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McMorals: Book Reviews

Charles F. Angell

Bridgewater State College, cangell@bridgew.edu

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Fast Food Nation

Eric Schlosser, (Houghton Mifflin, 2001)

Nickel and Dimed:

On (Not) Getting By in America

Barbara Ehrenreich, (Metropolitan Books, 2001)

by Charles F. Angell

Fast Food Nation and *Nickel and Dimed* both undertake to examine contemporary American culture, the first through the lens of the fast food industry, the second from the perspective of the low wage worker, many of whom the fast food industry employs. Schlosser's study presents the history of fast food franchising, the impact of this post WW II phenomenon on American (and increasingly world) agriculture and animal husbandry, and its effects on America's dietary and eating habits. *Nickel and Dimed* considers the plight of low wage workers, the "almost 30% of the workforce [that] toils for \$8 an hour or less." Both studies should give the thoughtful reader pause over what conditions we as a society are willing to tolerate in the pursuit of efficiency, convenience, and low prices.

I challenge anyone who argues that books can't change behavior to read Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* and not wonder whether consuming a Big Mac or a Whopper, ground beef in any form for that matter, is worth the immediate health risk or the less immediate support of industrial exploitation that permits the industry to prosper.

Schlosser proposes to explore the "values [fast food] embodies, and the world it has made...During a relatively brief period of time," he writes, "the fast food industry has helped to transform not only the American diet, but also our landscape, economy, workforce, and popular culture." Whether a frequent, infrequent or non-consumer of the industry's offerings, Schlosser maintains that the fast food industry has altered every American's behavior.

In his chapter, "The Founding Fathers," Schlosser provides a history, some of it familiar, of how such entrepreneurs as Ray Kroc (McDonalds), Harlan Sanders (KFC),



Dave Thomas (Wendys), Matthew Burns (Burger King), and William Rosenberg (Dunkin Donuts) brought the food franchises into national, even international, prominence. All intuited in the decade following WW II how the United States' commitment to the automobile, especially in the West, would alter the country's living patterns and social needs. Strongly iconoclastic themselves, they understood their customers' desire for uniformity and consistency. A burger bought at McDonalds in Peoria should not differ from one consumed in Los Angeles. In Ray Kroc's words: "We have found out... that we cannot trust some people who are non-conformists. We will make conformists out of them in a hurry... The organization cannot trust the individual; the individual must trust the organization."

Visionary as they undoubtedly were, none would have succeeded without the benefit of enormous government subsidies, most particularly the construction of the interstate highway system. "Had the big auto companies," Schlosser observes, "been required to pay for the roads—in the same way trolley companies had to lay and maintain track—the landscape of the American West would look quite different today." Where the roads went, the golden arches followed.

Interesting though Schlosser's chapters on the fast food industry's growth are, his chapters on the impact and effects of the industry on America's agriculture, eating habits, and health are compelling, perhaps even horrifying. Anyone who's ever wondered where all the French fries come from, needs to read how J. R. Simplot mechanized the potato industry. Simplot, who does come across as a resourceful and responsible entrepreneur, runs several potato processing plants, one of which is in Aberdeen, Idaho, "a small facility, by industry standards" which "processes about a million pounds of potatoes a day." Schlosser tours a much larger plant where—I find this process mindboggling—the Lamb Water Gun Knife

“uses a high-pressure hose to shoot potatoes at a speed of 117 feet per second through a grid of sharpened steel blades, thereby creating perfectly sliced French fries.” Though the “dozen or so” multi-national agribusinesses have amassed fortunes, the potato growers, forced to specialize in a single crop and to maximize production by adopting increasingly expensive technologies, have become “beholden to the companies that supply the inputs and the processors that buy the outputs.” Too many farmers frequently suffer the loss of their land owing to high costs; those who manage to remain find their status reduced nearly to sharecroppers.

Much the same holds true for the cattlemen where the feedlot owners and meatpacking firms have forced the farmers to standardize their cattle raising. For those with the fortitude to read through Schlosser’s descriptions of slaughterhouse working conditions and the potential for contaminating enormous quantities of meat, his gripping chapters, “The Most Dangerous Job” and “What’s in the Meat,” provide an indictment of such giant meatpacking firms as Con Agra, IBP (Iowa Beef Packers), and Excel to name only a few. Through mechanization of the meatpacking process, reliance on a mostly unskilled workforce, virulent anti-unionism, and help from friendly politicians, these meatpacking giants eventually drove small, independent processors, located primarily in Chicago, out of business.

Located mostly in rural communities where their presence has often overwhelmed local populations, these slaughterhouses operate virtually around the clock, killing thousands of animals every day. The blood, feces, and offal collect in pools, endangering the environment. The slaughterhouse workers must incise carcasses at a rate that guarantees serious injury—usually knife punctures—and all too frequently death. Imagine, if you can, a job which requires standing for eight and one half hours shooting an animal with a bolt stunner to render it unconscious, one animal after another. Even Schlosser has to admit “I’ve seen enough.”

Schlosser makes clear that these conditions exist as a direct result of a hands-off government attitude. Beginning with the Reagan administration, meatpacking executives have participated in and sometimes led with considerable success, a movement to reduce or eliminate the USDA and OSHA’s regulatory and inspection powers. IBP, for instance, routinely maintained double logs of worker injury reports, one for company use, another for government inspectors. Deregulation in the 1980s resulted in a 20% reduction of OSHA inspectors. Large campaign contributions to friendly politicians meant

sympathetic congressional representatives who passed industry favored legislation or defeated legislation that might have served wider interests. By these means and others he documents, Schlosser believes the industry has avoided a long overdue scrutiny of its practices.

Just this past August IBP recalled from mid-western restaurants and supermarket shelves nearly 500,000 pounds of contaminated meat, mostly hamburger. The potential for such extensive contamination resides squarely in slaughterhouse production schedules that require unskilled, near minimum wage, and often immigrant employees, to submit to pressures that bring feces, urine, dirt, and other impurities in contact with the meat. The most frequent pathogen contaminating meat is *Escherichia coli* 0157:H7, itself potentially lethal. Where in the past hamburger ground in the local supermarket, if somehow contaminated, might only sicken a few people, today the huge mechanized slaughterhouses producing millions of pounds of hamburger a week, should the meat become contaminated, pose a public health problem of almost unimaginable scope. Schlosser points out, if I may quote him at some length, that

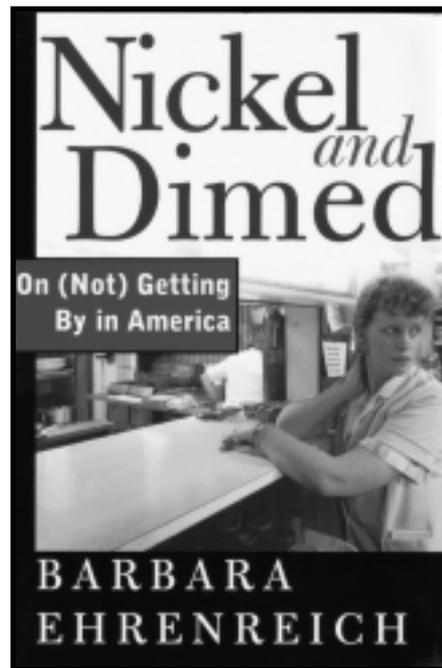
While medical researchers have gained important insights into the links between modern food processing and the spread of dangerous diseases, the nation’s leading agribusiness firms have resolutely opposed any further regulation of their food safety practices. For years the large meatpacking companies have managed to avoid the sort of liability routinely imposed on the manufacturers of most consumer products. Today the U.S. government can demand the nationwide recall of defective softball bats, sneakers, stuffed animals, and foam-rubber toy cows. But it cannot order a meatpacking company to remove contaminated, potentially lethal ground beef from fast food kitchens and supermarket shelves. The unusual power of the large meatpacking firms has been sustained by their close ties and sizable donations to Republican members of Congress.

But, to be fair, Congress does reflect occasionally the will of the people. Our desire to have everything fast, convenient, and cheap may have blinded us to the true costs of our happiness. *Fast Food Nation* is an eye-opener.

So, in its way, is Barbara Ehrenreich's *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*. Ehrenreich resolves first-hand to experience what living on poverty level wages is like and whether one can survive on an annual income of considerably less than \$20,000 a year.

"Maybe," she writes, "when I got into the project, I would discover some hidden economies in the world of the low-wage worker. After all, if almost 30 percent of the workforce toils for \$8 an hour or less, as the Washington-based Economic Policy Institute reported in 1998, they may have found some tricks as yet unknown to me." Working first as a Florida waitress, next for a Maine house cleaning service, and last as a Minnesota Wal-Mart sales associate, Ehrenreich learns that low-wage earners have no tricks to stretch the few dollars they earn.

Finding affordable housing reasonably close to the workplace, as might be expected, poses an almost insurmountable problem. Fortunate workers may reside with a family member or relative; the less fortunate dwell in run-down motels and rooming houses, trailers, cars; the unfortunate are homeless. Desperation and resignation overcome workers compelled to accept such circumstances if they have any hope of making ends meet. These employees work hard, yet are bullied by supervisors, taken advantage of by their employers, subjected to various forms of harassment, and often denied in their workplaces any effective remedies to regain their rights. Ehrenreich realizes that working conditions at Wal-Mart, a company that advertises itself as all-American, cry out for unionization. Dare to mention collective bargaining, however, and the employee is quickly shown the door. In recounting her experiences cleaning houses in the more affluent suburbs of Portland, Maine, Ehrenreich points out that she and her co-workers were pretty much invisible to the homeowners and, when they were visible, the homeowners treated them as ignorant and untrustworthy. She began, she tells us, to resent and acutely dislike her middle-class employers, people she realized were not so different from herself in her other, professional life.



Ehrenreich experiences what it means to be among the "working poor." I will quote, again at length, her conclusion:

When someone works for less pay than she can live on—when, for example, she goes hungry so that you can eat more cheaply and conveniently—then she has made a great sacrifice for you, she has made you a gift of some part of her abilities, her health, and her life. The 'working poor,' as they are approvingly termed, are in fact the major philanthropists of our society. They neglect their own children so that the children of others will be cared for; they live in substandard housing so that other homes will be shiny and perfect; they endure privation so that inflation will be low and stock prices high. To be a member of the working poor is to be an anonymous donor, a nameless benefactor to everyone else.

Ehrenreich's words struck home for me when I read in the paper a few days after the World Trade Center tragedy that many of those who perished were immigrant workers, some perhaps illegal, who would very likely never be identified. They cleaned the offices, cooked in the restaurants, provided the security for the professionals who worked alongside them in the towers. The WTC towers can be rebuilt, but Schlosser and Ehrenreich both tell us that if conditions don't improve for many of those called upon to do the building, those proud towers may not be the last to swift destruction doomed.

—Charles F. Angell is Professor of English.