Fast Food and Environmental Awareness


Serendipitously, a surprise encounter with a student in the neighborhood park brought the genius of Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* into our hands two years ago. Given your goals of environmental education, she mused, connecting food for thought with food for the belly, you will find rich reflections in *Fast Food Nation.* Our students constantly enrich our curricula and pedagogy. Once again our students became our teacher. Soon after, the book became central to our philosophy of education course for undergraduate education majors.

In our university, one cannot help but feel compassion for the undergraduates crammed into classrooms, moved through programs, and then finally processed into professionals. In swift, orderly, indistinguishable fashion, students progress toward their places within society. They dash from dorm to dining hall, apartment to eatery, meeting groups, navigating libraries, submitting papers and projects all for the goal of matriculation. Their lives are fast. And speed, for all of its allure, exacts a price.

Fast food feels like no fad for our students. To them it’s a basic necessity. Many students declare that they would not eat if it were not the free home-delivery or the under five minute drive-in deal that liberates them from shopping, chopping, cooking, cleaning, mopping ... and disposing of the black garbage bag at the curbside.

For Laura, it’s a matter of simple pride in her single mother who could raise her whole brood, abandoned by their father, thanks to the meal deals wheeled out by the fastest familiar eateries in her ghetto. For the majority, it’s the freedom found to study and graduate faster on the already fast lane to graduation and a real job. For Debbie, who already has a real job, it’s her savior. This underpaid teacher struggling with advanced certification in our summer intensive course, is raising her own three kids alone, while seeking to motivate and inspire the 23 children in her fifth grade class.

So go the stories of Week 1 of our course. The celebration of fast food is unabashed.

Schlosser’s stories bring to life for them the American dream turned fabulous reality by Ray Kroc, one of the founding fathers of McDonald’s, or of Carl Karcher, Richard and Maurice “Mac” Donald, Harland Sanders, and the other emperors of the fast food empire. With the raw guts and tenacity admired in the pioneers opening new frontiers, they brought about the “industrial eating” revolution that revolutionized the lives of millions across the nation; and now promises to do so across the world’s “global economy.” A revolution started without arms and ammunition, the victorious golden arches rise over highways as the universally famous, luminous “mother McDonald’s breasts.”¹ Our students love Schlosser’s stories of “rags to riches” that keep alive, for them, the American Dream.

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When beginning to explore the connection between fast food and philosophy of education, here’s what the bravest and boldest students are provoked to ask: “Professors, we know all about fast food. We eat it every day. What does fast food for the belly have to do with food for thought? What does Fast Food Nation have to do with education?”

To begin addressing these questions, students learn not only of the enormity of the fast food industry (Americans spend more on fast food than higher education, computers, or new cars), but how the industry reflects and permeates the society.

Schlosser compels students to pause—perhaps for the first time in their lives—before their beloved nation’s fast food economy. As they discover in the chapter, “Why the Fries Taste So Good,” the picture of a sophisticated scientific and technological achievement emerges. Fries taste good not because of the potato or grease but because of a myriad of flavor and aroma compounds added to ensure uniformity of both. With this revelation, our students begin to reevaluate their taken-for-granted understanding of what’s in the “food”? What exactly is “food,” anyway? Real food? Fossil fuels and other chemicals?

Schlosser’s answers take us behind the fast food counter, into the factory, the trailer home, the field, the slaughterhouse and corporate headquarters. In his stories, our young eaters/teachers-in-the-making smell and see the real lives of adolescents sickened by “affluenza” (DeGraff and Boe 1997). Slowly, ever so slowly, the picture emerges of the penetration of a fast food ethos and reality into their schools, into contemporary classrooms, athletic fields, school buses, and not the least, cafeterias—alluring young eaters and image targets, even as they contradict lessons learned in health class, science class, and social studies class. But it is still some time before the answer to the question of what all of this has to do with education and the philosophy of education comes into focus.

Schlosser takes his readers a part of the long way Wendell Berry (1990, 148) has traveled to discover:

It would not do for the consumer to know that the hamburger she is eating came from a steer who spent much of his life standing deep in his own excrement in a feedlot, helping to pollute the local streams, or that the calf that yielded the veal cutlet on her plate spent its life in a box in which it did not have room to turn around. And, though her sympathy for the slaw might be less tender, she should not be encouraged to meditate on the hygienic and biological implications of mile-square fields of cabbage, for vegetables grown in huge monocultures are dependent on toxic chemicals—just as animals in close confinement are dependent on antibiotics and other drugs… The industrial farm is said to have been patterned on the factory production line. In practice, it looks more like a concentration camp.

Junk food junkies are fast fed into obliviousness—the grease-ease drug and admen’s images convincing them that the “happy meal” spreads happiness across the global landscape. Schlosser’s shake-up, however rudely felt at first, is finally seen as pertinent. Compassion for the eater and the eaten, for the fryer and the fried, for the farmer and the rancher rips through the lies, deceit, and conceit that feed all of us fast food. Students resonate with this compassion, even as they listen to the simple though disturbing facts revealed by Schlosser’s well-documented research.

Students read how soils of small farms, community commons, and slow food villages are mauled and hauled away; laid over with concrete slabs of interstates working 24 hours a day to keep us addicted to the fast food that fuels our fast, thoughtless, crazy, stressed, damaged and damaging lives.

Schlosser’s “speed bump” slows our students down, enabling them to consider the price paid in speeding. They recognize the stress speed bears, the stress that kills. Documenting tragedies behind the scenes, Schlosser reminds us that the suicide rate among ranchers and farmers in the United States is now about three times higher than the national average. Urging his readers to look beyond the immediate horror—the suicides and dismemberments destroying millions of families today—there is the future growing increasingly bleak and dark. Schlosser will not let us easily forget that in ranching, a failure is much more likely to be final. The land that has been lost is not just a commodity. It has meaning that cannot be measured
in dollars and cents. It is a tangible connection with the past, something that was meant to be handed down to children and never sold. (pp. 146-147)

For the founding fathers of fast food, such sentiments are meaningless. Their success as much as their candid words teach us the price that must be paid for the success that defines the American dream. Ray Kroc reminds us about the pillars of competition that undergird this economic philosophy. Free of all illusions of political correctness that his CEOs today must mouth, in plain language Kroc dismisses any high-minded analysis of fast food success: “This is rat eat rat, dog eat dog. I’ll kill ’em, and I’m going to kill ’em before they kill me. You’re talking about the American way of survival of the fittest” (p. 37).

**Hourglass or Democracy?**

Describing the survival of the fittest in the food economy, Schlosser quotes William Hefferman who explains why the American agricultural economy now resembles an hourglass. “At the top there are about 2 million ranchers and farmers; at the bottom there are 275 million consumers; and at the narrow portion in the middle, there are a dozen or so multinational corporations earning a profit from every transaction.” (p. 120)

Over the past 25 years, Idaho has lost about half of its potato farmers.... Family farms are giving way to corporate farms that stretch for thousands of acres. You increasingly find two classes of people in rural Idaho: the people who run the farms and the people who own them. (pp.117-118)

Winners within the American hourglass oligopsony, J. R. Simplot the potato farm tycoon being one, are not self-conscious in declaring: I have been a “land hog all my life.” Simplot flies a gigantic American flag on a pole that’s ten stories high and “controls a bloc of North American land that’s bigger than the state of Delaware” (p. 116).

Schlosser celebrates the fast food success of specific moguls and emperors without glossing over the death of democracy that attends it. His prose creates openings for conversations with industrial eaters now conscious of the consequences of their eating addictions. “Strategic questioning” (Peavy 2001) about the issue of democracy as personal action and commitment now becomes possible.

**Slow Food Revolutions**

In what can we place our hope, ask our students? “What can we do?”

Radical hope is the essence of popular movements, we remind our students and ourselves. Grassroots initiatives and movements are surging with hope from the ground up; hope that common people can escape the global economy’s American-style, anti-democratic, oligopsonic eating hourglass. These common people seek to create new food commons; to regenerate democratic ways of eating; to rebirth their own cultural conceptions of democracy.

Taking us into the bowels of the beast, into the furthest reaches of the belly of the fast food empire, Schlosser offers stories of hope, courage, daring, and escape from “McDollars, McGreedy, McCancer, McMurder, McProfits, McGarbage” (p. 245). Expressing the kind of immediate hope that our students can closely identify with, Schlosser’s common sense suggests that

Nobody in the United States is forced to buy fast food. The first step toward meaningful change is by far the easiest: stop buying it.... The heads of Burger King, KFC, and McDonald’s should feel daunted; they’re outnumbered. There are three of them and almost three hundred million of you. A good boycott, a refusal to buy, can speak much louder than words. Sometimes the most irresistible force is the most mundane.

Among the gutsy, gumption-filled Schlosser stories of today’s Davids taking on Fast Food Goliaths, is the story of Helen Steel and Dave Morris; it is a marvelous moral tale of ordinary English people now resisting the domination of their lives by the Americanization of the world. Despite a vast international army of spies and attorneys deployed by the McDonald “Goliath,” two school dropouts in Britain turned on its head the “McLibel” case launched against them by McDonald’s Corporation and won
"the longest trial in British history," while creating a "public relations disaster for McDonald's."

If eaters like Helen Steel and Dave Morris are concerned about the contamination of their bellies, their mouths, and intestinal tracts with fast food poisons, then even more compelling are the tales of moral resistance coming from farmers whose way of working and life, of centuries-old family traditions are under brutal, bloody attack from "McGreed." Jose Bove, a French sheep farmer, demolished a McDonald's under construction in Millau, his hometown. "Lousy food" resister turned author of the bestseller, The World Is Not for Sale—And Nor Am I; this national hero risked even imprisonment while inviting his compatriots not to become "servile slaves at the service of agribusiness;" declaring, instead, "non a McMerde" (Schlosser, 244).

On this side of the Atlantic, south of the U.S. border, in the historic central plaza of Mexico's gracious Oaxaca, indigenous corn tamales won the day as thousands from all walks of life—from peasants and local restaurateurs to international intellectuals and world-renowned Mexican artists—came together to throw McDonald’s out of its preferred and prestigious location in the historic central town plaza.

Schlosser shows that change—real, meaningful, life-sustaining change—is neither far away nor hard to achieve. It is as close to us as our own hands and mouths. Millions are waking up from speedy somnambulance.

Beyond Fast Food Schizophrenia: Mind, Body and Soul Food Rejoined

Hope is further found in the fifty million "cultural creatives" (Ray and Anderson 2000) now currently departing on diverse, unique, personal, innovative paths (or escape routes?) from their consumptive, ecologically destructive, speedy, stressful, unhealthy, anxiety-ridden, fast paced North American lives. They are creating what some are calling "The New American Dream" (Glover 2002). There is nothing flaky or New Age about this, writes Sarah van Gelder (2001) "These people are practical. They love the Earth, and they want to live their values." (p. 15) They are, in the words of Joanna Macy (1998) contributing to the "Great Turning."

In our course, we also include numerous accounts of hope-filled initiatives around the world and around the country. Daily, we celebrate in class teachers who take their students out of doors and engage their communities, and teachers who are not bound and gagged by state-mandated curricula or pre-packaged teaching materials. Our students come alive with hope upon learning that school yards across the country that were concreted over are being de-concreted; the soil set free after years of imprisonment—to breathe again; to grow green; to nourish and be nourished with food for the body, food for the mind and food for the soul/spirit.

If such stories from schools—elementary, middle and high—do not inspire enough confidence in student-teachers daunted by supposed superintendents demanding they teach to the standards-based tests, there is yet more abundant hope-filled food for inspiration. We need only proceed as far as our own state of Pennsylvania, where initiatives such as STREAMS (Science Teams in Rural Environments for Aquatic Management Studies) reveal how middle grades students involved in integrated and environment-based studies are outperforming their peers in traditional classrooms on standardized tests. (Bogo 2003)

**Ecological literacy**

Ostensibly, our work with undergraduate education majors attempts to marry studies in philosophy of education to ecological literacy. We do this because we want our students to be able to critically address issues relevant to the survival of places, peoples, ways of knowing; and to be better able to confront environmental matters of concern within their community, municipality, home, and neighborhood. Over and over, we are surprised by the number of students who are neither familiar with nor conversant in a whole host of environmental issues. We take seriously Orr’s (1992) dictum that "All education is environmental education." By omitting environmental studies from our philosophy of education courses, we would, in effect, be teaching that the environment is irrelevant to an examination of philosophical issues.

We seek to draw connections between environmental awareness and students’ answers to questions such as What is the good life? What is happi-
ness?, and What does it mean to be educated? Forgoing the common approach to philosophical studies, we instead use environmental studies as the arena in which to provoke our students to ask what is education? And what is education for?

Dewey (1975, 48) long ago concluded that “the subject-matter of the curriculum, however important, however judiciously selected, is empty of conclusive moral content until it is made over into terms of the individual’s own activities, habits, and desires.” In our use of Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, our intention is to align our pedagogy with Deweyan philosophy, to begin with our students’ activities, habits, and desires. The “speed bump” that is *Fast Food Nation* is so effective among undergraduates primarily due to their familiarity with fast food. As former employees, they recognize the working conditions—late hours, surprising job responsibilities, and low wages—detailed by Schlosser. As former children, they speak fondly of toys, prizes, and playgrounds, all memories of serene, uncomplicated, joyous bygone days. As adolescents, they express gratitude for the convenience of warm food given the demands of school and extracurricular activities on shared family time. And, today as students busily preparing for their future vocation as educators, the irony of fast food as the one pause in lives lived fast is not lost on them.

What is revealed to them are the effects of speed on landscapes, familial relationships, civic participation, wealth distribution, health, and community life. They begin to see the consequent fragmentation of living within their fast food nation: of knowing from doing, of schooling from community, of individuals from democratic action, of knowledge itself, and of living from the environment. So begins the opening to environmental awareness. So begins an approach to an answer to the question, “What does fast food have to do with education?”

Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation* admirably shows us how we can slow ourselves down to even consider the price paid in speeding. *Fast Food Nation*, wedded to environmental awareness, yields a match made in heaven for bringing ecological literacy down to earth from distant ozone holes to the immediacy of what we put into our mouths several times every day.

Our students report that because of *Fast Food Nation*, their eyes are “open to things never thought of before ... making me want to make changes in my life and education and in others so that they can also make changes if they choose to.” They report new insights about what is going on behind the scenes and in rural towns. They speak about their new interests in “knowing where your food comes from and what’s in it” and of their wish to have read these stories and facts years earlier. To our delight, they share course materials with roommates, talk about it with parents, and opt not to sell *Fast Food Nation* and other course texts back to the bookstore at the end of the term! They swear off fast food, considering how they might, despite the restrictions of budget and time, incorporate food that is slow rather than fast into their lives; local, regional, and seasonal rather than that which travels long, international distances; food that supports rootedness and a sense of place rather than uprootedness, destruction, and thoughtlessness.

Once their food and all of its costs (ecological, social, or moral) have been accounted for, our students are now open to consider how their education has been similarly divorced from soil, landscapes, and environment. They begin to critically consider the previously unquestioned pedagogies to which they themselves have been subjected, pedagogies that have rendered them passive, uncritical, and unknowledgeable about innumerable concrete realities, not the least of which is their food and their relationship to places. Soon they begin to request participation in initiatives within the community as part of the class—from food banks and CSA farm distribution to educational events (children’s activities at Earth Day celebrations, summer camps, and enrichment programs offered to visiting high school students). They begin to cook together, inviting classmates to potlucks made of foods purchased and grown locally. Some even take to gardening.

Seeing gaps in their own knowledge about food as revealed in *Fast Food Nation*, they begin to recognize additional gaps in their knowledge that are equally critical to their own survival. From health practices to democracy, they see anew what is meant by “the hidden curriculum”; what they’re not learning about the environment they soon recognize as akin to what they’re not learning in other, equally essential areas.
Soon, they take hold of their learning, no longer passive consumers. From pallet to intellect, stomach to mind, students begin to slow themselves, and in slowing answer the questions that will sustain them in all the ways we seek sustenance.

In this slow mulling, they are liberated to accept the invitation to eat with the fullest pleasure—pleasure, that is, that does not depend on ignorance, perhaps the profoundest enactment of our connection with the world. In this pleasure we experience and celebrate our dependence and our gratitude, for we are living from mystery, from creatures we did not make and powers we cannot comprehend. (Berry 1990, 152)

Notes
1. "During the late 1960s, ... McDonald's Corporation hired Louis Cheskin—a prominent design consultant and psychologist. ... He argued against completely eliminating the golden arches, claiming they had great Freudian importance in the subconscious mind of consumers. According to Cheskin, the golden arches resembled a pair of large breasts: "Mother McDonald's breasts." It made little sense to lose the appeal of that universal, and yet somehow all-American symbolism. The company followed Cheskin's advice and retained the golden arches, using them to form the M in McDonald's." Schlosser, 97-98.

References