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Book Review of Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America

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Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America.
By Barbara Ehrenreich. New York: Picador, 2010, 256 pages. Paper, $16.00.

I come from a culture where concerns, complaints, and potentially negative outlooks are inherent parts of everyday discourse. A simple question of "How are you?" will almost invariably generate a detailed and, sometimes, brutally honest answer. As I was socialized in such a culture, the cheerfulness, positivity, and relentless optimism that often characterize American etiquette have always amazed (and occasionally puzzled) me. I have mostly found this side of American culture refreshing, but I have to admit, a few times, under especially challenging circumstances, I felt that exuding glee incessantly could be a somewhat tiresome exercise.

In *Bright-Sided: How Positive Thinking is Undermining America*, Barbara Ehrenreich (2010) probes positive thinking, which has become ubiquitous in American culture and life. Her book can be regarded as a social and cultural history and commentary, but it is also undeniably a poignant social and cultural critique. Ehrenreich takes an unbendingly critical stance on positive thinking. First of all, she points out its embedded contradictions. She argues that despite our gleeful reputation, the United States does not perform well in happiness studies compared to other nations. In addition, we, as a nation, account for two-thirds of the global market for antidepressants (Ehrenreich 2010:3). Moreover, Ehrenreich contends that insecurity and anxiety lurk behind efforts to embrace positive thinking because if we really truly believed that things move towards positive and better outcomes, we would not have to bother with (sometimes time-consuming and strenuous) positive thinking exercises. Her implication is that many of us secretly fear that if we do *not* engage in positive thinking, then things could actually become worse, or even catastrophic, and such trepidations seem to contradict the very tenets of positive thinking.

One of the intriguing points Ehrenreich makes is that Americans did *not* start out as a particularly positive thinking branch. As she puts it, "Americans did not invent positive thinking because their geography encouraged them to do so but because they had tried the opposite" (p. 74). She refers to Calvinism as "socially imposed depression," (p. 74), a preoccupation with sin, self-discipline, or even self-loathing. It was not until the 1860s that positive thinking started to gain some ground through the "New Thought Movement" and its main representatives, such as Mary Baker Eddy and Phineas Parkhurst Quimby. Then Norman Vincent Peale's *The Power of Positive Thinking* gave the ideology a further push in the 1950s, and by the late 20th century positive thinking became an omnipresent, formidable movement, as well as an extremely profitable industry. The historical overview of the book is especially thought-provoking because it challenges the assumption that positive thinking has always been an integral part of the American psyche.

The scope of *Bright-Sided* is compellingly wide; it spans across various fields, disciplines, and subcultures and highlights how positive thinking is interwoven through many, if not all, aspects of modern American life. The first field where Ehrenreich takes us is medicine, probably because it has a personal relevance to her. The first efforts to recruit her to positive thinking occurred when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. She describes her frustration when optimism and cheerfulness seemed to be the only acceptable responses to a cancer diagnosis and recounts the somewhat hostile retorts she received when she questioned those. The following sentence summarizes her feelings towards almost mandatory optimism: "I didn't mind dying, but the idea that I should do so while clutching a teddy and with a sweet little smile on my face - well, no amount of philosophy had prepared me for that" (p. 17).

Besides medicine, Ehrenreich studies other fields that are inundated with positive thinking and its experts and coaches, such as the workplace, especially corporate America, businesses, the economy, psychology with its own field of positive psychology, and religion, more specifically churches that teach the prosperity gospel. Ehrenreich makes an interesting point when she elucidates how positive thinking has united formerly different fields and subcultures and blurred the line between them. She argues that some aspects of positive thinking (such as the law of attraction and the manifesting power of thoughts) invoke spiritual, if not magical, thinking, which has led to many corporate businesses shifting away from rationality and towards the supernatural. At the same time, many churches focusing on positive thinking are run in highly rationalized, bureaucratic ways. In addition, science and research have entered the realm of positive thinking, so, as Ehrenreich stresses, rationality meets magical thinking. She quotes a few studies that praise the potential health and economic benefits of positive thinking, and she does her best to deflate them while referring to a few other studies that question those benefits. This is where I do not find her argument as strong as at other places. She seems to underplay the abundance of research that has, in fact, linked positive thinking to numerous physical and psychological measures of well-being.

Ehrenreich points out the potential dangers of positive thinking, some of which already manifested in the past, and some that might do so in the future. She defines positive thinking as "not so much our condition or our mood as it is part of our ideology – the way we explain the world and think we ought to function within it" (p. 4). As positive thinking has become a social convention, those who deviate from it might have to face dire consequences. For example, Ehrenreich highlights that positive thinking gurus tend to advise avoiding negative people, and the implication is that if you are one of them, you might have to brace yourself for dead-ends in your career and/or social isolation. Another option is compliance with the social, cultural, corporate, and religious norm (at least in some congregations) of positive thinking, which, if not done fully willingly, can require strenuous emotional labor. Ehrenreich mentions that cheer and optimism have been used as tools for political repression worldwide, in Iran or the Soviet Union, for instance, and positive thinking can become an insidious means of social control, especially if people are ready to impose it on themselves.

Another possible peril of positive thinking, according to Ehrenreich, is that it might impact our focus. She believes that in some cases positive thinking might be distracting or even counterproductive because if too much time and energy are spent on positive thinking efforts, there might not be enough left for action and problem-solving. Furthermore, as Ehrenreich explains it, positive thinking without a cold, hard look at facts first can actually lead to more negative outcomes because warning signs might be missed. She cites the recent economic recession as a prime example. Also, Ehrenreich cautions that too much faith in positive thinking can lead to self-blame and shame if someone fails, and this is something that positive thinking, somewhat ironically, has in common with our Calvinist past.

Bright-Sided is an engaging book, and the embedded anecdotes and humor make it an entertaining read. However, it can also be a challenging read because it takes a stab at certain core American beliefs, and it *is* successful in bursting some bubbles. At the end, Ehrenreich does not propose negative thinking to replace positive thinking; instead, she suggests *critical* thinking and a move away from *blind optimism*. *Bright-Sided* can be expected to generate strong reactions. Some will most likely rave about its critical and enlightening nature, whereas others might become defensive or even slightly offended. However, it is exactly those anticipated strong reactions that can promote a good debate in academic circles and the classroom. I believe this book could be useful in courses on American culture, social movements, social psychology, sociology of the economy and business, as well as sociologies of medicine and religion. Other disciplines, such as economics, psychology, or American Studies could also benefit from it.