). Sweden was no exception to this trend.

How to understand the protests of these counter-cultures was not clear to everyone. For instance, the liberal Eric Nelander claimed in 1969 that:

The past year has been, in a special way, the year of youth revolts. It does not only apply in certain other countries where there are certainly many bad conditions. It also applies here at home, where you sometimes wonder if the youth really know what they are demonstrating for. (prot. 1969 AK 5, p. 38f).

At the heart of this attempt to understand the meaning of these demonstrations lies the issue of whether this protest or opposition was recognized as a political act or not.

Some Swedish conservatives saw these counter-cultures as challenging societal and legal norms. In a political motion put forth in 1968, conservatives lamented the lack of “understanding for the legal order and the norms that must incise coexistence in a democratic society” that was expressed in the “increasingly common illegal demonstrations” occurring in Sweden (mot. 1968 FK 731, p. 13). The illegality that the conservatives perceived to be a part of such demonstrations was repeated some years later by Gösta Bohman, the leader of the Conservative Party, describing them as “anti-democratic” since they formed an assault on the principles of the democratic constitutional state (prot. 1971:71, p. 97).

The conservative Rolf Kaijser, in part deviating from the more common view of the drug user’s lack of solidarity, made an explicit connection between the use of drugs, transgression, and opposition to conventional norms in which drugs made possible the creation of group solidarity and opposition to the authority and conventional norms of the adult world. Kaijser summarized the main elements of this culture, proclaiming in a parliamentary debate that:

Hashish and marijuana appear to be most prevalent in youth circles who feel in opposition to conventional norms. The use of cannabis in these circles can be an instrument for group fellowship and protest against the authority of adults. It seems that in many cases it served as an expression of a lifestyle with values other than ours, a lifestyle that seeks away from aggression and self-assertion and strives for goals other than the conventional ones. (prot 1968 FK 10, p. 127f).

For politicians of the Communist Party, being themselves critical of the Swedish capitalist system and its accompanying norms that promoted a competitive lifestyle, the opposition to society and its norms was not itself a problem. For communist politician Eva Hjelmström drug

use had a repressive function since it “dissociates above all the youth from the active struggle against the societal system which creates social wrongs” (prot. 1976:37, p. 132).

In its first report, the Narcotics Care Committee included a report written by Dr. Åhström, responsible for an experiment with prescription narcotics. In his description of the drug users who took part in the therapy sessions that were provided as a part of the experiment, the doctor acknowledged that drug use did constitute a protest of sorts. He stated in psychoanalytical terms that “narcotics often represent spite, protest – sitting strike – against the father-society, and a substitution for the mother, that is, a possibility to escape one’s anxiety” (SOU 1967:25, p. 254).

This notion of drug use as a protest or opposition against society was a recurring theme in the Narcotics Care Committee’s work and actualized the issue of whether this protest should be regarded as political or not. In its third report, the committee provided a close examination of the “misuser”, dedicating a long chapter to the character and culture of the drug user. As part of this examination, the committee analyzed several international as well as domestic “counter-cultures”, including drug cultures, that “provide alternatives to otherwise accepted rules of conduct and appear as oppositional to them” (SOU 1969:52, p. 191). Through this analysis, the committee hoped to identify common mechanisms that might explain both the emergence of these counter-cultures in addition to the emergence of drug cultures. Among these counter-cultures, the committee discussed the civil rights and black power movements in the U.S.A., the protest movements of the 1950’s and 1960’s that opposed nuclear weapons and later the Vietnam War, the student protests in 1968, as well as the black panther movement. The committee recognized that the drug issue was tied to international developments and that these had influenced events occurring in Sweden. According to the committee, these were movements that had “come about parallel to the usual political organizations, have shown a surprising vitality and intensity, and defied good tone as well as customary patterns of behavior in a democratic society.” (SOU 1969:52, p. 192).

What at the surface seemed like different phenomena – “escapism or asocial norm-breaking on the one hand, and militant, political opposition on the other” (SOU 1969:52, p. 193) – actually shared several similar traits according to the committee. What they shared was “the inability or the lack of will to adjust to circumstances, to be contempt and satisfied, to adjust to the existing order.” (SOU 1969:52, p. 192). The committee drew on sociological control theories to identify the mechanisms that might explain the emergence of these phenomena and to explain these transgressing and oppositional actions. Increased competition, industrialization, urbanization, and social mobility had, according to the committee, led to increased loneliness and alienation of the individual, which meant that the social bonds and social control that had at one time provided security and stability for people and society had diminished.

Through this analysis, the committee was able to bring together a broad set of oppositional movements and cultures, providing them with a shared foundation and similar mechanisms that explained their emergence. However, in the committee’s report, it is possible to identify the construction of three interrelated, fundamental differences in how drug users and these movements or cultures act out their transgressions and opposition.

The first difference was construed in terms of a dichotomy between action/inaction:

One category reacts with protest, revolt, and action and wants to change the conditions or at least influence the situation. The second category reacts with escapism, flight, and repression of the problems. (SOU 1969:52, p. 192).

This connects with and strengthens the picture of the drug user as a passive figure, unable to act politically.

Related to the underlying dichotomy of action/inaction there was a difference cast in terms of presence/absence. The opposition of the

counter-culture had a social character: it existed within society, was aimed at society, and sought to bring about social change. The opposition of the drug user on the other hand sought to escape society and politics altogether and to situate itself outside of all social contexts. Although drug use involved a protest of sorts, according to the committee, the drug users “position themselves directly outside of society and refuse to play according to the rules of the game – this also being a flight response” (SOU 1969:52, p. 192).

Finally, there was a difference formulated in terms of a dichotomy between silence and speech. Although the committee acknowledged that the drug culture exhibited a “protest of sorts”, it was by rule “not conscious or articulated” (ibid.). This meant that the opposition of the drug users lacked a discursive existence and was mainly unarticulated in the drug user’s unconscious. The opposition of the drug user is thereby construed, similarly to Dr. Åhrström, above, as an individual, psychological trait that exists in a passive silence within the drug user as opposed to the active, social, and collective opposition of the youth movements which has a discursive existence and is located within a social space.

## Conclusion

During the 1960s in Sweden, the drug user became a useful figure in the attempts to regulate the boundaries of the democratic sphere and the constitution of homo politicus. The most dominant discourse on democracy during this period sought to constitute a cooperative civil society as the foundation of democracy. This discourse cannot be seen as isolated to the Swedish case examined in this article. The stated political aim of creating a universal community, constitutive of democratic life, instead follows a historically broad, Western tradition of democratic politics that primarily engages in the collective formulation of the common good and the creation of solidarity within a community of citizens. As [Habermas \(1996\)](#) has argued, the right of political participation is in this tradition cast as a “positive liberty” that allows for participation in a collective – as opposed to private – praxis involving free and equal subjects. Much in line with this tradition, Swedish politics of this time constituted homo politicus as a subject embedded in a community of citizens capable of exercising active and responsible self-governance in solidarity with each other.

The political demand for active participation and cooperation can also be traced back to ideas that cast political participation as a key mechanism for the cultivation of democratic values. It follows the theoretical tradition of Alexandre de Tocqueville, highly influential in the formation of Western liberal democracy, in viewing participation in a community of active and enlightened citizens as a “school of democracy” that guarantees the reproduction of homo politicus ([Blühdorn & Butzlaff 2020](#), p. 379). This simultaneously reveals the fragility of the figure of homo politicus and the democratic polity as they are in constant need of cultivation and reproduction. In this context, it is perhaps easy to understand the worries of the minister of social affairs, Rune Gustavsson, who in 1976 viewed the passivizing effects of drug use as a threat to the reproduction of a community of cooperative and ideologically informed citizens. This problematization of drug use arguably also influenced the emphasis on democratic training in treatment services during this period (cf. [Edman 2012](#)).

Being cast as its constitutive outside, the individualistic, passive, and uncommitted drug user enabled the constitution of homo politicus as a subject endowed with the capacity to cooperate within a community of active and politically conscious citizens. Furthermore, it enabled the constitution of homo politicus, and by extension democratic politics, as a Western phenomenon by positioning the drug user as someone foreign to Swedish culture.

The speech of the drug user, discussed in terms of the “psychedelic philosophy”, similarly enabled the regulation of the political discursive order. This philosophy, discussed at length by the Narcotics Care Committee, can be seen as taking part of what [Benhabib \(1996](#), p. 5) has

called a “politics of difference”, emerging in the West in post-World War II and challenging central assumptions of the politics of liberal capitalist democracy by emphasizing an alternative form of life shaped by an experience of otherness. The idealist-transcendental epistemological foundations of the drug user’s philosophy enabled the Narcotics Committee to judge the speech of the drug user as an expression of “an extreme subjectivism”. This subjectivism, with its valorization of “religious-transcendental” or “inner” experiences and its denunciation of an active communion in society, engaged in the collective formulation of the common good led the committee to disqualify this speech. At the same time, it enabled the committee to formulate the conditions for political speech in terms of an adherence to an objectivist, material-realist epistemological foundation.

Finally, although the drug user’s transgression and opposition to conventional norms were acknowledged as a form of protest, these were not recognized as truly political. By drawing on psychoanalytic language, this protest was instead cast as something personal rather than political, as something unconscious that resided within the individual self. While the protests of the counter-cultures of the 1950s and 60s in the Western world were aimed at society, seeking to bring about social change, drug users instead, according to the Narcotics Care Committee, positioned themselves outside of society and sought to escape society and politics altogether.

The analysis presented in this article has sought to demonstrate the need to examine the informal exclusionary mechanisms at play in the constitution of the democratic polity as the recognition of political subjects is dependent upon the informal rules that regulate what it means to be a subject endowed with the capacity to speak and act in political terms. By focusing on how the ideal subject of democratic politics, homo politicus, has been constituted in Swedish politics in the 1960s and 70s, it is possible to shed light on what [Krause and Schramm \(2011](#), p. 119) have called “the politics of belonging”, regulating who is included and excluded from the democratic polity.

The analysis, although examining the Swedish case, has broader significance as it demonstrates how acts of recognition are conditioned by political structures. Through the analysis of how the ideal subject of democratic politics, homo politicus, is construed it is possible to shed light on the exclusionary mechanisms that come into play in the constitution of the democratic polity. This opens up a space for reflecting on how the political recognition of the drug user is regulated through political structures as it highlights the distinction made in political discourse between the drug user and homo politicus. As [Lancaster et al. \(2018\)](#) have argued, calls for political inclusion often problematically assume an ontologically stable subject that needs to be allowed to participate in drug policy. However, rather than seeing the drug user as a fixed and stable subject, an examination of how the political field regulates subjectivities, discourses, and actions makes it possible to problematize acts of political recognition and reflect upon how such acts partake in the very constitution of subjectivities.

Finally, the political construction of homo politicus and the democratic polity in Sweden is not an isolated case but rather in line with political and philosophical traditions with a long history in the Western world. This opens up a space for reflection upon the political position of drug users in other geographical and temporal contexts as well. One important aspect of this is how alternative forms of life and experiences of otherness are construed and valued in specific political traditions.

## Funding sources

This research received funding from the following sources

This work was financially supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare [FAS 2017-01567].

## Ethics approval

The authors declare that the work reported herein did not require

ethics approval because it did not involve animal or human participation.

### CRedit authorship contribution statement

**Filip Roumeliotis:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Project administration, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

### Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

### Acknowledgments

The author wishes to thank the reviewers and Johan Edman for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this paper. This work was financially supported by the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare [FAS 2017-01567].

### References

- Anker, J. (2007). Limits and opportunities for autonomous user organisations in Denmark and Sweden. *Journal of Social Sciences*, 3(2), 78–87.
- Asmussen Frank, V., Anker, J., & Tammi, T. (2012). Drug user organizations in the Nordic countries – Local, national, and international dimensions. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 47(5), 462–473.
- Benhabib, S. (1996). Introduction: The democratic moment and the problem of difference. In S. Benhabib (Ed.), *Democracy and difference. Contesting the boundaries of the political* (pp. 3–18). Princeton University Press.
- Blühndorn, I., & Butzlaff, F. (2020). Democratization beyond the post-democratic turn: Towards a research agenda on new conceptions of citizen participation. *Democratization*, 27(3), 369–388. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13510347.2019.1707808>
- Brown, W. (2015). Undoing the demos: Neoliberalism's stealth revolution. *Zone Books*.
- Butler, J. (1990). *Gender trouble. Feminism and the subversion of identity*. Routledge.
- Butler, J. (2020). *Precarious life. The powers of mourning and justice*. Verso.
- Charmaz, K. (2006). *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis*. SAGE Publications.
- Clifford, M. (2001). *Political genealogy after Foucault. Savage identities*. Routledge.
- Edman, J. (2012). *Vård & ideologi. Narkomanvården som politiskt slagfält*. Boréa bokförlag.
- Edman, J. (2013). An ambiguous monolith – The Swedish drug issue as a political battleground 1965–1981. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 24, 464–470.
- Edman, J., & Blomqvist, J. (2011). Jakten på den verksamma vården: Kunskapssträvanden och målsättningar inom den svenska missbrukarvården under ett sekel. B. Olsson (Ed.), *Jakten på den verksamma vården: Kunskapssträvanden och målsättningar inom den svenska missbrukarvården under ett sekel. Narkotika. Om problem och politik*, 101–138.
- Foucault, M. (1981). The order of discourse. In R. Young (Ed.), *Untying the text: A post-structuralist reader*. Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Fraser, N. (1997). *Justice interruptus. Critical reflections on the "postsocialist" condition*. Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (1996). Three normative models of democracy. In S. Benhabib (Ed.), *Democracy and difference. Contesting the boundaries of the political* (pp. 21–30). Princeton University Press.
- Johnson, B. (2006). The development of user influence on Swedish drug policy 1965–2004. In J. Anker, V. Asmussen, P. Kouvonen, & D. Tops (Eds.), *Drug users and spaces for legitimate action* (pp. 131–158). Nordic Council for Alcohol and Drug Research.
- Krause, K., & Schramm, K. (2011). Thinking through political subjectivity. *African Diaspora*, 4, 115–134.
- Lancaster, K., Ritter, A., & Diprose, R. (2018). Recasting participation in drug policy. *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 45(4), 351–365. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0091450918776024>
- Lefort, C. (1986). The image of the body and totalitarianism. In J. B. Thompson (Ed.), *The political forms of modern society: Bureaucracy, democracy, totalitarianism*. MIT Press.
- Marchart, O. (2007). *Post-foundational political thought: Political difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh University Press.
- Mold, A. (2006). The welfare branch of the alternative society? The work of drug voluntary organization release, 1967–1978. *Twentieth Century British History*, 17(1), 50–73. <https://doi.org/10.1093/tcbh/hwi064>
- Mold, A., & Berridge, V. (2008). 'The rise of the user'? Voluntary organizations, the state and illegal drugs in England since the 1960s. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 15(5), 451–461.
- Lefort, C. (1988). *Democracy and political theory*. Polity Press.
- Mouffe, C. (2005a). *On the political*. Routledge.
- Mouffe, C. (2005b). *The return of the political*. Verso.
- Nelson, E. (1989). *The British counter-culture, 1966–73. A study of the underground press*. The MacMillan Press.
- Olsson, B. (1994). *Narkotikaproblemets bakgrund. Användning av och uppfattningar om narkotika inom svensk medicin 1839–1965*. Stockholm University. Department of Sociology/CAN report no. 39.
- Olsson, U. (2002). *Jag blir galen. Strindberg, vansinnet och vetenskapen*. Brutus Östlings Förlag.
- Pockettindningen, R. (1970). *Varför i helvete har vi inget att säga till om... synpunkter på anstaltsdemokrati*. Bokförlaget Prisma.
- Rancière, J. (1999). *Disagreement. Politics and philosophy*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Reuter, P. (2013). Why has US drug policy changed so little over 30 years? *Crime and Justice*, 42(1), 75–140.
- Tham, H. (1992). Narkotikakontroll som nationellt projekt. *Nordisk Alkoholtidsskrift*, 9(2), 86–97.