

The interpretation of the spirit of capitalism in nickel and dimes



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People have many motivations for working. For some it is more than just a paycheck, but also a fulfillment of something within themselves. Others are truly passionate about the jobs they choose and what they do. Some have the goal to simply get rich and retire early. Then there are the workers such as the ones in *Nickel and Dimed*. These low-paid employees are motivated to work by the necessity to pay bills and eat. It is possible to utilize Max Weber's interpretation of the "Spirit of Capitalism" as a lens to look into Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed*, and to understand the sense of irony and entrapment that Ehrenreich locates in American capitalism.

In *Nickel and Dimed*, Barbara Ehrenreich includes the experiences of her co-workers – mostly women – in her investigative journey. She writes about how her co-workers were "oppressed" by being subjected to demeaning and taxing activities with unreasonably low wages. Gail, one of Ehrenreich's co-workers, perfectly describes her manager's attitude as "They don't cut you no slack. You give and they take" (42). This point is further explored by Ehrenreich through the quote:

Cooks want to prepare tasty meals, servers want to serve them graciously, but managers are there for only one reason—to make sure that money is made for some theoretical entity, the corporation, which exists far away in Chicago or New York, if a corporation can be said to have a physical existence at all. (42)

The workers in *Nickel and Dimed* are doing the best they can at their jobs. The cooks and servers genuinely care about the comfort of their customers as well as the quality of their work. However, the managers still continue to

treat them unfairly, because their primary goal is to make maximum profits for the company. Moreover, Ehrenreich also proposes that she has been changed, as a person, after entering this low-wage work community - " In real life I am moderately brave, but plenty of brave people shed their courage in concentration camps, and maybe something similar goes on in the infinitely more congenial milieu of the low-wage American workplace" (50). This is said after the manager of locked the storage room, and Ehrenreich chose not to intervene. This position in her work took something out of her, and for the time being, changed her entirely. This suggests that low-wage workers might be facing a similar situation, where in reality, they are someone completely different from the ones they disguise as during their low-wage works. The low-wage works have stripped them from their true souls, until they can find something better for themselves and reveal who they are.

In *The Spirit of Capitalism*, Weber quotes Benjamin Franklin to illustrate the basic beliefs of ethos: " time is money", " credit is money", " money is of a prolific, generating nature", " the good paymaster is the lord of another man's purse" (Weber, 14-15). These beliefs reflect the capitalist ethos of honesty, punctuality, self-discipline, hard work as an end in itself and devotion to one's task. Putting it another way, Weber is describing the irrationality of capitalism where the sole purpose has become to make money even though the money may not fulfill other human needs. He suggests that people in a capitalistic society tend to view idleness as a squandering of moral duty. Weber believes that capitalism is presented as a natural order, or an " immense cosmos" (Weber, 19). We are born to this

norm and believe that we must conform to it – it becomes what we believe is the main purpose in life.

Weber defined the term “ The Spirit of Capitalism” as a desire for an increase in profits with the application of minimum effort. Thus, people in capitalistic societies needed to view work as a burden, which was to be avoided by all means. In addition, Weber notes that the spirit of capitalism cannot be quantified or defined in specific terms. “ Man is dominated by the making of money, by acquisition as the ultimate purpose of his life” (18). According to Weber, capitalism is what has ensued to take over economic life, educating and selecting the subjects in the economy who will make a journey through the economic process of survival for the fittest. This is also conceived by the society as a way of life.

Weber’s and Ehrenreich’s illustration of the concepts of “ The Spirit of Capitalism” is different in several ways. To begin with, it is important to note that Barbara Ehrenreich was born in a higher-middle-class family and may have grown to despise the unfortunate ones, until she actually placed herself in their position. Weber explains that the society believes that work is a burden that everyone ought to avoid at whatever cost and this is supported by Ehrenreich’s urge to survive and hence having to as hard as possible. It is impossible for her work less and be able to afford her own necessities; thus, work is inevitable. However, Ehrenreich is aggrieved that she, at times, received as little as \$2. 15 an hour for toiling in a store (Ehrenreich, 49).

Weber’s argument of hard-work being rewarding may not be applicable in this particular case. In contrast, underpayment crushes the dream of hard working individuals as exemplified in Nickel and Dimed. Moreover, Weber <https://assignbuster.com/the-interpretation-of-the-spirit-of-capitalism-in-nickel-and-dimed/>

holds onto the belief that honesty and truthfulness and dedication to one's job yields satisfaction. This, unfortunately, is not the case for Ehrenreich and her co-workers. They work extremely hard for such little payment and even so, they can hardly accomplish their individual responsibilities and meet their needs. At times, they view work as a punishment, and they wish they could at least get time off. The thought that they need money does not allow them to stop working. The 'masters of their pockets' are not convinced to pay nothing but the 'agreed' amount based on the amount of work dissipated. These workers, therefore, lack motivation to even pursue bigger dreams in life.

Still, Weber's notion of the spirit of capitalism manages to shed some light on Ehrenreich's piece. The reason that capitalism is initially based on historical concepts such as bureaucracy lays a basis for the understanding of social classes that are explored first-hand in Nickel and Dimed. The rich are the owners of the resources while the middle class are their workers. The cycle is vicious as the middle class can rarely overtake the higher-ranked jobs from the higher class. This may help explain the phenomenon where people of the middle class are unable to dream big. Weber's argument on the maximization of profits prompts a different perspective of Ehrenreich's work. In order to maximize profits, the owner of the resources has to mitigate the risks involved. They may, therefore, decide to reduce the costs in order to gain huge profit margins. This would be important since the rich have to be there, in order for the poor to thrive; the latter depends on the earlier for survival. In a scenario where the owner of the resources is not present, the poor would not be able to find available jobs, no matter how

little the wage. Thus, instead of blaming the employers for not paying them enough, Ehrenreich and the lower class workers should come to understand that the real reason behind such low wage is their lack of bargaining power.

Nonetheless, there are limitations that come with analyzing these two sources next to each other. Firstly, the ideals exposed within *The Spirit of Capitalism* are extremely idealistic. The piece does not take into consideration the issues between classes. It also puts forth the assumption that all people have the same capabilities, and therefore can capitalize on their abilities. *Nickel and Dimed* offers a much more realistic life view. While the author's own father lived the American dream and truly did pull himself up from nothing, the author does not look at the low income workers she is observing with distaste or condemnation. She instead gracefully walks in their shoes, and quickly realizes that had she not had some of the special opportunities available to her, she would be no better off than her current restaurant co-workers. She comes to understand the realities they face every day while figuring out how to keep a roof over their head while still paying other necessary bills. *The Spirit of Capitalism* offers a much more unforgiving and harsh lens with which to view the employees through.

Secondly, Weber's interpretation of the term "the spirit of capitalism" is limited in terms of its application in *Nickel and Dimed*. The premise that capitalism is based on the maximization of profits through minimum effort is highly refuted by Ehrenreich. She stoops as low as working as a maid and experience first-hand what it is like to be employed and poorly compensated.

The accumulation of wealth by the employer is unfair to the employees who are treated as underdogs. Ehrenreich seems to underline the importance of <https://assignbuster.com/the-interpretation-of-the-spirit-of-capitalism-in-nickel-and-dimed/>

employees to their employers. At the end, she even suggests mobilizing the workers to form movements to agitate for better remuneration. Besides, Weber's concept of choice lacks its full meaning if Ehrenreich's story is withheld. Ehrenreich and her colleagues have to no option but to take a low-paid job, no matter how unfairly-paid they are and how exhaustive the job really is. Their choices are dictated by their domestic and personal needs, which is to survive and take care of their kin. The limited job opportunities available are what they scramble for.

While Weber's view of capitalism might be positively idealistic, in reality, the capitalist system is at odds with the protestant ethics and fall short of expectations. This can be attributed to the fact that it is mainly directed towards profit maximization while the interests of the employees are not considered a priority. To the contrary, making huge profits and exploiting the ability of employees is the most important thing to and for the capitalists. This is evident as Weber stated in his article, " They make tallow out of cattle and money out of men". (Weber, 16)