

*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*

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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."

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.

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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 insecur

## NOTES

1. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Fear of Falling* (Pantheon, 1989) 12.
2. Barbara Ehrenreich, *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream*