Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams

Limbo: A Critical Review
Presented to
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**Introduction**

Alfred Lubrano is like most of the people whose stories he recounts over the course of his book, *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams*. Lubrano grew up in Brooklyn, the child of Italian Americans; his father was a bricklayer. But rather than follow in his father’s footsteps, he went to college and became a journalist. Lubrano has worked for such publications as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, and the *New York Newsday*.

As a result of his upbringing, Lubrano was given a very different perspective from those who grew up middle-class, with white-collar parents. His experiences inspired him to find out if other people from similar backgrounds had faced similar challenges as they pulled themselves up to a higher social and economic class. *Limbo* as a result is not just his story, but that of many who chose to walk a different path from that of their parents.

**Summary**

*Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White-Collar Dreams* delves into a rarely discussed facet of the American dream, the struggles that go along with pulling one’s self up by his or her bootstraps and rising to a higher social or economic class than one’s parents. In many cases this transition is even more difficult for women and members of minority groups. An example would be that of Dot Newton, who despite outright opposition from her mother and her mother’s boyfriend and later husband, went on to earn a college education and become a social worker (34-38).

One of the most common themes in the book was that of alienation. The “stradders,” as Lubrano chose to dub people of lower class origins who elevate themselves into the middle class, often find themselves distanced from their friends and family as a result of their change in
lifestyle. Family members often find themselves feeling threatened, or uncomfortable in their presence. Another possibility is that the family does not consider the straddler’s education important if it conflicts with the family’s expectations and sense that the straddle owes them something. The best example of this was Rebecca, whose family could not fathom her not helping them with their dairy farm (69-72).

Not only do the encounter difficulties with the people from their past, in many cases they discover that they are ill-equipped for interacting with the people who have been part of the better educated, more affluent class their entire lives. The author recounts his own experiences with seeing men who would have been ostracized in Brooklyn where he grew up experiencing greater romantic success than he did because they fit the expectations of the women near where he went to college (74). The sharp change in culture was something which straddlers are not prepared for, and often leaves them feeling even more isolated than they already were in the aftermath of leaving their families behind.

Ultimately these factors lead to a straddler’s greatest struggle, the question of identity. The world they grew up in and the one they rose to are very different, and often outright clashing in their demands and expectations. Both worlds distrust each other, and often fixate on the other’s negative stereotypes and negative past experiences. To quote Lubrano, “As always, it seems, people living the limbo life have a relationship with the world that is complex, contradictory, and difficult (197).”

Critical Evaluation

The readily apparent purpose of the book is to describe the struggle of those caught between the two worlds of blue and white-collar America. With regard to this objective, the
author was quite successful. Lubrano’s interviewing roughly 100 people when writing the book gave him a large and diverse sample from which he could draw (2).

While the work is effective, there is a clear bias. However, due to the nature of the work and its author, one would be unavoidable. Especially in light of the fact that the book is at least in part autobiographical in nature. Nobody can be completely unbiased when writing about him or herself. This does not reduce the book’s merit, just something one should keep in mind while reading.

On the subject of the book’s merits, the biggest one would be the inclusion of a great many personal stories. These stories help to illustrate the author’s points and make them more relatable by giving them a human voice. Some of the people which Lubrano interviewed for the book are referenced in more than one place to help tie various parts together by returning to already introduced figures, good examples of such people would be his father, Vincent Lubrano, as well as Richard Rodriguez. Taken purely in the abstract, much of what the writer describes would be boring, or taken as patently obvious. However, by putting them into the framework of someone’s life it helps to keep the reader’s attention and show how these problems are not nearly as easy to resolve or as obvious when placed into real world contexts.

As has been stated, the author effectively presented his narrative and the statement he wished to make. There was no particular need on his part to suppress evidence. While not everyone’s story of how they climbed the social and economic ladder is the same, enough of the rungs are at least similar for his points to be relevant.

Conclusion

I found the book to be enlightening on a subject which I had previously not given a great deal of thought. Even though I could see elements of my life and those of other members of my
family in the stories Lubrano included, I had not stopped to consider that other people had experienced similar things. While my own experiences were not exactly like those of the author, I could relate to a few of the points. My mother grew up on a farm, and my grandparents on my father’s side were a postman and a schoolteacher. Consequently, my father fits the definition of a straddler as used in the book. Lubrano’s use of his own life experiences as well of those from many walks of life, and from all across the United States helps to demonstrate the shared nature of the experiences and emotions many straddlers go through. It has also taught me the value of considering more than one perspective and someone’s social and economic upbringing should I become a human resources manager and need to make decisions which impact people’s lives.

As for the question of whether or not I would recommend *Limbo* to others, that depends. I do believe that human resources managers would find it useful and eye-opening. However, despite nearing graduation from college, many of my friends are from much more blue-collar backgrounds and that influences their tastes. I doubt many of them would be interested in the book, or reading at all, really. For them it would be far too much like the school which they were taught to despise by their poor teachers (something discussed in the book).
References