

Yixuan Pei

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2016 Common Read Essay - Critical

Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer's book, *\$2 a Day*, exposes an unseen side of modern day society. Through the eyes of families struggling to survive on meager morsels, the book divulges to us on how our theoretical social policies are being carried out in real time.

Spreading awareness of this impoverished demographic is vital, but the authors' approaches to doing so are flawed. Frequently criticizing the current welfare plan, the book uses the past welfare plan, prior to time limitations and job requirements, as a unit of comparison (10). However, in various sections, it also acknowledges the past welfare plan wouldn't have been realistic because it goes against our nation's values of "the autonomy of the individual, virtue of work, and primacy of the family" (157). The book is misguided in that it undermines the foundations of our welfare plan for a focused demographic. Claiming that we now spend more on welfare with less benefit to the needy (9), the authors' point to specific national data digits but rarely use percentages (relative to population) in their arguments (31). Because population has skyrocketed since the new welfare plan was amended, it's inappropriate to assert the new plan as profligate and ineffective merely based on a bigger number. There is no perfect solution, even so, we must attack the plan's weaknesses using peripheral programs instead of deprecating it in its entirety.

The book repeatedly promotes an increase in minimum wage to be a foolproof panacea (162). However, many research studies (i.e. California) have proven that an increase in minimum wage would lead to inflation in the long run, thus forcing the working class into the destitution

once again, only this time dragging our national economy into jeopardy along with it. In this respect, increasing minimum wage is inefficient and may not help our target demographic as much as expected. The best solution must offer equilibrium.

The book states that the employment system is practically functioning against the working poor, with its infamous inflexible hours (46). Nevertheless, business owners can't be blamed for making economically sensible decisions. Giving hours based on what's convenient for the employees slows down the efficiency of the entire operational system. As before, such an unpractical idea shouldn't be put up for comparison. We must take into account the position of employers and find a suitable solution for both sides. Instead of focusing on what can't be changed, let's construct alternative employment outlets.

Technology is taking over many lower ended jobs, but this isn't necessarily a bane. Ultimately, mentally and creatively demanding jobs will dominate the working class while reducing manual labor to a mechanized process. This switch may seem ludicrous now as a large percentage of our population currently depends on labor intensive careers, but that's only due to our negligence in adjusting our system to match the recent technological advances.

In the end, we must not forget that not all success is achieved through the same amount of effort. Life is unfair, but our job as a nation is not standardize the definition of "success." After all, happiness is subjective. We must instead create opportunities to help people out of the deleterious cycle. Our objective is to make it so that as long as one keeps trying, they will eventually get somewhere. The goal in science and technology is to attain more advanced, comfortable, and rewarding lives. The mechanization of jobs is a step in this process albeit one containing temporary setbacks, but none of said obstacles are insurmountable. What's most important now is to redirect our attentions to education.

If there's anything in the novel that I wholeheartedly agree with, it's the inaccessibility of quality education to children in impoverished households. Whether it be hunger or insufficient external incentives, they seem to be disadvantaged in the classroom. If we are to reorient our funds anywhere, it should be to education and childcare. Education is cardinal to America's future. In order to stop the cycle of dependency, to raise our future workforce to be resilient and capable, we must start with early education.

The book mentions that a possible solution to unemployment might be to subsidize private sector jobs (159). However, such a myopic approach is useless in the long run (161). We are not only trying to lower unnecessary joblessness temporarily, but rather we are trying to rid of ourselves entirely of this idleness that has found itself so ingrained in our culture some even consider it inevitable. We can focus on raising future generations with reoriented priorities. The future jobs for those with little may be completely accessible from the comforts of home, hence eliminating the inconveniences and costs of transportation and childcare. There is endless demand for inventions and fresh ideas, surely these qualities will dominate the workforce in the near future.

In the meantime, instead of subsidizing private sector jobs, it's more efficient for the government to create afterschool daycare/educational programs, hence providing busy parents who work multiple jobs a place for their children. There, the kids will not only be able to hang out with friends, they can also finish homework and get tutoring. As for the instructors, the government can generate jobs for unemployed parents to help out. We can create activities that focus on developing innovation and creativity, characteristics that are intrinsically non-mechanical.

One thing that is not mentioned in the book is the amount of debt America is in currently, and as various economists try to cut funding in all national departments in an attempt to remedy this calamity, it's rational that welfare financing has also been curtailed. One may argue congress's tendency ignore this debt crisis gives leeway for more important issues like welfare funding to do the same. However, nothing can condone putting America's future in jeopardy by spending what is not there. The current welfare plan is in line with both our ideals and our budget; all it needs are side programs to patch blind spots such as the \$2 a day households.

The \$2 a day families struggle to make ends meet, and though America shouldn't have people living under these conditions, it must be taken into account that the majority of minimum wage jobs are taken by students and others who don't have to pay bills or support dependents. Is the proposed solution putting the entire economy at stake for a small percentage of our population? Why don't we just target them exclusively by making more specific adjustments to our policies? We need a more subjective way of distributing funding that takes into account all that a family needs to provide for. One might argue that this approach is lengthy and will require much more research and backing to set up; however, the \$2 a day crisis is neither a trivial nor a temporary issue. Rather than looking for a short term monetary solution, we must be smarter about how we approach this problem. Searching for immediate solutions merely traps us in a vicious cycle; we must identify the root of the problem.

The \$2 a day families are stuck within a crisis. In a nation that prides itself on quality, it is crucial that we raise up the standard of living for the lower class. Although *\$2 a Day* underscores these issues, it also overstates and assigns blame to misleading culprits. The basis of the welfare plan, minimum wage, employers, and the mechanization of labor are not entirely responsible, rather we are with our misguided priorities and tendency to take the easy way out.

Through our laziness, we have let these families slip by our awareness. Poverty is a big issue; however, in implementing policies, we must not have tunnel vision. There are many circumstances to take into account, and by directing our focus to reaching out to those in need while still acknowledging the issues that affect the rest of the nation, we'll create a solution that may not be flawless but will strive to be as ideal as humanly possible.