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## 5 Questions with Dr. Mark Smith

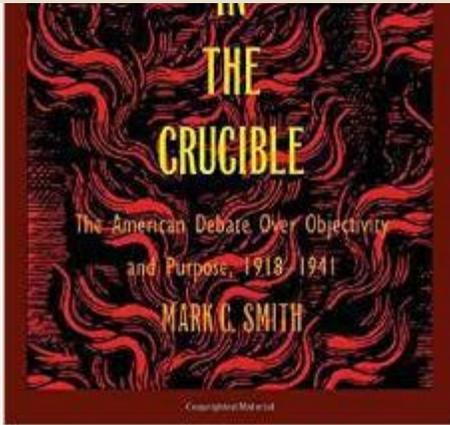
by American

Studies

Today we are pleased to present the next in our series of interviews with American Studies faculty and affiliate faculty members: **5 Questions**. We recently sat down with **Dr. Mark Smith**, whose research interests include the history of social science and the cultural history of alcohol and drugs.

**AMS :: ATX** is a blog dedicated to representing the many activities and interests of the department of American Studies at The University of Texas at Austin. Together with the department's Twitter feed, this blog exists to serve the AMS and Austin communities by acting as a hub for up-to-date information on events and opportunities at UT and beyond.





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## 1. What was your favorite project to work on and why?

I'm sure my answer's going to be a little bit different from the other people who I think would talk about their research projects, but I think I'd really like to talk about the teaching that I've done around the issue of alcohol and drugs, which is something I just chanced into. In fact, I started working at a drug and alcohol treatment center, and I realized that there was a lack of historical and sociological background to see where that stood, particularly where it stood in the issue of cultural history. And what I've done is I've been able to give a series of classes to different people that deal with the issue of drugs in various permutations. Someone once told me that in scholarship, the question is whether you do more and more about less and less, that is, your focus becomes wider and wider; or whether you do more about less and less. The second is clearly what you do when you



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write books. Teaching gives the opportunity to do the former. I've taught three classes. I taught the original class, a seminar in the American cultural history of alcohol and drugs, and I've taught that primarily as an upper division undergraduate class. And I've also taught an upper division class for Plan 2 which treats the issue from a public policy standpoint, and now I'm teaching an undergraduate class on alcohol and drugs from an international standpoint, pointing out the fact that alcohol has been handled differently in places like Sweden and Finland and Africa.

## 2. How do you see your work fitting in with broader conversations in academia and beyond?

You know, if you asked me ten years ago, I'd have a very clear answer for that. I deal in cultural history; I believe that I was the second person who taught both parts of the cultural history survey. My perspective is always to provide a general overview on the issues involved. I've always done that, that's always been my interest. I was one of the first people to teach Introduction to American Studies. But my feeling is not to plunge myself into a topic- and maybe not even come out- my interest is providing a background so that people in important contemporary fields like Gender Studies or Queer Studies can have background and context. To that extent, I think I'm very much rooted not only in these issues that are coming up today, but those issues that have come up in the past and hopefully the

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future as well.

### 3. What projects or people have inspired your work?

Within alcohol studies, probably the best books that I know are W. J.

Rorabaugh's *The Alcoholic Republic*, and then recently, on Prohibition, Daniel Okrent came up with a book called *The Last Call*. I think those have really been useful. Clearly, Neil Sheehan's *A Bright Shining Lie*, about Vietnam, and Frances FitzGerald's book *Fire in the Lake* have been books that really had a lot to do with my understanding of the kind of world that I had grown up in. More recently, George Chauncey's *Gay New York*, a work that you might think would be narrowly focused but instead tells you a lot more than you think it ever could. There are many amazing works on slavery, but the one that first opened my eyes at a very unprogressive time was Kenneth Stampp's *Peculiar Institution*. And then sometimes there are books where you think you're not going to be interested in the topic at all and you're surprised. There's a man who died much too young by the name of Roland Marchand who wrote a book called *Advertising the American Dream*. This is one of the big books, ambitious books, books that you just look at and go, "Wow, this is amazing!" and you're reading them and you're taking notes and you do that for two whole days. I think that's why a lot of graduate students have a "fear and loathing," to use Hunter Thompson, in

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reference to the whole concept of the comprehensive exam fields. And to me, maybe that was my greatest scholarly experience in a way. Not only because you have a sense of accomplishment, but because you wind up reading books that you would never read. If you were just interested in alcohol and drugs, you would *never* read Marchand's book. And that's just a sampling of the books that have influenced me.

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