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Smoke Across the Water

All over Europe anti-smoking laws are challenging one of the age-old pillars of Continental identity (the others being strong coffee and wine). **Bruno Maddox** asks: Is Europe turning into America? And would that really be so terrible?

By Bruno Maddox

You didn't have to be a Communist to feel a quiet pang of loss when the Berlin Wall came down. Obviously, we were happy for the East Germans, and freedom is a beautiful thing. But Cold War Berlin always seemed like a beautiful thing as well—all noirish and furtive and romantic. Without a wall, what were lovers going to nestle against the buttresses of while ducking searchlights and expressing their love? Would there still be men in trench coats exchanging significant nods beneath streetlamps, then melting back into the fog? Even if we usually gave the whole gunplay-and-poisoned-umbrella scene a fairly wide berth on our own visits to East Berlin, the world was a richer place for knowing it was there. And then all of a sudden it wasn't. By precisely the same token, you don't have to be a smoker to feel a pang of loss these days upon opening the morning paper and finding that yet another European nation has banned smoking in bars and restaurants. The Netherlands, France, Ireland, Italy, Poland...the list goes on.

We expect this type of behavior from ourselves—here in America we've been persecuting smokers for years. But the whole point of Europe, Americans thought, was that they didn't. Will Italy still be Italy if an aspiring Mastroianni can't light the cigarette of the woman at the next bar stool without even looking up from his *Gazzetta dello Sport*? Will Poland still be Poland if a man can't warm himself with a trembling *papyrossi* while drawing his peacoat tighter and waiting stoically for dawn in a shipyard in Gdansk? Can a smoke-free Europe, in short, still be Europe?

Possibly not. Just look at Ireland. For millennia, Ireland was an ancient and soulful land whose firelit pubs bulged with eccentrics drinking beer, singing songs, writing literature, and dispensing quirky pellets of counterintuitive wisdom. It was classic.

Last year, the Irish government passed laws making smokers about as welcome in pubs as they are in the incubator wards of maternity hospitals. And now the magic is gone. The Ireland of 2005 is a giant strip mall of telemarketing call centers, real estate offices, and glass-fronted wine bars in which the talk is less of blarney than of bling. The romance, the depth, the magic of Ireland has vanished in a puff of non-smoke. The government's own ombudsperson, one Emily O'Reilly, gave a speech last November decrying "the vulgar fest that is much of modern Ireland...the staggering drink consumption, the childlike showing off of helicopters and four-wheel drives and private cinemas, the fetishizing of handbags and high heels."

Sound familiar? The term Ms. O'Reilly was either groping for or tiptoeing around is *Americanization*—a transformative cultural force the traveling American fears nearly as much as dysentery. Part of the fun of foreign travel is going somewhere, well, foreign. If other countries turn themselves into America, then for our purposes the world shrinks.

But this nonsmoking thing is more than that. It's worse. Around the family-of-nations dinner table, America has always looked on Europe as a sort of jaded older sibling, the stubbly, college-age brother who smirkingly helps himself to more wine as we deliver high-pitched lectures on the evils of eating dead animals. We believe every sanctimonious syllable we've ever uttered—people *shouldn't* smoke, *tofu is* food—but we've been stealing envious glances at Europe all the while, wondering when it would be our turn to grow up and be cool. Europe quitting smoking turns this natural order upside-down. It's like your stubbly older brother returning from college and tearfully apologizing for ever having disrespected the boy band whose posters paper your bedroom walls, each member of which he now appreciates as a musical genius—especially J.C., the dangerous-looking one. It's just wrong. Eventually turning into Europe was supposed to be our destiny; now that Europe is turning into us...well, it's just wrong.

Before anyone panics, however, there is the case of France to be considered. France passed anti-smoking legislation all the way back in 1993, and since then the place has become, if anything, even more French. The wine is still wet. The cheese is still soft. Old men are flinging their *boules* around in little parks with more gusto than ever. And, frankly, people are still smoking in bars and restaurants. The laws are universally ignored, except by a tiny minority that addresses them by shrugging, Gallically. Twelve years into the smoking ban, a sign on the door of Le Pichet, one of Paris's best restaurants, reads NONSMOKERS TOLERATED.

It's a pretty childish sign, which could be the lesson here. Just as all younger siblings come to realize, as they themselves grow up, that maybe the worldly older brother wasn't quite as cool and self-assured as he always seemed, maybe we in America have finally grown up enough to see that there always was something rather desperate and affected about the European love affair with cigarettes. The movies should perhaps have tipped us off. French movie stars to this day apparently can't do anything—rob a bank, make love, remove an appendix—without lighting a Gauloise and peering through the smoke, sucking it down to where the filter should be, then decisively flicking it away before vamoosing in a squeal of tires. Is it conceivable that certain countries in Europe have been smoking extra-hard these last 50 years or so for the same reason teenagers smoke: because it made them look poised and secure at a time when they were feeling anything but?

The fact is, the two European nations that are smoking as much as ever, despite the obligatory restrictions, are France and Germany—the mini-bloc Donald Rumsfeld undiplomatically dismissed as "old Europe." Whether or not one agreed with France and Germany's opposition to the war in Iraq, it wasn't hard to detect in their behavior at the UN a petulance and frustration that had less to do with what was being proposed than with who was, and who wasn't, doing the proposing. It isn't easy after being held in awe for centuries by one's younger siblings to see them suddenly helping themselves to wine, dating people you wish you were dating, driving a car when you can no longer afford one. No, it stings. And for a while you're going to sulk about it. You're going to lie on the couch and decline a lift to the store even though you really need to go. And you're going to smoke cigarettes, harder than ever, just to remind them of who they used to think you were.

That's all this is. And the quiet pang of loss we felt at the news that Europe says it's quitting smoking is nothing but simple nostalgia for our own youth, when we were the young, awestruck sibling with no pressures, no responsibilities. Life, however, marches on, and we should probably all think about growing up.

BRUNO MADDOX *is a novelist based in New York, and a frequent contributor to Travel + Leisure.*

The information in this story was accurate at the time it was published in **May 2005**, but we suggest you confirm all details and prices directly with the service establishments before making travel plans.