[Bright-sided: How the Relentless Promotion of Positive Thinking Has Undermined America, Barbara Ehrenreich, Metropolitan Books, 256 pages]

Have a Nice Day — Or Else

By Florence King

IF YOU HAVE EVER BEEN sitting quietly in a public place, minding your own business, only to have a perky thug gambol up to you and bray, "Whatcha so sad about? It can't be that bad—smile!" this is the book for you. Barbara Ehrenreich is a liberal but a refreshingly grumpy one, equipped with a gimlet eye that stares down the national Smile Button and makes it blink in this relentless exposure of America's resolve to look on the bright side at all cost.

A personal crisis led her to the subject. She was diagnosed with breast cancer and began treatment, entering into a world within a world where a half-full glass runneth over and everything is pink. The changing room for mammogram patients was bedecked with pink ribbons, pink artificial roses, sentimental verse and cute sayings photocopied on pink paper, and of course, pink teddy bears. The gift shop carried pink pajamas, aprons, coffee mugs, candles, cancer diaries, pink pens to write them, more and bigger teddy bears, and even pink wind chimes. All this "pink sticky sentiment … oozing from the walls" made Ehrenreich long "for a clean and honorable death by shark bite, lightning strike, sniper fire, car crash."

Like all mass enthusiasms, positive thinking coins irritating words like "wellness." The upbeat vocabulary stuck in her craw. No one ever spoke of "victims" or even "patients." The operative word was "survivor," making support groups sound like AA meetings when speakers introduced themselves with "I'm a three-year survivor." Nobody merely had cancer; they were "battling" it, and they expected to defeat it because they were convinced that a positive attitude could make cancer give up and go away. Some of the upbeat optimism they expressed verged on the insane: "Cancer is a gift," "Cancer makes you grow as a person," "I realized that the source of my happiness was, of all things, cancer," "If I had it to do over, would I want breast cancer? Absolutely."

The emphasis placed on industrial-strength cheerfulness also led to victim blaming ("If you got cancer, you must have wanted it") and self-punishing guilt ("If I get sad, or scared or upset, I am making my tumor grow faster and I will have shortened my life"). Ehrenreich soon discovered that "dissent [is] a kind of treason." One day she posted hers on an online message board and heard back: "You need to run, not walk, to some counseling."

A classic feminist would dismiss the Pink Cancer as the infantilization of women and the inability of the male-dominated medical profession to deal with the double-whammy of the breast as a symbol of both sexuality and maternity, but Ehrenreich fingers a practical reason for the trend. If enough people insist on believing that an optimistic frame of mind strengthens the immune system, it will create "expanded opportunities" in the cancer research and treatment field for behavioral scientists in search of grants.

Positive thinking is as American as the *Mayflower*. But Ehrenreich traces it back to its opposite, the Calvinism of early settlers, wherein the sinner looked for sins as the cancer patient looks for lumps. In either case the result is the same: morbid introspection, self-loathing, harsh judgmentalism, and relentless efforts to stamp out "negative thoughts."

By the 19th century, Calvinism had lost its hold, replaced by "New Thought," a blend of Emerson's Transcendentalism and Mary Baker Eddy's Christian Science that saw God not as a vengeful deity but as a metaphysical power incorporating Thought, Mind, Spirit, Goodness, and Love. According to Eddy, there was no such thing as illness; it was a temporary delusion, an "error." She was right to a point. Christian Science had no effect on infectious diseases or somatic ravages, but it did make headway in curing "neurasthenia," the 19th-century name for hysteria, depression, anxiety, and insomnia—i.e., the nervous disorders and personality problems caused by too much Calvinism. Americans discovered that being upbeat did help, and so positive thinking took root in the national psyche.

Unfortunately, the American obsession with bigger 'n' better led to bigger 'n' better positive thinking, especially in those ever fertile fields of prosperity and the American Dream. Enter the self-help books, such as *Think and Grow Rich!* (1937) by Napoleon Hill, who explained how a go-getter could manipulate his subconscious mind. Dale Carnegie's *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) taught us, says Ehrenreich, "how to fake sincerity" in order to rise in the white-collar world. Finally and inevitably, *The Power of Positive Thinking* (1952) by Norman Vincent Peale made it official: negative thoughts were effectively declared unconstitutional.

The machinery is now in place for bullying and controlling the faux middle-class—Ehrenreich calls it the "white-collar proletariat"—that the obsessive pursuit of the American Dream has created. But now there is something more to pursue: the changing nature of workplace success. The

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objects of labor are no longer physical things—equipment and the like—but people. The "soft skills" of interpersonal relations are vital to getting the job done. Most of us work with people, for people, or, like salesmen, on people. "We have become the emotional wallpaper in other people's lives, less individuals with our own quirks and needs than dependable sources of smiles and optimism" who must work "on the self in order to make that self more acceptable and even likeable to employers, clients, coworkers, and potential customers."

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Panicked by the economic downturn and the specter of tumbling back down the ladder of success, the white-collar proletariat will do anything to hang on, and the positive-thinking industry stands ready to make it "see the glass half full, even when it lies shattered on the floor."

Ehrenreich's account of how it does so is bleakly funny. Basically, it's the Pink Cancer all over again. Salesmen attend mandatory training seminars where "life coaches" yell, "I DARE YOU TO DEVELOP A WINNING PERSONALITY!" and the salesmen yell back, "I FEEL GREAT!" Motivational speakers tell them that the recession is nothing but a mass outbreak of pessimism and urge them to "resonat[e] in tune with the universe. … Think the thought Yes. … Say 'I love you' in your head at all times so that we can heal all that needs to be healed." Blunter motivational speakers get right into it in the opening sentence of their speeches, like the one who bellowed, "Negative People SUCK!" For white-collar proletarians who like to read, there's *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne, who assures us that we can "attract" what we want merely by thinking about it because positive thoughts create vibrations that enable us to manipulate the physical universe. Ehrenreich likens this to sticking pins in voodoo dolls.

And if, after attending all the weekend retreats, tribal pathfindings, and Buddhist vision quests, you still get fired, you should think of it as the best thing that ever happened to you because it's not called "fired" anymore. It's a "release of resources." If you need comforting you can always go to church, but beware: the positive-thinking industry has invaded the sanctuary with the message that "God wants to prosper you." The Crystal Cathedral in Orange County, California is pastored by Robert H. Schuller, who preaches, "Never verbalize a negative emotion," while Houston boasts a megachurch led by the oleaginous Joel Osteen, who advises his flock to reprogram their minds with positive images to activate the law of attraction so they can draw in whatever they think about—i.e., Ye shall be as magnets.

Lest you think that positive thinking too shall pass, guess again. The American Psychological Association has recently recognized "positive psychology" as a valid discipline, and it is even making headway in academia, where it is increasingly being called "the science of happiness." Some 200 colleges and graduate schools now offer courses in it (called "Happiness 101" by some undoubtedly negative types), and efforts are afoot to get it into public schools.

Ehrenreich blames some of the mortgage meltdown on the forays into positive thinking by Joe Gregory, former president of the former Lehman Brothers investment bank, and Angelo Mozilo, CEO of Countrywide Financial, the company that almost single-handedly set off the subprime crisis. Both men hired motivational speakers and believed in Wall Street's favorite fortune-cookie sentiment, "Crisis is opportunity." Gregory was called "warm and fuzzy," "a Feeler with a capital F," and "Mr. Instinct." Mozilo won the Horatio Alger Award for his "hard work, determination, and positive thinking," which explains why he replied, "You worry too much," when one of his vice presidents expressed alarm over steadily rising housing prices. Anyone who tried to apply rational analysis to financial decisions was chided for "intellectualizing" and, if he persisted, was ostracized. Positive thinkers did not worry about these things because the market was self-correcting. It achieved the status of a deity, Ehrenreich deadpans, "closely related to Mary Baker Eddy's benevolent, ever-nurturing, and all-supplying universe."

She does a convincing, highly readable job of weaving the economic turndown into her theme, but she omits one vital factor: "red-lining." For years the federal government has been pressuring banks to grant mortgages to risky borrowers or else be accused of racism. Ehrenreich speaks of "low-income" or "disadvantaged" borrowers but she never mentions race per se, even though political correctness is just another version of positive thinking.

She leaves us with the apt reminder that brutal authoritarian regimes always demand unflagging optimism from their citizens. Pessimism is "ideological wavering," pessimists are "defeatists," and they tend to disappear. Ehrenreich herself is no pessimist—though you would never know it from her book titles: *Fear of Falling* is about the middle class, *Bait and Switch* is about the American Dream, and *Nickel and Dimed* is about service jobs—but in a country hooked on positive thinking, she may end up as the American Cassandra. As far as I'm concerned, she shares a cachet with George Orwell: the conservative's favorite liberal writer. ■

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[Strange Days Indeed: The 1970s: The Golden Age of Paranoia, Francis Wheen, PublicAffairs, 352 pages]

Sinister '70s

By Brendan O'Neill

READING *Strange Days Indeed*, British writer Francis Wheen's rollercoaster romp through the 1970s, made me glad that I am too young to remember that doom-laden decade, having only been born halfway through it.

The nostalgia industry may recently have got its grubby mitts on this most peculiar 10-year period in modern history, re-presenting it as a gloriously un-PC decade in which men wore kipper ties and swore a lot ("Life on Mars") and women leapt around like menopausal kangaroos while singing ABBA songs ("Mamma Mia"). But that says far more, Wheen convincingly argues, about the history-warping, money-making opportunism of the nostalgists than it does about the reality of life in the 1970s.

For this, he reckons, was a decade not of song, dance, and abandon, but of fear, paranoia, and political madness. It was a decade that kicked off with Richard Nixon moaning about the threat posed by "homosexuality, dope and immorality in general" and ended with the election of Margaret Thatcher in the UK and the revolutionary victory of Ayatollah Khomeini in Iran. The grocer's daughter and the imam had something in common, Wheen notes: both wanted to turn back the clock, Thatcher to the Victorian era of "self-help, private philanthropy and *laissez faire*," Khomeini to the era of the Islamic Caliphate.

In between Nixon's paranoia and the rise of Thatcher and Islamo-fundamentalism, there were guerrilla warfare, strikes, conspiracies and also conspiracy theories, green extremism, the rise of neo-Malthusianism, an increase in state surveillance, a new era of "claustrophobic cinema," punk, nihilism, and a general, free-floating feeling of fear and dread that, Wheen says, was best expressed by Chairman Mao's wife in 1971: "I have been feeling as if I am going to die any minute, as if some catastrophe is about to happen tomorrow. I feel full of terror all the time."

Was the decade really so dark? Why was it a fertile breeding ground for fear, conspiracy theory, and some of today's most backward, stifling, and now orthodox political outlooks, including misanthropic environmentalism? Wheen paints a Hieronymus Bosch-style picture of a decade in which a British prime minister hysterically described himself as "a big fat spider in the corner of the room" who was being followed by secret services and an American president covered up a break-in to try to save his political skin. Unfortunately, he is weaker on the "why": he never completely analyzes where the widespread sense of paranoia came from or what, ultimately, it expressed.

The main thing about the 1970s, for Wheen and most historians, is that they were not the 1960s. Dropping out of the rat race was replaced by conspiratorially imagining that The Man wanted to kill us all. The hippie anthems of The Mamas and The Papas were replaced by the harsh tones of Iggy Pop, Lou Reed, and David Bowie, who said in 1976, "I believe Britain could benefit from a fascist leader." And the running street battles between students, professors, and Panthers and the powers that be were replaced by the bombings of miniscule yet mayhem-creating terror groups such as the Baader-Meinhof Gang and Weatherman, nicely described by Wheen as products of the "defeats of 1968." Indeed, the Seventies can be seen as the big fat comedown from the decade of peace and love and experimentation. (Though, lest we forget, our image of the Sixties is also a product as much of nostalgia as reality.)

Wheen felt the Not-the-Sixties nature of the Seventies more acutely than most. He was brought up in the bosom of privilege and educated at Harrow, Prince Charles's alma mater. Like many advantaged young Brits with time on their hands—and disposable income to spend on pop singles such as The Groundhogs' bizarre peace anthem "Thank Christ for the Bomb"—he became a hippie. "Wishy-washy liberal," he'd say, when asked by friends to define his political outlook. In 1973, he sneaked out of the family home in dull suburban Kent, leaving a note telling his parents that he was "off to join the alternative society" and would not be back.

But to Wheen's surprise, and disappointment, the alternative society was no more. Arriving at a hippie hangout in West London that he had read about in the underground press, the 16-year-old announced, "Hi, I've dropped out," only to be told, "Drop back in, man. You're too late. It's over."

That feeling of "it" being over—"it" being the something-or-other about the 1960s that made them so apparently sexy and exciting—was palpable for Wheen's too-late generation. Wheen runs through various theories about when "the Sixties" ended. For Joan Didion, it was Aug. 9, 1969, the night Charles Manson's disciples murdered Sharon Tate and four others. For Kenneth Tynan, it was March 9, 1971, when Muhammad Ali—that "epitaph of the Sixties: flair, audacity, imagination, outrageous aplomb"—was defeated by the "stubborn, obdurate" Joe Frazier. For Edward D. Berkowitz, it was April 30, 1974, the day Nixon released the profanity-strewn transcripts from recorded conversations at the White House, ending "the postwar presidential mystique." Yet while the birthdate of the Seventies is debatable, says Wheen, the flavor of those years should be clear: "A pungent mélange of apocalyptic dread and conspiratorial fever."

Politically, culturally, and academically, there was an atmosphere of anti-hope, a future-fearing sense of dread, he says. In the U.S., it was embodied in Nixon, the anti-Kennedy, a politician with a sweating, gurning face better suited to the gramophone era than the TV age, who, Wheen strongly hints, was mad. As the Sixties ended and the Seventies began, Nixon was "dreaming up policies at five in the morning," says Wheen, including his plan to bomb the living daylights out of Cambodia: "They say the darkest hour is just before the dawn, and caliginous thoughts often swirled through [Nixon's] murky,

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