Making Fast Food Essay, Research Paper

In the book Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan into the Fryer, the author, Ester Reiter examines how the fast food industry changed the lives of many. In 1982-83, Ester Reiter, an assistant professor in Sociology at Brock University, spent five months working at Burger King. Much of the observations and research presented in the book are the author’s real experiences and opinions during her time at this ever expanding fast-food outlet. In a fascinating way, this book looks at how the fast-food industry affected and changed the family. The book also focuses on how the fast-food industry grew and developed with the assistance of repetitive work for cheap labor. In the next few pages, I will discuss the main issues the author has written about in her book. The introduction of restaurants were only appealing to the wealthy because they could afford going to Inns in which these restaurants were located. By 1920, with the help of technology, mass production had started. The introduction of mass production and scientific management went hand in hand to make the industry become efficient and effective. Similarly, urbanization was on the rise and thus more and more people were moving to the cities and businesses were being opened. The development of the transportation industry also increased and therefore, more transit services were available for the people. By 1950 and 1960, change was occurring quickly. The introduction of Superhighways, motels, service station, etc were on the rise. Reiter explains, “The level of urbanization increased substantially; by 1961, 70 percent of the Canadian population was classified as urban.” (Reiter, P41) Change in demand for goods and services had increased. People started to rely on and required more goods and services than in the past. In the shift from pre-industrial to post-industrial society, people’s logic of thinking changed. The author discusses the impact of having both partners working outside the home and how this had affected the family relationship. As the dual-earner family became the new family norm, it replaced the typical family structure. That is, the husband being the breadwinner and the wife being the homemaker. Thus, the dual-earner family had become the predominant social reality. Changing social attitudes and the expansion of the possibilities open to women in education and work had brought about changes within families. Changing roles of women played a major part in the introduction of the fast-food industry which moved eating times outside the home. Furthermore, the increase of technology (e.g.: cars), shopping malls, grocery stores, etc, gave family life a new face. Clearly, the dual-earner family appears to be here to stay as families continues to adapt to changing economic and social trends. The author discusses the introduction of technology in the fast-food industry. Some argue that technology has caused new and more skilled jobs to appear in the labor market. Others argue that technology has led to decreased jobs for workers. Reiter writes that technology has caused the need of skilled labor to decrease and that there is no demand for skilled labor. “In place of the coordination of skilled workers required in manufacture, the work is done by the machines themselves.” (Reiter, P49) Furthermore, the fast-food industry does not really look at the skill you have but rather look at how fast and efficiently you can to the required work. Although technology replaced many jobs, there were still other jobs the managers had to systematically design to ensure good results. In 1911, Frederick Taylor created a rule of thumb for scientific management principles. In short, he believed that the responsibility of management was to organize the workplace (decision-making). Therefore it was necessary for managers to redesign jobs, and implement tight administrative and employee controls (eg: monitor workers’ performance) in order to fulfill their top priority – efficiency and profits. (Krahn & Lowe, P214) Similarly, Reiter explains how scientific management is used today. For example, at Burger King, the ultimate goal was to maximize food sales and minimize labor costs by implementing the SOS (”speed of service”) strategy. (Reiter, P85) In order to ensure such strategy is followed, management must obviously outline a standard work procedure and have strict control in all Burger King stores. The author also touched on Harry Braverman. Braverman argued that twentieth century capitalism was not exactly how Karl Marx described the labor process. Braverman writes that technology has not created new skills but has instead degraded skills. (Reiter, P115) Thus, the work done by management and the work done by employees is the “basis for the division of labour and the key to understanding how Taylor’s ideas came to dominate production in many industries ” (Reiter, P115)

Reiter highlights the hunger the fast-food industry had and clearly still has for cheap labor. Workers were very often hired on the bases of their availability at the cheapest cost to the company. Thus, many of the businesses recruited unskilled people because they were likely to accept the low rates of pay. Technology assisted in simplifying jobs and therefore decreasing the need for skilled labor. The issue of control also plays part in hiring unskilled laborers. This is because unskilled workers are more likely to accept minimum-wage and to do what their employer tells them where as for skilled workers it is much harder to control them. Reiter explains how the fast-food industry in particular relied a lot on student labour because nobody else was willing to work part-time. At the same time, students would probably be the only ones to accept irregular hours, low wages, and no additional benefits. Some women were able to work in this industry because they would be able to squeeze their hours in during the day in order to be home in time to greet the kids, clean and get the dinner ready for the family. Additionally, many recent immigrants who had a hard time finding work would accept to work in the fast-food industry. Many times these immigrants were employed for washing dishes, cleaning bathrooms and making sure the floor was clean. Such jobs required minimal training and communication with others. Power and control in the hands of top management work simultaneously to mind boggle both the customer and the employee. This industry used a somewhat manipulating yet intensifying strategy to get customers to believe in them. Commercials and advertisements are used to pursued families in thinking that they needed more time together. Thus, slogans such as “give yourself a break today” (Reiter, 19) are often used. Power in the hands of owners or managers characterize work in our society. This power is used to maximize profits rather than empowering employees. This power is not only used to control workers but “Corporate control is the key to standardized product.” (Lowe, P373). This control and power paint a picture that the employee clearly understands and that is that only the managers are in control and therefore the employee should not expect to see increase in wages, better working conditions or any control over the labor process. Furthermore, Reiter explains how the shifts were shortened when she was working in order to get the employees to worker fast and harder without the need for a break. In short, if you could not adapt to the standardized work and could not follow the specific rules, you were easily replaced with no difficulty on the employers part. In conclusion, this is a well documented and easy-to-read book that leaves no doubt of the tremendous impact the fast-food industry had on family life. Furthermore, the pictures by Richard Style not only add a humorous touch but also a somewhat relaxed atmosphere. BIBLIOGRAPHY Krahn Harvey, Lowe Graham. Work, Industry, and Canadian Society. Scarborough: International Thomas Publishing, 1998. Lowe, Graham. The Canadian Review of Sociology and Anthropology. Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1992. Reiter, Ester. Making Fast Food: From the Frying Pan Into the Fryer. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1991.