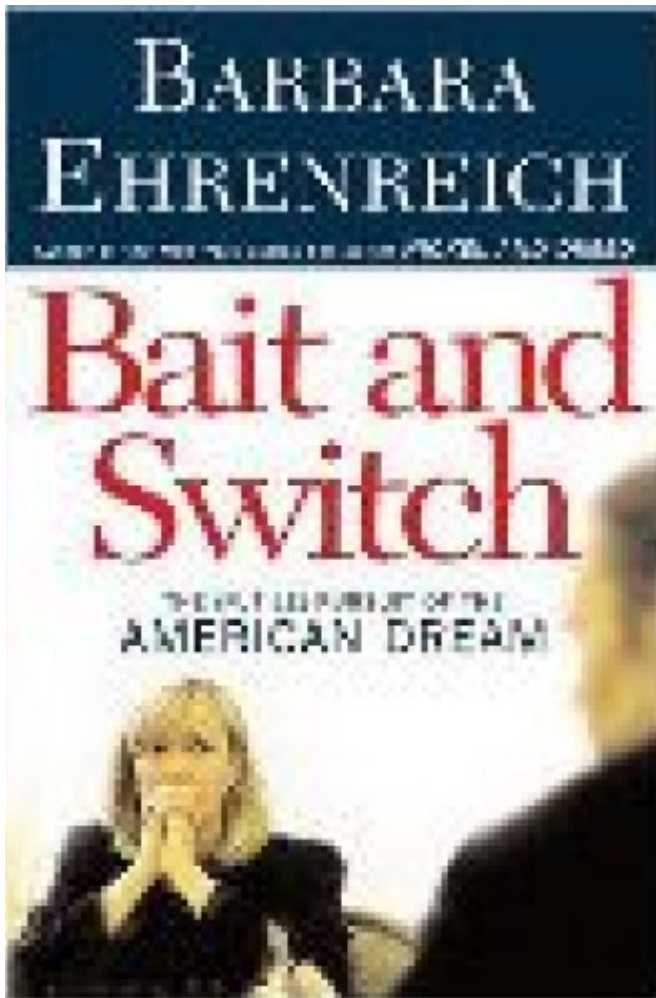


Lost in transition

By [Lillian Daniel](#) in the [November 29, 2005](#) issue

In Review



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

Barbara Ehrenreich
Metropolitan

In 2001 Barbara Ehrenreich opened people's eyes to the life of America's working poor with her provocative bestseller *Nickel and Dimed*. The author, journalist and

speaker had gone under cover as a low-wage worker taking positions as different as Wal-Mart cashier and cleaning woman. By telling her story in print, she focused a national spotlight on Americans who add one seven-dollar-an-hour job to another and weigh the medicine bill against the school-supplies list.

In her latest book Ehrenreich focuses her journalist's eye on middle-class corporate America, this time going undercover as a white-collar job seeker. As the title suggests, Ehrenreich had her struggles at the corporate level of the class structure as well, beginning with her struggle to get a job at all.

Ehrenreich hoped to translate her skills as a writer, lecturer and teacher into a \$50,000-a-year, benefits-level public-relations position, but she ended her corporate odyssey of many months with only two offers of commission-only sales positions, both of them lacking benefits as well as salary. So in a fascinating shift, what began as a project to understand corporate life became instead a story about being unemployed, unemployable and disappointed in the American dream.

What's going on in corporate America? Ehrenreich picked up a few ideas as she attended countless networking seminars and unemployment support groups and surfed résumé boards on the Internet, all under an assumed name. What she discovered is disturbing.

Ehrenreich explains what most of us already know: many of the long-term unemployed are white-collar corporate people who have been laid off in the name of higher profits for shareholders and replaced by cheaper, younger and often more enthusiastic newcomers. As grim as this picture is, another segment of the American economy is booming as a result—the “transition industry,” a massive, ragtag collection of job coaches and networking specialists, many of them recently laid off from corporate jobs themselves, who are there to assist or prey upon the growing number of white-collar unemployed people.

The biggest revelation in this book may be that the ubiquitous networking events in chain restaurants and motels around the country provide few opportunities to network and little time even to chat with one's fellow unemployed because they are set up as recruitment opportunities for paid job coaches or to encourage the purchase of the next level of networking tips, few of which actually lead to jobs.

So where is our salvation? Can the church help? Ehrenreich's description of Christian networking groups is more vexing than inspirational. She stumbles upon a number

of faith-based employment groups that offer little concrete assistance but serve instead as devices for proselytizing people while they're at their most discouraged. Ehrenreich is decidedly cynical about the testimonies at one such gathering, especially because they lead into a pitch for a CD of the pastor's sermons and promise prayer-delivered employment. This scathingly described episode took place at a well-known large church in the Virginia suburbs of Washington, D.C., whose congregation, Ehrenreich believes, has become so sadly utilitarian in its aping of business culture that it is a "realm drained of all transcendence and beauty."

In the arena of Christian unemployment groups, Ehrenreich's claws are out, but she fails to explore this world deeply, focusing on only one type of ministry to the unemployed. She misses the fact that for many unemployed people, life in the local church provides both spiritual support and a way to contribute time on a volunteer basis to an institution that values them more highly than the market that has tossed them aside. Yet we can take Ehrenreich's devastating description of how at least some churches respond to white-collar unemployment as a painful shot in the arm that may improve us—or at least inoculate us.

Despite her critique of the church, Ehrenreich hurls her sharpest arrows at the magical thinking of the business world, taking aim at the latest corporate crystal ball: the personality test. In one fascinating section, Ehrenreich reflects that when she entered the business world, she expected to find herself in "a brisk, logical, nonsense-free zone . . . in its focus on concrete results. . . . But what I encountered was a culture riven with assumptions unrelated to those that underlie the fact-and-logic-based worlds of, say, science and journalism—a culture addicted to untested habits, paralyzed by conformity, and shot through with magical thinking."

Ehrenreich describes a world in which "passion," "having the right attitude" and flimsy personality tests all carry more weight than actually being able to get the job done. Ehrenreich's stories of the outlandish results she got on her own many tests (for instance, this best-selling author of 13 books was told that she should not be a writer) are amusing until we consider how many people's God-given gifts have been swept aside by such psychologically fashionable tools.

As she piercingly comments, "Despite the personality tests, which rest on the assumption that personalities vary from person to person, only one kind of personality seems to be in demand, one that is relentlessly cheerful, enthusiastic, and obedient—the very qualities fostered by the transition industry." For those of us

who follow a Savior who suffered upon the cross, what does it mean to live in an economic system that demands enthusiasm at any cost?

Victim-blaming seems to be present across the board in the transition industry. The white-collar unemployed are berated for any negativity they project, often at seminars they have paid handsomely to attend. This combines with the sense of defeat the unemployed can feel to create a culture in which nobody is asking the hard questions.

For instance, why are talented businesspeople who find themselves unemployed so easily fleeced by entrepreneurs who profit from their misfortune? And given this flimsy global economic house of cards, why is health insurance tied to our jobs? Finally, why do the white-collar unemployed tolerate this system instead of banding together with their blue-collar brothers and sisters and organizing?

Fans of *Nickel and Dimed* will notice that something is missing from *Bait and Switch*: the rich characterization of people. In her earlier book her band of working-class co-workers became people the reader could know and root for. *Bait and Switch's* characters are more lightly sketched, with Ehrenreich drawing from an anonymous collection of furtive comments over a quick coffee and from the longer late-night Internet musings of the lonely. It seems as though the author and her subjects never clicked but merely drifted about in the same desert, none of them finding living water or even a shared canteen.

Ehrenreich notes that there is a disturbing lack of camaraderie among the white-collar unemployed. They are a guarded and competitive bunch whose silent stoicism is fueled by a job-coaching industry that draws people together to network but doesn't actually foster relationships. And in the personality-test ethos, cultural critique and political analysis are taboo, evidence of the ultimate bad attitude.

Can such an order be redefined by the Christian gospel, which dares to suggest that the last shall be first? Although Ehrenreich won't let the church groups she encountered off the hook, I am left hoping that people of faith will read this book and ask those bad-attitude questions from a deeper theological standpoint than she encountered, and prove her lampooning wrong. Why shouldn't churches, where the unemployed and currently employed sit side by side in the pews, be the place where those very provocative questions about the systemic causes of unemployment are raised? Must the enthusiasm industry have the last word, or can we offer a deeper passion than rooting for the signer of our latest commission-only paycheck? I can't

help believing we have a better coach.