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SPRING 2026

WORKING THE LAND: LESSONS IN LABOR AND COLLECTIVE ACTION

orionmagazine.org

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The Disassembly Line

How the meat business set the stage for modern labor

ART BY TAMARA KOSTIANOVSKY

LIKE MOST FAST-FOOD JOINTS in the United States, the one where I worked earned the lion's share of its daily revenue at the drive-through. Cars pulled up to the menu board as I watched them through a black-and-white TV monitor. Over a headset, I asked customers what they wanted. They told me through a speaker. And I punched their order into a computer. We only saw each other when they pulled up to the window to hand me a wad of cash or a credit card before driving to the next window to pick up their food. It was a fleeting interaction. Still, the pressure was always on to make it even shorter.

Mistakes are inevitable when you're all at once taking orders for one lane, juggling cash for two, and fielding complaints. They're even more likely when it's busy, as my restaurant tended to be every day from about eleven in the morning until three in the afternoon, and then again from four until eight or so at night. To avoid errors, we had the added task of verbally confirming orders with every customer before they paid, stressing the vocal cords a little more.

Admirers and critics alike insist that the fast-food industry's rise is a story of innovation: clever entrepreneurs in Southern California found a completely original way to operate a commercial kitchen, making the burger business faster and more efficient than ever. Today, we see variations of that myth in the founding stories of other "disruptive" new businesses and industries that promise to deliver a familiar product or service more quickly and for less money.

Yet so often, the "innovation" in the story is illusory. Gains in speed and reductions in cost don't usually come from some technological breakthrough but in reorganizing people to make them work faster for less money.

The story of fast food is illustrative. Before the industry's ascent after the Second World War, car-oriented burger shops were called "drive-ins," where customers parked and staff members called "carhops" served them in their vehicles. After the war and subsequent job boom made it difficult to retain a low-wage workforce, the McDonald's brothers—proprietors of a namesake drive-in in San Bernardino, California—laid off their carhops and had customers pick up their food themselves. Inside the kitchen, the brothers divided the work of making burgers into discrete tasks. Just like in a factory, where workers made cars or air conditioners by repeating one action (or even one movement) over and over, McDonald's workers handled a single task, like frying patties, adding condiments, or bagging the finished product, and performed it repeatedly throughout their shift. The customers and burgers moved, the workers remained in place, and a skilled job for one person became an industrial one, dispersed across several people with a modicum of training.

Through that social reorganization, burger chains became efficient and enormously profitable, giving rise to an entire fast-food industry and readying McDonald's and a gamut of competitors for a global takeover. It's also how fast-food work became undignified, precarious, and underpaid, as the companies' gain became workers' loss. That trade-off isn't unique to fast food. Yet the role of burgers in the story is anything but incidental.

> *If it's possible to trace the dehumanization of labor to a single technological leap, the refrigerated railcar would be it.*

IN 1869, THE FIRST SHIPMENT of already-cut, or "dressed," beef arrived in Boston after a long journey by train from Detroit. Though scarcely remembered now, the event signaled a new era that was probably more consequential than the one that followed Charles

Opposite: *Finding Space*, 2025. Recycled clothing and other textiles, wood, meat hooks, 86 × 36 × 24 in.

Lindbergh's flight across the Atlantic fifty-eight years later. Until that moment, beef distribution had been a laborious and temperamental affair. Ranchers, cowboys, and trains drove steers from the Texas Plains all the way to big cities on the East Coast, where wholesalers slaughtered them and distributed their carcasses to butchers, who then turned the carcasses into dressed beef.

Within that tightly choreographed dance, butchers had a special—and respected—position. They were craftsmen, regarded for their knowledge and skill. They knew every part of a steer and how to single-handedly turn one into a pile of meat. They were also the people responsible for distributing that meat to customers. At that time, beef was only available in winter, when the weather kept it from spoiling. While pork, especially cured pork, and some forms of game were available year-round, beef was a comparatively rare thing, and butchers had the unique role of supplying steady, albeit modest, quantities to the towns and neighborhoods they worked in. But with the advent of the refrigerated railcar in 1869, all of that changed.

If it's possible to trace the dehumanization of labor to a single technological leap, the refrigerated railcar would be it. With refrigeration, beef went from a seasonal local meat to a year-round food for the masses. Most significantly, the last stop for live cattle moved from the East Coast to the Midwest, shifting meat processing from the butcher shop to the factory floor, where armies of semiskilled workers handled the process of turning cows into dressed beef to be distributed anywhere trains could carry it.

"It would be difficult to find another industry where division of labor has been so ingeniously and microscopically worked out," the economist John R. Commons wrote upon studying one slaughterhouse in 1904. "The animal has been surveyed and laid off like a map; and the men have been classified in over thirty specialties and twenty rates of pay." While one man pulled off the animal's tail for twenty cents, a second pounded off a part of the hide. Different tasks called for different tools. "The knife of the 40-cent man cuts a different texture and has a different 'feel' from that of the 50-cent man," Commons wrote. "Skill has become specialized to fit the anatomy."

At one rather typical Chicago slaughterhouse, 157 men worked in a single "killing gang," another observer noted. While no one among them could break down a cow alone, together, the group turned out more dressed beef in a ten-hour shift than a single butcher could in a year.

Within the slaughterhouse, the key to making everything function was an overhead rail along which the bovine carcass traveled from one worker to the next. The feature, colloquially known as the "disassembly line," allowed management, rather than workers, to determine the pace of the slaughterhouse floor. It also kept workers fixed to their stations, preventing them from socializing, or even having a conversation. The line was dehumanizing in that way. It was also essential to subjugating labor to an industrial process, which made the entire scheme function.

The disassembly line changed more than food. It marked the beginning of the industrialization of labor. After he saw an overhead rail in action at one Chicago slaughterhouse, Henry Ford was inspired to use a similar device to mass-produce cars for the first time. Similar systems that move the product while keeping workers separated and stationary have been essential to industrial worksites ever since, from package fulfillment centers to fast-food drive-throughs.

Chicago meatpacking quickly became one of the biggest, most sophisticated, and wealthiest industries in America. Cows, capital, and people went in; meat and profits came out. In 1860, before the invention of the refrigerated railcar, investors had staked about $330,000 in Chicago's meat producers. Twenty years later, that figure had increased nearly four hundred times, to $117 million, and the number of people employed surged from the hundreds to the tens of thousands. But even as it drew more people and resources, the meat industry's profits funneled to an ever smaller group of people.

> *Chicago meatpacking quickly became one of the biggest, most sophisticated, and wealthiest industries in America.*

Such exponential success quickly influenced how people thought of the fundamental work of making and distributing things. Artisanal production began to look like a relic of another, backward time, and scale became an end in itself. In 1902, sociologist Charles Joseph Bushnell said "the most remarkable and far-reaching development of the last fifteen years" was that "the daily necessaries of life can be produced and their distribution accomplished on a large scale much better and cheaper than on a small scale." Bushnell attributed the shift in thinking to the success of the meat industry.

Other, wider-reaching changes followed, as an industry that began with a clever workaround to nature's limitations went about subjugating nature wholesale. More landowners added steers to once wild pastureland, and railroads pushed farther out across the western United States, like threads of an iron spiderweb, to collect them. Before long, meat companies were churning out more beef than they could sell to Americans alone, so refrigerated ships joined the battery of conveyances. Leading producers, like Swift & Company, set up distribution hubs as far away as London and Shanghai until, as Bushnell observed, "the areas to which Chicago now exports her meats has become practically the whole area of the habitable world."

AS THE INDUSTRY DISTRIBUTED beef from Chicago to the world, people came to Chicago from across Europe to work for it. In one account offered to a local journalist in 1904, a Lithuanian worker who went by the pseudonym Antanas Kaztauskis told of his first morning when he went looking for a job at the stockyards and found around two hundred hungry-looking men and even children waiting alongside him. Twenty-three men were chosen with a random wave of a hand and ushered through the company's doors. The rest looked despondent as they waited for the day to pass so they could try again the next.

For those people chosen as workers, the labor of making meat was constantly strenuous and frequently dangerous. Even when they moved fast, they were always under pressure to move faster. Managers didn't care if any of them quit or were incapacitated on the job. Outside the company's gates, there were always more people to replace them, many of whom were willing to work for even less.

"All of us were telling our friends to come soon," Kaztauskis said. "Soon they came, even thousands. The employers in the yard liked this, because those sharp foremen are inventing new machines and the work is easier to learn, and so these slow Lithuanians and even green girls can learn to do it, and then the Americans and Germans and Irish are put out and the employer saves money, because the Lithuanians work cheaper."

Though the meat industry has since left Chicago for more rural areas, like Kansas and South Dakota, its workforce is still made up of a significant portion of immigrants. Many are refugees from South and Central America, Africa, and Asia.

Growth, **2024. Discarded textiles and other fabrics, 93 × 29 × 19 in.**

Low pay and abysmal conditions are still features of the job, and desperation is still a common trait of the people who take it. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, the largest producers tallied tens of thousands of cases, yet the plants stayed open, even after hundreds of workers died.

It's a similar story in fast food today: the work is stressful and low-paying, and slick floors, hot oil, and the fatigue that come with long shifts make injury a constant risk. Yet for people with limited command of English, it's often the only job available—especially in those suburban, rural, and inner-city areas where housing is most affordable.

Over a century ago, even the meat industry's admirers, like Bushnell, were bothered by how quickly it had upended society. "Undue emphasis upon production for its own sake—that is, solely for the sake of profits to be productively reinvested—becomes a menace to all the other social functions," like raising kids, staying healthy, and participating in civic life, the sociologist wrote in 1902. By forcing desperate people to work tirelessly just to survive, those activities that imparted a sense of meaning and were essential to the functioning of a healthy society became the purview of a "small favored property class."

Perhaps the only significant difference between then and now is that alienating, low-paying, and exploitative work is not unique to a single industry concentrated in one city, but is a feature of industries across the United States.

DISTANCE BETWEEN workers is one feature of the modern worksite that we can trace back to the meat industry. Distance between workers and everyone else is another. Early critics of the meat business noted that workers toiled in windowless buildings under poor electric lights. Kept out of sight from the eating public, the companies could treat

workers however they wanted, as Upton Sinclair vividly depicted in his 1906 novel-exposé about Chicago meatpacking plants, *The Jungle*.

The drive-through similarly separates workers from the people they serve. In the few seconds after customers pay for their order at the first window, the only thing they see of the restaurant is a featureless wall, behind which a battery of workers moves furiously to get their food ready. On a fully staffed shift, an order of one burger and a side of fries at the restaurant I worked typically involved seven people, few of whom spoke English as a first language, most of whom worked fifty or more hours a week, and many of whom supported relatives in other countries with the wages they earned. By the time customers pulled up at the second window, all they saw of this labor and the people who performed it was a greasy bag and a smiling face.

The standardization of work that began in Chicago persists at every level of the food system. In the soy lands of Brazil and Argentina, where the raw protein for meat producers in Europe and Asia largely originates, the dual alienation of labor and nature exists as two sides of the same phenomenon. Farming soybeans now more closely resembles high-tech manufacturing than the kinds of agriculture practiced in the same countries a hundred years ago. As in the stockyards, the entire process is segmented. Instead of farmers, there are specialized workers who prepare the soil, others who plant the seeds, and yet more who apply chemicals—usually from inside a tractor. The most fortunate work in air-conditioned cabs, following routes determined by satellite over hundreds or thousands of acres without ever touching the soil.

It's easy to see the ever rising output from soy fields to meat plants to fast-food outlets and think that humanity has gained something by following the model pioneered in Chicago and subjecting the work of making food to industrial rigor. But when people are reduced to biological components of an otherwise mechanical operation, their employers begin to think of them as though they are disposable.

Fast-food executives have internalized that way of thinking so deeply, they now strive to remove workers from their operations entirely. In 2016, Andy Puzder, who, at that time, was the chief executive of CKE Restaurants—the parent company of Carl's Jr. and Hardee's—stepped into an automated restaurant in San Francisco called Eatsa and left enthralled. He described the experience to *Business Insider*: people walked in, ordered "all-natural" foods, like salads and grain bowls, via touch-screen, and collected their food from a slot in a wall. He was sure he could do the same thing on a larger scale. Instead of employees, he said, he would invest in robots.

Why robots? Puzder said he'd been to fast-food restaurants where younger people, especially, formed a line at a self-ordering kiosk while a living, breathing, wage-collecting person waited dutifully at the cash register. More important, robots were desirable for all the reasons they differed from workers: Robots didn't get hurt and they didn't complain. "They're always polite, they always upsell, they never take a vacation, they never show up late," he said. A device that never complains

AARON COLEMAN

You Betta Work

Un-, up-, de-, re-, and post-latch my consciousness, rival with time:
(*so*) *Cacique así que* Belle Isle-idle *útil* until
Oceanic, ruffled, riddle-faced,
Lost lifetime light mechanic and lovingly you,
Yours, and theirs and thirst and (*under*)mine, yes, but
My Spanish is as motley
As my English is—
Some ungodly captive captain colonial crunch
Capsized for the love of night, winged *lenguas* laborious—
(*the snow tells stories*)
So here's us: un- *y una* well and mostly
Torn together, marinated on a spit roasting—:
Roosting without knowing

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***Quarter with Tropicalia*, 2022. Recycled clothing and other textiles, metal chain, 46 × 42 × 18 in.**

Opposite: *In the Shape of Home*, 2024. Discarded textiles and other fabrics, 74 × 29 × 12 in.

Mesmerizing Flesh, 2022. Recycled clothing and other textiles, wood, meat hook, 62 × 20 × 12 in.

Images courtesy of SLAG&RX–New York/Paris and the artist.

is never going to sue, either. "There's never a slip-and-fall, or an age, sex, or race discrimination case," as he put it.

Yet the notion of a robot restaurant was always more ideal than reality. Even though some media accounts called it a "fully automated" operation, Eatsa was little more robotized than a fast-food outlet equipped with touchpad ordering kiosks. Behind the wall of cubbies, a handful of workers toiled in a kitchen, just as they would at any fast-food place. What distinguished it from a local McDonald's was that instead of the workers being scarcely visible to customers, they were completely out of sight.

Yet even when its promise is just illusory, the pursuit of "full automation" gives management yet another chance to call workers useless, to say it's only a few years before they cut them loose entirely. Given the efforts to raise the federal minimum wage from the paltry $7.25 an hour where it's been stuck since 2009, Puzder said, it was inevitable that more restaurants would seek ways to purge the human element. "If you're making labor more expensive, and automation less expensive—this is not rocket science," said Puzder.

(The same year, Donald Trump declared that he wanted Puzder to serve as his secretary of labor, though the executive later withdrew himself from consideration after Senate Republicans told Trump they didn't have the votes. Among Puzder's flaws, he had once hired an undocumented house cleaner and failed to pay the requisite taxes.)

This is not rocket science. I keep coming back to these words, as cliché as they are. There was a logic to it, Puzder insisted, and the logic was easy to intuit: the more the government pressured fast-food corporations and their franchisees to humanize workers (by giving them more money in acknowledgment of their rather basic needs outside the restaurant kitchen, for instance), the more fiercely the industry would strive to make those workers disappear.

But, in truth, the industry always strived to make workers disappear. That's the *real* logic of fast food—the logic that precedes its inception by most of a century, going back to the early days of the meat industry—and it is, perhaps the logic of capitalism, more generally: technology is good, people are not. Humans are the weak link in an otherwise perfect system.

Reading the trade publications for fast-food operators, I can tell you the latest fads are much ado about AI. Instead of placing an order with the disembodied voice of one of my old coworkers over a tinny intercom, why not speak to a machine that can *really* hear you? Behind the synthetic voice will still be people, but customers won't even have to *speak* with them. Is this the way, the future, the better way to eat a burger? I have no doubt that some, and perhaps a great many, will come to see that it is.

Whether or not customers want robots, the fast-food industry—perhaps like every low-wage industry—wants them. And if it can't have robots, it will still treat the least powerful, most desperate workers as much like robots as the law and the limits of their bodies will allow. It's how the meat business underwent such exponential growth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and it's how the many other industries that followed grow larger today. *This is not rocket science*.

BY THREE O'CLOCK, the cars at the drive-through window typically slowed to a trickle. I could feel myself thinking my own thoughts again, moving like a sentient creature and not just part of a mechanical apparatus.

> ***Artisanal production began to look like a relic of another, backward time, and scale became an end in itself.***

Near the end of one shift I realized, no matter how efficient I was, I could never be fast enough. I could only run constantly, take orders constantly, and try constantly. The pace might occasionally meet my boss's expectations, but unless I took orders perfectly every time and ever faster, it would never meet the standards of the system I worked for.

The thought occurred to me and then it was time to move on to something else.

"Grab a towel," my manager said when I walked back into the heart of the kitchen. "Find something to do." ●

Alex C. Park is a researcher and journalist in Oakland, California. His book To Eat the World: Fast Food and the Making of a Global Era *is forthcoming from Beacon Press. His work on fast food and agriculture has been published in* The New Republic, The New York Times Magazine, Al Jazeera, *and many other places.*

Argentine American artist Tamara Kostianovsky's work addresses the environment, violence, and consumer culture, often employing discarded clothing to create visceral and intricate sculptures and installations. Her work has been exhibited at the Musée de la Chasse et de la Nature, The Baker Museum, the Denver Botanic Gardens, and numerous other venues.