this regard, Volberda’s book is a virtual compendium of issues affecting organizational flexibility and thereby serves a benchmark against which Volberda’s own and other normative theories of how to increase flexibility can be measured. At the same time, what the volume suggests to this reviewer is the potential for developing new normative theory that provides a more fundamental view of the underlying reasons why organizations tend to become inflexible and could therefore suggest a simpler framework for representing and addressing the many issues Volberda raises. As Einstein cautioned, however, a good theory should be as simple as possible, but no simpler. It will be interesting to see whether or not the normative approach Volberda recommends for managing the issues he describes so well can be made simpler through the introduction of new perspectives on the underlying causes of organizational inflexibilities.

References


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Have you ever wondered how adults working for slightly more than minimum wage as waitresses, housecleaners, and Wal-Mart clerks pay their monthly bills? Think about it. A job paying $7 an hour generates a gross weekly income of $280, or approximately $1,260 a month. Subtract money for food, rent, medical expenses, car payments, insurance, and child-care and what do you have left? Not much. Although Wal-Mart is the largest private employer in the United States, and several heirs of Sam Walton are among the richest people in the world, many Wal-Mart employees do not make a “living wage,” estimated to be $8.89 an hour in 1998 for those with a one-bedroom apartment.

These are some of the issues that inspired social critic Barbara Ehrenreich to work at low-wage jobs for one month in Key West, Florida; Portland, Maine; and Minneapolis, Minnesota. Her goal was to earn enough money, and minimize her

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expenses, to afford a second month’s rent at each location. Although Ehrenreich’s exposé is burdened with anti-capitalism biases, an unwillingness to seem too nosey for fear of blowing her cover, and an overemphasis on how she, rather than her coworkers, paid monthly bills, the book provides a sad peek into the lives of people our students may manage or relatives they may be distancing themselves from. These employees are not lazy people with drug and alcohol addictions. Instead, they are hard working single mothers, married women providing a second income, immigrants, and other people stuck in low paying jobs who could have significantly benefited from a college education.

Ehrenreich’s adventure begins with waitressing in Key West, Florida, earning $2.43 an hour plus about $5 an hour in tips. She takes on a second waitressing job at a higher volume restaurant to make up for her monetary shortfall, working back-to-back shifts from 8:00 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. Through Ehrenreich’s working class lenses we learn that cooks want to provide high quality meals and waitresses want to provide humane service, but neither can because managers supply cheap food, cut corners wherever possible, and overwork the waitresses for a distant corporate entity to ensure their own jobs. Managers pit the waitresses and cooks against the customers, who come across as over-demanding nuisances.

Managerial sins, which significantly disturb Ehrenreich, include verbal abuse of employees, invasion of privacy through drug testing and purse searches, restraining employee gossip, withholding health insurance, not allowing waitresses to sit down except to urinate, being oblivious to employee grievances, exploiting immigrants, insufficient cleaning supplies, and pitiful job interview skills.

Employee shortcomings, which do not disturb Ehrenreich, include unsanitary treatment of customer food, profanity, theft, out-of-wedlock pregnancies, smoking and alcohol addictions, ill-advised boyfriend choices, taking unauthorized breaks, and putting too much butter and sour cream on customer meals to get even with stingy managers. According to Ehrenreich, the employees are capitalist victims deserving of their vices and acts of revenge against management.

The waitress job, more so than any of her other low-wage jobs, provides Ehrenreich the greatest opportunity to learn about her co-workers’ living arrangements. Sadly, these include living out of a van, sharing a flophouse room, four people sharing a two room apartment, two people in a one-person trailer home, and $60 a night for a Days Inn motel room. The latter choice highlights the low-wage earner’s Catch-22. They don’t have the $1,000 necessary in advance to pay one month’s rent and deposit, so they spend $60 a night, or more than $1,000 a month, for a motel room.

Next, Ehrenreich journeys north to Portland, Maine and stays in a motel apartment at $120 a week. She works two jobs to cover her costs, a $6.65 an hour housecleaning service job during the week and a $7 an hour weekend job as a dietary aide in an understaffed nursing home caring for Alzheimer’s patients. The cleaning women typically work in teams and survive on the free coffee, bagels and doughnuts available when they meet at headquarters in the morning to receive their assignments. This job permits Ehrenreich to divulge her resentments toward the wealthy, many of which are not shared by her coworkers. When told to scrub a marble shower stall wall extra hard to stop the grouting from bleeding water,
Ehrenreich writes, “That’s not your marble bleeding, I want to tell her, it’s the world-wide working class—the people who quarried the marble, wove your Persian rugs until they went blind, harvested the apples in your lovely fall-themed dining room centerpiece, smelted the steel for the nails, drove the trucks, put up this building, and now bend and squat and sweat to clean it” (p. 90).

Ehrenreich’s final job stop is as a Wall-Mart ladies’ wear clerk in Minneapolis, which pays $7 an hour. She is responsible for returning shopping carts filled with unpurchased fitting room clothes, folding them neatly on shelves and hanging them on racks. She finds the pre-employment drug and personality tests dehumanizing. Ehrenreich had recently smoked marijuana, so she digested over-the-counter detox products and three gallons of water a day to flush the residue from her body.

Affordable housing in Minneapolis appears to be limited to motel apartments ranging from $200 to $295 a week, most of which are taken. She settles for a kitchenless $245 a week motel apartment run by an East Indian couple twenty minutes from Wal-Mart. The room’s sole window has a transparent shade and lacks a screen to keep the bugs out, the door doesn’t have a bolt to protect her from unsavory characters, and the floor is littered with mouse droppings. After declaring defeat, Ehrenreich pays $50 a night at a different motel ($1,500 a month!), a price she could not afford on her $280 a week job.

To experience purpose while performing her daily menial tasks, Ehrenreich encourages other Wal-Mart “associates,” many with additional part-time jobs, to form a union. But she finds a rather contented group of employees who have accepted their predicaments, which she attributes to the successful weeding out of rebellious people by pre-employment personality tests.

In the book’s final reflective chapter Ehrenreich turns her analysis to the market’s inadequate response to the lack of affordable housing. Although the demand for affordable housing far exceeds supply, driving prices up to unaffordable levels, other real estate developers do not enter the market because the expensive housing market, which generates even higher profits, is very robust.

Ehrenreich also ponders how the law of supply and demand applies to low wage jobs. Low unemployment rates should increase wages. But wages remain stable because the success of recent job and welfare-to-work programs, along with an increasing number of formerly stay-at-home parents entering the labor market, provide a strong stream of potential applicants. Nonwage perks, such as flexible hours, free meals, subsidized transportation, and store discounts, all of which can be easily withdrawn when the labor market changes, make the work appealing to low-wage workers.

Ehrenreich concludes her analysis by turning the welfare dependency argument upside down. She writes: “The ‘working poor,’ as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for, they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor to everyone else” (p. 221).

There is much truth in what Ehrenreich reveals, but it will fall mostly on deaf ears due to its one-sidedness. The tone of the book is “Hey, you liberal Democrats,
look what I experienced! What are you going to do about it?" Her many snide political and economic comments are likely to disengage moderates and conservatives from the discussion.

Ehrenreich too quickly accepts some of the bad habits of the working poor. For instance, the money spent on a bag of hot dog rolls for lunch, no less for cigarettes, beer and recreational drugs, could be better allocated for healthy meals. She interprets these vices as signs of rebellion for demeaning, physically grueling, and overly monitored work environments. This misplaced rebellion, mimicking the worst habits of the middle class and wealthy, is a major stumbling block to moving up the economic ladder. These bad habits keep the working poor stuck in the cycle of poverty. Many of Ehrenreich’s working poor are emotionally immature single parents whose children will inherit their parents’ bad habits. The wealthy class is also peopled with dysfunctional families, but they have the economic and educational leverage, as well as higher-level job contacts, to do well despite it.

The only other rebellious action Ehrenreich found among the working poor in Florida, Maine, and Minnesota was a team of housecleaners blasting profanity laced rap music on the car stereo while driving through a rich neighborhood. These same housecleaners greatly admire the owner of their company for obtaining financial security. There is no groundswell for a proletarian revolt. Without political will, or some magical spiritual transformation, we are left with a few enlightened business leaders offering gainsharing and profitsharing opportunities, a few university leaders developing innovative plans for children in the worst public schools, and underpaid social workers directing the poor out of poverty’s grasp.

By the book’s end, I wish I knew a lot less about Barbara Ehrenreich and a lot more about her co-workers and neighbors. She writes too much about how she survived being jobless and homeless in new communities, rather than how others survived on their meager, though steady, job incomes. Maybe she was too tired at the end of the day to more thoroughly interview them. In the meantime, I still want to know how Holly, the leader of a housecleaning team, feeds herself, husband and elderly relative on her $30–$50 a week food budget.


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Transforming Social Inquiry, Transforming Social Action, as the title suggests, presents an integrated approach to social research and political action. It confronts the split between research and action, which is common in social science, through a focus on the community action activities that emanate from universities into their local communities.
