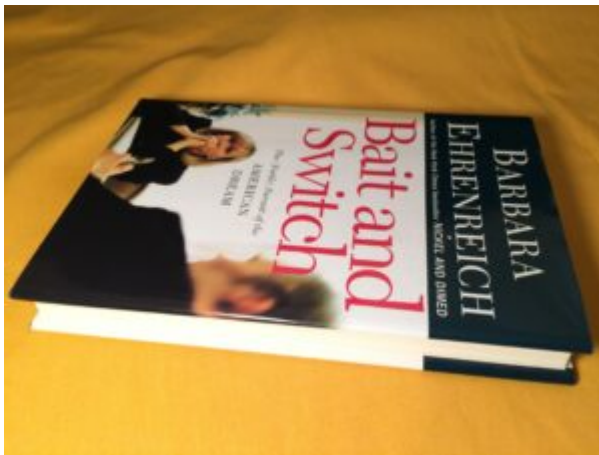


# White-Collar Hell

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*Editor's note: Barbara Ehrenreich, a New Politics sponsor, passed away on Thursday. In 2005, she was interviewed by Scott McLemee (who is now a member of the New Politics editorial board).*

*Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*, published this week by Metropolitan Books, is a return to matters that Barbara Ehrenreich has written about in the past. And no, I don't just mean the world of economic hard knocks.

In obvious ways, the new book's narrative of trying to get a white-collar corporate job (say, as a public-relations person) is similar in method and tone to *Nickel and Dimed* (2001), her account of the lives the working poor. Both are works of first-person reporting *a la* George Orwell's *Road to Wigan Pier* — treading the fine line between investigative journalism and participant-observer ethnography, with the occasional dash of satire thrown in.

But Ehrenreich's new book also revisits a world first explored in her early work on "the professional-managerial class" (often abbreviated as PMC). In papers written during the late 1970s with her first husband, John Ehrenreich, she worked out an exacting Marxist analysis of the PMC as "consisting of salaried mental workers who do not own the means of production" (hence aren't capitalists) but whose "major function in the social division of labor may be broadly described as the reproduction of capitalist culture and capitalist relations." Ehrenreich revisited the topic, in a more popular vein, with *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1989).

You don't hear any trace of sociological diction in Ehrenreich's latest book, in which she goes

undercover as “Barbara Alexander,” a homemaker with some work experience in writing and event-planning. (Alexander’s resume is a more modest rewriting of Ehrenreich’s own background as academic and journalist.) Her search for a new job puts her in competition with other casualties of downsizing and midlife unemployment. She spends her time reading Monster.com, not Louis Althusser.

But some of Ehrenreich’s old theoretical concerns do pop up as she tries to land a gig on the lower rungs of the PMC hierarchy. More than a quarter century ago, she had written that the private life of the middle class “becomes too arduous to be lived in private: the inner life of the PMC must be continuously shaped, updated and revised by ... ever mounting numbers of experts.” And so Barbara Alexander finds teams of “career consultants” ready to help her adjust her outlook to fit into the new corporate culture. How? Through the modern science of psychobabble.

After reviewing *Bait and Switch* for *Newsday*, I still had some questions about where the book fit into Ehrenreich’s thinking. Happily, she was willing to answer them by e-mail.

**Q:** *Nickel and Dimed* has become a standard reading assignment for undergraduates over the past few years, and some of that audience must now be entering the white-collar job market you describe in *Bait and Switch*. Is there anything in the new book intended as guidance for readers who will be facing that reality?

**A:** I’d like to reach undergraduates with *Bait and Switch* before they decide on a business career. I’m haunted by the kid I met at Siena College, in N.Y., who told me he was really interested in psychology, but since that isn’t “practical,” he was going into marketing, which draws on psychology — though, as this fellow sadly admitted, only for the purpose of manipulating people. Or the gal I met at University of Oregon who wants to be a journalist but is drifting toward PR so she can make a living.

Right now, business is the most popular undergraduate major in America, largely because young people believe it will lead to wealth or at least security. I want them to rethink that decision, or at least do some hard thinking about what uses they would like apply their business skills to.

There’s not much by way of individual guidance in *Bait and Switch*, but I do want to get people thinking more about corporate domination, not only of the economy, but of our psyches. Generally speaking, the corporations have us by the short hairs wherever you look, and of course, one source of their grip is the idea that they are the only or the major source of jobs. I’m asking, what kind of jobs — back-breaking low-wage jobs as in *Nickel and Dimed*, or transient, better-paid jobs that seem to depend heavily on one’s ability to be a suck-up, as in *Bait and Switch*?

**Q:** *The pages in Bait and Switch devoted to New Age-inflected business-speak are quite funny — but in an angry way. How much do you think people really buy into this ideology? Do they take it seriously? Or is it just something you have to repeat, to be part of the tribe?*

**A:** Well, someone must believe it, or there wouldn’t be any market for all the business advice books spewed out by career coaches and management gurus. I had the impression that the job seekers I was mingling with usually thought they should believe it all, or at least should act as if they believe it all. There certainly seems to be a lot of fear of being different or standing out in any way.

**Q:** *What’s the relationship between the world you are describing in the new book and that of the professional-managerial class? Are business professionals fully fledged members of the PMC? Or are they clueless and self-deluding mimics of it? All of the above?*

**A:** Sure, they're bona fide members of the PMC as John Ehrenreich and I defined it in the 70s; they are college-educated and they command others or at least determine the work that others will do. But your question makes me think that an update on the PMC is long overdue.

In the late 80s, when I wrote *Fear of Falling*, it looked like the part of the PMC employed as corporate operatives was doing pretty well compared to the more academic and intellectual end of the PMC, which was beginning to get battered by HMOs (in the case of physicians), budget cuts (in the case of college professors, social workers, and others), etc.

Starting in the late 80s, though — and insufficiently noted by me at the time — the corporate operative-types began to lose whatever purchase they had on stability. First there were the mergers and acquisitions of the 80s, which inevitably led to white collar job loss; then there was the downsizing of the 90s; and now of course the outsourcing of many business-professional functions. So no one is safe.

**Q:** *Do people in this sphere have any way to win a degree of real control over their economic condition? If they don't have some regulation of the market for their labor via certification (i.e. real professionalization) and they find it unimaginable to be unionized, does that leave them any options?*

**A:** No. As a blue collar union friend of mine commented: They bought the line, they never had any concept of solidarity, and now they're sunk.

**Q:** *In reporting this book, you created an alter ego, "Barbara Alexander," who is not the same person as Barbara Ehrenreich. But she's not totally different, either. There is a degree of overlap in age, background, work experience, etc. The job search proves fairly humiliating for Barbara Alexander. Was it hard to keep some distance from the role? It felt like she might explode a few times.*

**A:** Remember, "Barbara Alexander" was just my cover; I only distanced myself enough to be a fairly low-key observer/reporter. Hence no tantrums or crazed rants. So yes, a certain amount of self-control was necessary, and it did take its toll. I often felt extremely soiled, compromised and generally yucky about the whole venture.

By which I don't mean I'm too pure to be involved in the great corporate money-making machine (my books, after all, are published by a large corporation and I happily accept my royalties) but that I was trying to act like someone I'm not and that I suspect very few people are, i.e., the endlessly upbeat, compliant, do-with-me-what-you-will corporate employee.

**Q:** *Some aspects of the labor market you describe in Bait and Switch sound comparable to trends emerging in parts of academe. Any thoughts on that score? Have you considered writing, say, Ivy and Adjunct?*

**A:** You want me to go undercover as an adjunct? No way. First, I've been an adjunct, years ago, at both NYU and the College of New Rochelle, and I understand the pay hasn't improved since then. So sorry, that option is no more enticing than another stint at Wal-Mart.

Someone should write about it though. The condition of adjuncts, who provide the bulk of higher ed in this country, is an absolute scandal. I've met adjuncts who moonlight as maids and waitresses, and I've read about homeless ones. If the right is so worried about the academy being too left wing, they should do something about the treatment of adjuncts (and many junior faculty.) There's something about hunger that has a way of turning people to the left.

Reposted from *Inside Higher Ed*.