

Ehrenreich skilfully



Throughout the book, Ehrenreich skilfully writes about her day-to-day lifestyle and tries to give a detailed account of her life as a minimum wage worker. She is given a new name, instead of Barbara she is now "Barb," an alias given by Wal-Mart due to the limited space available on the employee id. It is also a way for Wal-Mart to depersonalize its employees. Since she is assigned to ladies wear, she must memorize the entire clothing layout which "[w]ithin each brand-name area, there are of course dozens of items, even dozens of each kind of item" (Ehrenreich 155). Her experience accurately corresponds with Max Weber's Iron Cage theory. By constantly giving tedious and menial work, she becomes "a passionless, coldly calculating, and instrumentally rational actor" (Weber 128). Weber is describing the effects of modernity of the bureaucratic system on individuals.

In order to increase the efficiency of a bureaucracy, an organized social stratification system is needed. This helps define the roles for workers by giving them specific positions. That way, both the employers and employees know what roles to play and follow the rules accordingly. Once their roles are established, personality is no longer an asset or liability for the workers. Instead, the emphasis is placed upon the person's productiveness.

I was initially thrilled to read the things Ehrenreich was writing about serving in Florida. I find it hard to fully engage the contempt-ridden position women described in this section are in. As she progressed up north to Maine I was pleasantly awaiting something better, as the author was herself. I too believed that the all white New England state would provide a better

opportunity for this experiment. The maid work she was applying for seemed slightly more pleasant and less degrading.

As she proceeded on with her experiment, I again grew ominous thinking of the looming omen of a feces ridden toilet or pubic hair ridden Jacuzzi she would come in contact with. The degradation suffered by these consistently well below the poverty line women is enough to turn one's stomach. And to have to keep a cheery disposition and never curse on the job created even more of a hostile mindset for myself.

She described in this chapter a woman working with her with no front teeth. How terrifying having a job where one relentlessly cleans someone else's belongings and tries to maintain their comfort with a good smelling house, meanwhile this lady's mouth is filthy and foul smelling (I assume, because of the rotten teeth observation of Ehrenreich) with no prospect of health or dental care anywhere in the near future or even probably her whole life.

The co-workers described in the book amazed me. With the exception of a few nameless angry people, for the most part there was an unusual camaraderie of people of different ethnic backgrounds and age brackets. It was uplifting that people in such a miserable position were not vengeful, even after she revealed herself as an undercover writer. I think this drives the point home about human nature and how one cannot help but relate to someone who is willing to relate to them, especially in a helpless position.

One of the most unusual relationships I formed with Ehrenreich over the course of the book was over her experiences with the laundry mat. It has been roughly 6 years since I have owned a washer and drier. I think she did

an excellent job of explaining/conveying the undignified experience of patronizing these places.

Another unusual thing she helped me uncover about myself was as her Wal-Mart experience was developing, she mentions the negative person she potentially could have become after a life spent at these dead-end, low compensating, menial positions. My own personal experience reflects the same exact occurrence. I notice a change in myself, almost as if I have some undesirable monkey on my back. A desperate feeling even lingers after the day is over and I am home.

Ehrenreich compares many of her low wage work experiences to times that occurred in her normal life. Like, during one of her orientations for a job she compares the long time to a seven hour air-line delay and say that the air-line delay is better because you can read a book or walk around (Ehrenreich 146). These comparisons help readers understand how different the life of a person living in poverty is from a person living in wealth. Sitting through an eight hour orientation for a job that could easily be learned in half the time is something that millions of Americans must do to get a job.

Ehrenreich made it hard to "feel" for low wage workers at some parts in her book because there were times when she completely left her poverty life and spent a couple minutes in her life full of wealth and prosperity. While working in Minnesota, her motel room gets flooded and she is only worried about her laptop that she brought from her home (Ehrenreich 158).

I do not think that too many low wage workers that claim to be living in poverty own a laptop, especially if they are currently living in a motel room.

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She also talks about what to eat for dinner at some point through her journey and says, " how about the polenta-crushed salmon filet with pesto sauce and a nice glass of J. Lohr Chardonnay?" (Ehrenreich 102). This shows that although she was trying very hard to have the constant mid-set of a middle class, working woman, she still dreamed of the life that she left to explore this so different lifestyle.

Nevertheless, although Ehrenreich writes a gripping account on the challenges faced by her fellow employees. She fails to address the viewpoints of the employers thus giving somewhat of a biased view. In spite of this, it is readily visible throughout " Nickel and Dimed," that there are mysterious forces at work. Ehrenreich, sheds some little light on the welfare reform issue, but grossly understates (if she mentions it at all) proverbial other side of the picture. Specifically, she does not give the psychology or history of this demographic so much as a second glimpse, before declaring from her ivory tower, that the whole of American society should feel some level of social guilt, indeed collective shame, for existing in a world where there are those less fortunate than the average individual.

At the conclusion of my reading I felt anger and relief. Anger because of the government and richest one percent of this country continually turn a blind eye to this enormous part of the population. After all of the baffling numbers at the end of the book I was edgy, yet somehow didn't feel completely defenseless. The mere fact that Ehrenreich began and finished her study was enough to prove that there is hope for improvements in this culture. I was relieved. However, I must say that after reading this book, I really do not have a critically different feelings about low wage workers.

Works Cited

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