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Fuel for Thought

(Non-)Smoking Spaces and Academic Life

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Today, as smoking at universities becomes less and less visible, it is easy to forget that until quite recently, tobacco was a standard accessory of academic life for many. Professors habitually chain-smoked while holding office hours or giving lectures. Students regularly lit up in seminar rooms and university residences, as well as during study sessions and exams, and sometimes even graduation ceremonies.¹ At least until the end of the twentieth century, it seemed that there was a special convergence between spaces of higher learning and spaces of smoking.²



Image 1: Smoking students in the main lecture hall at the University of Zurich, 1971. Film Still, University of Zurich Archives, UAZ E.7.1.206, [https://www.archiv.uzh.ch/dam/jcr:00000000-792c-65b2-ffff-ffffb71b4cc7/03_UAZ_E_7_1_206_Raucher_Aula.jpg]

Especially in the decades following World War II, photographs and films documenting academia rarely went without lit cigarettes, smoke and overflowing ashtrays. Public intellectuals and professors such as Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Hannah Arendt propagated the image of smoking and critical thinking as intrinsically linked, and legions of students followed their example. In the 1960s and 1970s, cloudy seminar rooms packed with smoking students became a fixed component of the public imagination, with clichéd images of the intellectual who cannot read or write or think without a cigarette settling around the milieu of the humanities in particular.



Image 2: Jean-Paul Sartre lighting a cigarette while Michel Foucault reads a statement by the Prisons Information Group (GIP) at a demonstration at the French Ministry of Justice in January 1972. In the background: notorious chain-smoker Gilles Deleuze. Photo by E. Kagan, unrestricted use. Taken from: <http://www.lacontemporaine.fr>

For further evidence of just how essential smoking was to academic life, just ask older scholars. Often, their eyes will begin to gleam with nostalgia as they recall stories of benevolent processors bringing packs of cigarettes for the entire class while their assistants distributed ashtrays, the air in the room slowly becoming thick. Whereas for some, the eventual disappearance of the ubiquitous smoke and smell was a relief, others sentimentally report that they owe their first student job or a key tip on their research to a smoking break with their professors or peers. These anecdotes also frequently invoke a communal spirit and a sense of belonging, where the offer of a cigarette from an older student or teacher was regarded as a badge of honor. Some recall that they reluctantly started lighting up just to be part of the in-group, or to make long hours in smoke-filled seminars more bearable.

Even as smoking bans have become widespread, a dwindling cohort of committed students and faculty continue to flock to ever-shrinking smoking areas between classes or meetings. Such get-togethers allow for different, often informal, interactions between students and faculty as well as university staff, or among colleagues from different disciplines.³ Researchers have long identified water coolers or office kitchenettes as spaces of serendipitous encounter and innovation; smoking areas have surely contributed to a similar number of groundbreaking research ideas, collaborative papers, or grant applications.

How did smoking cigarettes at universities shift from being an accepted – or encouraged – intellectual habit to a stigmatized vice? What impact have smoking bans had on the university as a social setting? In the following two sections, drawing on personal experiences and historical perspectives, we focus on US and German contexts to consider these questions more closely.

Smoking at US Universities: A First- and Second-Hand Account (Sage Anderson)

When considering the particular relationship between cigarettes and institutions of higher learning, it is crucial to keep in mind that universities are not only places where people do or do not smoke but also where influential research related to smoking is produced. In the US context, the significance of cigarettes in a specific setting cannot be separated from the historical significance of tobacco as one of the country's defining crops.⁴ Over the course of the twentieth century in the US, topics of study ranged from the farming techniques and agricultural economics of tobacco growth and cigarette production to the public health effects and legal framework of tobacco use and cigarette regulation.⁵ Indeed, laboratories containing seed samples or dissected lungs and libraries shoring up studies on crop cycles or cancer incidence are just as much sites of the contested history of smoking as the campus zones marked by (no) smoking signs.

As for the activity itself, smoking at colleges and universities in the US is on the one hand like smoking anywhere in the country, which is to say that it is subject to spatial regulations and conflicting interests. Driven in part by student protests, cigarette bans have also met with widespread resistance on campus and elsewhere, demonstrating incommensurable claims to opposing freedoms – the freedom to be in smoke-free spaces and the freedom to smoke where one pleases.

While regulations differ from state to state, and also from institution to institution, bans on smoking in public space have generally grown tighter and tighter since the 1970s.⁶ Recently, the increased popularity of e-cigarettes has fueled further public health policy debates. Many colleges and universities voluntarily surpass local restrictions to implement stricter smoking policies of their own, often as part of “smoke-free” or “tobacco-free” campus initiatives. In order to explore this phenomenon, I will briefly zero in on New York University as a case study, also for the purposes of presenting anecdotal evidence from my own graduate school experience.

Spatial restrictions on smoking and other behaviors play an active role in the maintenance of certain institutional images, as evidenced in the case of NYU by the [“Smoke Free NYU” policy](#); close reading reveals a condemnation of tobacco use that far exceeds advocacy for public health, shedding light on the moral dimensions of antismoking discourse.⁷ Beyond sobering statistics on death, illness, economic cost, and environmental consequence, a list entitled “Did You Know?” presents the following as justification: “The typical nonsmoker’s net worth is roughly 50% higher than light smokers and roughly twice the level of heavy smokers.” While this point might be more likely to hit home if it were linked to information on the university’s own astronomical tuition or the crippling [burden of student-loan debt](#) across the US, the assumption seems to be that NYU students should implicitly accept the prospect of a significant toll on their future net

worth as a valid reason for the ban on tobacco products within 20 feet of university property.

The invisible nonsmoking boundary around NYU buildings, which dominate the area around Manhattan's Washington Square, is marked by smoke smudges just beyond its reach. During my (long) career as a PhD candidate in the department of comparative literature, I observed the establishment and enforcement of this boundary first hand. When I arrived in 2006, the confusingly addressed Languages and Literatures building at 13–19 University Place was easily identified by the reliable presence of fellow students and professors smoking next to the door. (This was also a good sign that one was not late to class.) Smokers might be standing alone, visibly lost in thought or palpably stressed, or in small groups, discussing seminar content and departmental gossip in equal measure. In subsequent years, at the prompting of the security guards who monitor building access, it became necessary to move further away from the door to a less sociable stretch of sidewalk.

Image 4: Google street view of the building in question, with a small nonsmoking sign in the right-hand window. Note the absence of cigarettes and presence of masks marking the timeframe.

Later still, smokers were shooed across the street to Washington Mews, a quaint cobblestone alley fronted by NYU's Maison Française and Deutsches Haus. The curbs of this pedestrian passage were generally safe for sitting and smoking without sanction, perhaps due to a tacit agreement to pretend that this was Europe.

The dramatic increase in cigarette prices enacted in New York City during this period also caused a marked change in the culture of campus-adjacent smoking. While the request for a cigarette had once been a negligible favor lightly granted, the tone of this interaction shifted dramatically after the price of a pack exceeded \$10.⁸ As prices climbed, the request to bum a smoke came to be accompanied by a sheepish offer of a dollar bill on the part of the asker, and an anxious count of remaining cigarettes on the part of the smoker. Thus the combined effect of spatial displacement and economic strain significantly detracted from the congenial quality of the cigarette break, snuffing out conversations spilling over from classroom to sidewalk, or at least putting them on pause until drinks were flowing at the nearest bar.⁹



Image 3: Student at a protest against smoking bans at Arizona State University, hosted by Students for Liberty, in Tempe, Arizona, 2012.

Image by Gage Skidmore, Creative Commons.

Source: <https://www.flickr.com/photos/gageskidmore/8268552277/in/photostream/>

While my observations on smoking in NYC and at NYU came to an end when I moved to Germany in 2012, they served to highlight the contrast of my new surroundings. In Berlin, the relative affordability of student life extended right down to the lower cost of cigarettes, and opportunities for exchange flared up in less stringently regulated spaces, now featuring beers that could be opened on the street.¹⁰

Smoking and its Discontents at German-Speaking Universities (Stefan Höhne)

During my studies in Leipzig in the early 2000s, smoking had already been largely outlawed in lecture halls and seminar rooms. However, it was still common in the hallways and cafeteria of the university's rundown central building, opened in 1971 when it was still named Karl Marx University. I also got an anachronistic taste of smoke-filled seminars during a memorable class on, of course, philosophy of art. Our professor brought large packs of French cigarettes and a comically huge wooden ashtray, which was always enthusiastically filled during the following four hours. Despite its intriguing themes, the course would soon thin out. Only a handful of devoted students remained, breathlessly trying to keep pace with the teacher's thoughts and her cigarette rate.

When looking for traces of the (still unwritten) history of smoking and its administrative regulation at German-speaking universities, evidence is hard to come by, especially before the second half of the 20th century. However, sources indicate that the University of Zurich included a smoking ban in lecture halls, reading rooms, and seminars in their house rules as early as 1914, only to be largely ignored until the 1980s.¹¹ In 1923, the University of Mannheim urged students and faculty to refrain from smoking in parts of their facilities. These restrictions – issued not for health reasons, but to protect the fragile decors of some historical interiors – likewise did not herald much success.¹²

In 1972, the university banned smoking in the old university castle with somewhat more effect, this time citing potential fire hazards. In general, however, even when such smoking restrictions officially existed, faculty, staff, and students happily ignored them. Such practices were so omnipresent that administrations seem to have considered it simply impossible to enforce these rules. Eventually, some universities designated small, often remote areas of the campus as non-smokers' corners. But mostly, they resorted to an appeal to common sense and personal responsibility, for example futilely pleading to at least keep the cafeteria smoke free during lunch hours.



Image 5: Protesting students of the University of Frankfurt, including Adorno and Horkheimer, discuss their demands with university leadership in May 1969. As with most regulations set by the administration, the plea to “please refrain from smoking!” on the backboard was most likely disregarded. Screenshot from a documentary on Adorno by Meinhard Brill und Kurt Schneider (arte, SWR, 2003): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1dbBpVIKi0&t=1685s>

It was only in the late 1980s and early 1990s that resistance against the ubiquitous smoke and littered cigarette butts started to form, leading to frequent initiatives for a “smoke-free campus”; prohibitive signs mushroomed across university premises, only to be largely disregarded. More often than not, it was not only students or staff members but also professors who insisted on their right to light up wherever they pleased. According to one anecdote, in the late 1980s when the council of the Free University of Berlin finally voted in favor of a far-reaching smoking ban, the philosophy professor Margherita von Brentano rose to speak: lit cigarette in hand, she stated that, while she wholeheartedly accepted the result of the vote, she unfortunately had to continue smoking as otherwise she would simply be unable to think.¹³

While such demonstrative stubbornness remained rare and smoking ban initiatives continued, they remained difficult to enforce, as university management did not tire of lamenting.¹⁴ At least until recently, cracking down on smoking seemed to contradict the idea of a liberal and open atmosphere on campus. Freedom of speech and the freedom to smoke were considered by many to be intrinsically linked, in the US as well as in Germany.

It would take until the early 2000s when a broad coalition of 50 German university administrations joined forces to finally push for a “culture change”. At this point, smoking was rigorously banned in most shared spaces of the universities and these rules were finally enforced, with only a few clearly designated, often remote smoking areas remaining. Nevertheless, the coalition admitted that it would be difficult or impossible to forbid professors from smoking in their offices. Also, there would be greater lenience during exam periods, as this is “surely an unfavorable time for nicotine cessation.”

However, such tolerance towards “nicotine-junkies” on campus waned quickly. Most student councils soon agreed to support these initiatives, albeit only after heated and extensive debates. More and more, universities would crack down on hold-outs, threatening them with hefty fines and mobilizing security personnel, despite standing on shaky legal ground. At the University of Vienna in 2003, for example, so-called “smoking police” started to patrol the premises, photographing rule breakers and escorting them from the premises.

Back at my alma mater in Leipzig, in 2007, the demolition of the old university building to make space for a controversial new church-inspired building marked the end of its indoor smoking culture. Now, smokers had to move outdoors and were eventually pushed further and further away from entrances and refuges. Only a handful of professors from the humanities initially insisted on continuing to smoke in their offices. Confronted with the prospect of hefty fines for fire hazard violations and the installment of smoke detectors, they finally had to give in as well.

Narcotic Universities Today

Despite the proliferation of anti-smoking regulations and the peripheralization of smoking zones that we both witnessed, clandestine niches remain for those who are in the know. They can range from lockable cleaning rooms, defunct corridors or hidden stairways to covert passages, rooftops, and balconies. It is usually only long-term students, staff, and faculty who gather in these secret spots, often lamenting their stigmatization between coughs and hectic pulls on cigarettes. With growing awareness of the devastating health hazards of cigarettes for both active and passive smokers, not kicking the habit is increasingly regarded as a sign of irrationality and weakness. Consequently, getting caught smoking by students has become a widespread fear among faculty, and vice versa.



Image 6: A remote smoking shelter at Keele University, UK. The caption reads: "This modest structure would appear to be able to accommodate no more than one person at a time." Photo by Jonathan Hutchins, 2016, Creative Commons [CC BY-SA 2.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/), <https://www.geograph.org.uk/photo/4749983>.

The social function of smoking as a collective ritual and opportunity for informal encounters has been diminished, and thus its other dominant function has become more and more apparent: stress relief. Students smoke to cope with the pressure of exams, and PhD candidates before consultation with their advisers; postdocs light up while hastily writing applications, and professors while awaiting their performance evaluations or tenure results. Given the realities of high pressure at every level of the university – and professional precarity at every level except perhaps the very top – widespread reliance on different forms of chemical support and release is no wonder.

As institutions of higher learning become increasingly inhospitable spaces to smoke cigarettes, the question of other substances shifts into the forefront. The smoke-free campus may be a thing of the present, but for many academics it might be impossible to imagine a scholarly career in the US or Germany without caffeine, or student life without alcohol, and these are only the most visible examples.¹⁵ In settings nominally devoted to the cultivation of thought, the role of mind-altering substances deserves to be taken seriously, in terms of stress management, social lubrication, self-medication, enhanced productivity, and many other demands of academic life.

While universities proudly advertise their health initiatives and smoke-free environments, studies indicate that in recent years the use of substances including ketamine, ecstasy, or cocaine on campuses in Europe and North America has increased substantially.¹⁶ At the

same time, the rampant epidemic of overdoses involving opioids such as Oxycodone, heroin, and fentanyl is reaching universities across the United States, Canada, and even Australia. Responding to this crisis will require very different strategies than prohibition, and accounting for narcotic spaces in the university will call for perspectives encompassing much more than just No Smoking signs.

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References

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2. Smoking habits among students worldwide have been the focus of a surprisingly huge amount of research. For example, one can find studies on the gendered smoking habits at Hodeidah University, Yemen or on the shifting smoking status of pharmacy students at Hacettepe University, Turkey. See: Yegenoglu S., Aslan D., et al. (2006): What is behind smoking among pharmacy students: a quantitative and qualitative study from Turkey (Substance Use Misuse, 41(3)), pp: 405–414. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10826080500409142>; Nasser, Abdulsalam M A, and Xinping Zhang (2019): Knowledge and factors related to smoking among university students at Hodeidah University, Yemen. (Tobacco induced diseases, vol. 17 42), <https://doi.org/10.18332/tid/109227>.
3. The memory of collective smoking breaks even found their way into academic obituaries. See for example: Bernhard Heininger (2021): Nachruf Frau Hannelore Ferner. <https://www.theologie.uni-wuerzburg.de/en/institute-lehrstuehle/bibl/neutestamentliche-exegese/nachruf/>
4. “For a literal representation of the crop’s importance to American politics, one need look no further than the Capitol building’s grand Hall of Columns, where tobacco leaves sit atop the Corinthian columns, holding the building together.” Milov, Sarah (2019): *The Cigarette: A Political History*, Cambridge, Ma: Harvard University Press, p. 2.
5. See Milov, *The Cigarette*, esp. pp. 8–10, 34–35, 99–100, 160–200.
6. Milov, pp. 196–200.
7. Milov presents a nuanced account of the complex, changeable moralizing components of anti-smoking discourse in the US, shedding light on the ways that wins for public health and environmental protection are tied up with losses in livelihood for tobacco farmers – as opposed to corporate cigarette manufacturers – and disproportionate burdens on low-income smokers. See Milov, “The Invention of the Nonsmoker,” pp. 160–200.
8. The state of New York has the second highest cigarette tax in the nation, and New York City imposes additional taxes. The current tax rate for a pack of 20 cigarettes purchased in New York City is \$5.85. See <https://www.tax.ny.gov/bus/cig/cigidx.htm>; <https://truthinitiative.org/research-resources/smoking-region/tobacco-use-new-york-2019>.

9. Those still smoking in NYC are those for whom the habit is not casual and social but necessary and personal, potentially sparking street-side solidarity among people from all walks of life, according to philosopher and cultural theorist Mladen Dolar, <https://vanishingmediator.blogspot.com/2013/06/mladen-dolar-smoking-communism.html>.
10. For more recent perspectives on smoking at NYU from undergraduate students, burning some holes in the smoke-free veneer, see for example: <https://nyulocal.com/the-smokers-guide-to-nyu-1ba140613893>; <https://nyunews.com/2016/11/07/smoking-outside-bobst-doesnt-make-you-cool/>.
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12. <https://www.uni-mannheim.de/newsroom/forum/ausgabe-1-2020/es-war-einmal/>
13. See Miloš ,Vec, et al. (eds.) (2018): Der Campus-Knigge, Beck: Munich, pp. 163-64.
14. For example, see in the address by university president Prof. Dr. Peter Schwenkmezger “Mehr Sauberkeit an unserer Universität: Ein gemeinsames Ziel!”, in: UNIJOURNAL, 28/2002, 2, University of Trier., <http://docplayer.org/18986944-Unijournal-zeitschrift-der-universitaet-trier-ergebnisse-des-forschungsprojekts-telearbeit-und-zeitoeconomie.html>.
15. The widespread use of Adderall and other amphetamines in higher education and research has been widely debated and even found its way into satire, for example in this hilarious article by “The Onion”: <https://www.theonion.com/adderall-receives-honorary-degree-from-harvard-1819571549>
16. For example, for the US, see the 2020 study: “Monitoring the Future (MTF) National Survey, Study on Drug Use” by The National Institute on Drug Abuse at The National Institutes of Health. http://www.monitoringthefuture.org/pubs/monographs/mtf-vol2_2020.pdf. For the United Kingdom, see the study: “Taking the hit: Student drug use and how institutions respond in the UK” by Release and The National Union of Students (NUS). http://fileserv.idpc.net/library/Taking_the_Hit_-_Student_drug_use_and_how_institutions_respond.pdf. See also: <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2020/oct/29/ketamine-is-big-here-why-bristol-university-is-testing-drugs-for-its-students>

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