

WELT ONLINE

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HEALTH

WHY THE ANTI-SMOKING CAMPAIGN IS SO HYPOCRITICAL

The anti-smoking campaign is becoming hysterical, and is driven by Puritanism and the search for clear enemies in a confusing world. Our correspondent shows how hypocritical and undemocratic the anti-smoking campaign is.

Caption: Taboo – a full ashtray with a smoking cigarette placed on a no-smoking sign in a restaurant.

The smoking ban is coming – humanity is saved! The healthy *Zeitgeist* has won the day! Hurrah! Now we can perhaps look back, speak out one last time and – without being influenced in any way by the tobacco lobby – describe the campaign as it really is: health hysteria, hypocritical, undemocratic, hypochondriacal and paranoid.

To avoid any misunderstandings: no one is saying that smoking is healthy. However, a whole series of indicators show that the supposed risks depend on the number of cigarettes smoked per day, on individuals' own health and a multitude of lifestyle factors.

Passive panic

The same applies to the alleged risk posed by passive smoking, which has become the subject of systematic panic-mongering. Anyone who examines the claim that 3300 people die per year as a result of passive smoking will realise that this figure lacks any serious scientific basis. There is no need to despair if you come into moderate contact with other people's smoke. If there were, people living in big cities would never poke their nose outside the front door.

A justified objection to smoking in public is the associated discomfort caused to others, so the various bans and restrictions in public buildings are sensible measures, but the intended total ban on smoking in pubs, bars and restaurants is hysterical and the result of systematic health demagogy.

The shrillness of the arguments used leads one to suspect that this is not just about smoking. One possible explanation may be that, in the modern world, which is becoming ever more difficult to understand and where environmental catastrophe looms, health has become the new, alternative religion. Melting poles, tipping [sic] seas, polluted soil, fine particles, food safety scandals and micro-poisons lurking wherever you look play on the nerves of health-conscious people and promote a feeling of fear and helplessness, and perhaps even pangs of conscience.

Viewed in this light, the anti-smoking crusade can be seen as a kind of alternative campaign of action or distraction (as well as a way of 'keeping busy'). The global destruction of the planet is registered only reluctantly, whilst the health evangelists exaggerate the risks of certain private pleasures to turn them into huge dangers.

The flipside of health consciousness

It is high time that we looked at the flipside of today's obsession with health. Never before has health played such a dominant role in people's consciousness. Never before have so much time and money been spent on it, has so much time been spent thinking about it, so much complaining and discussion been devoted to it. As a consequence, life has become a constant source of illness, a constant battle to prevent disease, a matter about which we stress continuously. Paranoia about our health has become our constant companion – danger is everywhere, everything is suspect, we have developed a paranoid need for safety and control. Finally, life is always demonstrating its flawed and malevolent side. Against this backdrop, the campaign against smoking has become a war of diversion.

But why do people smoke in any case? It is trendy nowadays to associate smoking with low education and antisocial living conditions. Yet historical examples show the opposite: wherever intellectual revolutions have taken place, the consumption of tobacco has been appreciated and cultivated: in the gentlemen's clubs of the European intellectual elite, in the artistic bohemia of the turn of the [19th/20th] century. Even the emancipation of women found its symbolic expression in a dramatic rise in the number of women who smoked.

Poetry, literature, film and even philosophy testify to the cultural and philosophical dimensions of smoking, its dignity, its pleasureableness, even its epistemological aspects (Sartre). Smoking experienced not as an obligation but as freedom from obligations.

Smokers: the victims of defamation

That is probably why smokers have always been subject to prohibitions and, in some cases, hateful defamation campaigns. Ever since the late 15th century, when tobacco was brought back to Europe from America, smoking has been discouraged and demonised. Rodrigo de la Jerez, a companion of Columbus and probably the first official smoker in Europe, was arrested by the Inquisition and thrown into jail when he returned from America with smoke streaming out of his mouth and nostrils.

James I, King of England and Scotland, wrote an essay in 1603/04 entitled "A Counterblaste to Tobacco" in which he summarised all the arguments against smoking still used today. He described smoking as "the greatest sinne of all". He even mentioned the, in his opinion, obvious menace of passive smoking.

Today's anti-smoking campaign is therefore based on a view which is already more than 450 years old. Only it uses other means: instead of the political authority of the King and the moral authority of the Church, we have the legal power of self-proclaimed health apostles and the unshakeable authority of modern medical research.

Smoking as "wasteful", "sinful" or an "ungodly vice": much points to a puritanical view of life, anchored deep in our Christian tradition, being one of the main drives of the modern anti-smoking movement. This would explain the missionary zeal with which smoking is still pursued today and why the main thrust of this modern wave of prohibition comes from the USA, still marked by Puritanism.

Puritanical ascetics

Nietzsche invented the idea of the "ascetic priest", a deeply misanthropic, puritanical, paranoid evangelic who, as the moral and psychological core of the movement, stands for *"this hate against what is human, and even more against animality, even more against material things—this abhorrence of the senses, even of reason, this fear of happiness and*

beauty, this longing for the beyond away from all appearance, change, becoming, death, desire, even longing itself — all this means ...an aversion to life, a revolt against the most fundamental preconditions of life".

The Americans and the Puritans must also acknowledge that, whether we eat or drink, work or exercise, stress or have fun – life is inevitably a process that leads downhill, regardless of whether we live like monks or live to party.

The driver in front of me happily blows his exhaust fumes into my face as I cycle behind. A nuclear reactor is busy somewhere producing the energy for the lights in my flat. We all pay for the conveniences of modern life with highly risky side effects. And, now and again (and, of course, with due consideration to others), we like to have a smoke.

The author, born in 1994, works as a television producer and journalist in Cologne. His book "Do you smoke? Defending a passion" was published by DuMont in 2005.

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