The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Society (Revised Edition).

Professor George Ritzer (University of Maryland USA)
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Originally published in 1992, The McDonaldization of Society caused something of a stir within the sociological academy. This was due to both its informality of style, and its attempt to reinvigorate the Weberian critique of the instrumental nature of modern society. Its content therefore, if not its stylistic approach, challenged the often optimistic and playful vision appropriated by many writers who, at the time, identified themselves more with the themes and motifs of postmodern social theory. In contrast, Professor Ritzers work presented a somewhat dark and foreboding vision of an increasingly alienated and disenchanted world. This McDonaldized world was one in which the straitjacket of formalised rules, regulations and the governance of the impersonal and technocratic organisation, was finally coming to dominate the everyday world of human interaction. Yet the books novelty, and thus some would argue, its appeal was precisely in this somewhat alarming juxtaposition of an implicitly dark and nightmarish 1984 future-scape, analysed in the context of the everyday tales of the happy and carefree world of Ronald McDonald and the Happy Meal.

This second edition attempts to refine some of the ideas presented in the original, as well as expanding its analysis into some of the realms of social life which Ritzer believed had to some extent previously resisted the onslaught of the McDonaldization process. It also, it must be noted comes with what has to be the most self-congratulatory revised preface I have ever seen in academic text, as well as a string of rave reviews and academic endorsements adorning the sleeve!

Professor Ritzers thesis draws heavily, as I have already noted, upon the writings of the German social theorist Max Weber (1864-1920). Briefly summarised, Weber claimed that the modern epoch can be characterised by a relentless drive towards rational efficiency in every aspect of our lives. However, whilst Weber referred to this process as one of rationalisation, Ritzer believes that today the process can be best understood through the idea of McDonaldization. However, this is more than simply a metaphorical device for Ritzer. Rather, he argues that the instrumental logic that has made the McDonalds organization such a success is succeeding in penetrating every dimension of the social and cultural lifeworld.

In the first half of the book Ritzer develops this analysis by dividing the McDonaldization process into four component elements. Each takes the form of a particular drive, or as Nietzsche, Webers own antecedent, would have explained it, a will. These consist of:

I. efficiency,
II. calculability,
III. predictability and
IV. control.

While all four are intrinsically inter-linked, Ritzer provides examples of their discrete characteristics within a number of media, most prominently of course the operation of a McDonalds or similar fast food restaurants. He claims, for example, that the process by which food is served in a McDonalds restaurant requires the least amount of physical exertion by either staff or customer. Efficiency is promoted by ensuring that the food is prepared off site as much as possible, while customers are offered minimum choice to reduce decision making time. Such levels of efficiency are in turn ensured by the optimisation and knowledge of calculable components, such as the exact time required to serve
an individual, or how long it takes to fry a standard size French fry etc. Predictability, which is ensured in turn by the above, and is one of McDonald's key selling points, ensures that no matter where in the world one is, no matter how uncertain ones life becomes, one can always be assured that a Big Mac will look and taste like a Big Mac. Finally, and arguably the most disturbing element of the McDonaldization process for Ritzer, is the level of control which is required to ensure such standardisation. This emphasis on strong control is achieved through the intervention of what Ritzer terms non-human technologies. Such technologies serve not to empower the individual but subjugate him or her to the rhythms of the rationalised life-world, examples of such being the conveyor-belt, the timed deep-fat fryer or the computerised, itemised cash register. Throughout the text Ritzer does of course cast his net somewhat wider, identifying facets of the McDonaldization process within everything from the newspaper industry and higher education to the provision of pre-natal care and the funeral business; but McDonalds itself remains the exemplar par excellence of the new sweeping tide of rationalisation.

The second part of the text focuses more centrally upon what Ritzer views as the negative consequences of the McDonaldization process, in relation to the de-humanisation process that he argues it engenders. At the ontological level for example, he makes the (not so original) observation, that the detrimental effects he perceives this process can have upon an individual, exposes an essentially irrational core at the heart of what professes to be a highly rational project. As a consequence, humanity is increasingly denied the possibility of creative, imaginative decision making, and is reduced to little more than a cog within a vast rationalised machine; a machine which is intensively occupied with going nowhere. He concludes by offering a handful of suggestions about how individuals can resist this process, often by modifying their patterns of consumption and general lifestyles, and thus strive towards a more authentic sense of their own humanity.

Now there is no doubt that this text can be read on a number of different levels, some of which are far more satisfactory than others. Ritzer is clearly an accessible and engaging writer. For an undergraduate audience which is unfamiliar with the language, and indeed, critical project of radical social theory, this text provides a worthy, and indeed somewhat enjoyable introduction. This is especially true for introductory Organizational Theory courses, where the central themes of a Weberian analysis, rationalization, bureaucratization and eventual disenchantment, are presented and expanded upon within a contemporary and accessible framework. Furthermore, his refusal to submit to the fin de millennium optimism of much postmodern ideology, provides a welcome respite for those of us who do not yet believe that we are finally witnessing the dawning of the Age of Aquarius. Hence as an introductory text in a number of disciplines it would make a significant contribution to student understanding of both the importance of social theory, and some of the problems faced by the organised industrialised societies as they approach the next millennium.

However, the irony is that as a considered critique of this process of McDonaldization, one cannot escape noticing the fact that in many respects this itself represents, the McDonaldization of the scholarly text. One can of course choose either to be persuaded or not by the actual argument and the empirical evidence which Ritzer submits. Methodologically the work is certainly no less rigorous than Weber's own masterpiece, The Protestant Ethic...one cannot escape wanting to engage in an immanent critique of his presentation and its relationship to his ideas. Throughout the text everything is presented to the reader in bitesize chunks, which of course makes it a delightful bath-time read, but as with the fast food he criticises, it leaves one with a discomfiting sense of emptiness not long after. It lacks little if any substantive analysis of the important tradition which exists in this line of critique. While there are valuable references to the historical antecedents of contemporary managerial techniques of control, most notable the scientific management of F.W. Taylor, no acknowledgement is given to previous key interventions which have taken place in this arena of critique. I find it hard to believe that a Weberian sociologist of Professor Ritzer's experience is not familiar with the work of say the Frankfurt School. Indeed one cannot help feeling that one is reading a re-constituted version of Marcuse's One-Dimensional Man, but this time with a Coke and large fries to-go. Clearly this places relatively little demand on the reader to intellectually engage with the material. Yet Professor Ritzer's rejection of scholarly conventions, and somewhat jocular style, appears to reinforce the very process
which he is at pains to denounce. For example, he adopts and brandishes the concept of rationalisation as an almost standardised, undifferentiated conceptual tool, making no effort to explain the far more complex and differentiated use of the term in Weber's original writings.

Equally problematic is that his reliance upon a Weberian analysis leaves him ill-equipped to provide any viable solution to the McDonaldization process. His obvious rejection of any form of Marxian inspired materialist analysis results in little more than a range of somewhat trendy soundbite individual resistance strategies, several of which I outline below:

V. Instead of using a "McChild" care center, leave your child with a responsible neighbour interested in earning some extra money.

VI. If you can afford it, send your child to a small, non-McDonaldized educational institution.

VII. To really shake up the clerk at the department store, use cash rather than your credit card.

VIII. Go to no movies which have roman numerals after their names.

While it would be unfair to go as far as to suggest that Professor Ritzer is no longer in touch with the real world, never mind one of the McDonaldized variety, the idea that such individualized practices, even if possible for the majority of the inhabitants of the industrialised world, would strike a blow at the process of capitalist rationalization, is problematic to say the least. Of course Professor Ritzer is at pains to actively oppose anything that may be viewed as revolutionary in intent, describing any such misguided souls who would wish to engage with the situation in such a forceful manner as extremists. Rather, as the examples above demonstrate, he prefers to place his faith in what appears to be the predominantly middle-class values of individuality which Ritzer still perceives as being alive, if not a little threadbare, within the American people.

Again perhaps this is being a little too hard on Professor Ritzer. As one of the laudatory sleeve note endorsements informs us:

This booked sparked the most animated response from students that I have ever experienced in the decade I have taught Sociology of Complex Organizations.

If one were to be cynical, there is no doubt that a book such as this would certainly spark an animated response from students who are forced to study a course which appears to be still based upon the Etzioni conception of the complex organization. Nevertheless it does serve to integrate classical social and organizational theory with a contemporary critique of the times within which we live, in a highly readable manner. Indeed, perhaps the greatest irony is that what Professor Ritzer has realised is, is that this is the only approach which is digestible for todays generation of McDonaldized undergraduates.

Now what was that about the world-wide spread of BSE?

More information on Ritzers thesis can be obtained on the World Wide Web at the following URL: http://exp2.wam.umd.edu/~allan/mcdonald.html

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