LIMBO: BLUE-COLLAR ROOTS, WHITE-COLLAR DREAMS

Critical Book Review

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**Introduction**

Alfred Lubrano is a Staff Writer for and part of the enterprise team at The Philadelphia Enquirer and Daily News ("Alfred Lubrano - philly.com," 2017). He grew up in Brooklyn, New York in a working class family. His father was a bricklayer by trade and had never attended college other than for the purpose of laying the brick that framed the institution’s buildings (7). His family’s formal education peaked in high school. However, Lubrano diverged from his family’s typical course by attaining a degree from Columbia University, the first in his family to break through this educational and social glass ceiling to enter the white-collar realm. Upon entering Columbia University, Lubrano felt a certain unrest. He quickly realized that he was different than most other university students, not only in appearance but in mannerisms and general perspectives. As a writer his natural response was to chronicle and analyze his feelings and observations. In doing so, he wrote *Limbo: Blue-Collar Roots, White Collar Dreams*.

**Summary**

This inner turmoil coupled with his experiences throughout college prompted Lubrano to take an in depth look at the dichotomy of working class roots and a middle class existence, aiming for a better understanding of the gains and losses realized by moving from the working class to middle class (1). Lubrano begins by using his personal experience through this transition and follows with expository accounts from more than 100 other “Straddlers” as he describes those who began in working class families only to transition into middle class society (2). These Straddlers experience the same inner turmoil Lubrano first realized as a student at Columbia University. They find themselves somewhere in between these two worlds, never quite feeling at home, existing in a state of limbo, hence the name of the book (2).
The book is structured by way of the natural progression of the experiences and feelings of a Straddler. It begins by laying the foundation of the phenomenon based on Lubrano’s personal experience. As the book continues, it chronicles the struggles of coming to terms with the different classes within American society, the pain experienced when transitioning from one to another, and the culture shock of entering this new and foreign world of the white-collar middle class. His interviews express the discord of family interactions after one has entered the middle class realm. Before the backdrop of this ongoing struggle, Lubrano goes on to describe the difficulty adapting to office dynamics in the white-collar world with a working class upbringing. The book concludes with an exposition of the perils of navigating the already complicated terrain of relationships, marriage, and childrearing in the context of the Straddler’s ongoing conflict.

Critical Evaluation

According to an interview with Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, Lubrano says he wrote the book to address the gap he was experiencing between him and his father as he was becoming an educated person and the gap between him and the other students at Columbia University (2013). He realized that he was somehow different from the other students and he was quickly becoming very different from his father. He felt he existed somewhere in limbo between his blue-collar upbringing and this new, foreign white-collar world. Lubrano aims to shed some light on a phenomenon that he later discovered many experienced but few understood. The limbo phenomenon as he describes is not confined to the actual transition from working class to middle class. That is to say, once one has made the move from a more physically focused, survival driven existence to an intellectually supported environment with creative freedom and complicated social landscape, the struggle does not cease. A constant friction exists in every
facet of a Straddler’s life. Many are aware of the struggle but may be unable to define it. Lubrano uses his own experience as well as many others to highlight the limbo dynamic. He uses a personal example in the latter part of the book describing a moment of conflict between his blue-collar roots and his newly developed internal white-collar faction. In a meeting where his editor backed out on a promise to credit Lubrano’s wife with her contribution to his article, he found himself at a crossroad. His blue-collar inner self, backed by his father’s conflict resolution advice, urged him to pin the editor against the wall and demand the honoring of their agreement. Fortunately, his white-collar inner self helped him avoid certain career suicide by directing his actions towards vocal discourse instead of physical contact as is the blue-collar way. Lubrano threatened to remove his name from the article in essence destroying months of work and wasting the newspaper’s money and resources. The editor eventually conceded. The interesting correlation Lubrano makes is this decision in itself was a compromise. The typical white-collar response would be to meet the editor afterward for a private conversation, certainly not to challenge the boss in front of the entire office (133). Herein lies the eternal struggle of the Straddler. In this example, Lubrano was aware of the internal conflict.

In another example, he did not realize the implications during a particular interaction. After being left on the verge of offense when a financial aid coordinator in college tried to set up a romantic connection with him and another young lady receiving similar financial support, Lubrano became intrigued. His interest was even further stoked upon realizing he was already dating the young lady he was being matched with based on financial status (164). He realized he was subconsciously drawn to other Straddlers. This further highlighted the differences he experienced when he dated those originally from the middle class. Lubrano found that other Straddlers had similar experiences. He records the account of a twenty-five-year-old Straddler
named “Tina” who quickly fell out of love when her generationally white-collar long-time boyfriend slapped a beer out of her hand as they were leaving a party exclaiming not to worry about where to put it, someone else will pick it up, that is what they are paid for (175-176). Lubrano hopes to assist readers in reconciling this constant state of unrest, at least to the extent it can be reconciled.

I believe Lubrano relays his purpose with some interesting and descriptive examples. He supports his claims with multiple accounts both from his personal life and from that of the 100 other Straddlers he interviewed. However, I can see this book as being somewhat biased as he does not include interviews from those growing up in the white-collar middle class. He clearly expresses his observations and feelings tinted by his blue-collar upbringing but only makes speculation of the intent and perspective of white-collar individuals. There are always two sides to every story. Even with this bias, I do not think the integrity of Lubrano’s claims are compromised. While there may be some negative implications throughout the book in regards to those who have only known a white-collar existence, Lubrano does an excellent job at relating to his core audience, Straddlers, without painting the white-collar culture in an undue negative light.

Lubrano writes in such a way and uses examples in such a strategic manner that the reader is almost forced to connect if any inkling of Straddler exists within them. As I was reading, I found myself immediately recalling similar experiences in my past. One of the strengths of Lubrano’s book is its relatability. His storytelling prowess allows him to make strong and easily understandable connections with his ideas of the limbo status and the struggles of many working class people. The real life experiences make all the difference in supporting his claims of the duality of having blue-collar roots while living in a white-collar world. However,
Lubrano is quick to clarify that he is not comparing the problems of all working class to the struggles of African-Americans in this country as W.E.B. Du Bois did when referring to the idea of a double consciousness. He simply borrowed his notion to help define the sense of living in two worlds simultaneously while never quite feeling at home in either (Massachusetts School of Law at Andover, 2013). The idea of existing in a state of limbo is clearly stated and supported throughout this book. Lubrano proves his point not only through the many examples he uses but through the support of noted professionals such as French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu who referred to the “social capital” that those born into the middle class possess (9). He shows that the American Dream may not be as equally accessible as it is made out to be.

**Conclusion**

If you are from a working class family but now exist and function in the white-collar middle class, I would suggest reading this book. I found it very thought provoking and enlightening. I, like many other Straddlers, did not know I was such until reading this book. My father did not graduate high school. My mother graduated high school only to enter immediately into the workforce, eventually retiring making not much more than I made at my entry level positions as a teenager. A college education was not as much discouraged in my family as it was viewed as a pleasant bonus if you could attain a scholarship. Otherwise, finding yourself a good trade was just as or more honorable.

Lubrano taught me that I am not alone in my unrest. I am not the only one that does not quite feel at home in either world. I have never understood how some are just content with their lot in life and never aspire to do more. In contrast, I have never quite felt comfortable building relationships in the business environment for the sake of future gain, or networking as it is called. I have always felt this to be unauthentic and contrived. Understanding the duality of my
existence helps me understand my feelings in these situations and how they relate to my career.

If I take these experiences in context, gain a better understanding of my roots, and make calculated decisions based on the understanding of the two worlds, I will be more equipped to navigate the sometimes treacherous environment of business. I can become a better leader, follower, and servant. As I will be the first in my immediate family to graduate college, knowing the duality of these two states of being will help me navigate both personal and professional relationships as I continue this journey.
References

http://www.philly.com/philly/columnists/alfred_lubrano


https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FigmgcPy9jc