

Book Review Essay: Anthropology of Work

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Barbara Ehrenreich

2001 *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*.

New York: Henry Holt and Company, Metropolitan Books.

John Bowe, Marisa Bowe, and Sabin Streeter, eds.

2000 *Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs*. New York:

Three Rivers Press.

In the thick of applying for research funding, it occurred to me that one could do the anthropology of work by, well, working. For example, I could wait tables for a couple of years, then publish my ethnography of the waiting profession (I'm still not ruling out this possibility, depending on the fickle twists and turns of the academic job market). Quite apart from its earning potential, however, such an anthropology of work would offer a vital, critical perspective to a public discourse that, until recently, seemed saturated with references to "prosperity," "full employment," and people being "lifted out of poverty" or going "off of welfare." After the "correction" of the "new economy" and the beginning of recession, there can only be a greater audience of readers interested in finding out what such language actually refers to on the ground.

Anthropologists are not the only ones concerned with such matters. Two recent non-anthropological texts have responded to this need for interpretation and critique with a focus on "the folks" in contemporary US society, which many anthropologists will find both familiar and satisfying. Barbara Ehrenreich's piece of investigative journalism *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001) and the oral history collection *Gig: Americans Talk About Their Jobs* (2000) attempt to do something like ethnography, whether pursuing a critical

project (Ehrenreich 2001) or an ostensibly more neutral documentary one (Bowe et al. 2000). Without comparing them favorably or otherwise with the substantial anthropological literature on work, I would like to suggest that professional ethnographers can benefit from engaging these books, both for the epistemological, political, and methodological issues they raise and for their value as texts for teaching about contemporary US society.

Ehrenreich's book joins a tradition of muckraking, exposé journalism, in which the author goes undercover to bring to light some aspect of social reality. Commissioned as a series of articles for *Harper's* magazine, *Nickel and Dimed* grew out of Ehrenreich's attempt to enter the life of an "Other," in this case, across class lines. In each of three locations—Florida, Maine, and Minnesota—Ehrenreich sought work in what is politely known as the service sector, in jobs that require little in the way of education or skills, and offer only minimal wages and benefits. The point was to find out if it was possible to "make it" in such situations and if so, how people managed to do it. The project was a response to welfare reform and the deterioration of the industrial base of stable, blue-collar employment.

Ehrenreich relates the conversation with *Harper's* editor Lewis Lapham that gave rise to the project:

How does anyone live on the wages available to the unskilled? How, in particular, we wondered, were the roughly four million women about to be booted into the labor market by welfare reform going to make it on \$6 or \$7 an hour? Then I said something that I have since had many opportunities to regret: "Someone ought to do the old-fashioned kind of journalism—you know, go out there and try it for themselves." I meant someone much younger than myself, some hungry neophyte journalist with time on her hands. But Lapham got this crazy-looking half smile on his face and ended life as I knew it, for long stretches at least, with the single word "*You*." (Ehrenreich 2001:1-2)

Unhindered by her lack of an ethnographer's license (besides her distinguished career as a writer and social critic, she has a Ph.D. in biology), Ehrenreich ventured into "the field." The account that results from her adventures does an admirable job of seeking a balance between Ehrenreich's compelling personal narrative and some big-pic-

ture contextualizing information, usually in the form of statistics cited in footnotes. The stats are there, it would seem, to provide ballast for a public policy argument. She is not particularly interested in contributing to the field of social theory or commenting on prior works: in the Maine portion of her project, Ehrenreich lugged along a bag full of books that turned out to be “the most useless items in my inventory” (Ehrenreich 2001:53).

There is plenty that separates the book from anthropology. The timeline of Ehrenreich’s project was scarcely enough to justify a doctoral dissertation, or even a “multisited” ethnography (see Marcus 1995). She gives herself a month to make it in each setting, and when the time is up, win or lose, she pulls up stakes and moves on. In this way she clearly does not respond to certain critiques of field work which take anthropologists to task for exerting the quasi-colonial privilege to leave the research setting, not sticking around to experience the effects (whether positive or negative) their work has on the population under study (see Gordon 1998; Visweswaran 1994). Also, in her zeal to humanize the low-wage workers she is trying to join in the struggle to make it, Ehrenreich skirts numerous issues that are dear to academics who weigh in on matters of politics, identity, and humanism. For instance, when she feels a stigma associated with her maid’s uniform that makes clerks in a supermarket eye her suspiciously, she writes “Maybe it occurs to me, I’m getting a tiny glimpse of what it would be like to be black” (Ehrenreich 2001:100). No doubt an academic text would require much more of a disclaimer for such a statement than the conscientious and liberal Ehrenreich provides.

Yet before dismissing the book on disciplinary or theoretical grounds, it is important to consider whether such a project ever could have been done under the auspices of an anthropology department. The professional mandate to obtain informed consent from the subjects of research becomes highly problematic in a corporate context—specifically, corporate management often does not want to be studied in a critical way, and its members are in a stronger position to resist being studied than are many conventional (i.e. subaltern) subjects of anthropology. The quandaries raised by these issues point to the always political nature of ethics and research. Working outside of anthropology, Ehrenreich was less hindered by such questions. Does this mean that the people about whose lives she conducted research were less protected from the potentially deleterious effects of being repre-

sented and objectified in text? Perhaps, but there is also the possibility that the political value of her book would have been lost among the disciplinary hoops-jumping of an academic project.

If Ehrenreich's book is the story of a personal venture into the capitalist heart of darkness, *Gig* takes its generic cues from Studs Terkel's oral histories, and is deliberately modeled after his widely-read text *Working* (see Terkel 1975). Like Terkel's landmark books, *Gig* presents people's experiences in their own words, with minimal introduction or commentary from the editors. The project began as a weekly column on the webzine *Word*, which published recorded interviews with people about their jobs. The collection effort began to snowball in true internet fashion as people emailed the editors with ideas for other jobs to be included, and eventually there were almost forty researchers involved in interviewing 126 subjects. The questions and comments of the researchers are not included in the text.

Again, it is easy for academic veterans of reflexivity and positionality training to critique the humanism of a work like *Gig*. The book is premised on the idea of language as a transparent medium for experiences and feelings to be transmitted from "real people" to the reader. One of the editors writes in the introduction:

Gig presents the mesmerizing, many-textured, profound, hilarious, and above all, unscripted voice of the individual. *Unmediated* by TV or magazine editing, it's something that nearly goes unheard beneath the deluge of movies, TV, celebrity coverage, advertising, and general hype that pours down upon us every day... We feel that the world hears too much from "experts" of all political stripes, and not enough from the people for and about whom they presume to speak. (Bowe et al. 2000, emphasis added)

Any academic worth their salary or stipend will recognize a number of appropriate critical questions: Who chose these narratives? How were the narratives edited? What was the context of the interview? What was the political relationship between the speaker and the interviewer? Of course these are valid concerns, but they remain unasked in much of anthropological work as well. The editors' claim to offer the authentic voice of their subjects goes unhindered by any qualification as to the partiality of the project, in both senses (see Clifford 1986). Yet the desire for authentic information and insight about real life, whether

derived from the “being there” of ethnography or from talking to the people themselves, persists on a deep level even in a reflexive and postmodernly-jaded anthropology.

In a blurb for *Gig*, quoted inside the paperback edition, a reviewer claims that the book portrays more about working life than any “theories of sociologists” could. This may be so, but a critical component is lacking here which might come through in a similar work that responds to social theory. The hesitancy of most interviewees to be critical of their jobs is striking. For the editors, this represents the “wholehearted diligence that people bring to their work.” I suspect it is also an aspect of the interview situation, as workers try to present a kind of “public face”—exactly what Ehrenreich tried to peer behind in her account. The benefit of a longer-term ethnographic approach often comes from sticking around after the formal, polite situation is over, thereby getting past the public front of a “positive light.” There are a few exceptional chapters in which this happens in *Gig*, such as the UPS driver who offers no romanticization of his work: “It’s basically a job for stupid people. It’s not very interesting. It’s just not. I mean, if you have no other opportunities and you need benefits, and you’re going nowhere, take this job” (Bowe et al. 2000). In another critical, powerful, and surprising moment, a computer systems administrator relates his disillusionment with the internet in a tale of a hacker attack on a university network that is agonizingly suspenseful. More often, critical content is buried between the lines. This should not preclude a teacher using these texts as material for discussing critical perspectives on society, but the counterpoint which would lay such issues bare is not always explicit in the text.

Nevertheless, this is a diverse read and a page-turner—how many academic texts can say the same? The text is grouped into headings that range from the understated to the sensational: the gruesome “Crime Scene Cleaner,” a job inspired directly by the movie *Pulp Fiction*, is under “Goods and Services,” while “Sex” gets a category to itself. The interviews run the gamut between cute (“Lemonade Salesman”) and a sort of documentary noir (“Transvestite Prostitute” and “Bookie”), and attempt to be inclusive of various class positions (from “Temp” to “Film Producer”). At times it seems that the ideal reader is someone contemplating a career change who seeks a voyeuristic glimpse at various occupations. But to its credit, as academic superstar Andrew Ross states in another blurbed review, the book pays attention to texts

that, however constructed they may be, are at least in part constructed by the people they are about.

At its best, ethnography can provide a combination of what these books try to do: a willingness like Ehrenreich's to get dirty and personal, putting her body on the line, along with the meticulous attention to self-representation found in *Gig*. However, the publication of these books poses tough questions to anthropology as a source of public commentary: Can the discipline, with its ritually-protected standards like the 12-month fieldwork period and competence in the research language, necessarily claim final authority in representing social life? When read in tandem, which representation can really be called authentic: the anthropological dissertation on discount stores, the jolly narrative of the "Wal-Mart Greeter" in *Gig*, or Ehrenreich's tales of her and her co-worker's humiliation and repetitive motion injury in Wal-Mart's shelf-stocking trenches? These are not questions to be answered, but can provide rich material for discussion that hopefully will result in positive change both to the production of knowledge and to the society which is ostensibly represented.

One glaring difference, of course, is that these books are destined to have a wider audience than just about any work of anthropology—already, they have captured the attention of no less of a mainstream organ than *Harper's*, which sponsored the first book and has excerpted the second in its pages. Despite the differences in sales rankings on amazon.com, though, these books and academic ethnographies share a similar political predicament: neither is liable to garner decisive attention from policy makers due to their fundamentally qualitative approach to social issues. These books can and should be provocative additions to the never-ending anthropological discussions about how we can be better "public" or "activist" anthropologists. To the benefit of those who read them, *Gig* and *Nickel and Dimed* did not have to wait for such professional soul-searching issues to be resolved before they appeared in print.

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