

My Secret Life on the McJob: Lessons from Behind the Counter Guaranteed to Supersize any Management Style, by Jerry Newman. New Delhi: Tata. McGraw Hill, 2007. Price Rs. 250.

This book is an attempt by Newman to uncover working conditions in the U.S. fast food industry. As a human resource expert, the author's focus is on the management practices related to franchise workers in the industry. Specifically, in the introduction of the book Newman (2007, 9) states that he would "focus on those management practices that were found to be both cost-effective for the business and beneficial to the employees and determine if it was possible to apply these findings generally to other businesses to improve productivity, keep turnover down, and control labor costs." Newman's emphasis on cost-effectiveness emerges from his initial hypothesis that the U.S. fast food industry is a pioneer in managing and controlling costs.

The book makes a promising beginning with a lively narration of Newman's experience of finding a piece of plastic in his daughter's sandwich at a fast food restaurant. The author's commitment to participant observation added further to my interest in the book. In Chapter 1, Newman gives a detailed outline of his research approach and his rationale for choosing the industry. In the rich tradition of extended case method laid down by Burawoy (1998), Newman commits himself to 14 months of data collection on the U.S. fast food industry by working in different restaurants. The first chapter further elaborates upon the set of rules followed by Newman for this research. The *a priori* framing of the problem and developing a blueprint to uncover it were necessary for the research. However, in the tradition of an emergent design, he could have allowed many of these rules to evolve during the course of his study.

In the second chapter, Newman elaborates on the nature of franchise work and suggests that the job is far from easy. He particularly challenges the description of McJob provided in Merriam-Webster dictionary as, "a low-paying job that requires little skill and provides little opportunity for advancement." Although Newman does not disagree with the low-paying part of the above description, he contends that McJobs require a considerable amount of skill. He further gives an account of difficult working conditions in the fast food industry by elaborating on the seven jobs done by him in the 14-month research period. This description by Newman provides further support to many who have criticized the exploitative nature of the fast food industry in the US. This description is the single biggest contribution of the book.

In Chapter 3 of the book, Newman focuses on the role of culture in influencing his work experience in the industry. By providing an account of diversity in organizational cultures across different franchises, often of the same restaurant chain, the author is able to emphatically defend his focus on culture. An interesting insight to emerge

from this chapter is that McWorld is far from a monolithic order. This insight complements Ritzer's (2000) celebrated work and his concern about the creation of a sanitized and homogenized world. Newman argues that although the production process is highly rationalized, the human resource practices diverge widely across different franchises in the industry. In particular, he places considerable emphasis on individual managers and their roles in imprinting workplace cultures in these outlets. Here, Newman develops an interesting typology of managers and their abilities to influence work in different outlets. It has to be noted, however, that the diversity comes in with an important institutional caveat, which Newman fails to elaborate upon. And this caveat relates to the universal emphases on understaffing and attempts to drive down costs by managers. Thus, across diverse work-cultures and managerial styles, the theme of over-exploited and under-paid worker runs through like a common thread.

In the fourth chapter, Newman raises the issue of why employees agree to work for lower salaries in these fast food restaurants. Newman offers access or skill inability and ignorance about better paying jobs as plausible reasons. However, a richer institutional analysis could have further enriched his understanding. Here, Newman's failure to delve deeper into the political economy of fast-food restaurants is evident. There is enough scholarly evidence to suggest that the coercive nature of the neoliberal phase of capitalism and the institutional failure of the American state to perform its welfare function have significantly contributed to workers' acquiescence to such working conditions. Strangely, Newman chooses to be silent about these institutional dimensions.

In the fifth chapter, the author provides insights into the limitations of the training methods used by fast-food corporations. His account of the differences between the picture of growth and employee-care painted in the corporate training programs and the actual working conditions reinforce the belief that businesses work by putting a veil around their real selves. Newman shows that the veil is not only to decouple the real nature of business from consumers, but is also used to manipulate its own workers. Newman also shows that the actual working of the McWorld is far from standardized and provides accounts of different interpretations of rules and guidelines. It further supports the institutional perspective that highlights the decoupling of formal rules from actual working in organizations (Meyer and Rowan 1991). As emphasized earlier, Newman could have improved his study by providing deeper insights into these institutional processes.

The sixth chapter of the book touches upon an important issue of discrimination and gender/racial relations in the fast food industry. Newman identifies a racial/ gender

divide in the industry; however, he does not believe that the fast-food corporations discriminate. To support his case, he argues that women disproportionately hold the top jobs in many of these stores. Here, a systematic contextualization of the employment opportunities for women and the nature of the US economy in which families are increasingly dependent on two low paying jobs, would have greatly added to the richness of the analysis offered by Newman. A similar assessment of non-white representation in McJobs would have added to the incisiveness of his analysis of the McWorld.

In the last two chapters of the book, Newman provides a summary of his arguments and in the process touches upon the problem of high turnover in the industry. The author believes that the problem of high turnover, which in certain cases is close to 500%, is because of the difficult nature of work in the fast food industry. He points out that the industry requires flexibility and a wide range of skills, which take a toll on workers. In particular, wide ranging skills are required from workers who are paid close to the legally stipulated minimum wage. Newman believes that the combination makes it difficult for workers to survive in the industry.

In the final analysis, the book is a rather banal account of fast food restaurants and suffers from some serious shortcomings. First, the writing style is monotonous and the author's attempt to create interest through snippets in the form of 'Behind the Counter' fails to make the book appealing. Second, Newman fails to do justice to the rich methodological approach of participant observation. The observational accounts could have been much thicker with emic and etic analysis. As a reader, I was constantly left yearning for depth and for a nuanced cultural analysis of data. Third, the book is narrowly framed and the study gets reduced to a 'teach-yourself-management in seven days' type of an effort. Specifically, instead of delving deeper into issues, Newman appears to be more concerned about coming up with some quick solutions to human resource problems. Fourth, it's a failed attempt to balance two contradictory dimensions of employee welfare and profit enhancement by cutting costs. This contradiction mars Newman's potentially promising work and he fails to give adequate voice to the McWorld workers. At several places in his book, Newman acknowledges that fast food employees are underpaid and managers under-staff for the sake of their own incentives. The author also emphasizes the exploitation of these workers by describing the working conditions. In light of these findings, Newman could have systematically worked on giving more voice to these workers in his book. He could have further added to the richness of his account by describing processes of subversion and resistance in the work place. Moreover, it is surprising that Newman does not find it necessary to offer insights into a lack of organized representation for these workers in the form of unions. This understanding could have been of great significance

and would have added to the richness of his work. Finally, the entire narrative is presented without an historical analysis of the evolution of the U.S. fast-food industry. This historical approach would have enhanced Newman's analysis by providing a context for understanding the contemporary human resources practices being followed in the industry. In summary, Newman's brave attempt to understand the working conditions is greatly hampered by his inability to go beyond a narrowly defined managerial agenda and his lack of willingness to offer serious institutional insights into the McWorld.

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Dare to think the unthought known? A festschrift for Gouranga Chattopadhyay
Edited by Ajeet N. Mathur. Tampere: Avioairut Publishing, 2006. Price 38 Euros

Ajeet Mathur in the book notes "a reasonable person submits, complies and adapts and enables status quo to be preserved, whereas an unreasonable person questions, explores and by rocking the boat, disturbs things and people and is regarded as bit of a nuisance – but by doing so brings about changes. Thus all progress is said to depend on unreasonable people, pushing the envelope so to speak". By this yardstick, Gouranga Chattopadhyay is certainly a most unreasonable man.

Group Relations Conferences (also known as Working Conferences) were started by The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, London, in 1957, based on the pioneering work of W. R. Bion who, as Gouranga Chattopadhyay likes to point out, was born in India. Group Relations Conferences started in India in 1973, which was before any country outside the United Kingdom began to offer it. The Indian Institute of Management Calcutta has had a special role in promoting group relations work in

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