BOOKS

Middle-Class Looking Glass

By Mary Warner Marien

THE recent death of Michael Harrington was taken by many to symbolize the end of socialist influence in American political thought. Through his many books, including "The Other America" (1982), the work said to have sparked the War on Poverty, Harrington served as the conscience of the left. "I see Michael Harrington as delivering the Sermon on the Mount to America," Senator Edward M. Kennedy once said.

There may never again be a voice like Harrington's, one that could make claims on the heart without hectoring. But those who think that socialist idealism has passed from the American landscape should consider Barbara Ehrenreich.

As she did in her controversial book on gender and family life, "The Hearts of Men" (1983), Ehrenreich uses her current text to trace a psycho-history of the professional-managerial middle class. The result is an alternative anthropology of American social relations from the 1950s through the 1980s.

Ehrenreich's reliance on the notion of class is a socialist legacy, but in the broader sense it also owes to 19th-century authors, like Balzac and Zola, who struggled to lay open the mental life of a class in order to expose the defining experiences of a nation. Her thesis, that middle-class life in our culture is taken as a social norm, has formed the basis of some of America's most influential books.

Both David Riesman's "The Lonely Crowd" (1951) and Charles Reich's "The Greening of America" (1970) rest on the assumption that middle-class behavior is the mirror of society.

More recently, Robert N. Bellah and his colleagues portrayed contemporary moral values through a surprisingly popular study of the middle-class mores entitled, "Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life" (1985).

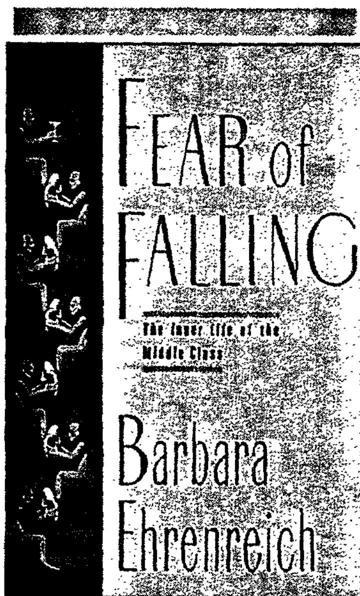
Ehrenreich's chronicle begins in the late 1950s, before poverty was "discovered," at the point where the perceived boon of American affluence was beginning to feel like a burden. She recounts that leading intellectuals, like David Riesman and Daniel Bell, were beginning to suggest that problemlessness was itself a problem. In the postwar period, the middle class worried that it might lose its creative energies and suffocate in a sea of consumer goods.

The War on Poverty provided the middle class the challenge it needed to rouse itself from malaise and a generalized fear of decadence. Ehrenreich notes that the rhetoric of renewal grew so fiercely uplifting, so focused on stirring the middle class, that it frequently lost sight of the objective fact of poverty.

It was, Ehrenreich suggests, a misfortune for the poor to be discovered by a middle class tormented by the forebodings of its own decline. Fear of falling grew more intense during the student movement of the late 1960s, when America's children of privilege seemed to be rejecting middle-class values.

Ehrenreich sees the student movement as a pivotal time, a period in which the middle class became more defensive and a lot less liberal. It was also the moment when the middle class made another discovery, or one should say, created another temporarily soothing symbol. This time it was the working class who suffered the anxieties of middle-class insecurities.

Working-class stereotypes came to stand for traditional American values, like hard work, independence, and self-discipline, which the middle class felt were slipping away. At the same time, the liberal elite, disparagingly called the "New Class" by neoconservatives, came to be seen as less American, that is, as selfish, slothful, and ineffectual. To neoconservatives and their growing number of supporters, cutting social programs was a way to reduce the bloated roster of New Class bureaucrats. To the New Right, the New Class had generated poverty by inducing dependency on federal programs. To end poverty, then, one had to reduce social spending.



FEAR OF FALLING: THE INNER LIFE OF THE MIDDLE CLASS
by Barbara Ehrenreich
New York: Pantheon Books
292 pp., $18.95

The yuppie phenomenon – hard work, hard spending, and high seriousness – drew on neoconservative values. Ironically, in Ehrenreich's view, the yuppies have brought the saga of the middle class almost full circle. She characterizes the present moment as one of anxious affluence and pent-up idealism.

What will be the next great shift for America's definitive class?

Ehrenreich hopes that contemporary middle-class anxiety over consumption will spur greater class consciousness, and ultimately lead to revisioning the middle class not as an elite, but as a class bearing strong affinities with the poor. Just as the middle class in the past discovered poverty and the working class, she hopes that it will discover the rich in the 1990s.

Overall, Ehrenreich's analysis of the psychic tides of middle-class life is on-target. Her writing, spiked with aphoristic observations of modern life, is always entertaining. When, in her conclusions, she recommends that the middle class undergo an implausibly abrupt change of heart, one still admires her moral purpose, and the principles of equality and social justice that give the book its bearings.

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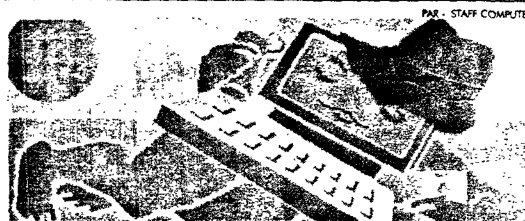

PAR - STAFF COMPUTER

COMMENTARY

Technomania

By Simson Garfinkel

IN just a few short years, the United States has become a nation of electronic addicts, technojunkies dependent on their microprocessors and mainframes.

I took a walk through the office of the future, counting the number of electronic brains I could find.

The tiny silicon chips were everywhere: in the telephones, the alarm system, fax machines, photocopiers, calculators, typewriters, desktop computers, even inside the company's postage scale.

At home I listen to music that is encoded as a digitized stream of 44,100 sixteen-bit numbers per second, recorded into a sheet of polycarbonate and played back by the use of a laser beam and a microprocessor.

My cassette deck has a light-emitting diode readout display and a digital alarm clock of its own, as well as soft-touch buttons for "play" and "rewind" that control computerized motors. Another chip controls my microwave oven. My computerized thermostat even has a tiny analog-to-digital converter so the microchip can tell if the room is too chilly or too hot and turn the furnace on or off.

From printing presses to automobiles, everything is controlled by packs of microprocessors, tied together with local area networks. National networks of automatic teller machines give us our daily "bread."

People who use the machines to earn a living – writers and businessmen, engineers and university professors – are the most dependent. Computers were supposed to set us free. The real effect, curiously enough, has been to enslave us: I know reporters who, having made the switch from typewriter to video-display terminal, now find it almost impossible to go back.

A friend of mine recently called a travel agent to find out about flights from Boston to San Francisco. "I can't give you that information now because the computer is down," he said. My friend reminded the agent about the Official Airline Guide on his desk – a hefty book published weekly that lists every flight in the country. "Oh, that's right, I can do it that way, can't I?" he quickly agreed.

Becoming attached to silicon chips is as habit forming as eating potato chips: Once you learn how to use the computer to write your memorandums, it is not a very big step to use it to balance your checkbook, "paint" your greeting cards, or correspond – electronically – with your friends.

In our throwaway society, computers are now even being sent to landfills. "There's something wrong with your ignition computer," the mechanic says when you take your new car in for service, and he sells you another one. There is simply no way to fix or recycle a microchip.

For those who worry about such things, American dependence on computers has real implications for national security.

If a pair of hydrogen bombs were detonated in space over the United States – possibly as part of a preemptive attack – nearly all the computers in the country could be damaged or destroyed by a phenomenon known as electromagnetic pulse.

Within seconds, the country's technological base could be blown back to the dawn of the Industrial Revolution. If our technological house of cards ever falls it will take a long time to pick up the pieces.

The problem isn't that we are in danger of having electronic brains make organic ones obsolete. The real danger is total dependence on the electronic ones. Computers can't think – people who say otherwise are simply using the machine as an excuse for not thinking themselves.

■ *Simson Garfinkel is a science and technology writer for the Monitor.*