

The McDonaldization of Society

INTRODUCTION TO SOCIOLOGY

Sociology 1010

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George Ritzer has taken central elements of the work of Max Weber, expanded and updated them, and produced a critical analysis of the impact of social structural change on human interaction and identity. The central theme in Weber's analysis of modern society was the process of *Rationalization*; a far reaching process whereby traditional modes of thinking were being replaced by an ends/means analysis concerned with efficiency and formalized social control. For Weber, the archetypical manifestation of this process was the *Bureaucracy*; a large, formal organization characterized by a hierarchical authority structure, well-established division of labor, written rules and regulations, impersonality and a concern for technical competence. Bureaucratic organizations not only represent the process of rationalization, the structure they impose on human interaction and thinking furthers the process, leading to an increasingly rationalized world. The process affects all aspects of our everyday life. Ritzer suggests that in the later part of the Twentieth Century the socially structured form of the fast-food restaurant has become the organizational force representing and extending the process of rationalization further into the realm of everyday interaction and individual identity. McDonald's serves as the case model of this process in the 1990's.

...McDonaldization,...is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world. (Ritzer, 1993:1)

How Far Has It Gone (local)?

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Since 1955 McDonald's has grown to 31,967 [outlets worldwide](#) (Ritzer 2011:2)([local](#)) ([Der Nürnburger, 2010](#)). The central concepts employed in the fast-food industry have spread to all types of restaurants. Everything from pizza to lobster, from ice cream to bread, from alcohol to fried chicken is dominated by the *Chain* mentality.

We no longer have to go to the chains. They have come to us. They are in the suburbs, the central cities, the malls, our schools and military bases, our hospitals and airports, even our airplanes and ballparks. They dominate our highway interchanges-every exit looks the same.

It's not only the food industry that represents this process of McDonaldization. Toy stores (Toys R Us), Bookstores (B. Dalton's), Newspapers (*USA Today*), child care (Kinder Care), learning (Sylvan Learning Centers) and a host of others have followed.

"In the 1980s and 1990s McDonaldization has extended its reach into more and more regions of society, and those areas are increasingly remote from the heart of the fast-food business." (Ritzer 1994:137)

Each new spin-off serves to further extend the process. The "news bites" of *USA Today* have changed the way most local papers present the news, perhaps even the way we see and hear the news on TV-take a look at *Headline Network News*. And even the way "news" is *constructed*-work of PR managers and press releases.

Ritzer outlines five dominant themes within this McDonaldization process: *Efficiency, Calculability, Predictability, Increased Control, and the Replacement of Human by Non-human Technology.*

Efficiency

Efficiency means the choosing of means to reach a specific end rapidly, with the least amount of cost or effort. The idea of efficiency is specific to the interests of the industry or business, but

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is typically advertised as a benefit to the customer. Examples are plentiful: the drive-up window, salad bars, fill your own cup, self-serve gasoline, ATM's, Voice Mail, microwave dinners and supermarkets (versus the old-time groceries where you gave your order to the grocer). The interesting element here is that the customer often ends up doing the work that previously was done for them. And the customer pays for the "privilege." We end up spending more time, being *forced* to learn new technologies, remember more numbers, and often pay higher prices in order for the business to operate more efficiently (maintain a higher profit margin).

Calculability

"(this) involves an emphasis on things that can be calculated, counted, quantified. Quantification refers to a tendency to emphasize quantity rather than quality. This leads to a sense that quality is equal to certain, usually (but not always) large quantities of things." (Ritzer 1994:142)

Examples of this element include: the "Big Mac," the Whopper," "Big Gulp," *Wendy's* "Biggie Meals," food sold by its weight--*Taco Bell's* 8 ounce burrito. Another manifestation relates to time-quicker is better. "Lose weight fast," microwaving allows for "spending less time in the kitchen," and in news reporting; no details to slow you down. A further extension involves the credentialing process. Status, capability and competence are assumed to be related to the number of initials one lists behind one's name or the number of pieces of paper we have hanging on our office walls.

Predictability

Predictability refers to the attempt to structure our environment so that surprise and differentness do not encroach upon our sensibilities. Rational people need to know what to expect. They want to be sure that the fun, satisfaction, taste, and benefits they received last week in Cincinnati will be repeated next week in San Diego. A Big Mac is a Big Mac is a Big Mac.

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The movie industry builds upon this concept by churning out sequel after sequel. The spin-off series in television programming, or the success of authors like Tom Clancy, also represent the importance of predictability: We get to follow our favorite characters and the publishers and producers can be assured of a predictable profit.

Shopping is predictable in the *mall*, the same stores, often the same layout, enclosed and protected from the unpredictable weather. Our lives are structured and controlled; we go through the motions on auto-pilot.

Control Through the Substitution of Nonhuman for Human Technology

Ritzer's discussion combines these last two elements of the McDonaldization process.

...these two elements are closely linked. Specifically, replacement of human by nonhuman technology is often oriented towards greater control. The great source of uncertainty and unpredictability in a rationalizing system are people—either the people who work within those systems or the people who are served by them. (Ritzer 1994:148)

Everything is pre-packaged, pre-measured, automatically controlled. The human employee is not required to think, just follow the instructions and push a button now and then. At home, our ovens and probes tell us when our food is done, seasoning is premixed, or the meal comes complete in one convenient package.

Checkers at the supermarket don't have to think either, just scan the barcode (we've already weighed and labeled the produce). "The next step in this development is to have the customer do the scanning,..." (Ritzer 1994:150). The scanners are replacing the checkers, but they also allow for more control over the customer; prices are no longer on the items we buy so we have less ability to oversee our spending and the accuracy of the store's charges. We accept the "infallibility" of the computerized check-out.

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Airplanes are already under the control of computers, pilots merely oversee the process. Soon automobiles will follow suit—already diagnostic modules "tell" mechanics what components need to be replaced (note: there is little *repair* that takes place).

What this means is that the skills and capabilities of the human actor are quickly becoming things of the past. Who we are and how we interact is becoming defined by our dependence upon and subordination to the machine.

The Irrationality of Rationality

Although there have been many benefits and conveniences that are related to this process of McDonaldization: variety, round-the-clock banking and shopping, and often speedier service; there is a certain sense that these rational systems tend to turn in on themselves, to lead to irrational outcomes.

"Most specifically, irrationality means that rational systems are *unreasonable* systems. By that I mean that they deny the basic humanity, the human reason, of the people who work within or are served by them." (Ritzer 1994:154)

The lines at the fast-food restaurants can be very long, and waiting to get through the drive-thru can even take longer than going inside. These rational system don't save us money; we might spend less, but we do more work. The food we eat is often less nourishing, loaded with stabilizers and flavor enhancers, fats, salt and sugar. This contributes to the health problems of our society, a definitely "antihuman" component. As our children grow up within these systems, they develop habits which insure our increasing dependency upon the systems. The packaging used in fast food industry pollutes the environment. And the family: part of its solidarity and integrity was centered around the family meal:

The communal meal is our primary ritual for encouraging the family to gather together every day. If it is lost to us, we shall have to invent new ways to be a family. It is worth considering whether the

shared joy that food can provide is worth giving up. (Visser, 1989:42; in Ritzer, 1994:156)

Microwavable foods and fast-food restaurants allow us to eat what we want, when we want it. The ritual of cooking, eating together, and sharing is fading from the American family.

Two final problems are worth noting. How long will it be before these rational systems evolve beyond the control of people. How much of our lives are already subject to their influence and control. What happens when the people who control the systems succumb to being controlled?

And, as these systems expand and develop interdependencies amongst themselves-both nationally and internationally, the possibility of a small number of individuals exercising tremendous control over the people dependent upon the systems becomes increasingly realistic. Perhaps a *Brave New World* is already in the making. What do **you** **THINK?**

Other Links:

- Check out McDonaldization.Com for a variety of resources on the McDonaldization thesis.
- Chris Wright's, "[The McDonaldization of Syracuse: Why my life looks a lot like a fast food restaurant.](#)" (currently unavailable)
- [The McDonaldization of Society](#) (Michael Farrell's analysis)
- [The McDonaldization of Higher Education?: Notes on the UK Experience](#), Christian Garland, 2008, Fast Capitalism.
- [Theorizing/Resisting McDonaldization: A Multiperspectivist Approach](#), Douglas Kellner, Illuminations: The Critical Theory Project, from: "Theorizing McDonaldization: A Multiperspectivist Approach," in Resisting McDonaldization, edited by Barry Smart. London: Sage Publications, 1999: 186-206.

Sources: The above information was drawn from two works by George Ritzer:

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The quote from Margaret Vissner, taken from Ritzer's presentation is found in:

"A Meditation on the Microwave," *Psychology Today*, December 1989, pp. 38ff.

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