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Interview with Barbara Garson

One Step Up, Three Steps Down

- Reviews section -

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Inequality has become a heated political issue with the eruption of the Occupy movement, followed by the spread of minimum wage struggles – including the election of socialist candidate Kshama Sawant to Seattle city council – and union organizing efforts and strikes in the fast food industry and the infamous anti-union Walmart.

Against the Current interviewed Barbara Garson, author of *Down the Up Escalator, How the 99 Percent Live* (Anchor Books/Random House, 2013). Her latest book traces the economic meltdown through interviewing the laid off and dispossessed, who are making plans for their new reality. Her interviews reveal how corporations use the recession as a way to restructure themselves, develop just-in-time staffing to match their just-in-time inventory and end up “awash with cash.”

Down the Up Escalator is Economics 101, where the reader can see and feel how the market affects the lives of people who are not “the decision makers.” Garson tracks how they navigate the increasingly precarious spaces of their lives. She does not reduce them to cardboard figures, but records them in their complexities. Her writing style is inquisitive, irreverent and informal.

A veteran of the University of California at Berkeley Free Speech Movement and one of the 800 arrested at the December, 1964 sit-in at Sproul Hall, she edited *The Free Speech Movement Newsletter*. She wrote *MacBird!* an anti-Vietnam war play written as a parody of *Macbeth*, and later worked at a G.I. coffee house near the Fort Lewis Army base in Tacoma, Washington.

Garson’s previous books include *All the Livelong Day: The Meaning and Demeaning of Routine Work*, *The Electronic Sweatshop* and *Money Makes the World Go Around*, *One Investor Tracks Her Case Through the Global Economy*. She has written several other plays including *Going Co-op*, a comedy, *The Dinosaur Door*, a children’s musical and *The Department*, a farce. She has received several grants and fellowships, including a MacArthur Foundation Grant.

Down the Up Escalator is divided into three sections: our jobs, our homes, our savings. After reading the book, readers are encouraged to follow the people she interviewed through the website: www.downtheupescalator.com.
–The ATC editors

Against the Current: You begin and end your book *Down the Up Escalator: How the 99 Percent Live with the life of Duane, a Vietnam war G.I. who becomes an itinerant skilled machinist*. What made his story particularly compelling for you?

Barbara Garson: I met Duane when I was working in an antiwar G.I. Coffee House. Duane was a sweet guy with a warm sense of humor, just back from Vietnam and waiting for his discharge. He was a handy guy, who loved to fix our record player and our old mimeograph machine (that will tell you how long ago that was). I bumped into him several times over the four decades between then and the Great Recession and realized how his life illustrated what was happening to the American working class.

Duane got out of the army at a time when it was easy to pick up a job that would pay your rent and food. In the sixties you could quit a job in Cincinnati and move to Cleveland just because you liked the band in that city.

The next time I met him I noticed that life was getting harder. For instance, it required two incomes to have a minimal

household. Duane evaded some of the worst of the deskilling and outsourcing that happened to industrial workers in the '80s and '90s because he always kept ahead of the technology. Yet when he died, after the housing bubble burst his children were left with an underwater house that they had to walk away from and small credit card debts from Duane's last job move.

This was a man who worked steadily all his life with increasing skill and productivity (American productivity went up by 99% in those 40 years) but whose real wage stagnated or declined. That's the story of the American economy over the four decades in which capital has taken more of the pie and labor has gotten much less.

That's what led to the Great Recession of 2008 and even though Duane died before it started, his life illustrated the economic trends that caused it. That's why I used his story. Of course, I also began with Duane because I like to make my points through real stories and Duane is such a dear funny guy that quoting him gets a good start.

I suppose I also feel guilty that I didn't keep up with Duane the way I should have, which maybe symbolizes for me that in the decades of writing about working-class Americans I actually did so little to stop the decline I wrote about.

ATC: A huge issue now is the debt that young people leaving college have from student loans. Have you had occasion to track this problem with the people you've followed?

BG: In the chapter called "Bubble Birth Control" I write about a couple who can't afford their second child, partly because they were caught in the housing bubble and partly because of student debt.

When I went to UC Berkeley I paid \$125 a term in fees. My tuition was free. It doesn't mean the college didn't have expenses. But colleges got most of their money from the state and federal governments back then.

Since the '70s rich people have been on strike. The same capitalists who took ever larger shares of Duane's productivity simply refuse to pay taxes. That's the primary reason why tuition prices have gone up and people graduate from college with mortgage sized tuition debts.

In addition student loans have special harsh terms. They can't be discharged through bankruptcy, most can't be refinanced when interest rates go down, and they are not subject to truth-in-lending laws.

Students who miss a couple of payments are often called by banks making offers that sound like a moratorium or a temporary reduced payment. But these offers often leave them paying for years yet owing more than when they started.

In a sense financiers now have a lien on the future income of college graduates or at least those who can't lay out \$100,000 in cash. So the superexploitation that Duane faced is moving from the industrial working class to white collar or professional workers. I think that's why we're finally hearing more about it.

ATC: Your new book takes off from the fact that U.S. labor productivity has expanded so much more rapidly than wages. Thomas Piketty's 500+-page book *Capital in the 21st Century* makes the same point and shows

how this produces greater returns to capital and therefore greater inequality. [See Charlie Post's review in this issue "ed.] Why do you think these issues have become a "mainstream" topic now, after being pretty much buried for a long time?

BG: First, thanks for comparing Down the Up Escalator to Piketty's Capital in the 21st Century. I guess you could say, Garson is the "illustrated version" of Piketty (though Down the Up Escalator actually came out first.) I say I'm the illustrated version because I use the lives of ordinary working people to tell the same story Piketty tells about inequality using his superb statistics.

Piketty concludes that today's crippling inequality could be reversed through a worldwide tax on accumulated wealth. That's a good idea, but who will bell the cat?

Will capitalists volunteer this tithe in order to keep their system going? Not likely. They never have before. And if they don't volunteer to share the wealth, who will force them?

If a real redistribution occurs it will be because of the efforts of forces like ATC and working people fighting for themselves

I happen to be a socialist. This means, among other things, that I'd like to see the economy and the places we work run democratically.

It also means that I'd like to see the wealth redistribution "in Down the Up Escalator I call it a jubilee" happen continuously. In other words I'd like a more egalitarian socialist system. The alternative is that we have these rapid wealth accumulations followed by painful crashes over and over again. That's no fun.

ATC: You say in your conclusion that the stories in this book aren't finished. How can people follow up on the recession victims you wrote about and what developments have most struck you since publication?

BG: I interviewed many people who lost their jobs during the recession. One man was reemployed in time for me to report his surprise happy ending. Everyone else I interviewed is still unemployed, or feel they're still unemployed. A couple of professionals are now working part time, doing the same jobs they did before, but for lower wages and without benefits.

Many employers used the recession as an opportunity to turn full time workers into permanent temps. Precarious or contingent hourly conditions now apply to college graduates as well as to what are erroneously called "unskilled" workers. So these folks are in fact as employed as they'll ever be. Neither they nor anyone else will ever get those old jobs back again "that is, unless we organize for better, more secure jobs.

The fight for a \$15 minimum wage is a good thing that's gotten off the ground since the book was finished. I was glad to go to a couple of the demonstrations.

As for all the talk in the press about inequality that's picked up since the publication of Down the Up Escalator, I guess I can take a little credit for that. I helped to make the intellectual case and to dramatize it. But as I said before, nothing's going to change except through the agitation of activist groups like yours and the actions of working people on their own behalf "that includes white-collar workers too, of course.

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You ask about the effects of my book. I'm not sure that literature and art really change society. In the 1960s my play MacBird! had hundreds of productions and sold over half a million copies. But the play didn't make the movement, it merely entertained the movement. It was the movement that made the changes.

I'll be pleased enough if Down the Up Escalator brings a smile and a nod of recognition to people already in action.

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