

Lacan's first words to the seminar participants were, "I would very much like to start this new year . . . by telling you—*The fun is over!*" In Lacan's view, what was fun, or at least easy, in contemporary psychoanalytic practice was its belief in an autonomous ego: that in each person there is a centered, stable self that can act and choose freely of its own accord. Lacan caricatured this "ego" by likening it to "*the-little-man-within-the-man*, who has an autonomous life within the subject and who is there to defend it—*Father, look out to the right. Father, look out to the left*—against whatever might assail him from without as from within."

Lacan called his denial of the ego "a return to origins," meaning that he, like Freud, emphasized the primacy of the incorrigible unconscious. But Lacan's view of the unconscious is hardly Freudian: "The unconscious is structured like a language." Lacan's proposition, in other words, is this: Once we dispense with the ego, we are not cast adrift into psychic amorphousness; rather we can explore the nature of grammar and syntax in order to understand the mind's dark workings. As Elizabeth Roudinesco noted in *Jacques Lacan and Co.* (1991), this linguistic emphasis changed psychoanalysis from a medical technique for curing symptoms into "a discovery of the mind, a theoretical journey," and, outside the bounds of his profession, it made Lacan, along with Jacques Derrida and Michel Foucault, a leading intellectual in post-war France.

Unlike Freud, whom supposedly he was championing, Lacan did not believe psychoanalysis was a science. "What holds good in the art of the expert cook," he conceded pragmatically, "is also true for psychoanalysis." The discipline closest to psychoanalysis for Lacan was not science but literature, and he even used Poe's "Purloined Letter" as a text. Many literary critics in America seized upon this cue, interpreting "texts" in the way a psychiatrist interprets his patient's unconscious: by explaining what the text (rather like the "ego") presents but cannot itself understand.

Yet Lacan's endeavor is stranger than any popular literary trend can suggest. The Lacanian imperative—to end the "ego-istic" perspective, the false "I" which considers itself the maker and doer of its own life—violates the comfortable, common sense of the way things

work. Dispensing with the ego may yield fresh perspectives, but Lacan was under no illusion that it would have wide appeal. Noting the revival of ego psychoanalysis in Freud's later career, Lacan wrote, "There was a general rush, exactly like the kids getting out of school—*Ah! Our nice little ego is back again. It all makes sense now.*"

Contemporary Affairs

THE IDEA BROKERS: Think Tanks and the Rise of the New Policy Elite. By James A. Smith. *The Free Press.* 313 pp. \$24.95

"What I fear," Woodrow Wilson warned in 1912, "is a government of experts." According to historian James A. Smith, Wilson's fear is now an American reality.

Ever since Joseph interpreted Pharaoh's dream, rulers have relied upon expert advisers. The uniqueness of Smith's 20th-century "idea brokers" is that they have turned "advising the prince" into a growth industry. They ply their trade in more than 1,000 "think tanks" throughout the United States. One hundred think tanks are located in the nation's capital, 60 to 70 more in the New York area, but no major city, no state capital, no large university is without at least one think tank operating in its midst. Every issue and item on the public agenda, from national security on down to child nutrition, has a think tank specifically devoted to its study. Day and night think tankers are at work—attempting to shape legislation, influence the media, or simply get their books adopted in graduate seminars—utilizing every possible strategy to affect government and public opinion.

A few think tanks like Washington's Brookings Institution are prestigious establishments with multimillion-dollar endowments. Most, however, are hardly more than a secretary and some dreary offices where junior idea brokers frantically write grant proposals in order to keep going. Despite these uncertainties, idea brokers shun the more secure academic or government bureaucracies where they could not speak out as freely and as quickly.

Although "policy intellectual" conjures up the image of a liberal, Smith shows that conser-

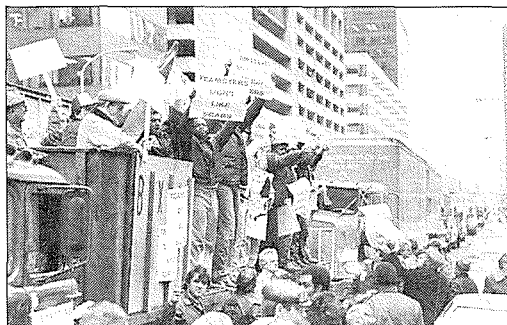
vatives have made the best use of think tanks. Eighty years ago, when Wilson was deploring "experts," business leaders like Robert S. Brookings realized that corporate interests required more than moralistic hymns to *laissez faire*; they needed to have a direct impact on specific government policies. Many think tanks of the 1920s, like the National Bureau of Economic Research, attempted to give "fact-based" economic guidance to the pro-business Coolidge and Hoover administrations. Despite the experts, the economy crashed.

After its eclipse during the New Deal era, this form of conservative advocacy was revived in the 1950s when William J. Baroody, Sr., took over Washington's American Enterprise Institute (AEI). "One of the shrewdest and most energetic men ever to preside over a Washington research institute," as Smith describes him, Baroody tirelessly sought to combat what he called "the liberal intellectual monopoly." A generation later AEI and other conservative think tanks supplied the ideas and the personnel for the Reagan Revolution.

But is this the "government of experts" that Woodrow Wilson feared? Wilson worried that experts would use their supposed status as "scientists" to foreclose debate and exclude the ordinary citizen. Something like that nearly happened in the 1950s when the Air Force employed its think tank, the Rand Corporation, to confine nuclear policy questions to approved "experts." But, Smith concludes, the mass entry of the idea brokers into the public "marketplace of ideas" has in fact demystified expertise and has thus, if anything, intensified public policy debate.

WHICH SIDE ARE YOU ON? Trying to Be for Labor When It's Flat on Its Back. *By Thomas Geoghegan. Farrar, Straus. 267 pp. \$19.95*

Thomas Geoghegan loves the rousing Labor Day parades; he loves the St. Joseph's Day feasts when the rank-and-file reaffirm their solidarity; he loves winning legal battles for what he calls America's "real counterculture." In short, he loves being a labor lawyer. That, however, does not mean he *likes* the modern American labor movement.



Since entering the fold some 20 years ago, Geoghegan has witnessed a steady decline of union vigor. Union membership today, he reports, accounts for only 16 percent of the American workforce, down from 20 to 25 percent a mere decade ago. In Chicago, where Geoghegan practices, the steelworkers' union alone lost 50,000 members during the 1980s. Geoghegan's prediction for organized labor is hardly sanguine. "A dumb, stupid mastodon of a thing" it is, he says, a beast well on its way to extinction.

Who does Geoghegan fault for labor's demise? Everyone. Industry, the unions themselves, and the government all come in for blame. American industry's obsession with immediate profits instead of investment in the future has proven disastrous for workers. Japan's Nippon Steel alone spends more on research and development than all U.S. steel companies combined. In the 1980s, many unprofitable mills closed and thousands of union members lost their jobs. Even more union members were on the street as industries, ranging from steel to automaking, began busting unions in order to maximize profits. The practice of firing union employees (usually illegally) and replacing them with "scabs" saves, according to one study Geoghegan cites, 20 percent on the nation's wage bills annually.

As shortsighted as industry is, Geoghegan thinks union members may be even more so. "Boy, were they dumb," is his comment on their always taking the immediate buck instead of demanding, or even wanting, company stock or assuming control over company pension funds. Those few unions that acquired stock in lieu of salary raises, such as the machinists and the pilots, are in a relatively powerful position today.