

Notes on using *Nickel and Dimed*

The following points are meant to encourage faculty to use the book in their courses, as well as to point out ways that students might make use of it in classes.

I. General issues that might be taken up in any class:

- How do you think Ehrenreich succeeds in capturing the moods of the situations she's describing? In analyzing the underlying causes for these conditions?
- What does it mean to "nickel and dime"?
- Ehrenreich moves back and forth between her own experiences in the workplace, the experiences of those around her, and larger issues of American commerce and culture. She is trying not only to explain these relationships, but to convey a feeling for their impact. How does her narrative structure relate to her analysis?
- What is the relationship between what people (both employees and managers) *say* about what they're doing and what they *actually* do? For instance, does Wal-Mart's rhetoric about unions jibe with its managers' portrayal of "servant leaders," "guests," etc?
- Ehrenreich speaks at the outset of journalism, but it's clear that she's also doing research and teaching. How would you define her process?
- How, in general, does work affect life and vice-versa?
- Journalists and social scientists are expected to conduct research from an objective, emotionally removed perspective. Ehrenreich, however, clearly becomes emotionally involved with her subject matter. Is her lack of objectivity an asset or a detriment to her study? Why?

II. Ways that the book might be used in specific courses.

In order to suggest possibilities, rather than to provide full coverage, the focus in this section is placed on just one chapter. The section on Wal-Mart was chosen because the company has had such profound influence on contemporary American life. While there are many ways that faculty members can draw upon the book, below are a few suggestions as to how scholars in different disciplines might get started.

- **Philosophy**
The connections between philosophy and public policy might be addressed in relation to the availability of food and housing support. Questions of distributive justice as posed by Rawls, for example, are central to matters of how—and how much—people are paid.

- **Sociology/Anthropology**

The role of ethnographic research in illustrating larger societal trends.

Relationships between socioeconomic contexts and the formation of culture.

The intersection of biography and history, as illustrated by C.W. Mills' notion of "the sociological imagination."

- **Political science**

The politics of minimum wage.

How various theories of power are manifested in both the fear and the exercise of managerial authority

- **Economics**

How Wal-Mart actually makes its profits.

Cost/benefit analyses of the ways workers are hired, trained, and treated, e.g. the costs of high turnover rates. If Wal-Mart paid more, it could keep its employees for longer periods, and would probably significantly increase productivity.

- **Psychology**

How the conditions of life and work shape people's outlooks.

- **Management**

Specific lessons our students might learn that could/ should shape their performance as managers.

How productivity issues are experienced by those upon whom they're implemented.

Cost/benefit analyses of the ways workers are hired, trained, and treated, e.g. the costs of high turnover rates. If Wal-Mart paid more, it could keep its employees for longer periods, and would probably significantly increase productivity.

What workers learn about what's expected of them if they become managers, and why some might or might not become managers.

- **History**

How 20th-century changes in economics affected developments in other aspects of life (the rise of consumer culture, for instance.).

How this book compares with earlier muckraking studies, e.g. *The Jungle* and *Black Like Me*.

- **Public affairs**

Problems of matching worker incomes to available housing stocks.

Relationships between public transportation and access to employment.

- **Communication**

Illustrations of the impact on perceptions through the use of language, e.g. “time theft”; “servant leader.” How these illustrate Wal-Mart’s attempts to get its employees to think in Wal-Mart’s terms.

Strategies to convince workers that they would not benefit from labor unions in the workplace.