

Barbara Ehrenreich

Ehrenreich's Corner

How to write a bestseller

Many IN THESE TIMES readers have probably asked themselves, "How can I write a best-selling book and become rich and famous?" In this column I will answer that question with simple guidelines and suggestions.

The first step is choosing a subject. Here there are two important criteria: (1) The subject must not offend any would-be publisher. This criterion is getting harder and harder to meet since most publishing houses have been bought up by conglomerates that also produce such items as dog food, photocopy machines, rock music and surface-to-air missiles. Do not plan to write a book critical of any product of any subsidiary of your publisher's parent conglomerate.

(2) The subject must be "in." The following subjects are either passe or definitely "out": black liberation, Winston Churchill, poverty, feminism, the Bermuda Triangle, corruption and sharks. As a general rule, avoid any subject that requires you to use the words "injustice," "struggle," or "oppression." If any of these words appear in your book, the critics will call you "humorless" or guilty of "mixing politics with art," which, in the literary world, is about on a par with mixing caviar with tartar sauce.

Fortunately this leaves many subjects that are both "in" and inoffensive to publishers. Here are a few examples, deduced from a computer analysis of recent best-selling lists:

- a sex survey of 500 suburban housewives. (Or, if you can't afford the postage, 50 big-city swingers.)

- the personal philosophy of a seagull, Irish setter, or veterinarian.

- a book proving that 1,400 clones of Calvin Coolidge are alive today, all occupying high positions in the public library system.

- a sex survey of 1,400 clones.

- a "how to" book on almost anything: how to succeed even though you are disabled, female, or congenitally shy; how to generate your own electricity from sonic booms; how to dress to intimidate waiters and IRS employees; how to make your own death into a memorable experience; how to start a mail order business in miniature orchids.

At this point you may be feeling panicky. Suppose you have chosen a subject that you know nothing about, and are not much interested in either. What comes next? Months of tedious research and outlining?

Relax. Today's best-seller writer starts—I repeat, *starts*—to plan the book by thinking through the talk shows s/he will be appearing on once the book takes off. Get a friend to role-play the talk show host. Go through as many simulated interviews as you need to develop the plot and major themes. Make notes as you go of any research you may have to do to keep up convincing talk-show chit-chat. Be spontaneous and creative, but never lose sight of the key question: how will my book come across on TV?

For example, suppose you have been inspired by the new "instant best-seller" *Plague Dogs*—a novel about two dogs who escape from a biological warfare lab,

as told by the dogs. So you decide to write a book about a family of E. Coli bacteria who escape from a recombinant DNA lab and hide out in the colon of a leading Atlanta orthopedist who is about to run for the Senate with the backing of the Korean CIA. *Great idea!* Now let's put it through a simulated talk show run:

Host: Hi [fill in an informal version of your name]. Great to have you here with us on the show. You sure take an unusual perspective in uh, uh (he's fighting to remember the name of your book). I never really thought of this DNA stuff from the point of view of the, uh, bacteria.

You: That's just the point, Tom. Everybody's worrying about whether the bacteria could escape from the labs and harm humans. No one's asking: what's it like to have your DNA recombined? I mean, there you were, a normal E. Coli and—splice—you're, you know, *different*.

Just from this brief exchange you learn the importance of a short, snappy title; decide to develop the theme of the bacterial identity crisis; and realize you ought to find out something scientific about E. Coli family life.

Once you've gone through enough simulated TV interviews to get the basic plot down and identify a minimum of facts to research, it's time to face some practical questions: (1) Should you get an agent? The answer is yes—if you're in the mood to contribute to the support of an interesting, well-dressed businessperson who can tell you all sorts of anecdotes about the publishing world. If you are not in the

mood, hustle the book yourself and save the money.

(2) Should you get a lawyer? Again, yes. A good deal of money in publishing is made through the law suits that follow the book's publication. Think in advance of someone *you* would like to sue—your editor, your agent, your co-author or possibly your typist.

Finally there's the problem of where to get all those rave quotes you'll need for ad copy. It is considered unethical to make them up yourself, but with a good lawyer you have quite a bit of latitude. For example, for the E. Coli book, try: "...the best book I have seen on this subject—Gerald Ford." This is safe because it is the *only* book on the subject, and because Gerald Ford will be grateful to see his name in print. Or, given the nature of your subject, you could use "...beyond a doubt the dirtiest book I have ever read," and credit the quote to Frank Zappa. He'll never notice.

But by now it is already time to be thinking of your next best-seller (the talk show hosts will want to know about it anyway.) You can try a variation on the same theme, e.g., the 1919 flu pandemic as seen from the viral point of view. Or you can take a tip from Erica Jong and write a second best-seller about how the first best-seller changed your life: the fame, the sudden wealth, the parties, the moments of self-doubt and loneliness, the travel, the endless talk shows. So, as you promote the first book, always remember to ask yourself: how will this talk show look in my next book? ■



Winpisinger

Continued from previous page.

ion, have taken me to task because I've openly stated that we've got to stop using military spending as an economic crutch.

We have stockpiled enough hydrogen bombs and sophisticated weapons to blow up the world several times over.

Most Americans know this, but too many have become dependent on defense spending. It's become a kind of massive and necessary public works project for individuals and communities alike.

The fact is that military spending is one of the least efficient ways to create jobs. The industries that produce planes, tanks and other implements of war are so capital intensive that it takes a billion dollars to create less than 46,000 jobs.

One solution for the "stagflation" that Carter hasn't been able to solve any other way would be an economic decision to shift \$5 billion out of the defense budget and into a Manhattan Project for the development of solar energy.

Some members of the Machinists union fear for the loss of their jobs in building warplanes, but there are better jobs to be had in building satellites that can be launched into space where they could convert the sun's energy into electricity and transmit it to receiving antenna on earth. The technology is already there, waiting to be developed.

Instead of pushing forward in this direction, the President had recommended \$20.5 million less for solar development in this fiscal year—up until just the other day out in Denver, when the pressure of our "Sun Day" celebration began to get to him—when he said, with his typical ambivalence, that more would be spent.

Perhaps he has been convinced by the oil and gas lobby that solar energy is not economically feasible. They mean that they haven't yet figured out a way to put a meter on the sun, but solar energy is just as economically feasible as stockpil-

ing billions of dollars worth of military hardware that will be obsolete by the time it hits the storage depots.

It's every bit as feasible as exporting 45 billion American dollars this year for oil that's produced at 30 cents a barrel and sold for more than \$12.00 a barrel.

While the administration and Congress diddle around, the American Solar Energy Association estimates that by fully utilizing already existing capacity, more than one million new jobs could be created in the installation or retrofitting of solar heating and cooling systems in existing residential and public buildings.

The immediate payoff would be the creation of one million new jobs, and the ripple effect of these million jobs would create another two-and-a-half to three million more jobs in the rest of the economy.

That would cut unemployment in half. The savings in unemployment compensation and welfare costs alone would total at least \$8 billion a year. And that does not include the billions more that would be saved on oil imports.

With less money flowing out to pay for imported oil. We could begin to reduce the inflation that is slowly but surely impoverishing the American people.

Last Wednesday an estimated 20 million Americans joined in a giant, nationwide solar energy pep rally in honor of "Sun Day." They showed that the American people are ready for an all-out battle to take back control of the country's economic destiny from the energy octopus.

This is a battle that can be won—not by labor alone, not by consumer groups alone, not by citizen organizations alone, not by public interest groups alone, not by churches alone—but by all of us working together. And I believe that's the way Eugene Debs and Norman Thomas would want it. ■

Joshua Dressler

St. Paul gay rights repeal a danger signal

On April 25 of this year, St. Paul, a supposedly progressive Midwestern town, became the second city in the nation to vote to repeal provisions of a Human Rights Ordinance which previously protected gay people. The vote was nearly two-to-one for repeal.

The ordinance in St. Paul was amended nearly four years ago to prohibit discrimination based on "affectional or sexual preference" in the areas of employment, housing, education, and public services. During the subsequent years there were no claims by anybody in the community of any harm as a result.

Suddenly, late last year, a public campaign for the repeal of the provision was initiated by a Baptist fundamentalist preacher, who called homosexuality a "murderous, ugly, twisted, addictive lust." He obtained the requisite signatures for the ballot measure from other fundamentalist followers. During the campaign he received comparatively little religious or institutional support.

On the other side was the St. Paul citizens for Human Rights, a broad-based organization of gays and straights which obtained enormous political, labor union, religious and professional support.

What happened during the campaign may serve as a chilling blueprint of what

The Baptist church, which began the movement, has a poor congregation. Its public supporters were not many. Yet, it hired the largest, most expensive law firm in the Twin Cities to represent them. It blitzed the television with numerous, expensive advertisements, and it clearly had money left over.

Its well-financed campaign was riddled with lies about the legal effect of the ordinance, and the minister preyed on the

fears and prejudices of the heterosexual community. One pamphlet was headlined "They can't reproduce, so they must seduce." The campaign also highlighted non-issues, such as parents' rights.

The campaign was so ugly that it brought to mind the Holocaust. The *Minneapolis Tribune* published an advertisement that called for capital punishment for gays. Supporters of the gay community were threatened with violence. One woman had her home broken into. On the night of the election, car-loads of campaigners drove by gays screaming obscenities at them.

The Baptist preacher was obviously the front for a coalition of right-wing forces: anti-abortion, anti-gay, anti-ERA, and pro-Nazi groups. These groups pooled their money and silently supported the campaign. While the television ads spoke of "decency," an insidious campaign was taking place.

Such groups, of course, are becoming increasingly emboldened. They have won victories in Dade County, St. Paul and most recently (by a five-to-one margin) in Wichita, Kan. A similar election is scheduled for Eugene, Ore. They have also won victories in the abortion field, and they have stalled the ERA. As their victories increase, we can expect them to move on to other communities.

If the defeat in St. Paul has any positive features, they are two: First, the gay community here has now become united and appears ready to take more militant measures to regain their rights. Second, it serves the rest of us as a clear warning that if we wish to prevent this right-wing coalition from making this the Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, we must unite ourselves, to fight for gays, women, and all other groups, NOW. ■

This is Part Three of a three-part series that we hope will inaugurate an ongoing exploration of an American form of socialism, how it would work, and what it would reject or build upon in the American historical experience. We invite responses to the series as well as original articles on the subject. Our hope is to stimulate American socialists to develop critical and concrete thinking about the practical problems of a socialist economy in the U.S.

By Leland Stauber

The political power of the conservative business community in the U.S. rests only in part on its own immediate resources, considerable as these are. Indirect power—the ability to utilize circumstances that are not of its own making and are ultimately beyond its control—is of far greater importance.

Given the importance generally accorded to economic performance, a trump card held by capitalists has been socialists' inability to devise an economically efficient alternative to private ownership of the bulk of big business. I have previously suggested that, on this point, the 20th century has been a graveyard of socialist ideas. American socialism has been no exception.

Socialist sympathies in the U.S. are—have always been—more widespread than support for the tiny parties of the left would indicate. The Democratic party contains today, and has contained for decades, groups who accept private ownership of most big business, not because they like it but because they feel socialists have no solutions to the administrative problems inherent in a socialist alternative. Many Americans' attitude towards socialists amounts to this: "Unless you can explain how to avoid the evils of existing systems, we won't be persuaded. Either come up with something better than capitalism or shut up."

A few questions:

(1) What is to prevent a socialized economy from being a vast bureaucratic monstrosity? If excessive government involvement in the economy is to be prevented, through what institutional structures is this to happen? Who is to hire and fire management in such vast parts of the economy? In a "government-owned" economy is this going to be done by government? What is to prevent such powers of appointment from being used for political purposes—including anti-democratic purposes?

(2) How can public investment funds be allocated to the most efficient and productive enterprises and denied to the least efficient and productive? If the competitive market is to be replaced by "democratic planning," with democratic representation of different regional and local interests, what is to prevent the "planning" from becoming another name for pork-barrel politics?

What is to prevent an accumulation of uneconomic subsidies to inefficient and obsolete enterprises, as workers and localities clamor for protection against closures of plants? When financing is allocated to firms how is the public to know what is a subsidy and what isn't? How can the profitability of an industry or plant be determined as clearly as in the operation of the competitive market?

(3) If the tradition of *unqualified* workers' self-management basically underestimates the need for professional management, how is this role to be preserved and protected and integrated into a socialist system? How is the management of firms to be appointed?

(4) Is political party patronage to be extended into the management of firms in the socialized sectors, as in Italy and countless other countries? If not, how is this to be prevented? How, again, is the managerial function to be protected?

In the face of such questions, American socialists have generally put their heads in the sand. Our "socialist" publications are full of every conceivable subject *except* thought about these problems; indeed, there is probably no subject most socialists want to discuss less than the difficult dilemmas of how to prevent or manage the many unsavory potentialities of socialism.

PERSPECTIVES

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For a socialism that works: Part III

But unless socialists can provide solid answers to these and other questions, the conservative business community and the Republican party have nothing to fear from America's socialists; they can rightly conclude they are a scatter-brained bunch—and therefore harmless.

This is the real state of the American socialist movement today—a vacuum of practical socialist ideas. The symptoms abound. Such problems, it is said, will be solved by "history." Instead of discussing these fundamental questions it is more "relevant" to hold conferences on the prospects of "the left" in the next presidential election. Or, it is said, socialists should concentrate their minds on agitation for liberal reforms in order to build "the movement"; a socialist program will materialize "later." Or, socialist organizations are "too fragile" to withstand discussion of such baffling and divisive issues, so they are best avoided in order to hold "the organization" together.

Some answers:

But all of this puts the cart before the horse. No "socialist movement" can be built upon a vacuum of practical socialist ideas. Capitalist political power, by contrast, rests, by default, precisely on that foundation.

To fill this vacuum the needed ideas must derive, not from romanticized portrayals of existing socialist systems, but from understanding of the *defects* of those systems. The needed ideas must provide, not vague slogans and misty hopes, but direct and practical answers to these defects.

To do this, some of the most sacred cows of socialist tradition will have to be dispatched to slaughter. You are going to need, within the framework of social ownership, a major role for a *purely commercial* institution. This violates one of the most sacrosanct dogmas of socialist tradition—that "public bodies should never be purely commercial." But precisely

by violating that dogma we can remove every single one of the really major administrative difficulties of a socialist system.

Thus, as to problem 1 above, national government power and bureaucracy can be limited by retaining the stock-company form of organization for firms, using this to disperse the ownership of each firm, and vesting that ownership in thousands of local public investment banks controlled by local governments. Simultaneously, national government regulation of these banks can be used to organize a national capital market and to insulate firms from political influences of individual local governments by permitting each bank to own only a small percentage of the stock of any given firm.

As to problem 2 above, the economic discipline of the market can be created by having the allocation of regular (external) investment funds to firms take place through a capital market that is separate from government. This means that when governments do intervene in the economy, to subsidize socially desirable but uneconomic activities, these measures will be far more visible and exposed to political challenge than if the regular financing of firms is decided within administrative agencies of government. The purpose of this is not *laissez-faire*; it is to put maximum pressure on governments to take direct political responsibility for the intervention they undertake.

As to problem 3 above, the needed role for professional management can be provided by having the management of firms appointed, not primarily by their employees, but primarily by financial institutions that receive profits from the firms and thus have a direct stake in their management on profit-and-loss principles.

As to problem 4 above, the most effective way to limit political party patronage in management is to create a situation where, as in private business, the appointment of management is removed as far

as possible from government and politics and the atmosphere is dominated by commercial motives and incentives.

The type of socialism that would make the most sense economically, however, would also be the most strategic politically, not only here but also in other countries. Not only does the U.S. need socialism, but the American predilection for pluralism and the market would be good for socialism as an international movement. It could vastly expand both its economic flexibility and its political potency in allowing wedges to be driven into the coalitions that comprise socially conservative political power. In this country, it could eventually become the program of the Democratic party.

A network of thousands of local public investment banks, which could contract out parts of their portfolio management to local stock brokerage firms and other local financial institutions, would be thoroughly decentralized and pluralistic. Precisely by violating much "orthodox" tradition, it would, in the context of American culture, be as comfortable as the corner drugstore and as sound as Herbert Hoover.

To the broad liberal camp, both its popular constituencies and its elite establishments—people who know big business is their political enemy but fear both bureaucratic and syndicalist socialism—we could explain a concrete plan that can remove both of those fears and explain how conservative power is supported by their own traditional belief in the sanctity of private property.

For a century in the U.S. the holders of concentrated wealth and the major parties have told us we need the sacrosanct system of "free enterprise" to save us from "the concentration of power" of socialism. That argument is a two-edged sword. Let us make it come home to roost.

Our conservative business community perennially opposes federal government actions for progressive and decent purposes—in a thousand different fields—and professes a love for local institutions. Fie. That fits American tradition. Let us give it to them.

But American socialists are going to have to decide whether they want to hear themselves repeat fixed dogmas of their own or whether they want to see the results we are talking about here.

Leland Stauber is professor of political science, Southern Illinois University, Carbondale. He is the author of the forthcoming book, *Market Socialism and the Problems of Control: A Reappraisal of Practical Experience*. The views outlined in his three-part series are presented in greater detail in his article, "A Proposal for a Democratic Market Economy," *Journal of Comparative Economics*, Sept. 1977.

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