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## **TITLE: Smile or Die**

**Speakers: Barbara Ehrenreich**

**Chaired by:**

Date:

Venue: RSA, 8 John Adam Street, London WC2N 6EZ

### **NB**

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**Barbara Ehrenreich:** Every few years I began to encounter the same ideology of positive thinking being applied to people who were downsized from the corporate world - white collar, middle level people being sent to support groups or networking groups - there are all kinds of names for these things - where the message was it's not bad to be laid off, it's actually a good thing, it's actually an opportunity, it's a growth opportunity, and you'll come out of it much better. And if you want to come out of it all all, of course, you'd better work on your attitude because the key to getting a job in today's corporate world is not knowing things or having skills or experience but having a positive attitude. Somebody who's in an absolute low point in their lives, and certainly losing a job can be that, and just tell them, "There's nothing wrong, just put on a smiley face and get on with it and don't complain, whatever you do."

So then I began to see a pattern and find in more and more aspects of American life this kind of mandatory optimism and cheerfulness. One area where it is very strongly concentrated now, and has been for some years, is the corporate world - the workplace, where the idea has been, "Yes indeed, you'd better be positive because you're not really there to do X or Y tasks, you're there to spread good cheer and make the other people around you comfortable and happy all day."

Now you might think what's wrong with that? Certainly many people have asked me. Well all right so it's delusional to think everything is okay. Go to the real delusional extreme embedded in all this is the idea that you change the physical world with your thoughts. When you send thoughts out from your mind they exert a force that brings things to you that you want. So if I were doing this right we could all concentrate on getting a million dollars or whatever and indeed it would come. And there have been a lot of attempts to explain this scientifically. For a while it was magnetism, that thoughts must exert a magnetic force that draws things to you. As we know, however, our heads are not attracted to

refrigerators, the magnetic force is so tiny that it's exerted ((00:02:54?)) quantum physics.

I love that in quantum physics for some reason it's become an excuse to mock all of science. See it's nothing real, nothing true and whatever you think, that's how the world is. So if you think positively you remake the world positively according to this pseudo scientist explanation. But anyway what's wrong with this why not delude yourself into thinking everything's fine and that you can change the world with your thoughts. And I have two problems with it: one, I'll be hard line about this, I think delusion is always a mistake. There are no safe delusions. Although one of the messages of positive psychology in the United States is "Yeah it's good to have some positive delusions about yourself."

I think the biggest evidence to that is the financial meltdown of '07. Now a lot of things went into that. You know it's extreme class and equality said the United States and it was for your country too, you know, greed and economies based increasingly on finance rather than manufacturing or anything. But certainly one element was the grip of positive thinking in the corporate world when particularly in the financial sector. I mean people who tried to raise problems in the middle of the last decade would be shut up or fired. You couldn't be inside Countrywide Mortgage company, which was the one that it almost singlehandedly set off the whole collapse in the US, and say, "I'm worried about our subprime mortgage exposure" or you'd be out.

And I got to interview some Wall Street guys, very successful Wall Street guys, and they said this is how it is, you can't ... You know people who try, let's say, within Lehman Brothers to point out that the housing prices could not rise forever were fired. And it was this wilful ignorance; nobody could think bad thoughts, and if you didn't nothing bad would happen.

And I think the other thing I find very, very disturbing about it is I just think it's

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cruel. I mean it's cruel to take people who are having great difficulties in their lives and tell them it's all in their head, and they only have to change their attitude. And my favourite example of this moral callousness is from the author of *The Secret* - that was a bestseller here too, admit it - the book on how you can have anything you want, attract anything to yourself by thinking. And she was asked about the Tsunami of '06 and how could this happen. And she said kind of paraphrasing it - those people, the victims of it, must have been sending out Tsunami like vibrations into the universe to attract that to themselves because nothing happens to us that we don't attract. And I think that's beyond any morality, I don't even know where to locate that.

I'm not advocating gloom and pessimism or negativity or depression those can also be delusional. You can go around making up a story to yourself that everything you undertake is going to fail and there's no reason to think that. A very radical suggestion is realism - just trying to figure out what is actually happening in the world and seeing what we can do about those parts of it that are threatening or hurtful.

My background is in science and I think there's not one fixed truth of reality but we close in on something. And then we think oh this is as good as we can understand for now until we get better information, we'll try to act on that. I would make a case that we're hardwired to be vigilant. I mean yes we have many other capabilities - to be jolly, to experience camaraderie, solidarity - all of those great things, but we're hardwired to be vigilant and on guard. That's how our very distant ancestors survived, not by saying, "Everything probably okay don't worry about the motion in the tall grass over there." The people who survived said, "Move it's a leopard, let's go."

George W Bush, George W Bush was a cheerleader in college, not an athlete but a cheerleader. And I think he construed the Presidency as a continuation of that role. He is one of those people who closed themselves in a bubble of positive feeling. Condoleezza Rice said, way too late, that she had had doubts

about the invasion of Iraq but she didn't dare express them because the President hated to be around 'pessimists'. You see the equation of pessimism was doubt. So nobody raised any questions about that war within the hearing of the President. Or those that did like the General who suggested that we were only putting half as many troops on the ground as would be needed to accomplish whatever we were trying to accomplish, he was pushed out of the way, he lost his job eventually.

What could be cleverer as a way of quelling dissent than to tell people who are in some kind of trouble - poverty, unemployment etc - that it's all their attitude, you know that that's all that has to change, that they should just get with the programme, smile and no complaining. It's a brilliant form of social control which, by the way, was practiced in the Soviet Union. One of the principles of Soviet Communism was optimism, so it's a form of social control by the way, it's quite widespread, has been widespread into totalitarian types of societies, but I think it has worked very well in America.

Take the issue of class and equality how can that become a problem if anybody can become rich by thinking about it. If any one of us can just attract wealth to ourselves there's no issue. Somebody raised a parallel to what we call market fundamentalism - the idea is that the market leaders will straighten everything out, that you don't have to intervene, you don't have to have policies, you don't have planning because there's this miraculous force that irons out everything, or maybe a couple of generations get crushed along the way, but it's basically... I think it complete overlaps with the positive thinking ideology; you don't really have to do anything because there is this benevolent invisible deity, the market, that will ((0:09:36?)) everything up. And ((0:09:39?)) if you really want to take a mental leap, a sort of a kind of belief - believe that we could change things. It's the powerlessness of positive thinking because it's always just envisions you as a lone individual changing the world, or not

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changing the world, redesigning the world to fit your ideas. But we do have power, we have collective power which we could use to make changes that would end a great deal of unnecessary suffering in the world.