

Book Review of *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*
(Eric Schlosser, New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2001. Available only in hardcover: \$25.00)

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If we are what we eat, then we are not well. Fast food is destroying us: individuals, communities, work and family life, and indeed, our very connections with the world. This is the alarming yet prodigiously researched message of the best-selling new book by Eric Schlosser, *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*.

Fast Food is a significant part of contemporary culture and economy: in 1970, Americans spent about \$6 billion on fast food; in 2000, more than \$110 billion. Americans drink soda at the annual rate of 56 gallons--or nearly 600 12-ounce cans-- per capita. McDonald's employs about 1 million people in the US, more than any other organization, public or private. McDonald's earns the majority of its income not from food sales, but from rental income from its vast property holdings. The golden arches that signify the firm are arguably the best-recognized symbol across the world, rivaling even the Christian cross.

The book chronicles, with vignettes, statistics, and engaging journalistic prose, the rise of fast food restaurants as they applied industrial practices of mass-production, specialization, and mass-marketing. To turn kids into faithful, long-term consumers, fast food has forged alliances with toy companies, sports leagues, Hollywood, and our nation's school districts. Exclusive contracts with chains such as Burger King and Pizza Hut have added to schools' budgets; although as the book documents, the costs of corporate presence in our schools are by no means small. Fast food's employment of teenagers has accompanied the de-skilling of work, low-wages without benefits, elimination of employee training (even as corporations simultaneously accept hundreds of millions of federal dollars in the name of employee training), union-busting, and the frequent violation of child labor laws. The book also takes up the industry's little-known practices that keep us hooked: chemicals that are added to flavor the burgers, fries, and milk-shakes, to add to their attractiveness, for example, and the practice of frying potatoes in fat that is 7% soy oil and 93% beef tallow.

By far the most engaging part of the book deals with the suppliers of fast food--the meatpacking industry--and their social and health impacts. The four largest corporations--ConAgra, IBP, Excel, and National Beef--today slaughter about 84 percent of the nation's cattle, up from only 21 percent in 1970. The industry has now relocated to anti-union states with cheap labor, such as Iowa, Kansas, Texas, Colorado, and Nebraska; wages in plants here are fifty percent lower than union-worker earnings in the old-style slaughterhouses of Chicago and New York.

The industry, like others, benefited from the Reagan-Bush era of lax anti-trust regulation, weakened federal oversight by OSHA (Occupational Safety and Health Administration), and food safety and environmental inspections. The book documents many cases of fraud committed by industry leaders in price-fixing, cheating, and under-representing worker injuries and safety violations. For example, between August 1992 and December 1995, Archer Daniels Midland, "supermarket to the world," conspired with its foreign rivals to over-charge farmers by as much as \$180 million. ConAgra, the third-largest chicken processor was forced to pay \$17.2 million in damages when it was found to have deliberately mis-weighed 45,526 truckloads of birds over an 8-year period at a plant in Alabama, systematically cheating thousands of the state's growers. Corporate officials considering new locations for plants also are not above lying to host communities: in a public forum in July 1988, in Lexington, KY, IBP officials promised worker stability; salaried, not hourly, workers; and smells not unlike "those emanating from your kitchens" (p 166). As in other communities that are home to meat-packing plants, Lexington residents complain of pervasive odors of burning hair and blood, animal grease, and rotten eggs.

Meat-packing is among the nation's most dangerous jobs. With line-speeds at 400 cattle per hour--up from 175 cattle/hour in 1980--and as workers wield large knives and cleaners hose water and chlorine heated to 180 degrees F, a third of the meatpacking workforce annually suffers injury that requires medical attention beyond first aid. Many meatpackers admit to using methamphetamine to feel charged and self-confident to confront their gruesome work. Turnover in processing plants, according to industry reports, is as high as 80%; the author found that during one 18-month period, the Greeley, CO, ConAgra plant hired more than 5,000 different people to fill roughly 900 jobs. By industry claim, such turnover has little negative effect on productivity and keeps insurance costs low. Transient labor is easy to control and hard to unionize. Death rates, however, are high in this work: "[Meat-packing] workers are the ultimate in disposable workers: illegal, illiterate, impoverished, untrained. The nation's worst job can end in just about the worst way. Sometimes these workers are literally ground up and reduced to nothing." In one IBP plant in which two workers died, OSHA imposed a fine on the company of \$480 for each worker (p. 178). Workers face strong pressure not to report injuries; injured workers are often brought back from the hospital to the plant to understate lost work-days; and plants are known to keep two sets of logs--the more optimistic one reported to government health inspectors.

The meat-packing industry, notwithstanding the free-market rhetoric that emanates therefrom, is subsidized by all of us--meat-eaters, vegetarians and environmentalists alike. In 1987, IBP exacted taxpayer subsidies from the state of Nebraska to the tune of between \$13,000 to \$23,000 per job. Despite this, IBP, a company that was launched in 1960 by C J Holman and A D Anderson, with a \$300,000 loan from the federal Small Business Administration, moved its headquarters in 1997 to South Dakota, a state without corporate taxes or personal income tax. Along with other fast food trade groups, it has lobbied to prevent raising the minimum wage, restrict union-activity, and minimize health and safety regulation--all stressed by conservative

political agendas especially as epitomized in the 1994 "Contract with America." Former U.S. Rep. Newt Gingrich (R, Georgia), the Contract's main author, received more money from the restaurant industry than any other congressman; of the top 25 House recipients of restaurant industry funds, only four were Democrats.

The huge feedlots, slaughterhouses and hamburger grinders, and the overall centralization of meat production have provided the means to disperse pathogens that cause severe illnesses more widely than ever before. *E. coli* 0157:H7, an especially virulent form of bacteria that now is the leading cause of kidney failure among children in the US, is largely spread through contaminated food. But it is not the only one. A USDA (United States Department of Agriculture) study in 1996 found that 7.5 percent of ground beef samples were contaminated with *Salmonella*, 11.7 percent with *Listeria monocytogenes*, 30% with *Staphylococcus aureus*, and 53.3% with *Clostridium perfringens*. Furthermore, 78.6 percent of the ground beef samples contained microbes that are spread primarily by fecal material (p 197). It will surprise many to know that, by law, the USDA cannot demand a recall of contaminated products; it has to rely on the offending company for information on amounts and locations. Once a company voluntarily decides to pull contaminated meat from the market, it is under no legal obligation to inform the public, even if consumers may continue to be at risk from contaminated products.

Reading this far, the shock of the knowledge that some of the most questionable ground beef in the US is purchased by the USDA for school cafeterias (to go into the free and subsidized meal programs), is probably somewhat tempered. USDA is required to purchase from the vendor with the lowest price, with no additional safety requirements. The book reports on plants that supply to the USDA, processing diseased cattle and those dead before arrival to the plant, and mixing rotten meat returned from retail operations. The meat purchased for schools has standards less stringent than even those imposed by the fast food industry. Meat exported to the EU is subject to tougher processing standards than for local consumption, thereby requiring slower line-speeds at plants; unsurprisingly, workers appreciate more producing for Europeans than Americans.

In turn, fast food's impacts on the American--and global--landscape and culture have been huge. For example: restaurant signs became taller and more garish as they competed for the attention of drivers on the emerging highways of the 1950s. Today, McDonald's uses commercial satellite photography to predict sprawl from outer space so as to be among the first to bid for cheap land along highway exits. Seven years after it opened its first restaurant in India, McDonald's established a supply network there, teaching Indian farmers to grow iceberg lettuce with seeds specially developed for the nation's climate. Today, in the US, obesity rates are the highest of any industrialized nation in the world. Obesity is spreading to China and Japan, countries that have adopted the "Big Mac and large fries" culture. Germany is home to over 1,000 McDonald's, and is the most profitable overseas market for what has become the biggest restaurant chain in the country. Across the world, fast food restaurants are targets for anti-globalization and anti-US-

imperialism demonstrations.

The book proposes solutions, but without devoting the length to document the ills of the industry. Free-range, grass-fed cattle production; family restaurants, independent processors, farm-land preservation efforts, and chains with worker-friendly practices (\$8/hour wages with health and retirement benefits, sick and vacation leave, etc.) are offered albeit with little conviction as alternatives to the highly concentrated, vertically integrated fast-food industry. On the policy side, more systemic proposals seek to curb industry malpractice and strengthen consumer, labor, and environmental regulations: ban advertising of foods high in fat and sugar targeted to children; strictly enforce minimum wage, overtime, child-labor and other labor laws; eliminate employee training subsidies to chains that churn workers and maintain low-skilled work; increase safety of school food; integrate food safety responsibility into one federal agency; improve sanitary conditions in the nation's slaughterhouses; improve working conditions in plants; place tougher sanctions on poor industry practices related to worker safety and health; and perhaps equally importantly, view livestock and land as values in their own right, not simply commodities. These are important proposals; the book falls short of addressing the question of how these are to be implemented. It is, however, no less valuable for such a lack.

Engaging, with a wealth of detail, and a finely modulated sense of outrage, the book is an important contribution to analyses of the global food system. It should be useful to students of globalization, corporate control, space and place, culture, urban and rural areas, and sustainable living. In its documentation of the corrupting nexus of money and power, it is not unlike two other recent books in its genre: *A Question of Intent* by David A Kessler (2001; New York: Public Affairs), an inside look at efforts to uncover Big Tobacco's lies, and *Dispensing with the Truth* by Alicia Mundy (2001; New York: St Martin's Press), which examines the battle over the diet drug Fen-Phen.

Consumers have made the fast food industry what it is today. This book gives us--as consumers and citizens--some of the tools we need to demand accountability from those in charge of its oversight and, at least partially, to reclaim our food system.