The antismoking forces are gaining in political muscle all over the country. Laws and municipal ordinances are passed to prohibit smoking in every sort of public place and, where that is not (or not yet) feasible, to segregate smokers in ever-smaller areas. There is pressure to further restrict advertising for cigarettes and to abolish federal subsidies for tobacco growers. But what is most interesting on the level of everyday life is the aggressiveness and the moral fervor with which this campaign is being conducted. There are segments of the American population in which the hostility to smoking and to smokers has taken on the quality of a crusade. And if we have learned anything from the politics of this century, it is to pay nervous attention to any new crusades appearing on the scene.

I freely confess that I’m not a disinterested observer: I smoke. Also I’m given to political paranoia: I can foresee a time in the near future when smoking will be prohibited everywhere except by consenting adults in the privacy of their bedroom (and, to be honest, I don’t trust the antismokers to stop short of the bedroom for very long either). Or, alternatively, I can see myself puffing my cigarillos in a fenced-off area near the toilets in my favorite restaurant, or slinking through the streets with a scarlet “S” pinned on my lapel, or having to make biweekly visits to a social worker to have my permit renewed (you see, I refused group therapy). Let these visions not be taken lightly: I have developed a wisensschaftliche respect for my paranoias; most of them have turned out to be predictions, at least when it comes to political reality.

Some stipulations, to be sure, are in order. Undoubtedly there are places where nonsmokers have long been annoyed by the proximity of smokers. Undoubtedly there have been thoughtless smokers who have caused discomfort, sometimes even real suffering, to others. No fair-minded person, even one who smokes twenty cigarillos a day, will object to rules that protect those caused discomfort or pain by people blowing smoke at them. But the current campaign goes far beyond the establishment of such rules. More important psychologically, the aggressiveness of the campaign cannot be explained by such rational grievances. Also, of course, there is evidence to the effect that smoking is unhealthy (though, let it be added, the evidence is less conclusive than the antismoking crusaders would have us believe).

But, once again, the thrust and the mood of the campaign make it implausible to seek motives in concern for smokers’ health. Not for a moment do I believe that these people want to protect me from emphysema. As a matter of fact I believe they would be quite delighted if I got emphysema—or worse—as just punishment for my wicked habit. It’s sort of the way I assess the motives of Jehovah’s Witnesses: They stand on the street corner offering me a copy of Awake! because it’s their duty to do so. But they know that come the day of reckoning very few will be saved—and, the way they look at me, I know that they don’t really mind my passing by my chance of joining that elite. In the business of salvation it’s long been true that “the fewer, the merrier,” and one doesn’t have to read Jonathan Edwards to know that the well-deserved suffering of the damned is one of the pleasures of heaven.

I’m digressing. Back to Wissenschaft: Sex is in; smoking is out. If you don’t believe me read the personals columns in the left-wing press (much to be recommended generally as a depth-probe into the consciousness of the New Class; by their libidos thou shalt know them) and count the number of times that nonsmoking is listed as a trait wanted in sought-after sex partners. It’s come to this: “Trim college professor, late 30’s, seeks liberated female for complementary relationship [that means he’s married], Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, NYC or Connecticut—nonsmoker.” “Westchester County couple, happily married, seeks young man or woman, early 20’s, for mutually satisfactory explorations in new life-styles—nonsmokers.” “Hispanic male, currently incarcerated, invites correspondence from submissive females, race immaterial—nonsmokers...”

Recently (as the result of a lawsuit, I believe) Eastern Airlines substantially decreased the space allowed to smokers on its planes. The new restriction also applies to the New York-Washington shuttle, a conveyance vital to the existence of politicians, lobbyists, agents of the...
South Korean Government, individuals who carry a hundred thousand dollars in attaché cases, and other people with nervous-making life-styles, mostly males, mostly smokers. But never mind; Justice is blind.

So the other day I was on the shuttle, joining the desperate rush toward the new Jim Crow section in the back of the plane near the toilets, where they keep the oxygen equipment and the old copies of Business Week. I lost the race to the last smoker’s seat to a fat young man in a seersucker suit, with ten ballpoint pens stuck in his shirt pocket and clutching two attaché cases (an agent for both the South Korean and the North Korean governments?). Consequently I was forced to sit in rigid abstinence in the enormously enlarged nonsmokers’ section (the man next to me, smiling sheepishly, smoked furtively—I was tempted to emulate him, but I’m a law-abiding citizen; also I’m given to anxieties, and the stewardess—pardon, the flight attendant—bore a striking resemblance to Bella Abzug…). I suffered (it so happens that I’m also given to fear of flying—Erica Jong hasn’t done a thing for me—but that’s another story). As everyone knows, suffering is conducive to insight. And so somewhere over Chesapeake Bay (the plane suddenly lurched and the engines didn’t sound quite right for a moment there) I had what my teacher Alfred Schutz used to call an “aha experience.” I think I know now what is going on in this department of our culture: Anti-smoking is the new anti-Semitism. And, like the old anti-Semitism, it has to do with the quest for immortality.

I recognize that, at first reading, these propositions may lack plausibility. I suggest that the propositions be scrutinized by following a very simple analytic procedure (Wissenschaft again): The antismoking attitude is one item in the consciousness of a specific group of people; it should be seen in relation to other items in that consciousness. At that point, I contend, my propositions gain plausibility. But first: Who are these people? That question is easily answered: We are talking about the aforementioned New Class—the people who consider themselves intellectuals but who are better described as that new segment of the upper middle class that derives its living (and ipso facto its material and ideological interests) from the so-called knowledge industry.

Daniel Bell and Irving Kristol have given us the basic sociological understanding of this class. It is a minority in the American population but, because of its relation to the education and mass communications systems, a very influential one. It is both the matrix and the principal clientele of most of our recent movements of cultural innovation, from the “new consciousness” to the “new politics.” Many recent events on the American scene make much better sense if one sees them as part of a class struggle (in quite classical Marxist terms) between this New Class and the old upper middle class (Kristol calls the latter, tout court, the business class). The outcome of this class struggle has not yet been decided, but there is little doubt that both the cultural and the political power of the New Class has been on the rise.

Not all elements of the consciousness of this class are relevant to the antismoking issue. But a surprising number are. These are all related to an overwhelming sense of corruption and pollution from which the society is to be cleansed. Ask this simple question: What are other causes to which the antismokers are likely to be attracted? There is, probably most important of all, the various causes espoused by the environmentalist movement. It began with Ralph Nader’s war against the automobile. It finds its foremost expression today in the campaign against nuclear energy. Modern industrialism (and, in the consciousness of the New Class, especially its capitalist version) is perceived as a gigantic death-machine, destroying the earth, poisoning the atmosphere, spreading every sort of plague. Then there are the causes related to the various health movements.

Commercially produced foods are supposed to poison us, and the only salvation is in the return to some form of organic nutrition. The drugs produced by the pharmaceutical industry (with the possible exception of hallucinogenic ones) are also death-dealing, and the medical establishment has been an accomplice in this conspiracy to destroy us (Ivan Illich—perhaps unintentionally—has helped to legitimate this particular hypochondria). And then there is the strong affinity of this same class for every conceivable type of therapy, from the conventional services of the psychoanalyst to the latest products of the California personal-liberation industry.

Other elements could be mentioned, but these three will do for the present purpose. What do they have in common? Hypochondria is as good a term as any. But one could also put it differently: What is said here is that all of us would lead long and...
healthy lives, if only this or that particular source of pollution were removed.

Thus the cultural scene is rampant with utopias of health: Get rid of the automobile, ban nuclear energy—and we would all live in bucolic idylls, riding our bicycles along crystalline brooks. Eat nothing but food grown on natural manure—and you'll never get ill. Follow this or that therapeutic treatment—and you will never be anxious again, never frustrated, never defeated. Is it too fanciful to push these promises to their final limit? I don't think so. For here is the finally implied promise: Do these things—and you will live forever. Only if one understands this can one understand the intense hostility to those (be they individuals or “the system”) who are believed to stand in the way of this vision of eternal health: They—the carmakers, the advocates of nuclear energy, the makers of nonorganic breakfast cereals, those who stop me from having all the orgasms I’m capable of—and of course the smokers—they are the enemies of life, the purveyors of death, the one great obstacle between me and the redeemed state.

It is not necessary to deny all empirical complaints of these movements in order to make this analysis. Thus, for example, there are very real threats to life in the diffusion of nuclear energy, threats that ought to be taken very seriously in the public debate. In other words, I’m not saying that there are no rational arguments on the side of the Clamshell Alliance; I am saying that these rational arguments are insufficient to explain the phenomenon of the current antinuclear movement. Indeed, almost every cause has some kernel of truth, but to understand the energizing passions behind a cause the validity of its empirical claims is often beside the point. This is unfortunate, to be sure, but it cannot be helped (those who have not learned this lesson from Marx may learn it from Vilfredo Pareto).

Jean-Paul Sartre, in his book Anti-Semitism and Jew (incidentally, his last intelligent comment on any politically relevant issue), interpreted modern anti-Semitism as a flight from the human condition. It was a profound and profoundly correct interpretation. For the anti-Semite it is the Jew who is the enemy of life, the corrupting and polluting force eating away at the health of the society. Therefore in battling the Jew the anti-Semitic is at the same time struggling for his own redemption, and the victory over the Jew is ipso facto a victory of life over death. This vision, Sartre tells us, is only possible by denying some fundamental and ineradicable elements of the condition of being human. For to be human means to live in an imperfect world, with all the anxieties and ills that go with this. Most important of all, to be human means to be mortal. Thus anti-Semitism, in the final analysis, is a flight from mortality and (in the mode that Sartre called “bad faith”) a denial of mortality.

Let me make clear that I’m not suggesting a moral equivalence between anti-Semitism and these contemporary forms of utopianism. Anti-Semitism, even in its less virulent forms, is a phenomenon sui generis, with a moral perversity all its own that should not be trivialized by throwing it into the same category with a lot of other phenomena. Nevertheless it is very useful to understand the common elements it shares with other turbulences of contemporary consciousness. Nor should we overlook the fact that a new variety of anti-Semitism (still generally camouflaged as “anti-Zionism”) has found a response precisely in the utopian milieu being discussed here.

One significant fact must still be added to the argument: The group that is given to these utopias is almost certainly the most secularized sector of the American population. In other words these are people who have been deprived (or, if you will, who have deprived themselves) of the consolations of religion in the face of mortality and all the other imperfections of the human condition. It is not surprising, then, that the flight from mortality takes on a rather frantic character in this particular ambience. In the absence of God the prospect of death becomes much harder to deal with. There is, of course, the great possibility of stoicism, but very few are capable of that. (Perhaps Sigmund Freud was the last great stoic. Certainly not Sartre, who got hooked on the “bad faith” of revolution.)

And thus it is with us again, that age-old quest for the secret of immortality. Long, long ago Gilgamesh looked for it in his journeys to find the Land of the Living. For a moment he thought he had found the secret in a plant that grew on a faraway shore, and he exclaimed: “This plant is a plant apart, whereby a man may regain his life’s breath....Its name shall be ‘Man Becomes Young in Old Age.’ I myself shall eat it, and thus return to the state of my youth.” Then a serpent came out of the water and carried off the plant and (according to the Akkadian version of the Gilgamesh story) “Gilgamesh sat down by the water and wept, his tears running down over his face.” One may say that the whole drama of biblical religion is one long effort to wipe away these tears over the anguish of human finitude—but the effort is not an easy one, and its fundamental presupposition is an acceptance of reality and a turning away from the illusions of false promises. It was another serpent, speaking of another plant, who promised: “You will not die....When you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God.”

But let me return from the ancient Near East to the Washington shuttle. We are all sinners. None of us are all that good at coping with the human condition. None of us have sufficient faith. (If I did I’m sure I wouldn’t smoke. For what smoking is finally all about is a profound impatience before the mystery of time, and this too is a lack of trust in God who is the Lord of time. But that is yet another story.) All of us are fugitives from mortality. Perhaps we can acquire a measure of tolerance from this understanding: Tolerance of each other—which precludes crusades. And tolerance of the imperfections of the world—which frees us from the illusion of utopianism.

Do you happen to have a light, Ms. Gilgamesh? Thank you. No, I’m not sure either where this plane is going....