

America the Featherbedded

by Suzannah Lessard

Finding your way around Long Island potato patches these days isn't exactly difficult but you do have the sense of working through a childishy anglophilic maze-puzzle: right on Churchill, left on Oxford, left on Cambridge, right on Guinevere, left on Arthur's Court. Though the little houses in rows yield no sign of trauma, those fairylands of yore are suffering a rude awakening. Pentagon money, the magic stuff that brought them *poof* out of the nowhere into the here, has suddenly vanished: the fairy godmother has turned fickle, and no Rex Futurus appears on the horizon. The quicksilver running thin, suburban glamor is beginning to look drab and tinkety to the stunned children of the realm, who, unequipped for rougher atmospheres, retreat into their obscurity, drawing their white collars closely around them, persevering in the old rituals and niceties. Blind faith? Shock? "You punch a guy in the eye and you don't see anything right away. But slowly it will get bluer and blacker and then you have an egg. It's a slow process."

Although defense work by no means monopolized employment in Nassau and Suffolk Counties, providing roughly 60,000 of 150,000 jobs in industry, it is the foundation on which the Long Island boom was launched and the repercussions of

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massive layoffs by the defense-oriented companies have reached all areas of economic life. Architects, accountants, and delivery boys—even a priest—have been registered among the jobless by the Nassau Employment Task Force. Few small businesses have not felt the chill. Yet silence is the order of the day. Local officials are mum, the Defense Contract Administration acknowledges no crisis, much less responsibility, and the people themselves, the unemployed and those threatened with unemployment, are withdrawn and secretive. Behind the silence lurks the unacceptable suspicion that a fundamental American myth is finally tearing at the seams.

Ironically, many of the people who work in the defense industry went into their fields not because they were particularly attracted to the work but because they were led to believe that security was one of the sure rewards of those professions—for instance, that a country absorbed in the demanding work of progress would always have a thirst for engineers. The larger theorem behind this corollary was that in America, if you get an education—a white collar—and are reasonably industrious there will always be a place for you. Consequently, for a believer there is a deep shame implicit in being unemployed: Despite the fact that the situation is far beyond the defense engineer's

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control, being out of work signifies that he is lazy or incompetent like the blacks and poor people who are screaming, in such an un-American manner, for free handouts instead of "striving." The layoffs have precipitated a collision of myth and reality which has left the victims speechless.

The myth has been out of joint with reality all along: the cautious white-collar, security-bound life in post-war America has little to do with rugged individualism, versatility, or even ambition, the classical traits which in the land of opportunity yield great rewards. The valiant struggle against adversity for wealth and honor typified by the Horatio Alger figures has become the valiant struggle for a piece of paper which is a passport into the white-collar corporate world where conformity is the mark of respectability—the new honor—and where adversity, kept well at bay by untold buffers, is unmentionable. But the myth lives on. The engineer is likely to see himself as a person who has striven hard and succeeded in the classical American style, and he believes that anyone with gumption could do the same. Now that he is unemployed—undesirable—he feels ashamed, tainted, and helpless. The cruelest consequence is his helplessness. He knows only dependence—how to go to work every day, sit at a desk, and come home with a check all under the protective aegis of a big company. Now the institutions for whom he has sacrificed so much of his individuality have discarded him with ease, and his virtues and accomplishments are unsaleable elsewhere. The myth mocks him. He feels used, duped, bewildered, and retreats into a schizoid silence. "Grumman lays off 3,000" report the newspapers, almost routinely, and the 3,000 disperse, eyes downcast, to their little houses on Longbow Drive and Crossbow Lane. Everyone is agreed. No one wants to talk about it.

Almost no one. Some people, as though finally unmuzzled by rejection, are singing out right from the

middle of white-collar Middle America like prophets in a wilderness calling the bluff. Keith Bose, engineer and technical writer with 25 years' experience, is one of the grass-roots iconoclasts. His basic thesis is that he and his compatriots have been cast aside so easily because they weren't doing anything of real value all along and hence have nothing to bargain with. "There is a creeping sensation of futility which follows the white-collar worker to his job these days... of being an expendable pawn... neither frugality nor industry will help us escape." The defense industry is notorious for padded staffs and superfluous activity, but it is hardly alone. When the recession hit, many strictly commercial companies laid off hundreds of people without hindering production, referring to these *people* as "corporate fat." "If Black America is crying for recognition," says Bose, "White America is praying that the myth of indispensability will endure If we appear uninterested in the politics of government, it is because we are consumed by the politics of keeping our job."

What angers Bose is the degradation implicit in being corporate fat, aggravated by the knowledge that it's impossible to speak out without forfeiting your security—since the work is useless, you are easily dispensed with and since there is a surplus of workers, you are easily replaced—difficult in fact to admit this to yourself without forfeiting whatever fragments of dignity your ephemeral status has lent you.

In his own community Bose has tried to "break this middle-class habit of silence" through an organization he calls Self Help. Though Self Help works to find jobs for its members, its primary and most effective function is as a forum, where people can pool their experience, exchange thoughts, and allow long-suppressed frustrations to surface in the company of people who have endured the same conditions. This alone is revolutionary for these people. That sort of candor has

long been purged from the company man's character. Even telling a colleague one's salary is often beyond the pale of exchange, and more crucial than secretiveness about salaries is the taboo against saying, "Most of what I do is horse feathers." Not only would you open your right flank to the rivals all around you but you would be troublemaking, a kind of behavior absolutely unacceptable within the code of "professionalism."

This code has benefited the corporate powers—creating a primary allegiance to the boss and a suspicion-fraught relationship between employees—but it has also sabotaged them, encouraging inefficiency, smothering candor, and allowing flaccid unmanageable structures to thrive. The real crime, however, is against the adherents to the code, forcing them to drift farther and farther both into trivial work and dependence on it. Most people recoil from speaking out. But those who break through the engrained habit of silence are vivid witnesses to the extent of deprivation and pent-up frustration in the white-collar world. Members of Self Help thrashing out their thoughts with each other is a passionate, messy affair, full of storm, black humor, apocalypse, disillusionment, anguish, and rage. It makes an SDS meeting look like a Sunday school picnic.

The issue of profession is a hot one. These are people talking about the shank of their life. "You can't just say for 30 years I've been doing nothing. Some people say it's a joke one day and are serious tomorrow," said a man who was doing exactly that from moment to moment. There's resistance: "We *did* get to the moon, and that blob on top of Dr. von Braun's rocket came from Bethpage—maybe we worked ourselves out of a job." And the response: "The creative engineering, the real work in design is done in the universities. We're just technicians." Another man dismissed the possibility of functioning as a professional on worthwhile projects as unattainable. He said that obviously

most of what they produced was esoteric junk, but that that was irrelevant: "This jackass Proxmire, for instance, says we don't need the SST. Of course we don't need the SST. We can make yoyos for all I care. It doesn't matter what you make but who makes it and where."

Bose on profession: "Professional life for us, particularly in the military-industrial empires, became an exercise in trivia... characterized more by jargon than the discipline of honest technology... relieved only by the pleasures of split-level materialism.... A great majority of the actual skills required of the middle-class wage earner could be acquired in a few weeks or months of training.... At some point in our careers we became conscious that we had no profession at all, and we hungered for a secret jargon to protect us, as hippies devise secret words." Some cryptograms from *The New York Times'* help-wanted section:

Manpower Development Specialist
Production Traffic Analyst
Quality Assurance Supervisor
Logistics Control Engineer
Planning Analyst

Bose's main theme is the loss of "human bargaining power" in the white-collar empires. He uses the term in a literal economic sense as well as philosophically. The two levels are very close: When people are doing inflated, useless work it is very easy to appropriate their powers of self-determination. The tendency will be that they won't even question this loss of control, but even if they do, they won't have the bargaining power to challenge it. Once they are dispensable they are helpless in the "insecurity within security" strait jacket. This is a realization that seeds a deep unquenchable rebellion, rebellion against having had to put up with it and against being tossed away with it. "In the history of civilization, America has now added a new facet—the throw-away, pop-top culture. Among billions of tons of non-returnable

bottles and saddening hulks of automobiles, we have now added the middle-class worker.”

It’s sad that people don’t let the rebellion surface until they are out of the ball game, but it’s there, unformed, nevertheless. People don’t like being wasted. It’s not good for them and it makes them unhappy. No matter what their salary, they don’t like being corporate fat, or bureaucratic excrescence, or credential padding. They can be paid off, and they will hide their outrage, their disappointment, and disillusionment from themselves as well as the outside world, but that doesn’t make the situation any less corrosive. “The majority of the people in this process don’t know that’s happening to them,” said an ex-engineer.

Clearly a mass revolt is not on the threshold. Apathy, mistrust, the absence of channels of communication and forums for ideas in most middle-class communities, shame, and indifference to others are powerful deterrents. It’s questionable too whether people who have spent their whole lives in service to a myth would be capable of change. So far most of them have reacted to unemployment in catatonic privacy. The drive, if any, has been towards covering up. Many families go on as if nothing has happened, go on building the swimming pool, coasting on unemployment benefits and savings.

One man felt so ashamed of being laid off that he couldn’t tell his wife, and for six months got up in the morning and drove off as though he were going to work. Others, in a desperate effort to preserve the status quo, break their necks taking jobs as cabbies and waiters, just so they can go on living in the \$50,000 house, wearing new clothes and paying for the ’71 Pontiac. But then the real crunch hasn’t come yet. People can still coast, can still pretend that everything will right itself. There is no telling what they will do if forced to the wall, whether there will be a lot of disappearing Daddies or if, in the

drastic atmosphere, ideas like Keith Bose’s will ignite and either change a small but significant number of people’s lives or catch on in a major way and wreak fundamental changes in the nation’s mythology.

Whatever the case, it looks as though there just aren’t enough white-collar jobs to go around. And if you consider everyone in a superfluous job (whether bureaucratic or industrial technically unemployed—in that what he is doing is useless—then the amount of real work diminishes further. The members of Bose’s group tend to see most jobs which are paid with taxpayers’ money, like defense, as essentially WPA projects, a way of getting money back to the people in an acceptable “free enterprise” fashion, a way of artificially priming the pump in a creaking economic system. “It doesn’t matter what you make but who makes it and where.”

Looking at the economy from its soft underbelly, they see the economic and political leaders as totally unaware—either intentionally or because their commitment to old ideas makes them unable to see differently—of the real nature of the socio-economic system. They roar with laughter, for instance, at anyone who suggests that minorities are out in the cold because they are black or uneducated, and doesn’t see that there’s simply no room for them in the system. They are extremely skeptical of suggestions that we turn towards ecology and pollution for a new source of meaningful work, not because it doesn’t need to be done, but because it would probably be only a variation on the defense set-up—government contracts with all the concomitant vagaries given out to companies called Ecological Systems Management, Inc., with all the old habits of fudging, padding, getting nothing done, and dehumanizing people. In this sense, they will say, ecology may provide a stopgap for the present middle-aged unemployed, but it will in no way solve the basic problem.

So Keith Bose and his friends are

saying two things. First, that the method of solving unemployment by building offices and creating companies to take up the slack, installing desks and telephones and typewriters to give the millions of Keith Boses their titles and paychecks is breaking down. Because of the huge number of workers graduating every year into an economy already straining against unemployment they are certain that they themselves, those over 40 who have been discarded in the present crisis, will never get back in, and by extension, seriously doubt that enough niches can be created to place the legions of new arrivals. Secondly, they are saying that even if you assume that enough niches can be created, the interior price of occupying them is devastating. People who grow up hoping to do something interesting, useful, and human are finding themselves enslaved in the manufacture of paper nonsense or hard-core junk, trivial activity which by its nature denies those engaged in it the most rudimentary satisfactions of purposeful labor.

To create more frou-frou jobs in an effort to swing the nation back to prosperity is to evade the challenge of the present crisis and only to aggravate the situation. The challenge is to redefine work. Work is effort directed towards the production or accomplishment of something useful. If the habit of thinking about work that way superceded the habit of responding to titles and monetary rewards, if education instead of gearing people up to getting a passport to high-paying, important-sounding niches developed an aversion to triviality as an affront to dignity, if the people in power looked at the working force as energy and talent to be applied to what needs to be done, it would become immediately apparent how wastefully fatuous the present system and projected policies are. The challenge is not to create a vacuous picture of prosperity. The challenge is to free the working force from the meshes of trivia and turn it towards the mountains of real work that needs to be done. ■

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