

Fast Food = Malignancy

By Adam Eisenstat

This article reviews the following: "Power Steer," by Michael Pollan, *New York Times Magazine* (March 31, 2002) *Fast Food Nation*, by Eric Schlosser (Houghton Mifflin Company, 2001)

America's signature toxins—bad food, wretched culture and programmed boosterism—find their apotheosis in the fast food industry. Nothing better captures this reality than a glimpse—seen through a window, in passing—of a morbidly obese person sitting in a McDonald's, fingering a promotional *Star Wars* figurine while cramming a burger into his/her over-worked mouth.

Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (Houghton Mifflin, 2001) is an important book that clearly shows how the enormously powerful and pervasive fast food industry has triggered the homogenization of U.S. society and rained down upon America any number of social and economic ills. From the exploitation of immigrant workers in the hellish meatpacking plants and the alarming increase in obesity among children, to the obliteration of small farms in favor of mega-production by agribusinesses, this book serves as a powerful indictment of an entire industry.

Food as Industrial Product

The greed of companies like Enron or Tyco or any of the other recent corporate malefactors, flagrant though it is, doesn't come near the scope of the avarice that defines the fast food industry and the damage it causes. At the root of the impact these mega-corporations have on the American landscape is the fact that they deal in something that is essential to our lives—food—and they have perverted every aspect of it, from cultivation to consumption.

Central to the power of the fast food industry is its massive scale, especially McDonald's. It is the nation's largest purchaser of beef, pork and potatoes and the second largest purchaser of chicken. McDonald's annually employs about one million people, more than any other

American organization; it's also the largest owner of retail property in the world.

McDonald's is the proverbial 800-pound gorilla and epitomizes how centralized purchasing decisions of the large restaurant chains and their demand for standardized products have given a handful of giant corporations a staggering degree of power over the nation's food supply.

Perversion of Provisions

In the 1950s, cows were two or three years old at the time of their slaughter; today they're 14 to 16 months. To raise a bovine animal from 80 to 1,200 pounds in that short amount of time takes enormous quantities of corn, protein supplements and drugs, including growth hormones. A major problem with this system is that cows are naturally grass eaters, so the corn diet causes severe and gruesome health problems that must be alleviated with more drugs—specifically antibiotics.

Regarding the supplements, they are often composed of cow blood and fat, chicken manure, and other elements alien to the bovine diet. This is a less extreme but still dubious version of feeding rendered cow parts back to cows, a practice the FDA banned in 1997 after scientists feared it could spread mad cow disease.

In the cases of both the feed and the supplements, an industrial logic prevails. It is oblivious to ecological or health concerns and seriously perverts the natural order.

The conditions under which cattle are bred and slaughtered undoubtedly put the consumer or "end-user" at risk. Cows live in their own feces and the filthy meat packing plants where they're slaughtered are breeding grounds for pathogens that cause a host of food-borne illnesses. Much of this risk is a consequence of increased production quotas and cost-cutting measures by the large meatpacking companies, who engage in such dangerous practices mainly to satisfy their primary client, the fast food industry.

The Sad Face Behind the Happy Meal

To effectively sell the unnatural and unwholesome products created by giant food corporations requires a particularly intense approach to marketing. Thus McDonald's, for example, spends more money in total on marketing than any other company. Building "brand loyalty" early is a key strategy for the company, so children are a major target. McDonald's operates more playgrounds than any other entity in the U.S. It's also one of the nation's largest distributors of toys. These efforts have been enormously successful. In a recent survey of children, 96 percent recognized the company's mascot, Ronald McDonald (Santa Claus was the only other fictional character with a higher degree of recognition).

The smiling face of Ronald McDonald and the bubbly actors in McDonald's commercials mask the grim realities of a product that is patently unhealthy. Also hidden behind the happy façade is the fast food industry's role as the most prominent global symbol of—if not the catalyst for—homogenization and the extinction of good taste.

Free Market Absolutism: Recipe for Abuse

Fast Food Nation, which is as much an indictment of free market absolutism as a critique of several major industries, convincingly shows that the interests of big business are frequently at odds with the welfare of the public. It would seem obvious then that effective government oversight is necessary to protect people from rapacious industries like fast food. This is unlikely to happen any time soon, especially given the fast food industry's power, greed, and history of aggressive action against any effort at increased regulation, to say nothing of the current climate in Washington.

What is needed, at the very least, is a large-scale public education campaign alerting people to the hazards, or at least details on the ingredients, of fast food. This would help stem the tide of obesity that threatens to drown America in an ocean of suet.

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