Denied the Fruits of Their Labors

Corey Robin

NICKEL AND DIMED:
ON (NOT) GETTING BY
IN BOOM-TIME AMERICA
by Barbara Ehrenreich
Metropolitan Books, 2001 256 pp $23

WHITE-COLLAR SWEATSHOP:
THE DETERIORATION OF WORK AND ITS
REWARDS IN CORPORATE AMERICA
by Jill Andresky Fraser
W.W. Norton & Company, 2001 352 pp $26.95

TOURING WEST VIRGINIA during the 1960 presidential campaign, John Kennedy was accosted by a miner demanding to know whether he was indeed "the son of one of our wealthiest men." Kennedy admitted that he was. "Is it true that you've never wanted for anything and had everything you wanted?" the miner pressed. "I guess so." "Is it true you've never done a day's work with your hands all your life?" Kennedy nodded. "Well," the miner drawled, "let me tell you this. You haven't missed a thing."

Mindless drudgery or moral elevation? In the Western tradition, work has been both, and for good reason. On the one hand, work, whether physical or intellectual, can be fulfilling. Reversing the usual stereotype, Karl Marx criticized Adam Smith for lamenting the burdens of work and failing to grasp that "the overcoming of . . . obstacles" was a basic component of human freedom. Work pressed men and women to develop their full capacities, a prerequisite for the realization of self. Less romantic types have celebrated work for the relief it provides from the misery of the human condition. Without work, Sherlock Holmes confesses to Watson, there is only tedium—and cocaine. "My mind," he says, "rebels at stagnation. Give me problems, give me work, give me the most abstruse cryptogram, or the most intricate analysis, and I am in my own proper atmosphere. I can dispense then with artificial stimulants."

But work can also *be* the misery of the human condition. It often requires demanding physical effort. It takes men and women away from more satisfying activity. It can be mind-numbing and oppressive. There is a reason, after all, that work is a biblical curse. And not only hard labor can seem onerous: whatever the charms of the life of the mind, Anthony Trollope noted, they alone could not compel a writer to put pen to paper; only the rewards of money and fame compensated for the painful effort writing required. "Take away from English authors their copyrights," he archly observed, "and you would very soon take away also from England her authors."

In recent years, this historic ambivalence about work has given way to a more flattened consciousness. In our post-welfare era, work is an unqualified good; the only bad thing is not having it. It gets people out of poverty—and out of bed. Going to work "constitutes a framework for daily behavior," writes William Julius Wilson, without which "life . . . becomes less coherent." Work instills discipline and responsibility. It converts the self's drifting energies into vital currents of industry and design. These claims are not new; centuries ago, John Calvin praised work as "a sort of sentry post" preventing us from "heedlessly wander[ing] about through life." What is new is the failure to acknowledge that work does not always fulfill its appointed mission. So complete is our faith in its virtues that George W. Bush, whose own life is not exactly an advertisement for steady work, can nevertheless luxuriate, without a hint of embarrassment or criticism, in its moral grandeur.

In two excellent new books, Barbara Ehrenreich and Jill Andresky Fraser provide a more skeptical account of life on the job. Ehrenreich goes undercover in the low end of the service economy, working as a waitress in Florida, a housekeeper and nursing-home aide in Maine, and a retail clerk in Minneapolis, while Fraser interviews scores of high-powered professionals at Intel, Microsoft, and other crown jewels of the high-tech economy. Despite their different travels, both authors land in the same place—a nation of intense economic anxiety. But more striking than their depictions of financial stress are their unsentimental renditions of work itself, particularly the nearly authoritarian control to which workers—blue-, pink-, and white-collar alike—are routinely subjected. Both authors show that far from giving men and women an opportunity for spiritual freedom, work today exacts a form of submission that is as far removed from the sunny bromides of the free market as it is from the most minimal definition of a liberal society. Workers inhabit a world less postmodern than premodern, whose master theorist is neither Karl Marx nor Adam Smith but Joseph de Maistre.

EHRENREICH GOT her inspiration for *Nickel and Dimed* over a $30 lunch of "salmon and field greens" with *Harper's* editor Louis Lapham. Dining at a tony New York restaurant, she and Lapham chewed over the question of how the millions of women being kicked off welfare were getting by in today's low-wage economy. "Then I said something that I have since had many opportunities to regret," Ehrenreich reports. "'Someone ought to do the old-fashioned kind of journalism—you know, go out there and try it for themselves.'" Next thing she knew, Ehrenreich was dishing out salad and Key Lime pie to hungry tourists at a downscale Key West restaurant.

Five jobs and three cities later, Ehrenreich concludes that many of today's jobs don't pay enough to support one person—much less a whole family. She works two jobs at a time and eats "chopped meat, beans, cheese and noodles." But in all three cities, rent gets the better of her economy. "You don't need a degree in economics," she writes, "to see that wages are too low and rents too high." But this is a mathematical conclusion, which could have been made with the aid of a calculator. By taking these jobs herself, Ehrenreich is able to capture the material details of workplace indignity—from the obstacle course she is forced to run at the restaurant ("Employees are barred from using the front door, so I enter the first day through the kitchen, where a red-faced man with shoulder length blond hair is throwing frozen steaks against the wall and yelling, 'Fuck this shit!'") to the "unwanted intimacy" she acquires as a maid cleaning the bathrooms of the privileged. Whether rehearsing the taxonomy of dirty toilets ("there are three kinds of shit-stains") or the grueling routine of washing windows in an un-air-conditioned house ("Outside, I can see the construction guys knocking back Gatorade, but the rule is that no fluid or food item can touch a maid's lips when she's inside a house"), Ehrenreich shows how work's various postures of submission recreate the upstairs-downstairs world of old Europe. As the brochure of a Maine cleaning service brags, "We clean floors the old-fashioned way—*on our hands and knees*."

Before she is even employed, Ehrenreich submits herself to the most intimate supervision. The drug tester at Wal-Mart, an "officious woman in blue scrubs," grabs Ehrenreich's hands, squirts a soapy substance onto her palms, and has Ehrenreich wash them in front of her—all to make sure that Ehrenreich does not slip a drug-dissolving agent into her urine. (Once employed, workers are told not only when to pee but when to hold it in: Ehrenreich recites cases of female employees, forbidden to go to the bathroom for up to six hours, wearing pads inside their uniforms into which they urinate.) The personality exams that follow the drug tests are more invasive. Some questions are about politics: does she think that "management and employees will always be in conflict because they have totally different sets of goals?" But others press her to self-revelation. Is she prone to self-pity? Does she think people talk about her behind her back? "The real function of these tests," Ehrenreich concludes, "is not to convey information to the employer, but to the potential employee, and the information

being conveyed is always: You will have no secrets from us."

On the job, employers closely watch workers. Managers prowl the aisles and hallways, hunting for "gossip"—anything from chatter about weekend plans to talking against the boss. Some of these proscriptions are illegal (prohibiting workers, for instance, from sharing information with each other about their pay). But most are not. As one of Ehrenreich's managers explains, if an employee on the job does "anything at all" besides work—including talking—it's "time theft." We are not that far, it seems, from Frederick Douglass's description of himself as a piece of stolen property.

Such intense supervision, combined with the omnipresent fear of being fired, turns employees—including Ehrenreich—into evasive men and women who shrink before authority and refrain from challenging injustice. After a Wal-Mart manager catches her stealing time and demands to know why she isn't at her computer, Ehrenreich squeaks out a lie and flashes "what is known to primatologists as a 'fear grin'—half teeth-baring and half grimace." At her job in Key West, she fails to protest when an assistant manager fires a nineteen-year-old Czech dishwasher whom she has befriended. "Something new—something loathsome and servile—had infected me," she confesses, "along with the kitchen odors that I could still sniff on my bra when I finally undressed at night. In real life I am moderately brave, but plenty of brave people shed their courage in POW camps, and maybe something similar goes on in the infinitely more congenial milieu of the low-wage American workplace."

One of the reasons workers have traditionally fled these dead-end jobs for the salaried life of the professional is to enjoy the autonomy that comes with the white collar. But as Jill Andresky Fraser demonstrates in *White-Collar Sweatshop*—a vivid piece of reportage exposing the dirtiest secrets of today's corporations—the top floor of the skyscraper may not be so different from the cafeteria kitchen. If today's professional wants to keep her position, she must prove that she is willing to work all the time, on and off the job, and do as she's told. In her mise-en-scène, Fraser describes the punishing schedule of Gemma, a marketing executive, who rides the 5:29 commuter train back to Scarsdale every day. But Gemma is no 9-to-5er. She makes calls for work the whole way home. Once there, she's back on the phone. After the kids are fed and in bed, she has faxes to send, e-mails to answer, and more calls to return. Her only break is the ten minutes it takes her train to travel the tunnel between Grand Central and 125th Street. "That's time when I couldn't use my cell phone even if I wanted to."

Gemma's schedule—and those of millions of professionals like her—is not freely chosen; managers make sure white-collar employees think they *must* work eighty-hour weeks simply to hold onto their jobs. "The most important role of managers is to create an environment in which people are passionately dedicated to winning in the marketplace," writes former Intel CEO Andrew Grove in *Only the Paranoid Survive*. "Fear plays a major role in creating and maintaining such passion. Fear of competition, fear of bankruptcy, fear of being wrong, and fear of losing can all be powerful motivators." Fraser shows that far from being powered by unleashed self-interest, the past decade's economic boom has a darker source. As a *Wall Street Journal* article puts it: "The workplace is never free of fear, and it shouldn't be. Indeed, fear can be a powerful management tool."

Some corporate chieftains inspire fear the old-fashioned way. Grove, for example, ran Intel the way Al Capone ran Chicago. When an aide is late for a meeting, Grove waits, "holding a stave of wood the size of a baseball bat." Finally, he slams "the wood onto the surface of the meeting-room table," and shouts, "I don't ever, *ever*, want to be in a meeting with this group that doesn't start and end when it's scheduled." Other bosses go high tech, relying on computer technology to monitor an employee's every move. The Investigator software program—used by Exxon, Mobil, and Delta—keeps track not only of workplace performance measures (like the number of an employee's key strokes and mouse clicks per day) but also of troublemakers. Should an employee type an "alert" word like boss or union, Investigator automatically forwards her docu-

ment to her supervisor. "Back in the fifteenth century," a PR executive tells Fraser, "they used to use a ball and chain, and now they use technology."

Intimidation and spying coexist with phony professions of individualism, while employees terrified of losing their jobs are corralled into elaborate affirmations of faux bonhomie and loyalty to the firm. After NYNEX began to cut its workforce, it required its MBAs and skilled technicians to attend a three-day-long retreat where they were asked to hop around a room. One employee tells Fraser, "The leaders would say things like, 'Look at how creative you are, how many different ways you can figure out to manage to jump around the room.' And we all did it. . . . We all did it." A marketing executive at a radio-station chain explains how a management consultant handed out water pistols to him and his colleagues and had them squirt each other. "There were all these executives running around squirting each other," he says. He thought to himself, "If I don't squirt, will I be gone too?" After a round of layoffs at the Bank of America, corporate higher-ups established a voluntary program for employees to "adopt" an ATM machine. More than 2,800 employees signed up, faithfully cleaning their own machine and its environs—on their own time, without extra pay—just to save their jobs.

ALTHOUGH NEITHER Ehrenreich nor Fraser addresses larger questions of social theory, their accounts pose a serious challenge to many contemporary intellectuals on the left. Against critics—inspired by Michel Foucault—who focus on disciplinary institutions like prisons, hospitals, and schools, these books remind us that the workplace remains the central institution in most people's lives. Foucault and his followers would have us believe that liberalism and the Enlightenment have vanquished the medieval world, and that discourses of freedom, reason, and individuality are the instruments of contemporary domination. But in the workplace, men and women are disciplined not by an impersonal panopticon but by the all-too personal figure of their boss. Liberalism is nowhere to be found, and Enlightenment might as well be the name of the utility company.

Against critics of capitalism, Ehrenreich and Fraser suggest that the great evil of work is not commodification or the culture of the market, but the undignified obeisance workers pay their supervisors. Karl Marx complained that capitalism combined "anarchy" in the market with "despotism in . . . the workshop." But many of his followers have paid more attention to the first than to the second. Ehrenreich and Fraser remind us why the workplace is so important to progressive politics. Men and women spend the bulk of their waking hours at work. It's where they earn their pay and meet the world. It can, if pressure is brought to bear, provide an opportunity for creativity and fellowship. But for the vast majority, work occasions a return to childhood, with few of its freedoms and most of its restrictions.

And, finally, Ehrenreich and Fraser force us to rethink the politics of poverty. Several reviewers have hailed *Nickel and Dimed* as a worthy successor to Michael Harrington's *The Other America*. The comparison is apt, but not for the reason these reviewers think. For Harrington discovered the poor, as he put it, "off the beaten track," rotting in the inner cities or along the rural peripheries. Though he discussed poverty's many guises and causes, he left the impression that people were poor because they did not fully participate in the economy. They were "the rejects of the affluent society" who "never had the right skills in the first place" or "lost them when the rest of the economy advanced." (In recent decades, William Julius Wilson has advanced a similar argument.) To understand the alien world of the poor required the talents of a modern-day Dickens, for only an artist could capture the "smell and texture" of people who "talk and think differently." Harrington's audience was the affluent society, the millions who had suddenly joined the middle class and forgotten that poverty existed. The only way to widen the circle of "the friends of the poor," he thought, was to describe and decry, in elegant and haunting prose, the poor's isolation, to remind everyone that though the poor were "other," they were still America.

But as Ehrenreich shows, today's poor are not the casualties of progress; they are its engines, or at least they grease the wheels that

make the engines go. They clean the hotel rooms of globe-trotting capitalists. They ride bikes through wet city streets, delivering food to Wall Street lawyers burning the midnight oil. They are the temps and contingent workers who make profit margins soar. We are far closer to *The Road to Wigan Pier* than to *The Other America*. For George Orwell understood the poor as indispensable agents of an industrial economy, not as objects of compassion. "You could quite easily drive a car," he wrote, "across the north of England and never once remember that hundreds of feet below the road you are on the miners are hacking at the coal. Yet in a sense it is the miners who are driving your car forward." Ehrenreich reminds us that though ours is a high-tech, service economy, we still occupy Orwell's world, where the poor are not so much cast aside as denied the fruits of their labor. And, as Fraser shows, low-level workers aren't the only ones feeling the pinch of others' profit, so are the middle tiers of IBM, Drexel Burnham, and other corporate giants. Harrington's imagined audience of white-collar readers has largely disappeared. Professionals, done in by downsizing and stagnant wages, are too frightened of losing their own jobs to worry about anyone else's. Given the steady convergence of the lives of the poor and of the middle class, perhaps the time is ripe not for a war on poverty but for a war on the workplace—or, better yet, in the workplace. ●

COREY ROBIN is an assistant professor of political science at Brooklyn College, City University of New York. He is writing a book entitled *Fear: Biography of an Idea*.

Standard-Bearer of the Right

Gary Gerstle

BEFORE THE STORM: BARRY GOLDWATER AND THE UNMAKING OF THE AMERICAN CONSENSUS
by Rick Perlstein
Hill and Wang, 2001 671 pp $30

NO POLITICAL movement in America these last twenty-five years has rivaled conservatism in appeal or influence. Everywhere one looks, conservative outlooks dominate public opinion: the market is celebrated as the most effective and just distributor of society's resources; government expenditures of any sort, other than for national defense, are condemned as ineffective or harmful to the Gross National Product; morality and social discipline are regarded as the only legitimate touchstones of social policy.

Despite conservatism's influence, historians of the twentieth-century United States have had a hard time giving this political movement its due. Libraries are choked with books on the history of liberalism and the left while the shelves on the history of conservatism are spare. In part this imbalance reflects historians' natural tendency to neglect the recent past and to focus instead on the more distant past, the first half of the twentieth century, when liberalism, in the form of Progressivism and the New Deal, really was the most important American political movement. This imbalance, however, also reflects the composition of liberal arts faculties at most colleges and universities, where liberals and leftists are abundant and conservatives are in short supply. Conservative intellectuals, by and large, have disdained the academic career path, preferring instead the work offered them outside universities in well-heeled conservative think tanks, where they tend to devote themselves to political philosophy and public policy rather than history.