Working Poverty in the US: Barbara Ehrenreich's Bestseller *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America* and its Countercultural Legacy

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Résumé : *Nickel and Dimed : On (Not) Getting By in America* (2001) est un documentaire sur les classes ouvrières pauvres aux États-Unis qui a connu un énorme succès. Dans ce reportage qu'elle a conduit incognito, Barbara Ehrenreich décrit l'humiliation qui est le lot quotidien des classes défavorisées et soutient que les effets psychologiques de l'exploitation capitaliste ont une finalité plus large. C'est en partie son style humoristique et autodiégétique ainsi que son esthétique vernaculaire qui expliquent la popularité de son accusation à l'encontre de la logique impitoyable poussant à l'accumulation par le capitalisme. Comme toutes sortes de milieux se sont sentis en résonance avec *Nickel and Dimed*, des millions d'Américains ont découvert à sa lecture les limites structurelles du succès économique. Cela a fait voler en éclat la croyance en le rêve américain, un rêve qui reste cependant pertinent. Cette critique sociale s'appuie sur les apports de la contre-culture et leur donne de la force. Slavoj Zizek pense que cette contre-culture a été co-optée par le capitalisme des grandes sociétés. Le reportage incisif et distrayant de Barbara Ehrenreich non seulement met en lumière la prise de conscience de la pauvreté, mais il fait aussi ressortir les liens entre la tradition contre-culturelle et les débats actuels sur les inégalités.

Key words: Working poverty, capitalism, documentary, counterculture, American dream

I.

Barbara Ehrenreich's undercover reportage, which exposes the ominous living and working conditions in America's low-wage sector, is not only a revelatory book it is also the most widely read book on poverty published in this century.[1] By putting in parentheses, and therefore highlighting "not", the colloquial subtitle, *On (Not) Getting By in America,* captures the book's overall shocking message : those working at the bottom of the labor market have little to no chance to survive on their meager income. No matter how hard they try, the working poor have little chance to support a family, or themselves, on poverty wages. This insight on the structural limitations of their economic success gets at the heart of the American Dream. It thwarts the core value of the nation that was once founded as an allegedly democratic, classless society.

Choosing the format of investigative undercover journalism, Ehrenreich did not just write another work of non-fiction but left the comfort of her middle-class existence to take on a number of menial jobs in four different locations and states. At the age of 57, the established author of more than 20 books decided to join the ranks of the working poor. For four months she worked full time as a

[1] *The New York Times Book Review* even proclaimed that it is "one of those seminal books that every American should read and read now". The reviewer also asserts that it delivers "the news of America's working poor so clearly and directly conveying with it a deep moral outrage" (see the back cover of the 2001 Picardor edition), thereby suggesting that it due to its clarity and truthfully documented facts that no one has yet dared to express.

waitress, a cleaning lady, a nurse, and a sales representative. In these dead-end, sweaty jobs Barb, to use her undercover name, made mostly $ 6-7 an hour, which was the minimum wage in the late nineties when she conducted her odyssey into the underclass. Without this personal investment, I argue, her report would have never sold two million copies. Not only has it been top-selling, *Nickel and Dimed* was also translated into nine languages. Its astounding popularity was in part the result of a good promotion but a plethora of raving reviews enhanced its recognition as a must-read. *Nickel and Dimed* has been appraised as a "riveting" (*Newsweek*), "captivating, explosive" (*The New York Times*), "insightful and moving book" (*The Nation).* Studs Terkel called it "mesmeric" while Naomi Klein went as far to proclaim that this "brave and frank book ultimately challenges us to create a less divided society".[2] With hindsight we can say that Klein's estimation was not prescient. Yet, the very conjecture speaks to the symbolic salience of *Nickel and Dimed*.

Published the year the World Trade Center was attacked, it appeared when America's collective concern turned to the war on terror. At the time, class related concerns where of little to no public concern. Seven years later when another traumatic event, the economic crisis, erupted and the economic meltdown followed suit, a book like *Nickel and Dimed* would have possibly been more timely. In 2001, a report on the underside of capitalism that received most favorable reviews was amazing and path breaking. Again with the privilege of hindsight one could argue that *Nickel and Dimed* set the stage for a number of later publications criticizing the negative effects of capitalism. Published before the media widely reported on the shrinking of the middle-class, the ever-widening wage gap, and eleven years before President Obama called economic inequality "the defining issue of our time",[3] *Nickel and Dimed* is an early exponent of the current inequality debate culminating in such recent publications as Josef Stiglitz's *The Price of Inequality* (2012) and Timothy Noah's *The Great Divergence: America's Growing Inequality Crisis and What We Can Do About It* (2012)[4].

Published more than a century after Jacob Riis's classic reportage on the living conditions in the slums of New York – *How the Other Half Lives* – this contemporary examples of the documentary tradition portrays how a third of America's labor force lives in the twenty-first century. If it is true that thirty percent of America's workforce is unable to support a family, as Ehrenreich argues, the book stresses that the term *working* poor is not an oxymoron; it is a fact in contemporary America.[5]

Slaving away "Barb" rarely earned more than 82 dollars a week and had to pay around $60 to have a roof over her head. Making roughly $1000 a month, her income was just above the official poverty level. The main message of her documentary is that even a well-meaning, assiduous, healthy, and educated worker can hardly balance her expenses with her income. In the land of plenty it is

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[2] See the inside flap of the 2001 Picador edition of *Nickel and Dimed*.

[3] Barack Obama, "State of the Union Address 2012", Washington, DC, 24 Jan. 2012.

[4] See also Andrew Hacker, "We're more unequal than you think", The New York Review of Books, 23 Feb. 2012. Web. 30 May 2012; or European commentators such as Kate Dailey, "Is Occupy Wall Street bad for the American dream?" BBC News Magazine, 14 Oct. 2011. Web. 15 April 2013 ; or "Amerika, was ist aus dir geworden ? Wie eine Familie gegen den Abstieg kämpft – in den USA geht es jetzt um Gerechtigkeit", *STERN* 11, p. 34-46.

[5] Ehrenreich bases her numbers on data published by the Economic Policy Institute, but recent data released by the Center for Research on Globalization, stating that "nearly 30 percent of US families subsist on poverty wages" (Tom Eley 2009), confirm her observation. The "living wage" at the time would have been at about $14 an hour, but according to Ehrenreich "over 60 percent of American workers earn less than that [$14] per hour—many less than half" (Ehrenreich, p. 213).

basically impossible to get by on minimum wage. To afford a one-bedroom apartment in 1998 when Ehrenreich began her project required a minimum hourly wage of $ 9 (Ehrenreich 3). Making only slightly more than minimum wage, which was roughly 7 dollars per hour at the time, Barb was unable to live off of what she earned. Barb's "failure" to do so proved what Barbara Ehrenreich set out to verify in her "experiment", to use her term for this venture, conducted at the turn of this century.

Wanting to find out if it was possible to survive on minimum wages she went undercover to prove her point. Once the working-class character of *Nickel and Dimed* had to admit to her failure to make ends meet, the experiment was aborted. Barb quit her jobs; Barbara returned to her desk and started writing about her odyssey into the lower stratum of American society.

The success of *Nickel and Dimed* is, as argued above, based in part on its sense of authenticity. It seizes on the authority of authenticity thereby conveying narrative reliability. Given that the (lower-class) protagonist Barb coincides with the (middle-class) journalist Barbara Ehrenreich, it allows the middle-class reader to identify with the protagonist and her coworkers. The reader is not only willing to suspend disbelief, as any reader of a fictional text does, but suspends his/her reluctance to confront an unpleasant topic. Once the reader has entered Barb's narrative world, the decidedly colloquial and informal style of writing functions as bait, pulling him or her further into the narrative. This enables the reader to symbolically cross the class divide.

To keep the reader interested the narrative frequently uses humor and irony. For example, when Barb worked as a waitress in a local diner, she had to serve four tables of demanding customers, all of whom had special requests and were highly impatient. The scene culminates in a whirlwind of orders. At one point Barb had to take back a tray stacked with dishes that had to be reheated. Entering the kitchen, the manager brazens out:

"What *is* this?" She [the manager] means the food – the plates of rejected pancakes, hash browns in assorted flavors, toasts, burgers, sausages, eggs. "Uh, scrambled cheddar", I try, "and that's – "No", she screams in my face, "is it a traditional, a super-scramble, an eye-opener?" I pretend to study my check for a clue, but entropy has been up to its tricks… "You don't know an eye-opener from a traditional", she demands in outrage (Ehrenreich, p. 47).

The detailed list of the various dishes, set off by commas, demands a fast reading rhythm matching the fast pace that this job requires. Italicizing the dexis ***is*** in What *is* this? and "N*o*" – her boss's exclamation – Ehrenreich conveys the drama and the stress that a waitress experiences during peak business hours. On a formal level, this is communicated through the short sentences, the back-and forth of the dialogue, and the terse style of writing. The foreign word "entropy" creates a narrative distance as it reminds the reader that Barbara, not Barb, is the narrator of this incident.[6] This stylistic device of narrative self-irony emphasizes the distance between the experiencing I, working class Barb, and the narrating I, middle-class Barbara. This precarious dialectic in turn allows the middle-class reader to be amused about Barb's sense of defeat.

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[6] Another example for this narrative strategy is a passage in which Barb has to dust the bookshelf at an extravagant house in Maine. The narrator gives an assessment of the "literacy spectrum" of her clients, inferring that, for the rich, "books are (mostly) for show" (p. 94). The narrator concludes her literary investigations with, "the real issue for a maid is the number of books per shelf" (p. 94). Again the diverging perspective of Barb and Barbara is at the core of the humorous effect.

Unable to meet all of her customers' demands, Barb goes under in a storm of calls and orders only to be chided by the kitchen manager screaming "is it a traditional, a super-scramble, an eye-opener?" (47). When Barb cannot answer that question, her boss fumes: "You don't know an eye-opener from a traditional" (47). This sense of indignation evokes the reader's empathy with the employee and disrespect for the hysterical employer. Humorous dialogues expressed in the vernacular such as this elicit a smile in the reader. This enables the cross-class encounter and gives insight into the humiliating world of working poverty.

Another humorous scene is set in a suburban middle-class home, in which Barb and her team were working hard vacuuming, scrubbing floors, and cleaning everything else. When dusting an array of decorative copper pots hanging from a rack above the stove Barb steps on the countertop to reach for the last pan. The heavy pan slips from her hand and "comes crashing down into a fishbowl cunningly furnished with marbles. Fish fly, marbles skitter all over the floor and water […] soaks everything, including a stack of cookbooks … and yes, Martha Stewart herself" (98).

This passage ridicules Barb's mishap, and links self-irony to slapstick but it also adds collective self-irony by mocking the bourgeois Martha Stewart lifestyle. From the vantage point of the working class, the pots and pans and fishbowl and obsession with hyper-cleanliness might seem petty. Apart from the slapstick, the short and simple sentences and the use of the deictic term "yes" are indicative of the book's overall vernacular style. To conclude, the dry sense of humor, the vernacular style of writing and self-ironic autodiegetic voice cast this documentary in a style that is riveting, sassy, and entertaining. This narrative mode facilitates the cross-class alliance without which Ehrenreich's reportage would never have become a bestseller.

The following passage also describes a routine activity in the daily life of a cleaning lady. The narrator boldly addresses the implied reader in the second person: "For those who have never cleaned a really dirty toilet, I should explain that there are three kinds of shit stains, landslides, splash-backs, and 'a crust of brown on the rim of a toilet seat'" (Ehrenreich, p. 92). After this uncalled for, disconcerting statement, echoing Barb's narrative voice, the narrator Barbara turns directly to the reader with the rhetorical question: "You don't want to know this?" (92). Most readers will be appalled to learn about these details concerning human feces. To be called out for not wanting to know even exacerbates the reader's sense of unease. This provocation is devoid of self-irony but resonates with sensationalism.

When the narrator goes on to discuss "that other great nemesis of the bathroom cleaner—pubic hair", the reader is confronted with yet another repulsive aspect that cleaning ladies are confronted with daily. To counterbalance the otherwise embarrassing topic, the narrator continues with a tone of irony, "I don't know what it is about the American upper class, but they seem to be shedding their pubic hair at an alarming rate" (92). Here the voice of Barb, the character commenting on hygiene, and Barbara, the reporter-narrator, fuse. In narratological terms this narrative voice that blends the protagonist's and the narrator's voice, fusing direct and indirect speech, is expressed in free indirect discourse. It is precisely through the informal, sassy, colloquial style of writing that the world of working poverty – and its unpleasant realities – becomes accessible to the reader. Formally speaking, the use of free indirect discourse in *Nickel and Dimed* bridges the middle and the lower class. In effect, Ehrenreich's vernacular realism, which uses witty free indirect discourse to describe unpleasant

and cruel realities, enhances the reader's curiosity. Its vivid and riveting style entices the reader to understand what it means to clean up after what others "shit or shed" (92).

While the colloquial style of writing carries throughout the book, in this passage its confrontational mode runs the risk of sensationalism. Sensationalism, as Josef Entin, has pointed out in his book *Sensational Modernism* is a mode of poverty portraiture that contrasts with the sentimental mode. Using the term sensational as an aesthetic category, Entin takes the term sensational modernism to be synonymous with "poverty modernism" referring to works of art that focus on laborers whose disfigured bodies become a sight of pain and resistance.[7] Entin also spends considerable attention to the viewer's and reader's response to these crude images and texts, which tend to evoke a visceral and sensational reaction.[8]

The reader's reaction to the above-cited appalling passage might evoke disgust and thus runs the risk to backfire. The attempt to bridge the class-divide might lead to the unintended effect of distancing the world of the working poor from those reading about them in *Nickel and Dimed*.

This report on the working poor exposes the cruel reality of class exploitation not only in a humorous tone of voice; there are also those passages in which the narrator assesses their exploitation in a very straightforward, empathic tone of voice:

> When someone works for less pay than she can live on – when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently – then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The "working poor", as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor, to everyone else. (Ehrenreich, p. 221)

The working poor, prefigured as female, become benevolent donators who make big sacrifices to nurture the collective body. The cliché of the undeserving poor is turned on its head. The have-nots are the givers, the haves are the takers, the working poor are the good Samaritans, and the stock-holding capitalists are parasites who (ab)use the innocuous to secure their property. This makes the rich into cruel perpetrators of evil and the poor into unacknowledged philanthropists. The tone is harsh and indicting, thus contrasting with the above examined humorous passages.

One of her most striking observations about America's economy is Ehrenreich's conviction that the employees are being deliberately humiliated. The daily humiliations, which Barb experienced and

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[7] He adds to the burgeoning new modernist studies movement that includes *Cruising Modernism* (Michael Trask, 2003) *Paranoid Modernism* (Trotter, 2001) to *Border Modernism* (Schedler, 2002) to *Reluctant Modernism* (Cotkin, 2004), *Pop Modernism* (Suarez, 2007) or *Primitivist Modernism* (Lemke, 1996). Entin also contributes to recent research that reconsiders the Depression Era such as *Picturing Poverty* by Cara Finnegan, which re-examines social documentary photographs of the Thirties, and Jani Scandura's *Down in the Dumps: Place, Modernity, American Depression* (2008).

[8] "The effort, often 'realist' in intent, to encode poverty in narrative and visual forms – an enterprise [that] acquired particular saliency and urgency during the Depression – created cognitive ruptures that were registered in tropes of disfigurement and in departures from conventional aesthetic techniques and styles. Sensational modernism is, in a sense, a poverty modernism […]" (Entin, p. 263). As representatives of this kind of modernism, Entin turns to William Carlos Williams's works, Richard Wright's *Native Son*, and lesser-known works such as Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*.

that Barbara Ehrenreich puts into a larger perspective, are not just caused by impetuous managers; they serve a function. Ehrenreich even moves beyond Marx's theory of accumulation when she emphasizes the psychological factor of economic exploitation. Low-wage workers are deliberately deprived of their self-confidence, she suggests, in order to keep the wages down. Similar to the military drill that keeps the soldiers compliant, humiliations at work put the employees in their place to secure profits and to solidify the system of accumulation.

The psychological effects of this economic "dictatorship", as Ehrenreich calls it, are devastating. In an empathetic undertone, she asserts, "If you are constantly reminded of your lowly position in the social hierarchy, whether by individual managers or by a plethora of impersonal rules, you begin to accept that unfortunate status" (210). The shift of narrative perspective from the first to the second person is a rhetorical device employed to implicate the reader. When the implied author/narrator uses the second person he/she addresses the implied reader head on: "If you're made to feel unworthy enough, you may come to think that what you're paid is what you are actually worth." (211) The observation that the working poor have neither material comfort nor a sense of self-worth is not substantiated by other research, its credibility derives from Ehrenreich's, or Barb's, own experience.

II.

Ehrenreich's indictment of capitalism as a system that deliberately deprives workers in the low-wage sector of their self-esteem to secure the gains and economic privileges of the rich, is a shocking message. Workers are treated as untrustworthy, so they lose their sense of self-worth and self-respect. This outrageous charge becomes plausible when the reader learns about the drug tests Barb had to take, which demanded that she undress in front of a health worker, or the various personality tests Barb had to fill out as part of her job application, which were replete with assumptions about the untrustworthiness of the applicant. Apart from the managers, who curtailed basic civil and human rights of their employees, some of her coworkers gleefully neglected their own rights and body. Afraid that they could lose their jobs, they worked beyond their physical limits.

This explanation of the inner workings of capitalism links the economic exploitation to the phycial and psychological deprivation of those working in the low-wage sector. But Ehrenreich even takes her argument one step further by suggesting that this "routine surrender go[es] beyond the issue of wages and poverty". (210) America's exploitative system has political repercussions. "We can hardly pride ourselves on being the world's preeminent democracy, after all, if large numbers of citizens spend half their waking hours in what amounts, in plain terms, to a dictatorship" (210). If America is a dictatorship, as Ehrenreich has it, shouldn't her citizens do to their nation as it had done to dictators abroad? The implicit political call of her narrative dovetails with her explicit plea for a future when collective anger will give way to "strikes and disruption".

There is a scene in the break room of the Wal-Mart branch Barb worked at during the time. She watches the local news. It features a big union strike organized by employees of a local hotel. In an ebullient tone, Barb says "We could do that too" (191), and the coworker sitting next to her promptly responds, "Damn right". A few lines down, the texts shifts from the optimistic perspective of the protagonist to the more realistic perspective of the narrator who doubts the likelihood of a

strike.[9] But nevertheless, the ensuing section, "Evaluation", envisions a future moment when the exploited class will revolt, "there'll be a lot of anger when that day comes, and strikes and disruption" (221). This passage clearly expresses a self-ironic undertone.

The question of how the reader should respond to all of this injustice is not only explicitly raised but also answered unequivocally: "The appropriate emotion is shame – shame at our *own* dependency, in this case, on the underpaid labor of others" (221). Using the first person plural, the implied author and narrator tells us to be ashamed for our dependency. By italicizing "own" instead of "our", it highlights the reader's responsibility. The possessive pronoun reminds the middle class readers that their privileges cannot be extricated from the depravity of the working poor.[10]

The imperative "be ashamed" certainly adds a moral dimension to this project, which aims at truthfully reporting on the actual conditions of the working poor. Ehrenreich's portrayal of the plight of the poor ends with indicting the middle class for its general unwillingness to share national wealth by taxing the rich and subsidizing the poor. As long as this unwillingness persists while the income gap widens, any reportage on the economic divide has to succumb to moral self-accusation.[11] The collective reluctance to redistribute the wealth and to increase taxes precludes any other response to economic injustice. Hoping for a better future, the documentarian is left with appeals to commiseration, charity, or self-blame.

On the other end of the spectrum, Ehrenreich assumes a tone of anger expressing an outright rage and a longing for a future moment when the exploited class will revolt: "there'll be a lot of anger when that day comes, and strikes and disruption" (Ehrenreich, p. 221). This foreboding statement, which resonates with joyful anticipation, however, is then counter-balanced by the above-cited scene in the break-room of Walmart, which implicitly acknowledges the futility of that very project. Conceding that the American proletariat will not revolt any time soon, this reportage ends on a somber but realistic note. The only way to effect change then lies in the journalistic endeavor to uncover these grievances as well as in the activist commitment to the living wage movement, of which Ehrenreich has been an active member ever since her book was released.

III.

The predominantly raving reviews and many supportive e-mails, as well as the few negative responses, have contributed to the striking salience of *Nickel and Dimed*.[12] Not only did it become a

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[9] "I still think we could have done something, she and I, if I could have afforded to work at Wal-Mart a little longer" (p. 191), Ehrenreich infers retrospectively. The use of the conditional "could have" suggests that the struggle for economic justice is contingent and improbable.

[10] Ehrenreich herself contributed her share to this task as "a speaker at living wage rallies and fund-raising events", she writes in the "Afterword" (p. 232). "As *Nickel and Dimed* was adopted as a required course reading in many colleges" (p. 233), it helped to raise poverty awareness and lead to protests on campus, in which she enthusiastically joined in with workers and students: "For an old activist like me, these were peak moments, charged with solidarity and hope" (p. 233).

[11] Much has been written about the widening income gap and economic inequality. As a small reminder, the CEOs of the two hundred largest companies earned an average of $11.7 million in 2007 (*New York Times).* Barb or any member of the working poor could have expected to earn $13,000 a year on average. Roughly, the income of a CEO is about a thousand times higher than that of those workers at the bottom.

[12] Ehrenreich received hundreds of e-mails from workers who expressed their appreciation that someone finally acknowledged how hard it was to survive on minimum wages: "[…] the book has been far better perceived than I

national bestseller, it represents a "publishing phenomenon", at least according to its publisher Picador. While this assessment has to be taken with a grain of salt since it serves the purpose of self-promotion, the fact, for example, that "the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill assigned the book to all incoming students" in 2003 (Ehrenreich, p. 225), is another indicator of its significance. What is more, this academic assignment "prompted a group of conservative students and state legislators to hold a press conference denouncing *Nickel and Dimed* as 'classic Marxist rant' and a work of 'intellectual pornography with no redeeming characteristics'" (225). Apparently, *Nickel and Dimed* has the power to polarize: some consider it pornography and those who agree with *The New York Times Book Review* that Ehrenreich is "our premier reporter of the underside of capitalism", might come to the conclusion that her critique of economic injustice is ultimately beneficial to perfecting American democracy.

To answer the question of why this acerbic critique of America's socio-economic system was able to reach a broader cross-class audience and become a bestseller, it is important to remember that working poverty among Euro-Americans was at the time of the book's publication not a widely known fact. This made *Nickel and Dimed* a timely book that exposed a relatively novel social condition. While working poverty had long existed among African Americans and immigrants, it was not associated with Euro-Americans. Ehrenreich's focus on white Americans working in Maine or Minnesota – and overall neglect of people of color – is a striking shortcoming of her report. At the same time, however, it exposes the theretofore lesser-known reality of white Americans working assiduously for poverty wages.

By exposing this unpleasant reality, *Nickel and Dimed* documented the dire existence of working poverty in 21st century America. If this were a widely acknowledged fact, it would have broader ideological repercussions unsettling the long held belief that it is reasonable to anticipate economic success if one merely worked hard and was self-determined enough. It shatters the all-American myth that hard work and will power pave the road towards happiness and possibly wealth. With it, the confidence in work ethics, social mobility, and meritocracy is at stake. More than exposing the neglected population of the working poor, this reportage gets to the symbolic core of America's national identity. Generations of immigrants were driven by the aspiration and confidence to make it in America. To acknowledge that the dream of economic success and social mobility remains a dream deferred for a third of the labor force, as Ehrenreich claims, amounts to an explosive recognition. In the aftermath of the economic downturn, this very insight is even more acute.

Apart from it being a timely publication with pertinent symbolic repercussions, another reason why *Nickel and Dimed* became a bestseller relates to its accessible and sassy style of writing. Here I am riffing on *Publisher's Weekly* which praised *Nickel and Dimed* as "a fast read that's both sobering and sassy". The above-discussed narrative devices – the use of humor and irony, the vernacular style, the keen moral appeals and evocations of empathy – attribute a readerly quality in the sense Roland Barthes uses the term since it does not challenge the (middle-class) reader in a way a writerly, more detached documentary style would. This makes *Nickel and Dimed* a page turner. In my opinion, it is

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[Ehrenreich] could have imagined it would be, with an impact extending well into the more comfortable classes. […][but it also] has been widely read among low-wage workers themselves […]" (Ehrenreich, p. 226).

this very combination of a politically acute topic with a vivacious vernacular style that explains why this disclosure of the underside of capitalism became a popular book. It did so, surprisingly, although it articulates a radical critique that works within, but also exceeds, the classic Marxist and the neo-Marxist view on class exploitation. Whereas Marx's theory of exploitation presupposes a fundamental class antagonism envisioning the revolt of the proletariat, neo-Marxists like Antonio Gramsci argue that the economic and cultural elite manages to encumber the revolt of the oppressed by asserting their hegemony through consensus. Ehrenreich suggests that today's proletariat is kept in its place by instilling an inferiority complex. The psychological deprivation obstructs a healthy self-esteem and impedes class-consciousness. As a result, the oppressed either blame themselves or try to enhance their sense of self-worth by working extra hard. This might explain why Marx's envisioned revolution of the proletariat has not yet occurred in spite of the exacerbating class divisions and dismal economic injustices that persist to this day in many parts of the world.[13] Ehrenreich's observation about these subtle, psychological mechanisms is insightful and original but at the same time her assessment inadvertently relegates the working poor into the role of victims. Being exposed to daily humiliation, Ehrenreich implies, the working poor are not only economically exploited but also deprived of their self-worth and therefore yearn for recognition, which makes them volatile and less likely to rebel. This view, however, is based on the tacit assumption that the working poor are victims and thus cannot represent themselves. As Karl Marx had it when describing the exploitation of the peasants suffering under Napoleon's rule proclaimed: "They can not represent themselves. They have to be represented",[14] a statement Paula Rabinowitz took as the starting point for her monograph on the politics of documentary fiction. She argues that voyeurism is an inevitable condition of portraying poverty and injustices, "voyeurism and its attendant sadism is at the heart of the documentary narrative, which depends on the power of the gaze to construct meanings for the writer and the reader of 'the people'" (Rabinowitz 51). Ehrenreich's book responds to this dilemma. In an attempt to avoid a dismissive attitude towards "the people", *Nickel and Dimed* assumes an autodiegetic perspective. This in turn has its drawbacks, as I suggested earlier. Like all representations of poverty or working poverty, Ehrenreich has to walk the tight rope between sentimentalism and sensationalism. But unlike many, her perhaps most piercing criticism of capitalism is intractably linked to this fundamental dilemma of representation.

IV.

Ehrenreich's report on the underside of capitalism, to use the phrase of the media, i.e., her critique of the ruthless, inhumane logic of capitalist exploitation, has to be understood in the context of, and as a trailblazer for, the current discourse on the crisis of capitalism.[15] But it also very much grows out

[13] Given the fact that in one of the richest countries in the world, one in six people experience hunger, the grim living conditions of the bottom segment of society have not drastically changed since Marx drew attention to the plight of the 'lumpenproletariat'. Although today's poor are not dressed in rags, many live in food insecure households. See the 2011 United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) report on Food Security in the US: "Household Food Security in the United States in 2010" *USDA – Economic Research Service*.

[14] Cited in Paula Rabinowitz, *They Must Be Represented: The Politics of Documentary*, London, Verso, 994, p. 51.

[15] One of the most compelling and historically comprehensive assessments of the crisis of capitalism is David Harvey, *The Enigma of Capital and the Crises of Capitalism*, New York, Oxford UP, 2011. In the remainder of my essay I will however not discuss this emerging discourse that is currently in the making but rather take a look back in time.

of an intellectual legacy. *Nickel and Dimed*, I venture to argue, is strongly rooted in the intellectual tradition of the counter-culture as it resonates with the irreverent, critical, and leftist spirit of the sixties and seventies. In spite of its humorous tone, Ehrenreich's documentary is a contemporary example of protest literature. This affinity with the spirit of the counter-culture, which manifests for example in the author's articulated yearning for revolt, is not surprising given that Ehrenreich herself was actively involved in student protests during the late sixties as well as in the anti-Vietnam movement and the women's health movement.[16] As opposed to many others, she has remained an activist and socialist all her life.[17] Recalling the revolutionary spirit of the sixties, the veteran of the counterculture whose involvement in the feminist, democratic, and socialist struggle spans 45 years, has the following to say:

> In the intersection of the left and the counterculture, a new kind of political ideology emerged. It was definitely of the left by its hatred of corporate power and the military-industrial complex, but too wary of government to be socialist. It was altruistic in its commitment to the downtrodden, but too invested in a vision of personal liberation to be dour and self-sacrificing. It was egalitarian, but in a way that went far beyond the reach of law or Supreme Court rulings - demanding and envisioning nothing less than the abolition of all hierarchy - whites over blacks, teachers over students, parents over children, and (by the late sixties) men over women. It was, of course, utopian, contemptuous of mere reform, and committed to a startling, total transformation that would bring human social arrangements into line with human needs and desires.[18]

The political ideology of the counter-culture was leftist and egalitarian in its effort to eliminate imbalances between those in power (white Americans, teachers, parents, men) and the powerless ("blacks", students, children, women, and "the downtrodden"). While this is a utopian agenda, as Ehrenreich argues, this ambitious endeavor carried on into the 80s and 90s fueling the "multiculturalist" agenda as well as that of many academic fields (e.g., Minority Studies, Queer Studies, Cultural Studies, Disability Studies) organized around issues of identity and equality. However, a "total transformation that would bring human social arrangements into line with human needs and desires" has not occurred. Without specifying what this transformation entails – if it involves job creation programs, tax reform, an overhaul of the welfare program or a redistribution of wealth – Ehrenreich suggests that the underlying project of the counterculture to provide for human needs remains an unfinished project.

Nevertheless, Ehrenreich stands for, and embodies, continuity between the generation of the sixties and today. A diverging assessment of the relation between the counterculture and today's

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[16] Ehrenreich even co-authored a history of that movement entitled *Long March, Short Spring: The Student Uprising at Home and Abroad* (1969).

[17] In the seventies she joined the leftist New American Movement; in 1982 she co-founded the Democratic Socialists of America. In the 90s she participated in a Conference entitled "Making Trouble" which aimed at "Building a Radical Youth Movement". In the last decade, she was active in the living wage movement and she also initiated the group Progressives for Obama. She was active in the living wage movement and she also initiated the group Progressives for Obama.

[18] Barbara Ehrenreich as cited in "Barbara Ehrenreich on the Move to Postmodernism in the 60s", *Beams and Struts,* 09 Dec. 2012. Web. 19 Apr. 2013.

political climate was articulated by Slavoj Zizek. To him, "the big outcome of the '60s [is] the triumph of capitalism": his evaluation of the countercultural legacy is worthy quoting at length:

> The new capitalism triumphantly appropriated this anti-hierarchical rhetoric of '68, presenting itself as a successful libertarian revolt against the oppressive social organizations of corporate capitalism and "really existing" socialism. This new libertarian spirit is epitomized by dressed-down "cool" capitalists such as Microsoft's Bill Gates and the founders of Ben & Jerry's ice cream. [...] What survived of the sexual liberation of the '60s was the tolerant hedonism readily incorporated into our hegemonic ideology. [...] Liberal-democratic capitalism is accepted as the finally found formula for the best of all possible worlds, all that is left to do is render it more just, tolerant, etc.[19]

One could add Steve Jobs and Mark Zuckerberg to his list of cool capitalists, but nevertheless Zizek's contention that "after the social tumult of the '60s capitalism usurped resistance itself, turning attempts at subversion into commodities", might not be novel, yet, it is undoubtedly observant. The cooptation of the protest movements into "tolerant hedonism" and an omnipotent capitalism mocks the socialist dream of "total transformation" Ehrenreich envisioned. Ironically, but not so surprisingly, it was Ehrenreich's little book on the alarming injustice of class exploitation that turned out to be a bestseller. Apart from being a hot commodity on the book market, *Nickel and Dimed* revitalizes the spirit that Zizek declared to be dead. Ehrenreich's commitment for the downtrotten, whom she considers the true philanthropists, rehabilitates this part of the population drawing attention to often neglected aspects of American society. Likewise she, willingly or unwillingly, reanimates the countercultural ethos by raising poverty awareness.

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[19] Slavoj Zizek, "The Ambiguous Legacy of 68", *In These Times.* 20 June 2008. Web. 19 April 2013.