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Have it Your Way

That day McDonald's was the nicest, cleanest, brightest place in all of Pluen. Children played with the Hot Wheels and Barbies that came with their Happy Meals, and smiling workers poured free refills of coffee. Outside the window, three bright red flags bearing the golden arches fluttered in the wind.
—Eric Schlosser

Nothing will benefit human health and increase chances for survival of life on Earth as much as the evolution to a vegetarian diet.
—Albert Einstein

One evening, when we were resting on the floor of our hut [in a German concentration camp], dead tired, a fellow prisoner rushed in and asked us to run out to see the sunset. The whole sky was alive with ever changing shapes and colors, while puddles on the muddy ground reflected the glow. After minutes of moving silence, one prisoner declared: "How beautiful the world could be!"
—Victor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*

When I was a kid and my father was out of town on a fishing trip, our mother sometimes walked with my two sisters and I the two miles to the only McDonald's in our town, Flint, Michigan. This was a genuine treat, very much not the ordinary home-cooked meal. As I grew up in the 1960s and Seventies, so did the fast food industry. While I attended rock festivals and high school, political rallies and antiwar protests and college at the University of Michigan, fast food restaurants sprang up all over the county—Burger Kings, Pizza Huts, KFCs, White Castle, Burger Chefs, Taco Bells. At the same time, people my age often had a feeling of boundless optimism about American life and our futures. The Civil Rights, Anti-war, and Women's Movements all had carved out paths of (some) success, fueled by our concerns and thirst for social justice and framed by our music and art. Many hoped or just assumed that other matters would fall into line: life would truly get desegregated, we'd all have equal rights, the fast food fad would fade away. We thought that we—every one of us—would make sure of it.

[*Objectified version:* In the early 1960s, throughout most of America, fast food restaurants were rarely seen, and families had to make some effort to get to a McDonald's or one of the few other brands in existence. When they did go, it was a genuine treat, very much not the ordinary home-cooked meal. As the country grew through the '60s and Seventies, so did the fast food industry. While the kids attended rock festivals and high school, political rallies and antiwar protests and college at the University of Michigan, fast food restaurants sprang up all over the county—Burger Kings, Pizza Huts, KFCs, White Castle, Burger Chefs, Taco Bells. At the same time, young people often had a feeling of boundless optimism about American life and the future. The Civil Rights, Anti-war, and Women's Movements all had carved out paths of (some) success, fueled by their concerns and thirst for social justice, framed by their music and art. Many hoped or just assumed that other matters would fall into line: life would truly get desegregated, we'd all have equal rights, the fast food fad would fade away. The vibrant Movements of that time felt that they would make sure of it.

By the early Eighties, it was clear little like that would happen. Reagan was into his second term, the US was back to fighting secret proxy wars like the one in El Salvador, and more junk food places than ever sprang up like weeds across the land. Even the radio stations were degenerating into homogenized, boring McMusic outlets. By the close of the century, many progressive Americans found themselves fighting despair that about world affairs and the collapsed economy—feelings that may have made any argument about the topic of fast food seem simplistic at best. Who cares when everything's going to hell anyway? How can a writer argue a point about the American diet with a suspicion lingering that somewhere someone in the bowels of Pepsi is busy drawing up plans for the first downtown Baghdad Kentucky Fried Chicken? How can we realistically hope for change or for a better world for our kids?

Eric Schlosser's book, *Fast Food Nation: The dark side of the all-American meal*, brought what he calls the dark side of fast food into public conversation, and many things in the book lead *away* from hope. The demise of the family farm, the consolidation of giant food businesses, the ever more common use of chemically engineered flavors—how does a mere individual stand a chance to "live right" or eat healthily? As one potato farmer Schlosser interviews says, "The only thing I can control is when I get out of bed in the morning." (120) Just as many feel too caught up in the systems of our lives, including the food systems, to avoid doing things they might not like, like commuting, this farmer is trapped in the system of the contemporary corporate farming:

By embracing this industrial model of agriculture—one that focuses narrowly on the level of inputs and outputs, that encourages specialization in just one crop, that relies heavily on chemical fertilizers, pesticides, fungicides, herbicides, advanced harvesting and irrigation equipment—

American farmers have become the most productive farmers on earth. Every increase in productivity, however, has driven more American farmers off the land. (119-20)

The "industrial model," which largely gave McDonald's its early success (66-7, for example), involves tightly controlled mechanisms and systems of production, including many individual subsystems and workers in supporting industries. For the potato farmers or ranchers, those producing the chemicals and harvesting machines are part of the system that helps them, but it also destroys them. To look most pessimistically at the question of fast food in our lives, it works the same way: it helps us, feeds and comforts us, but also hurts us and our children, litters our world, reduces our chances for healthy lives.

This is a difficult system to resist, for it does do both positive and negative things. Later in the same chapter, Schlosser takes his readers on a journey through the flavor industry that helps make these foods (and many, many others) attractive. The "flavorists," scientists who create the chemicals that make things taste (or just smell) good, engineer biochemical compounds "by blending scores of different chemicals in tiny amounts, a process governed by scientific principles, but also demanding a fair amount of art." (127) We are sold chicken sandwiches that have beef extracts in them, barbecue flavored food that has a chemical barbecue smell, wonderful fruit flavored things whose only real flavor is chemicals. (128) But even knowing these things, most of us will indulge from time to time, if not often, because they *do* taste (and smell) good, because we're busy, because we can.

So again, we are trapped by what we love—but not entirely against our will. We do have true choice in these matters, as consumers and as parents. Even though it may seem futile in the face of the sheer size and power of an industry like the fast food business, if families decide to take better control over their diet, they can. They can buy organic vegetables, plan meals, make lunches, buy juices instead of sodas. It takes some effort, but alternatives do exist in most places. *You* (and I) never absolutely have to buy anything made by a large corporation, and least of all food. Fresh ingredients are still easy to come by, and people can also make food for meals, with planning and a conscious choice to do it!

When enough people make this harder choice, just like when enough people protest, then things will change for society, and the junk food industry will change, too. We can't afford the luxury of pessimism in our individual lives, and, as even Schlosser concedes, "There is nothing inevitable about the fast food nation that surrounds us—about its marketing strategies, labor policies, and agricultural techniques, about its relentless drive for conformity and cheapness." (260) The great social movements of the past, like the Civil Rights movement and the anti-Vietnam protests, mobilized millions of people to primarily peaceful and non-violent resistance to entrenched systems that many felt were wrong and bad for the country. Yet each decision to be a part of such movements was an individual one, political acts of consciousness. Just as we respond individually as well as collectively to events in the world, we need to realize that our individual choice to walk into Carl's Jr. for that bacon cheeseburger is also a political act. And individual choices combine to make up our world, for society's political, industrial, and marketing systems respond to them eventually.] see <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~mmartin/mccessay.htm>

Sources

Schlosser, Eric. *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. New York: Houghton-Mifflin, 2001