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Appreciation

My Revolutionary Inspiration, Barbara Ehrenreich

- Features - In Memoriam - Obituaries and appreciations -

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None of the obituaries I have read of feminist fighter, activist, and writer Barbara Ehrenreich come close to capturing her significance to the movement, apart from the one penned by her lifelong friend Deirdre English for [Mother Jones](#). Nearly all others give center stage to her powerful best-seller *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001), a stirring undercover account of the appalling poverty, stress, and disrespect faced by the working poor, especially women. Written at the beginning of twenty-first century, it remains a shocking description of the obscene inequality characterizing our times. It is a book that any person of progressive leanings will applaud.

However, by the time *Nickel and Dimed* was published, Ehrenreich had already had a long career stretching back to the heyday of women's liberation, when she'd left her indelible mark on the movement by battling to preserve within it the revolutionary socialist current initially at the heart of Western feminism. First and foremost she was, and remained, the archetypal socialist feminist. Like Sheila Rowbotham in the UK, Barbara helped shape its meaning, as part of an "internationalist anti-racist, anti-heterosexist feminism." In her germinal essay "[What is Socialist Feminism?](#)" (1976), she explains that socialist feminists are distinct from classical Marxists in that they aim "to transform not only the ownership of the means of production, but the totality of social existence . . . women who seemed most peripheral [to Marxists], the housewives, are at the very heart of their class raising children, holding together families, maintaining the cultural and social networks of the community." She maintained this distinctive stance in all she said and did until her dying breath, having just turned eighty-one.

The very first time I met her, in the late 1970s, she was visiting me in North London at the Islington Community Press, where I helped produce an alternative local paper, committed to supporting the colorful diversity of radical grassroots struggles. "We must form an international conspiracy of feminist guerrillas," Barbara laughed. Captivated by her witty, thrilling company, I soon visited my exciting new acquaintance in her home in Syosset, Long Island, meeting her charming children Rosa and Benjy, and her militant Teamster second husband Gary Stevenson. Later I would also stay in her lush home in Sugarloaf Key, Florida. I also had the huge pleasure of welcoming Barbara to my own home on several visits she made to London to promote the launch of her many books over the years. "How come you've kidnapped the sexiest men in London and got them holed up here servicing you?" she quipped, with characteristic exaggeration, surveying my collective household in the 1980s. Men sharing domestic responsibilities with women really met with her approval, since she feared that feminism might assist men in avoiding housework and caring responsibilities that men would suddenly feel freer to abandon newly "independent" women.

This was a topic she tackled in one of her earlier books, *The Hearts of Men: American Dreams and the Flight from Commitment* (1983). There she argued that even before women's liberation, some men were cheerfully resisting domestic ties and duties, envious of the life they saw in *Playboy*, in whose pages women were still submissive, nurturing, and responsive, yet also financially independent. By the 1980s, with the arrival of recession and welfare cutbacks in much of the West, Barbara feared that feminism might have "freed men first," leaving more women only a divorce away from chronic poverty, left trying to support themselves and their children without men's higher wage. Always a personal inspiration, I often seemed to be following in Barbara's footsteps: by the end of the decade, I was writing my own book about men after feminism, *Slow Motion: Changing Masculinities, Changing Men* (1990), although in it I didn't fully share Barbara's robust cynicism of men, since in the left libertarian households I knew household chore rotations and shared childcare were sacrosanct.

Within her career, *The Hearts of Men* was an outlier, however: Barbara's heart always remained largely focused on women, especially the most oppressed and exploited. The point of her socialist feminism was not to waste her time berating men; she was happier poking fun at what she saw as the residual pathetic "rubble of patriarchy." In one of

her late articles for *The Baffler*, "[Patriarchy Deflated](#)" (2018), she encouraged any woman to "laugh out loud at every instance of male and class-based pomposity," while pondering "what a world shaped by the female pursuit of pleasure might look like."

Barbara was all too aware of the cruelties and exploitation women have always faced, simply from being born female. Indeed, her first international best-seller, *Witches, Midwives and Nurses* (1972), written exactly half a century ago with Deirdre English (former editor-in-chief of *Mother Jones*), reminded readers of the grotesque history of witchcraft persecution. The book argues that accusations of evildoing directed at women healers and midwives helped the emerging medical profession to exclude women from the expanding (male) power of the medical profession.

Later studies complicated that story, suggesting that the majority of people persecuted during the long period of Western witch-hunts were predominantly not women healers, but simply destitute women, especially older women living on their own. However, that book was important in highlighting women's prolonged exclusion from the medical profession until well into the twentieth century. Two subsequent books by Ehrenreich and English on the effects of such exclusion, *Complaints and Disorders* (1973) and *For Her Own Good* (1978), cover the routine sexism evident in the treatment of women as the weaker, pathological sex. They also highlight the deeply contrasting class and race differences in the levels of care and respect patients receive from doctors and psychiatrists. Her interest in the wholly inadequate nature of health care in the United States had actually begun well before, when living with her first husband and enduring friend, John Ehrenreich. Together they wrote *The American Health Empire: Power, Profits and Politics* (1971), after having participated in and researched the global dimensions of student revolt in the late sixties for *Long March, Short Spring* (1969).

Yet, always a militant feminist, Barbara also knew that whatever the enduring evils inflicted on women because of their sex, "there is no way to understand sexism as it acts on our lives without putting it in the historical context of capitalism." It was exploring that shifting historical context that became her life work, even as she mourned the decline of socialist feminist organizing in the United States. In her essay "[Life without Father: Reconsidering Socialist-Feminist Theory](#)" for *Socialist Review* (1984), Barbara described how, back in the seventies, socialist feminist conferences had been irreparably damaged by the activities of a few Marxist-Leninist and Maoist groups. It was the very success of the autonomous socialist feminist movement by the mid-1970s that attracted the aggressive incursions of a few women determined to impose on other feminists the forms of hierarchical discipline and outlook drawn from their own fringe left grouplets. As Barbara later mourned, these "sects" joined and harassed more than twenty socialist feminist groups around the United States, "dragging almost all of them down to their deaths in arcane squabbles over the 'correct line': "I have never seen an adequate or even inadequate account of this nasty phase of left feminist history that addresses . . . why socialist-feminist organizations, including the successful and level-headed Chicago Women's Liberation Union, crumbled in the face of so much bullshit." In sync again, I would later report similar sectarian battles undermining socialist feminist conferences in the UK at much the same time in my reflections on the decline of socialist feminism in the UK, *Is the Future Female: Troubled Thoughts on Contemporary Feminism* (1987). Other British feminists were also troubled by the shifting feminist terrain when the ties between feminism and the left were fragmenting, along with the weakening of the left itself.

Undeterred, with socialist feminism soon overtaken by a more aspirational, distinctly women-centered feminism in the United States, Barbara joined and soon cochaired the independent activist alliance the Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) in the 1980s, alongside the late Michael Harrington. Her daily work turned then to recording and protesting the "decade of greed" ushered in by Ronald Reagan, a year after Margaret Thatcher moved the right into power in the UK. That decade of increasing inequality and poverty was generating anxieties even among the professional middle class. In *Fear of Falling: The Inner Life of the Middle Class* (1989), Barbara revealed them now struggling to preserve their privileges and provide every possible advantage for their children to ensure their upwardly mobility in the face of rising hardship among the working class.

With Clinton's election in 1992, Barbara was busy organizing against his destructive "reforms", cutting welfare and

food stamps, thereby forcing women, especially those supporting dependents on their own, to work in jobs that denied them even a living wage. This is what led to her research for *Nickel and Dimed*, with its vivid descriptions of the plight of women forced to work not one but two or more jobs, struggling at home and at work simply to keep themselves and their families from total destitution. She succinctly summarized this suffering in a 2009 blog:

The recession of the '80s transformed the working class into the working poor, as manufacturing jobs fled to the third world, forcing American workers into the low-paying service and retail sector. The current recession is knocking the working poor down another notch from low-wage employment and inadequate housing toward erratic employment and no housing at all. Comfortable people have long imagined that American poverty is far more luxurious than the third world variety, but the difference is rapidly narrowing.

In *Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream* (2005), written as a companion to *Nickel and Dimed*, but also as a kind of sequel to *Fear of Falling*, Barbara this time entered the anxious world of job-seeking middle-class women to observe them struggling to find work within the corrupt networking cultures of the corporate world. Chronic failure to secure employment left them with a massive sense self-blame, even as it pushed them onto the expanding slide of downward mobility.

However, there was always a global dimension to Barbara's socialist feminism, and she was quick to underscore the worldwide reach of the harsh entrenchment of class, ethnicity, and gender in her homeland. The low-wage workers struggling in an inhospitable world were increasingly drawn from international care chains of the most hyper-exploited women. It was the other side of the imperial plunder that had helped impoverish the birth places they felt forced to leave. After teaming up with eminent sociologist Arlie Hochschild, Barbara cowrote *Global Woman: Nannies, Maids, and Sex Workers in the New Economy* (2003) to address the distinct disadvantages, insecurities, and indignities faced by immigrant domestic and sex workers in the United States. These women were shouldering the U.S. "care deficit" so that they could send remittances to their own families and children whom they'd left far behind.

Yet, amidst so much gloom, Barbara never lost faith in the power of radical direct action, nor in people's potential for collective celebration. She was the severest critic of the United States' pernicious promotion of individual optimism, cheeriness, and the power of "positive" thinking. In another passionate publication, *Bright-sided: How Positive Thinking Is Undermining America* (2009), published in the UK with the more concrete command *Smile or Die*, she excoriates the new "science of happiness" as an ideological move to discourage people's acknowledgment of loss, sorrow, or anger, since in neoliberal times, even the emotional life must be made to serve market interests. The relentless pressure to present a cheerful face, she argues, encourages a morbid preoccupation with feelings of guilt for failing to flourish against impossible odds, while deliberately undermining people's courage to resist abuse and exploitation, or even their capacity for critical reflection. This same ideology also lay behind the most rapacious and destructive aspects of U.S. capitalism at the national level. Its blind insouciance to anything impeding profits, she argues, facilitated the reckless financial gambling responsible for the economic collapse of 2007-8. Its repudiation of suffering also fostered engagement and compliance with U.S. military aggression which, while first and foremost catastrophic for the countries invaded, was always devastating for anyone caught up in the mutilations of warfare.

So where is joy? Unfailingly outraged by the prevalence of suffering everywhere, Barbara was nevertheless always on the lookout for sources of pleasure and hope, sometimes finding them in the grimmest of situations. Her call for collective joy was one that came from a deeply held belief that such celebrations were essential for the health of any society. Never frightened of encompassing the broadest geographical and historical sweep, in her book *Dancing in the Streets* (2007) Barbara traced the repeated clashes between rapturous merrymakers and righteous moralizers right back to Pentheus, the king of the Thebes, in Greek mythology. And, following Max Weber, she saw the rise of capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as responsible for the gradual suppression of free, exultant

public festivals, with church and state colluding to prevent them once industrialization required workers to remain sober and disciplined year-round. While Weber wrote of the widespread disenchantment accompanying the spread of the Protestant ethic, Barbara attributed the prevalence of widespread depression in our own times to the gradual disappearance of carnival life and the dampening down of community celebrations. As ever, I cautiously borrowed aspects of Barbara's thinking for my own book *Radical Happiness: Moments of Collective Joy* (2017). For both of us, the fundamental point was to promote collective engagement with the world, escaping the sad self-monitoring that we are urged into at every turn.

Entertaining as Barbara's writing always was, her most lasting legacy is her tireless involvement in the political domain. She never sought and tended to dislike the celebrity bestowed upon her after *Nickel and Dimed*. As a socialist and a feminist, she was horrified with injustice in the world at large, which once took her on a trip to Palestine, where she would be interrogated at length on her departure from Israel, the border authorities even confiscating her vacation reading, a harmless thriller. And she was outraged at the wretched poverty expanding unremittingly in the richest country in the world. Barbara's sharp anger and denunciation of the chronic exploitation and abuse which the affluent ignore, or assist, was invariably delivered with acerbic wit and gritty humor. It's why she was always exciting to encounter or observe. Both her outlook and performance provided a model of how to remain an engaged socialist feminist, while supporting all forms of progressive resistance. Not long ago, when interviewed by a young journalist, Gabriella Paiella, for *GQ* (March 2020), she explained that the best way for her to express anger was through humor: "Humor contains a lot of aggression. That's one good way to let the anger and aggression out, and it's always been a source of inspiration to me." The crucial point for Barbara which I try, no matter how inadequately, to follow and spread was that we can find joy in collective resistance. In that conversation with Paiella, Barbara suggests that, if asked to give one piece of advice to young leftists, it would be this: "Don't forget to have a good time. . . . Political work . . . should also be pleasurable, sociable, fun. And if we can't create organizations and enterprises and cultures like that, we're not going to succeed. . . . We have to provide more attractive places to be, socially and collegially."

She knew in the short term that we are likely to have only small victories, especially with the rise of the right, with the reality that Trump, the Tea Party, and MAGA still steer the Republican Party. But, as she modeled for us, she would die fighting. And she did. Her last great cause was the Economic Hardship Project which she founded in 2012, funded by money she earned from *Nickel and Dimed*. Its goal was to encourage other journalists to write about class deprivation and to embolden the voice of poor people themselves, especially women struggling to support themselves and their dependents.

It was such a privilege to have known Barbara. Her children, Ben Ehrenreich and Rosa Brooks, continue her legacy, both writing on injustice and destitution, near and far, leaving their mother immeasurably proud of them both. Ben tells us today that Barbara's dying wish would be for us to "fight like hell" for a better world. But whenever we can manage to continue fighting, in preserving Barbara's spirit we must also try to ensure we enjoy it as much as we can. I see it in some recent left feminist movements, today more often outside of the West. A new wave of feminist internationalism is now evident in the huge marches to defend women's rights to abortion in Poland, and in the recent Green Wave of feminist militancy (symbolized by women waving or wearing large green handkerchiefs) that has swept across Latin America, with huge mobilizations to end violence against women and secure women's reproductive rights. Turning history on its head, these activists sometimes say they hope to inspire women in the United States to defend their own reproductive rights. It could, I believe, lead Barbara to rest happily, knowing that resistance continues, and that her voice can inspire us still. You never know, socialist feminism may rise again in our own heartlands, at least for those who come after us. Barbara Ehrenreich must not be forgotten.

Source [Boston Review](#).

PS:

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