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Review: Fast Food Nation by Eric Schlosser

Anarcho

April 28, 2009

This is an excellent book, crammed full of useful (and disgusting) “McNuggets” of information on the whole process of producing “fast food.” From the industrialisation of farming, to the monopolisation of food processing, to the standardisation of food consumption throughout whole sections of North America, Schlosser’s book exposes the horrors of modern corporate capitalism. He documents the impact of the rise of fast food on almost all aspects of North America, from farming to health, from working practices to landscape, and beyond.

Like the “fast food” economy he dissects, Schlosser’s work is far ranging, covering such notable scum bags as Walt Disney (whose father, ironically, was a socialist) and Ray Kroc (the man responsible for making McDonalds what it is now). Schlosser, to his credit, fills his book with interviews with workers involved in every stage of the “fast food” process, including independent farmers and those opposed to corporations advertising in schools and providing teaching materials. He brings a refreshingly human

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look at an industry that denies in practice individuality and humanity.

The vision of a “fast food” world is truly horrific. It is a world where even the smell and taste of food is mass produced. Standardised food for a standardised society. As he memorably notes, *“Millions of... people at that very moment were standing at the same counter, ordering the same food from the same menu, food that tasted everywhere the same.”* The true banality of capitalism is exposed in all its multitude of ramifications in Schlosser’s book. The Orwellian world of modern corporate capitalism is seen in all its “glory.” A world in which the industry group formed to combat **Occupational Safety and Health Administration** regulation is called *“Alliance for Workplace Safety”* and where the processed food’s taste has to have the correct *“mouthfeel.”* It is a world where corporations feed at the public trough and then praise the free market, where firms grow huge and exercise monopolistic power while talking about competition, where executives talk about *“the very essence of freedom”* and yet their corporation’s *“first commandant is that only production counts... The employee’s duty is to follow orders. Period.”* For all its talk of liberty, the essence of capitalism is wage slavery, and its most odorous aspects are well documented here.

Fast Food Nation discusses the corporations’ perspective on independent farms, opposing any attempt to form co-operatives or associations to improve their bargaining position in the market. As one executive put it, *“Our relationship with our growers is a one-on-one contractual relationship”* and they *“want to see that it remains that way.”* As with the industrial workforce, the talk of “teamwork” just hides the reality of corporate power – the liberty of doing what you are told, under conditions specified by the powerful. Under such pressure, America’s independent farmers are being replaced by industrial farms.

Schlosser places the birth of the “fast food” industry within the 1950s love affair with “progress.” Technology would solve all

will capitalists submit to state regulation. And as the 1960s and 70s show, this submission will not last long.

This is not to suggest that individual decisions on what to consume are irrelevant, far from it. Nor are consumer boycotts a waste of time. If organised into mass movements and linked to workplace struggle they can be very effective. This is the main failure in **Fast Food Nation**. It fails to appreciate the importance of working class struggle and organisation (forming unions is mentioned in passing, for example). As the book makes clear, much of the drive behind the way the fast food industry has developed has been fuelled by fear of labour. Like the food they produce, the “fast food” corporations want workers that are standardised, uniform, easy to define and replace. No training is the goal in this industry and de-skilling the means. Applying Taylorist ideology developed in mass production, the skills of workers are transferred as far as possible into the hands of management and into machinery. In this way anyone can be replaced, making workplace organising and action more difficult. Schlosser presents extensive evidence of machinery designed to reduce the power of labour, industries moved to crush unions and, of course, the anti-union perspectives of the “fast food” giants. Needless to say, this fear of labour is well-founded as profits are unpaid labour extracted by management’s power over workers, whose acts of resistance can bring the whole thing crashing down.

It is here we must look for a real solution to the problems generated by capitalism, not in “green” consumerism. Equally, we must also be aware that the new world we are struggling for must not just aim to take over, without modification, the existing industrial structure. While the expropriation of capital is a necessary step in the social revolution, it is not the end. As **Fast Food Nation** shows, an alienated society has created an alienated means of feeding itself. Such a system will have to be transformed from top to bottom by those who live and work in it into one fit for human beings to live in.

our problems, even the ones it generates itself. The irrationalities here can easily be seen. For example, faced with the serious health problems generated by the industrialisation of meat processing, the meatpacking industry advocated yet more technology to “solve” the problems caused by the existing technology. Rather than focusing on the primary causes of meat contamination, they proposed irradiating food. Of course the firms involved want to replace the word “*irradiation*” with the phrase “*cold pasteurisation*”!

Much of what happens today is justified in terms of “progress.” Progress is, we are assured, “neutral.” As if! Capitalism is a class society, marked by exploitation, oppression and social hierarchies. As such, change within it will reflect the various class conflicts, social hierarchies, power relationships and so on which exist within it as well as the rationales of the economic system (e.g. the drive for profits). Therefore progress can hardly be neutral. This is particularly true of the economy. The development of the industrial structure of a capitalist economy will be based on the fundamental need to maximise the profits and power of the capitalists. It does not follow that because a society which places profits above people has found a specific way of organising production “efficiently”, a socialist society will do the same. Anarchists have long been aware that capitalist methods are precisely that and that they may not suit a society which replaces the profit system with human and ecological need as the criteria for decision making. Reading **Fast Food Nation** brings home this anarchist perspective and provides some modern and well researched documentation to support it. We must never forget that capitalism twists progress in its own imagination.

Fast Food Nation also brings home how alienated the West is from its food. Food production has become increasingly industrialised and concentrated into fewer and fewer big firms. It also raises some important questions for revolutionaries. Clearly, the Leninist idea that socialism simply involves nationalising big business is a fallacy. If a future society is seen in terms of nationalis-

ing McDonalds and appropriating the “efficient” mass production generated within capitalism, not only will it not work, it will not inspire anyone to fight for it.

The logical conclusion of the Leninist vision in terms of food production would be highly centralised and extremely fragile to outside shocks. The disruption of “normalcy” experienced in most revolutions would quickly mean the disruption of such an industrialised food production and distribution system. This reinforces Kropotkin’s arguments in **Conquest of Bread** on the importance of decentralising production during a revolution. Not only would this ensure the feeding of a rebellion, it would also be the first step in creating a method of producing food which was in harmony with nature and encouraged diversity in both production and in the final meal (as the French say, “*Non a McMerde*”).

The book has its weaknesses. Like most of the so-called “anti-capitalist” authors how being published by capitalist firms to profit from the current wave of global mass protest, Schlosser nor his proposed solutions are in any way anti-capitalist. While presenting a searing indictment of US capitalism, his vision of the future is simply US capitalism infused with a European social-democratic sensibility. Needless to say, he is not opposed to wage labour. Indeed, he holds up family owned businesses which treat their workers paternalistically as an alternative to corporate capitalism. There is not even a mention of co-operatives which would, at least, be a step forward. Schlosser’s vision of a nice capitalist is identical to that of Tolstoy’s kind donkey owner who will do everything for the donkey except get off its back.

Similarly, his suggested European-style America is totally compatible with capitalism. While correctly acknowledging (in fact basing his suggestions on) the corporate control over the political structure, he raises the spectre of consumer power as the means of achieving his goals. As he puts it, corporations will “*sell free-range, organic, grass-fed hamburgers if you demand it. They will sell whatever sells at a profit.*” Which, of course, is true. It is

equally true that we are not forced to buy fast food, which is why companies spend so much in convincing us to buy their products. Even ignoring the influence of advertising, it is unlikely that using the market will make capitalism nicer. Sadly, the market rewards the anti-social activities that Schlosser chronicles in his book. As he himself notes, “*The low price of a fast food hamburger does not reflect its real cost... The profits of the fast food chains have been made possible by the losses imposed on the rest of society.*” The idea that by using the market we can “reform” capitalism is flawed simply because even “good” companies have to make a profit (i.e. will exploit workers’ labour) and so will be tempted to cut costs, inflict them on third parties in the form of pollution, and so on. Ultimately, the price mechanism does not provide enough information for the customer to make an informed decision about the impact of their purchase and, by reducing prices, actively rewards the behaviour Schlosser condemns.

Rather than see change as resulting from collective struggle, Schlosser sees it in terms of individual decisions within the market place. As such, it does not break from the logic of capitalism and so is doomed to failure. After all, what is now “organic” production was just the normal means of doing it. The pressures of the market, the price mechanism he suggests as the tool for change, ensured the industrialisation of farming he so clearly condemns. Ultimately, we must never forget that the unfeeling corporate capitalism Schlosser exposes so well, sprung from the family owned, small-scale industry he holds up as an alternative. Indeed, one of his examples of paternalist capitalism broke apart in the 1970s under the pressure of class struggle and competitive pressures from less “ethical” capitalists.. This, in itself, shows the weakness of his means of change. Capitalism has a dynamic nature that propels it in certain directions, namely towards big business. Only when faced with a greater danger (namely a mass popular movement which could go further than the politicians suggest),