



## Fast Food, Fast Track: Immigrants, Big Business, And The American Dream

By Jennifer Parker Talwar

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Hailing from China, the Caribbean, Latin America, and India, a colorful sea of faces has taken its place behind one of the most ubiquitous American business institutions – the fast-food counter. They have become a vital link between the growing service sector in our cities' ethnic enclaves and the multi-billion dollar global fast-food industry. For four years, sociologist Jennifer Parker Talwar went behind the counter herself and listened to immigrant fast-food workers in New York City's ethnic communities. They talked about balancing their low-paying jobs and monotonous daily reality with keeping the faith that these very jobs could be the first step on the path to the American Dream. In this original and compelling work of ethnography, Talwar shows that contrary to those arguing that the fast-food industry only represents an increasing homogenization of the American workforce, fast-food chains in immigrant communities *must* and *do* adapt to their surroundings.

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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Talwar, a sociology professor at Penn State-Berks Lehigh Valley, took a job in a Brooklyn, N.Y., Burger King to study the recent flood of immigrant employees in fast food restaurants. She also interviewed more than 100 employees (mostly Asian and Latino ,migr,s) of New York-area McDonald's and Burger King franchises in ethnic neighborhoods. Here, she compares these fairly new sources of employment with the more traditional unskilled jobs in immigrant-run groceries, restaurants and other mom-and-pop enterprises, exploring why immigrants increasingly turn to fast food jobs and whether these jobs lead to English fluency and useful mainstream skills or are a dead end. Much of the text is Talwar's description of fast food life and her interpretations of the employees' survey responses and behavior. Missing are the first-person stories and real conversations that usually enliven the participant/observer genre even the extended survey answers seldom go more than one paragraph, and Talwar seems loath to let the workers speak for themselves without adding her own analysis. While she provides an unusual inside look at the pan-ethnic environment, hierarchies and racial conflicts of immigrant neighborhood fast food chains, her approach, as well as her sometimes facile observations ("It is interesting that [recent Chinese immigrants] Paul and Tina view McDonald's as foreign when the general public has long viewed Chinatown as foreign") deaden what might have been an engrossing and original study. (Mar.)Forecast: Readers of Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation* (2001) will reach for this, undoubtedly hoping for more social analysis. Once word gets out that it doesn't measure up, though, sales will fall flat.

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From Library Journal

With the publication in 1993 of sociologist George Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society*, the word "McDonaldization" became part of our vocabulary, usually used to describe prolific spread and mind-numbing sameness. Ritzer's ideas were further promulgated by subsequent titles such as *McDonalidization Revisited* by Mark Alfino, et al.; Barry Smart's *Resisting McDonaldization*; and, most trenchantly perhaps, Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the All-American Meal*. Talwar (sociology, Penn State, Berks Lehigh Valley) offers us a less bleak perspective on fast food restaurants by examining the employment opportunities they represent for newly arrived immigrants in this country. The homogeneity decried in these other volumes here gives way to ethnic complexity, as restaurants (and their corporate owners) respond to local demographics. What appear to be dead-end jobs to those born in the United States are, in fact, just a rung in the ladder of upward mobility for ambitious new Americans. Intriguing and well researched, Talwar's argument is recommended for all libraries. Ellen D. Gilbert, Princeton, NJ  
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Review

"Fortunately, Jennifer Parker Talwar, takes a different approach [to the national debate over immigration]." -  
- *The Wall Street Journal*, February 28, 2002

"Intriguing and well researched..." -- *Library Journal*

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#### **James Weil:**

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