

The futile pursuit of reformism

Bait and Switch by Barbara Ehrenreich

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28 December 2005

Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream, by Barbara Ehrenreich, Metropolitan Books, Henry Holt 2005

Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed* caused a minor sensation by exposing the plight of low-wage workers in the United States. Going undercover, Ehrenreich took several hard-labor positions (waitress, cleaner, etc.) and tried living on the wages therefrom. Of course, she found it almost impossible. Her eyes, as well as many readers', were opened to the economic tragedy of trying to support oneself, let alone one's children, under such conditions. It was a good glimpse into what the working class endures at the hands of the capitalist system.

Unfortunately the author did not offer a clear analysis of, let alone a solution to this situation. With her newest book, *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*, Ehrenreich posits that, no matter your education or previous track record of success in the white collar world, you are not assured of a stable economic future. You might play by all the rules, but that will not make you a winner.

While her premise is correct, it is not groundbreaking. Nor is it well-presented. Many of the sources cited in the book are 10 or more years old, indicating that the reality of the increasingly "downwardly mobile" economy is one with deep roots. Yet this work is surprisingly shallow in its views. The export of employment was at first a blue collar problem. Now this practice has hit the white collar sectors as well. Many technical jobs, once some of the best paying in the United States, have been sent to India or other third world nations, where highly skilled workers do the work for less pay, and without the benefits of their US or Canadian counterparts. The extravagantly paid CEO positions, however, remain in the "first world."

The shifting of jobs to more pliable and inexpensive places, where such things as workers' rights not only do not exist, but are often violently suppressed, is seen as a magnificent cost-cutting measure by the elite, who remain secure in their income as stock prices and profit margins increase. Further profit increases are seen as workers'

pensions and health benefits are cut in the industrialized countries, assisted by the repeated betrayal by the workers' union leaders. It is left now to the white collar worker to scramble for a position.

Undercover again, this time trying to break into the corporate world, Ms. Ehrenreich takes us along on countless networking, "workshopping" and consulting excursions (though much of the consulting requires only phone contact, so "excursion" is a bit of a stretch). In every scenario she is exhorted to be "upbeat." The constant emphasis on maintaining a winning attitude even in the most dire of circumstances devolves into a flat-out denial of reality. The question, unasked in this book, is: who is served by the denial of reality?

The undercover tactic which worked wonderfully in *Nickel and Dimed* does not serve so well in *Bait and Switch*, in large part due to the author's surface treatment of the subject. Though she states on page 2 that "stories of white collar downward mobility cannot be brushed off as easily as accounts of blue collar economic woes," she has done a pretty good job of doing just that. It is as if she was afraid to get too close to any of the people whom she encountered along the way.

Though most of her networking meetings and seminars are well-attended, the reader gets scant more than stereotyped descriptions of Ehrenreich's fellow jobseekers. She makes superficial appraisals of them, without talking to them at any length. While this is ostensibly to avoid being caught out in her disguise, one feels that Ehrenreich wants to avoid looking too closely at the economic problems these people face and what it says about the system as a whole.

A mix of babble and pseudoscientific "personality tests" comprise most of the networking and workshop leaders' tools. Though she (rightly) takes the Meyer's Briggs personality profile (which compartmentalizes people into 16 personality types) to task for its unscientific origins, methods and erratic results, and provides a valuable service in discrediting this "test," Ehrenreich does so by relying heavily on another author's work—Annie Murphy Paul's

The Cult of Personality (New York Free Press, 2004).

The Enneagram, another tool for “analysis” of personality which Ehrenreich encounters, is revealed to have its origins in mystic traditions as varied as Sufism, Jesuit philosophy and Celtic Lore, and is correctly characterized as a “pastiche of wispy New Age yearnings for some mystic unity underlying the disorder of human experience.” Much weight is given to these tests by the workshop leaders. This is frequently combined with advice to treat job hunting *as* a job and to avoid absorbing the stench of unemployment (i.e., don’t associate with other jobseekers). Add to it all a distinct lack of networking contacts of any value unless (and, one suspects, even if) paid for, and we have a very disheartening picture.

Compared to these encounters, the “Bible-based” networking Ehrenreich does seems almost banal. The New-Age mumbo-jumbo of Enneagram and Meyer’s-Briggs is more interesting than the veiled, and not-so-veiled, racism and sexism of the religious groups she encounters. However, the only real difference between them seems to be that with the New Agers you must blame yourself (while not taking on a “victim mentality”) for not connecting with your inner energy and projecting it strongly enough, while with the Bible-thumpers it is your failure to connect with God which has brought you to this sad meeting. Either way, it’s your fault, not the systematic quashing of opportunity in the name of profit.

Along the way, the author frequently says she “is outraged,” but seems unable to express what is so outrageous to her. Is it the exorbitant fees demanded by “consultants”? The endless hours spent alone searching online for a job? The nattering on and on about “attitude”? Perhaps she is outraged that she feels unable to connect with her fellow jobseekers. It is not until the last chapter that they are given a chance to voice their concerns. Even then, they are kept at a distance and their words are limited to excerpted paragraphs. There are no conversations presented, and a strange lack of human context. It is as if the author is tired of her subject and the subjects of her study.

One of the odd things to come out of the book is an online forum for white collar networkers. Given the author’s stated belief that these are futile exercises, this writer found it surprising that Ms. Ehrenreich would propose such a thing. Given the relatively low participation (as of early last month there were 119 registered members), her readers seem to agree. Overall, I am left with the impression that rather than allowing her time to be sucked away in endless networking workshops and high-priced consultations, actually talking at length and honestly with the struggling white collar jobseekers would have provided a much better view of not only where we are now, but where we need to go.

In the last chapter, Ehrenreich notes that in all the various organizations she has observed that “any subversive conversation about the economy and its corporate governance is suppressed.” She continues, “I make no claim that this silencing is deliberate. No one has issued an edict warning about the revolutionary threat posed by unemployed and fearful white collar workers, should they be allowed to discuss their situation freely. But, whatever the motivations of the coaches and organizers of networking sessions, the effect of their efforts is to divert people from the hard questions and kinds of dissent these questions might suggest” (p. 219).

However, Ehrenreich herself largely evades these hard questions. While passing references are made to “the economy” and “corporate culture,” there is no real explanation of the meaning of these concepts.

The work lacks true insight into the underlying causes of the problems facing the white collar workers. Never does she suggest seriously that there is something inherently wrong with the capitalist system which has ensnared the workers of every collar in a soulless façade of upbeat defeatism.

She ends merely with a call to the unemployed to organize and get involved to lobby for improvements. These calls to action avoid the need for systemic change while perpetuating the blame-the-victim attitude which Ehrenreich claims to deplore, saying in effect, “If you would just pay more attention and get involved, we would not be here now.”

Her suggestion to shift the burden of health care to the government and the expansion of unemployment benefits seem almost laughably naive as we witness the current cuts in Medicaid, the privatization of the drug programs and the slashing of every kind of social benefit. A serious approach to these issues would require confronting the incompatibility of unrestrained global capitalist competition with the maintenance of the basic needs of the working class, white collar and blue collar. Similarly, one would have to address why the Democratic Party has abandoned any association with social reformism.

Ehrenreich does none of these things. The author is unable to look beyond her narrow reformist perspective and see that what is needed is not lobbying to patch up a dying monster, but an independent political movement of the working class against the system as a whole.



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