

POSITIVELY DELUSIONAL

JOHN SUMMERS

BRIGHT-SIDED: HOW THE RELENTLESS PROMOTION OF POSITIVE THINKING HAS UNDERMINED AMERICA

BY BARBARA EHRENREICH
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Positive thinking should never be the same after Barbara Ehrenreich's *Bright-Sided*. But as Ehrenreich herself shows in a sketch of the movement's history, its theorists, hucksters, and practitioners have thumbed their noses at reason ever since Mary Baker Eddy popularized New Thought with the mind-over-matter healing doctrine of Christian Science. Led by preacher Joel Osteen, motivational guru Tony Robbins, and academic psychologist Martin Seligman, among many others, the national cult of uplift abounding has lately generated subprime mortgages, megachurches, and a "pink-ribbon culture" that promotes a mind-cure-style approach to treating breast cancer: Maintaining a positive outlook, Ehrenreich learned firsthand, is supposed to boost the victim's immune system.

Ehrenreich is a sharp and reliable student of the divided middle class, as good as the American left can boast. In attacking the thick irrationality of our public lives, *Bright-Sided* homes in on a particularly salient line of argument—that positive thinking is not only preposterous but pernicious: "The effort of positive 'thought control,' which is always presented as such a life preserver, has become a potentially deadly weight—obscuring judgment and shielding us from vital information. Sometimes we need to heed our fears and negative thoughts, and at all times we need to be alert to the world outside ourselves, even when that includes absorbing bad news and entertaining the views of 'negative' people. As we should have learned by now, it is dangerous not to." Positive thinking, the stepchild of Emersonian self-reliance, "has undermined America."

The thesis contains a paradox: Why should a movement committed in advance to the notion that prosperity is largely a matter of self-confidence flourish in times of institutional failure? Doesn't preaching a doctrine of attitude adjustment insult one's intelligence in a contracting labor market? In fact, Americans have always been great dreamers. The 1930s, the heyday of success manuals, made best-selling authors of idiots savants like Dale Carnegie, Walter Pitkin, Dorothea Brande, Napoleon Hill, and other fools for

good news and easy money. *Let Your Mind Alone!*, cried James Thurber, in a 1937 collection of satyros aimed at these writers' contempt for social ethics. Then Norman Vincent Peale published *The Power of Positive Thinking* in 1952, and all was lost.

The briskness and lucidity of the prose Ehrenreich deploys in reviving the struggle for national sobriety might make it easy to miss her erudition. *Bright-Sided* draws from a genre of radical social thought that tries to understand the eclipse of the Protestant ethic and the pursuit of wealth divested of morality: Ehrenreich nods to Donald Meyer's *The Positive Thinkers* (1965), still the best study of the subject. But her argument also summons a number of other classic examinations of the dubiously rational American character, such as the portrait of "cheerful robots" climbing the corporate ladder in C. Wright Mills's *White Collar* (1951).

Ehrenreich shows how rationality has lost out in corporate management since Mills's day—but like him, she explains the ongoing appeal of positive thinking as a consequence of alienation. Positive thinking, she argues in fine left-wing fashion, is an ideology that sustains economic inequality by isolating individuals from brute facts. For all its nostrums, it has not made Americans any happier. Behind that tight smile lies the despair of helplessness. Her antidote remains much the same as the cure prescribed in the 1950s: "anxious vigilance," "a certain level of negativity and suspicion," and "a relentless commitment to hard-nosed empiricism."

These admonitions are not likely to enlist already committed positive thinkers, and Ehrenreich acknowledges the intrinsic difficulty of reaching them: "It remains the responsibility of each individual to sift through the received wisdom . . . and decide what's worth holding on to. This can require the courage of a Galileo, the iconoclasm of a Darwin or Freud, the diligence of a homicide detective." Certainly, given all that is required, rationalists would do well to cultivate an empirically grounded belief in the actual efficacy of "critical thinking." Yet *Bright-Sided* says nothing about politics. The hard form of positive thinking is junk science, to be sure. The soft form, though, may offer Americans a chance to participate vicariously in the national sport of ambition.

Looking plainly at the environmental sources of breast cancer or the scourge of global warming—"to always keep in view the specter of injustice," as Ehrenreich advises—is to raise the possibility that there is nothing to be done by the powerless many, and much that will never be done by the powerful few. To embrace critical thinking under the illusion that it will make you happier is only to prepare for disappointment. The positive-thinking movement appears to be held together by deluded, isolated servants of the status quo. Meanwhile, the status quo's permanent opposition on the left knows its own psychopathologies as resentment, anger, and moral vanity. Critical thinking, no less than the positive kind, can hurt your brain. □

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