

Do We Want *That* with Fries?

Book Review by Joe Guzzardi

Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* is many different stories in one outstanding book. On one level it is the history of an industry that transformed the way America eats. From a few hot dog stands scattered across the country into major corporations that sell billions of dollars of hamburgers and fries, fast food has made home cooking passé.

Schlosser paints a vivid picture of how McDonald's has dominated not only the fast food industry but has also ventured into other corporate fields. McDonald's is the biggest buyer of beef, pork, and potatoes. The company is the largest owner of retail space in the world, the biggest private operator of playgrounds, and one of the country's major toy distributors. "The fast-food industry now stands alone atop a massive food-industrial complex which has gained control of American agriculture," writes Schlosser.

One of every eight workers in America has at some time worked for McDonald's, and the nation's 3.5 million fast-food workers are the largest group of minimum wage earners.

Ninety-six percent of American school children can identify Ronald McDonald — a higher percentage than recognize Santa Claus. Schlosser forces the reader to stop and consider how McDonald's has used its influence to make its hamburgers part of our everyday life.

On a second level the book's main focus is what a thoroughly bad product fast food is. Schlosser

Joe Guzzardi is a long-time newspaper columnist in Lodi, California and teaches adult immigrants through the public education system. He also is the director of the Media Standards Project of NumbersUSA.com.

develops the theme of just how unhealthy those burgers are. While it comes as no surprise that fast food is not good for anyone, some new facts emerge. As an example: fast food restaurants rely heavily on the contributions of the billion-dollar flavor industry which manufactures and sells the complex chemicals that give distinctive flavors to processed foods such as "smoky" chicken, "strawberry" shakes, and even "flame-broiled" burgers.

The book shines when Schlosser ties the declining quality of fast food to the heavy reliance of the industry on illegal immigrants to work in the slaughterhouses.

Back in the early 1980s, in their never-ending quest to reduce costs, the meatpackers busted the unions and set out to hire unskilled, underpaid laborers. According to Schlosser, at least one meatpacker operates a labor office in Mexico City and a bus line from Mexico to the American

mid-west.

Roy Beck, in his book *The Case Against Immigration*, wrote about the unscrupulous meatpackers' practices of undermining the unions. Schlosser confirms every detail revealed by Beck.

Beck wrote, and Schlosser reinforces, that Americans once held jobs in slaughterhouses, performed their tasks with skill and pride, and were paid fairly. Their work was performed in accordance with the strictest safety conditions.

All that is now gone. Working on the kill floor is reported to be "a job Americans won't do." And, of course, under the current circumstances no American would want to do the job. For an illegal alien, however, the job is a ticket to life in America.

In a post-publication interview with *The Atlantic Monthly*, Schlosser predicted what he described as a developing migrant "industrial work force." He said:

Until the late 1970s, meatpacking was one of the highest paid industrial jobs in the United

**Fast Food Nation:
The Dark Side of
the American
Meal**

by Eric Schlosser
New York: Houghton-Mifflin
288 pages, \$25.00



States. And then the Reagan and Bush administrations stood aside and allowed the meatpacking industry to bust unions, to hire strikebreakers and scabs, to not only hire illegal immigrants for these jobs but to transport them here from Mexico in company buses. Now meatpacking is one of the nation's lowest paying industrial jobs as well as one of the most dangerous. I'm sure other companies, in other industries, are contemplating the same tactics. And it just can't be allowed.

In his epilogue, Schlosser calls for meatpacking companies to be held accountable for the products they sell and for the federal government to be given the power to recall tainted meat and to impose stiff fines for violations of that policy.

Schlosser would like to see worker safety improved. He recommends slowing down the production line from between 350-400 cattle an hour to 100-115, the levels that are current in Western Europe and Australia.

In the end, however, Schlosser is not optimistic about any legislation proposing wholesale reforms ever being introduced. The meatpacking and restaurant industries simply have too much clout in Congress to expect any changes. •

Immigration and the Meatpacking Industry

The importation of hundreds of thousands of foreign workers each year is worse than unnecessary: It ruins good occupations; it rewards callous business management; it penalizes businesses with a strong sense of corporate citizenship; and it creates sweeping changes for communities that never request them and seldom approve of them. At the most basic level, it changes the lives, the aspirations, and the very identity of many individual Americans.

Perhaps no industry reveals that sad spectacle any more dramatically than the meatpacking industry of the last three decades.

Congress in 1965 inadvertently came to the rescue of the union-busting, wage-lowering strategy of the new meatpackers. The 1965 immigration law had a major impact in the direction of the meat-processing industry by creating surplus labor pools with spiraling family chain migration and massive refugee resettlement operations.

— Roy Beck
The Case Against Immigration
W. W. Norton & Company, 1996