

## *The Middle Class Professional at Risk: Review of Barbara Ehrenreich's Bait and Switch{PRIVATE }*

Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*. New York: Henry Holt and Co., 2005.

*reviewed by Russell Harrison*

Barbara Ehrenreich's new book, taken in conjunction with her 1989 book, *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class*, effects a kind of longitudinal study of this classically American stratum. In the earlier book she defined what she called "the professional middle class" as:

all those people whose economic and social status is based on education, rather than on the ownership of capital or property. Most professionals are included, and so are white-collared managers, whose positions require at least a college degree, and increasingly also a graduate degree. . . . it includes such diverse types as schoolteachers, anchorpersons, engineers, professors, government bureaucrats, corporate executives (at least up through the middle levels of management), scientists, advertising people, therapists, financial managers, architects . . . .<sup>1</sup>

In that book she argued that the middle class was becoming worried and defensive about its socio-economic status as a result of a re-emerging (self-)consciousness of the working class. This middle class felt threatened and saw the professions as their "class fortresses." But as of the 1980s, it was more an anxiety than a fear. Soon enough, however, it had metamorphosed into a true fear of a true object: joblessness. Her new book concerns itself with this professional middle class, mostly with those individual members who have lost their jobs and are seeking new ones, who are, as the euphemism for unemployed now has it, "in transition."

The title comes from the fact that these:

are the ones who did "everything right." They earned higher degrees, often setting aside their youthful passion for philosophy or music to suffer through dull practical majors like management or finance. In some cases they were high achievers who ran into trouble precisely because they had risen far enough in the company for their salaries to look like a tempting cost cut. They were the losers, in other words, in a classic game of bait and switch. <sup>2</sup>

In her next-to-last book, *Nickel and Dimed*, Ehrenreich became a low-waged American worker, living and working as such. In her new book she becomes "in transition," looking for a job as a public relations executive, calculating that such a job would call on her writing and public speaking skills. She changes her name (back to her maiden name, Alexander) and gets a new social security number and, budgeting \$5000 for the task:

The plan was straightforward enough: to find a job, a "good" job, which I defined minimally as a white-collar position that would provide health insurance and an income of about \$50,000 a year, enough to land me solidly in the middle class. The job itself would give me a rare firsthand glimpse into the midlevel corporate world, and the effort to find it would of course place me among the most hard-pressed white-collar corporate workers--the ones who don't have jobs.<sup>2</sup>

Ehrenreich never achieves that "rare firsthand glimpse" because she never gets a "good" job. The book, thus, becomes a narrative of the various steps Ehrenreich takes towards that job that are typical of the unemployed professional.

She first goes to a career coach, meeting him in a local Starbucks where he hands her several transparencies one of which "features a picture of a harness racer and horse" and reads as follows:

Clear mind, skillful driver  
Sound spirit, strong horse.  
Strong body, sound carriage.  
Mind, body, spirit work as one. . .  
Path to victory is clear.

It is necessary (and justifiable) in a review to give short shrift to such nonsense which is not atypical of the coaching industry. Most of what Ehrenreich encounters in the course of her networking, coaching and bootcamping is a mix of EST, Jungian personality archetypes and the personality tests broadly based on the latter. But the above quote is certainly representative of the coaching industry. "The peculiar emphasis on 'personality,' as opposed to experience and skills, looms like a red flag" (35).

She then goes to another career coach ("whose web site describes her as 'a career and outplacement consultant, trainer and writer'"). She "agree[s] to a weekly half-hour session by phone at \$400 a month, or \$200 an hour" (21). In general the coaching field seems to offer obvious pieces of advice, such as to disguise periods of unemployment (which are euphemistically now called "consulting") and to disguise one's age once it passes the optimal mid-30s moment, along with some bits of fine-tuning (for example, in terms of dress) and repellent suggestions such as to treat oneself as a "brand."

She attends several networking events (flying to Atlanta [twice] and Boston from her home in Charlottesville, Va.) She even, in the chapter "Networking with the Lord," goes to a religiously oriented networking event which focusses on personal, power-of-positive-thinking anecdotes of how the Lord responded to intercessional prayer.

Depressing/poignant, too, are the hoops the in-transition folks decide to jump through. One, a "marketing man and fellow member of the Atlanta Job Search Network, is taking a . . . creative approach to hobnobbing with the decision makers":

I'm interested in a waitstaff job in the Capitol Grille [an upscale restaurant in downtown Atlanta] . . . where serving gives you a chance to network with the big shots by giving them your business card with the check. The most expensive bottle of wine on the menu costs eight hundred dollars. So I'm going to take a three-day course on wines. (172)

In the end, Ehrenreich doesn't come close to getting a good job being offered only two sales jobs, one with AFLAC with "no salary, no benefits, not even an office with fax machine and phones. I might as well have applied at Wal-Mart and been given a pushcart full of housewares to hawk on the streets," she remarks (181).

*Bait and Switch* makes clear that in 99.99% of the cases, the individual who has lost his job and can't find another is unemployed through no fault of his own. For the coaching industry and its offshoots this, of course, can never be admitted. When the issue of age is brought up, the coach's response is: "'It's all internal--whether you're sixty-two or forty-two or twenty-two . . . It's never about the external world. It's always between you and you" (79). Recessions, downsizing, global competition are never even hinted at.

This reader came away with the impression that the whole job search industry is, at most, next to useless. When there are Web services that can send out 8000 resumes at a key stroke and there may well be 8000 people blasting away with their cvs, what are the odds on getting an interview? Ehrenreich was urged to treat the job search as a job, getting up in the morning at the same time, checking one's email etc. She suggests that the networking and emailing could, if focussed on such things as external causes and thus possibly external solutions for the jobseekers' dilemma, be productive. But "In every one of these settings [networking groups, church groups, for example] any potentially subversive conversation about the economy and its corporate governance is suppressed" (218). She continues: I make no claim that this silencing is deliberate. . . . 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 the kinds of dissent these questions might suggest" (219):

For example, the constant injunction to treat your job search as a job in itself, preferably "supervised" by a friend or coach, seems designed to forestall seditious musings. Much of the job seeker's "job"--Internet searches and applications--is admitted to be useless, and seems to have no function other than to fill the time that might otherwise be devoted to reflecting on the sources of the problem.<sup>3</sup> (219)

Early on Ehrenreich remarks that "While the fifties and sixties had produced absorbing novels about white-collar corporate life, including Richard Yates's *Revolutionary Road* and Sloan Wilson's *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit*, more recent novels and films tend to ignore the white-collar corporate work world except as a backdrop to sexual intrigue" (3). To my knowledge she is correct, although the 1993 Michael Douglas Film, *Falling Down* is well worth viewing in the context of Ehrenreich's experience. However a look at a novel such as *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (1955) is particularly useful, as it reveals startling and depressing changes in the world of the white-collar worker. And the revelation of these changes, it seems to me, constitutes a valuable part of Ehrenreich's book.

The novel's protagonist, Tom Rath, has worked for seven years for a small foundation "which an elderly millionaire had established to help finance scientific research and the arts."<sup>4</sup> The Westport, Connecticut house he and his wife, Betsy, and their three children live in, is beginning to feel somewhat constraining and Rath's salary won't allow them to do much about it. As a result he then takes a better job as the personal assistant to the head of a huge corporation and although he does well and his future is almost limitless, he finds the pressure, especially the time he must devote to the job, destroying his marriage. At a critical moment he refuses the sacrifices this job requires and accepts a decent, but much less high-profile position in the same company. The novel fully supports his decision as wise, humane and healthy.

Obviously no one novel is going to be typical in all its details of a generation and a class. Indeed, although the novel begins with Tom Rath clearly rooted in Ehrenreich's professional middle class by virtue of the fact that his "economic and social status is based on education, rather than on the ownership of capital or property," by the end of the novel his class affiliation undergoes a rather wrenching ascent. He had been educated in a New England boarding school and graduated from Princeton but--in the beginning--still has to work for a salary. At the end of the novel he has inherited some Connecticut waterfront property from his mother, which he plans to subdivide and, it is clear, will soon enough achieve the rentier status which will take him out of the middle class. The development project is also presented as a way in which the Raths can realize themselves (choosing the architect, the builder, landscaping, i.e., their good taste--no tacky half-acre lots for them), the deciding factor driving all this is money and the independence it will allow them.

What is so striking and distressing, though, and what becomes clear through the comparison of the fifties novel with Bait and Switch is how the corporate workers in Ehrenreich no longer demand or expect or even think about getting a job that will provide them with some shred of a possibility of realizing themselves in even a semi-authentic way while at the same time also allowing them a decent family life. Ehrenreich's image of corporate life puts the cliches of the fifties to shame. Although most of the people she meets in her rounds of networking and bootcamping are unemployed (some are employed but see the writing on the wall and are acting "proactively"), their history is of middle-class employment and thus they provide glimpses of what such work is like.<sup>5</sup> It is a world where "appearances mean everything," where "Success and failure seem to have little to do with one's accomplishments" (217) and where success results from

"who you knew. If the boss was into golf, we were all supposed to be into golf. If he smoked cigars, we all smoked cigars. If he drank brandy, we all had to drink brandy. Eventually you saw some serious vices and then you had something on him. Then, if you had the dirt on them, they'll keep you on. To survive, you need to know where the bodies are buried. (227-28)

Towards the end of her book, Ehrenreich makes an interesting observation on the appearance of a new quality that an employee or would-be employee must possess vis-à-vis her job: passion. "Increasingly, company websites offer breathless claims of 'passion' as one of their corporate attributes and requirements for employment" (231).<sup>6</sup> And Ehrenreich insightfully points out that this "new insistence on 'passion' marks a further expansion of the corporate empire into the time and spirit of its minions" (232), further noting that "it is the insecurity of white-collar employment that makes the demand for passion so cruel and perverse" (232). Since such professionals are now expected to have eight to ten employers in the course of their careers, how will they be able to be passionate about all their jobs? To say the least it is an unreasonable and unrealistic demand. But of course corporations can make such demands due to the above-mentioned insecurity.

And there is no question whence this insecurity derives. Just when it looked--briefly (say 1945-1965)--as if capitalism could provide full, or something like full, employment, that Marx's industrial reserve army of the unemployed had vanished (been vanquished might be a better way of putting it), it returned with a vengeance in the 70s and after. But with the late 80s, 90s and 2000s, it was now affecting the professional middle class as well, not just blue-collar workers. Especially after 1989/1991 when the former Communist-bloc middle class of programmers, musicians, doctors/nurses opened itself up to exploitation, the competition for professional middle-class jobs became global and relentless. Thus we now have a professional middle-class reserve army of the unemployed.

As Ehrenreich writes: "What sets the white-collar corporate workers apart and leaves them so vulnerable is the requirement that they identify absolutely and unreservedly, with their employers" (234). A "crisis management" instructor "made clear" that the CEO may be a fool; the company's behavior may be borderline criminal--and still you are required to serve unstintingly and without the slightest question" (235). To one outside the corporate world this aspect of the "corporate empire," its demand for the worker's spirit as well as body has always been one of its most unattractive features. Such a condition has parallels in other large organizations. Certainly it is not so different from the higher levels of the military and more intriguingly it overlaps with the image of the Stalinist Communist Party. This makes sense in that all three institutions are totalitarian. Oddly enough, though, in certain ways the capitalist corporation is not the least rigid of these institutions, as a personal anecdote may make clear.

From 1987-1989 I taught American literature in Czechoslovakia. Often my Czech colleagues and I would chat in our offices about trivial (and thus revealing) things. I had been living in West Germany right before I came to Czechoslovakia and I said I had been struck by the fact that the German phone company didn't itemize international calls, just billing a gross sum for the month. In the United States, I noted, our bills were itemized and one knew exactly how long each call had been and how much it had cost. "Yes," one of my colleagues, a senior Communist Party member, said. "We itemize the calls here. And," he added, "for an extra five crowns you can get a tape of the call as well." Compare this "Stalinist irony" with an anecdote cited by Ehrenreich from the *Financial Times* columnist, Lucy Kellaway which:

tells of a woman in a senior position who was upbraided for revealing, in a personality test: "Irony is one of my favorite forms of humor." "She is not going to be fired," the article reports, "but it has been made clear to her that unless she seriously rethinks her sense of humor she might fit better somewhere else" (229).

Odd, or perhaps not, that a capitalist corporation has less-- in fact apparently no--tolerance for irony than a hard-line Communist Party of the 1980s. Such uptight behavior on the part of corporations signals intense defensiveness. Moreover, as the veritable flood of anti-corporation films such as *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* and *The Corporation* reveal this institution is under attack on many fronts. *Bait and Switch* indicates in telling detail some of the reasons why this is so.

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## NOTES

1. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling* (Pantheon, 1989) 12.
2. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (Henry Holt and Company, 2005) 6.
3. Just as I was writing this I came upon Joann S. Lublin's "Managing Your Career" column in the *Wall Street Journal*. Coincidentally, it was about a 49-year-old "veteran public relations man," unemployed in his profession since 2002 and "working as a temporary letter carrier during warm weather." I was astounded by how many of Lublin's suggestions were identical to the ones *Bait and Switch* convincingly presents as useless. A recruiter to whom Lublin referred the case responded in a way that he himself must realize is duplicitous: "Employers ignore a prospect's age if he is impeccably professional and technologically current." The rest of the column was, if not as patently false, similarly useless. (Joann S. Lublin, "How Older Applicants can put together a Savvy Job Search." *WSJ*, June 6 2006, B1.)
4. Sloan Wilson, *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Simon and Schuster, 1955) 3.
5. "I am surprised," she writes, at how many of my fellow campers are actually employed, at least at the moment, since I had expected to be surrounded by jobless seekers like myself. But the white-collar work force seems to consist of two groups: those who can't find work at all and those who are employed in jobs where they work much more than they want to. In between lies a scary place where you dedicate long hours to a job that you sense is about to eject you . . ." (73).
6. This would not have surprised the writer Charles Bukowski, who knew a thing or two about alienated labor. As his alter ego, Henry Chinaski, puts it in *Factotum* (perhaps the finest novel about work in American literature) about a job at a "magazine publishers distributing house": "'That's when I first learned that it wasn't enough to just do your job, you had to have an interest in it, even a passion for it.'" Charles Bukowski, *Factotum* (Black Sparrow Press, 1975) 17.

*REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW*, vol. 9, no. 1 (Fall 2006): 43–46.

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