Nickel and Dimed

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A government exists to function as a caretaker of the people it is elected from, in the sense that it is responsible for protection of its citizens and the rule of order and justice inside its territory. It is a general truth supported by everybody but questioned in the book “Nickel and Dimed” by Barbara Ehrenreich (2001). The rule of law, as the book shows, is more about requesting people to be law-abiding citizens, and accept the initiatives the government comes up with. Though, the rule of justice and protection (in this case, social protection) is more of a theoretic concept detached from the challenges of the real life. The government reform focused on transformation from welfare support to dependence on competitive job market is shown to push people in need into a dangerous pool from which there are few chances to fish out something substantial, and there are good chances to be devoured by sharks of competitive employment culture.

The problem raised in the book is quite serious and deals with those layers of society who are in the most need of governmental protection. For example, the book looks into the case of single mothers and their chances to make it through on 6$ to 7$ an hour with the obligation to pay for all the bills and still bring food home on the table and clothe their child or children (Ehrenreich, 2001). As one reads the book, it is very hard not to feel sympathetic for all those real-life cases described collectively in the book. One can realize that these are not just stories or figures of statistics, but real people who have upset feelings and psychological pressure with real children who have no one else to turn to for care and provision but their mothers.

Of course, the government is ready to provide the childcare subsidies and even housing subsidies, and, in terms of heath care, one can get access to Medicaid. Moreover, there is even the system of food stamps to help the needy people out. However, the fundamental financial
support should come from, as encouraged by the government, individual employment. This is where the problem actually rises to its full power. How, for example, can single mothers, find such a job that would pay her sufficient money to be able to afford a small apartment with one bedroom? This question still demands an answer.

Single mothers have to provide for their families here and now having neither time nor resources for some extra educational courses or any other undertakings that could make them eligible for better-paid jobs. Here we do not talk about thousands of mothers, although the life of every person should be important for the government, but Ehrenreich mentions four million women! (Ehrenreich, 2001) How do they survive?

Ehrenreich wanted to experience that herself and went to the very bottom of what the job market could offer a homemaker, who, for example, had experienced a divorce. She realized that even for a person working at a couple of jobs, incomes are, nonetheless, very small and expenses for housing are too challenging for a marginal endurance.

She goes on to say that, because the rich have got richer owing to the growth of stock prices and the salaries of executive officers have raised as well. Thus, they can afford to purchase the best offers on the housing market leaving the broken down and remote housing for those, who underfeed themselves, take time away from their children working at additional jobs, and seem to be sort of “sacrificial lambs” of the rule of a contemporary definition of justice (Ehrenreich, 2001).

Therefore, apart from asking the question “How can such people survive?”, we should look deeper into the root of the problem and ask ourselves “How did we end up with the rich getting richer and the underprivileged facing more and more survival challenges?” Maybe a better question could be “Was it intended by those who rule the country?” What hinders the
government to actually go by the book and facilitate the justice and equity for all citizens, either rich or poor? What is the contemporary definition of social justice?

This book was quite thought provoking for me, and raised before me far more questions than it was able to provide answers. The most powerful and eye-opening conclusion of the book seems to be that the poor sacrifice their dreams and wants to let the better-off lead a life they can only dream of. It is not just. Moreover, it undermines the concept of government as we know it.
References