

Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream

Barbara Ehrenreich

New York: Henry Holt and Company, 2005 (237 pages)

It is hard to imagine a writer who can fill a medium-sized auditorium for a summer lecture. Yet, Barbara Ehrenreich did so one evening last summer at Holy Cross College (Indiana) to discuss her best seller, *Nickel and Dimed*. The entrance fee was a nonperishable food item for the Food Bank of Northern Indiana. An enthusiastic and opinionated speaker, the author did not disappoint her audience, consisting mainly of public service employees and advocacy group members. *Bait and Switch*, Ehrenreich's new book, most likely will be as widely read and discussed as *Nickel and Dimed*.

In *Nickel and Dimed*, the author, who considers herself an immersion journalist, explores life as a minimum-wage worker at establishments such as Wal-Mart and Molly Maids. In *Bait and Switch*, Ehrenreich, using her maiden name along with a new identity, attempts to enter mid-level corporate life. Contrary to comments on its dust jacket, this book is not a "searing exposé of economic cruelty where we least expect it." Rather, the author tries to make the case that business culture, which she sees as increasingly Christianized in some regions of the United States, fosters the creation of a body of disposable white-collar employees always willing to return to work regardless of hardships endured in off-periods.

Ehrenreich writes well, and one cannot help but laugh and cry as she describes her futile efforts to obtain a fifty thousand dollar a year job in the corporate sector as an event planner/public relations expert/speech writer. The author admits that her age (over forty), gaps in employment history, and a lack of corporate experience adversely affected her search. Furthermore, she suggests that the "academic stench" of a resumé could sink a corporate career. Although the author lives in Virginia, she targets Atlanta, Georgia, in her efforts to gain corporate employment.

The *Bait and Switch* title no doubt refers to self-help organizations, attended by the author, promising job networking. She found that many consisted instead of either Christian testifying or the marketing of additional services. *Bait and Switch* may also refer to job listings in public relations that turn out to be offers to sell insurance and cosmetics. However, this reviewer felt that the book itself baits the reader with the opportunity to gain insight into corporate careers and only after several chapters reveals that the author's job search was ultimately unsuccessful.

Ehrenreich is justifiably offended by comments at church-sponsored networking meetings stereotyping certain groups. However, this does not prevent the author, albeit more cleverly, from doing likewise. Nevertheless, Ehrenreich insightfully describes church buildings with corporate-like offices that offer a variety of social services yet are devoid of transcendental symbols.

The author spent over six thousand dollars on various coaches, trips, training and networking sessions, books, and positions on “elite” or “VIP” job boards. From this experience, she concludes that white-collar corporate employees face intrusive psychological demands, manipulation, and mind games in which personality and attitude outweigh performance. To gain corporate employment, according to the author, one must assume a conformist and passive attitude; thus making one susceptible to poor treatment both by employers and those purportedly assisting the unemployed. More so than blue-collar and professional workers, middle-class workers identify with employers and, therefore, fail to band together to defend their jobs. Ehrenreich calls for expanded and increased unemployment benefits, universal health insurance, and a fresh start for debt-ridden individuals who played by the rules, did everything right, and still ended up in ruin. The author ignores the extent to which her suggestions, if implemented, might increase the incidence and duration of unemployment of those for whom she expresses concern.

In stepping outside the government/academic sector, the author seems surprised at her difficulty in gaining a corporate position. By chance, the author witnesses a corporate training session and notes its rigor. Then, she says that small give-away props like Play-Doh encourage participants to “regress.” The author does not hold out hope for the white-collared unemployed and believes positive thinking is misguided. The book is incapable of providing concrete job-search suggestions; all means presented in the book are equally ineffective.

The goal is to describe corporate culture from within, but the author’s journalistic immersion is reduced to describing the plight of the “nonstandardly” employed. Nonstandard employment, according to the author, consists of holding positions as realtors, franchisers, and commissioned salespersons. Ironically, the author herself has done quite well as a nonstandard, self-employed, freelance writer. Yet, she provides only negative anecdotal accounts and statistics of employment in these sectors. This reviewer, on the other hand, was inspired by Ehrenreich’s descriptions of families and displaced mid-career individuals coping with job separation.

No doubt, the author’s six thousand dollars in search fees will be recovered by writing this book. Let us hope that those about whom she writes will do likewise in an economy flexible and resilient enough to make their present struggles but a distant memory.

—Maryann O. Keating
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