

THE MCDONALDIZATION OF SOCIETY 6

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- Family (quick fixes to family problems in books, TV shows)
- Schools and the policies that serve to McDonaldize them
- Lossing weight and the McDonaldization of the body
- Internet as a site of McDonaldization (and deMcDonaldization- see Chapter 10)
- Farms and their supersizing
- Religion and the McDonaldization of religious creeds
- McJobs
- Politics ("drive-through democracy")

The Dimensions of McDonaldization

Why has the McDonald's model proven so irresistible? Eating fast food at McDonald's has certainly become a "sign"¹¹⁰ that, among other things, one is in tune with the contemporary lifestyle. There is also a kind of magic or enchantment associated with such food and its settings. The focus here, however, is on the four alluring dimensions that lie at the heart of the success of this model and, more generally, of McDonaldization. In short, McDonald's has succeeded because it offers consumers, workers, and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control.¹¹¹ Chapters 3 through 6 will be devoted to each of these aspects, but it is important to at least mention them at this point.

Efficiency

One important element of the success of McDonald's is *efficiency*, or the optimum method for getting from one point to another. For consumers, McDonald's (its drive-through is a good example) offers the best available way to get from being hungry to being full. The fast-food model offers, or at least appears to offer, an efficient method for satisfying many other needs, as well. Woody Allen's organatron offered an efficient method for getting people from quiescence to sexual gratification. Other institutions fashioned on the McDonald's model offer similar efficiency in exercising, losing weight, lubricating cars, getting new glasses or contacts, or completing income tax forms. Like their customers, workers in McDonaldized systems function efficiently by following the steps in a predesigned process.

Calculability

Calculability emphasizes the quantitative aspects of products sold (portion size, cost) and services offered (the time it takes to get the product). In McDonaldized systems, quantity has become equivalent to quality; a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good. As two

observers of contemporary American culture put it, "As a culture, we tend to believe deeply that in general 'bigger is better.'¹¹² People can quantify things and feel that they are getting a lot of food for what appears to be a nominal sum of money (best exemplified by the McDonald's "Dollar Menu," which played a key role in recent years in leading McDonald's out of its doldrums and to steadily increasing sales).¹¹³ In a recent Denny's ad, a man says, "I'm going to eat too much, but I'm never going to pay too much."¹¹⁴ This calculation does not take into account an important point, however: The high profit margin of fast-food chains indicates that the owners, not the consumers, get the best deal.

People also calculate how much time it will take to drive to McDonald's, be served the food, eat it, and return home; they then compare that interval to the time required to prepare food at home. They often conclude, rightly or wrongly, that a trip to the fast-food restaurant will take less time than eating at home. This sort of calculation particularly supports home-delivery franchises such as Domino's, as well as other chains that emphasize saving time. A notable example of time savings in another sort of chain is LensCrafters, which promises people "Glasses fast, glasses in one hour." H&M is known for its "fast fashion."

Some McDonaldized institutions combine the emphases on time and money. Domino's promises pizza delivery in half an hour, or the pizza is free. Pizza Hut will serve a personal pan pizza in 5 minutes, or it, too, will be free.

Workers in McDonaldized systems also emphasize the quantitative rather than the qualitative aspects of their work. Since the quality of the work is allowed to vary little, workers focus on things such as how quickly tasks can be accomplished. In a situation analogous to that of the customer, workers are expected to do a lot of work, very quickly, for low pay.

Predictability

McDonald's also offers *predictability*, the assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locales. The Egg McMuffin in New York will be, for all intents and purposes, identical to those in Chicago and Los Angeles. Also, those eaten next week or next year will be identical to those eaten today. Customers take great comfort in knowing that McDonald's offers no surprises. People know that the next Egg McMuffin they eat will not be awful, although it will not be exceptionally delicious, either. The success of the McDonald's model suggests that many people have come to prefer a world in which there are few surprises. "This is strange," notes a British observer, "considering [McDonald's is] the product of a culture which honours individualism above all."¹¹⁵

The workers in McDonaldized systems also behave in predictable ways. They follow corporate rules as well as the dictates of their managers. In many cases, what they do, and even what they say, is highly predictable.

Control

The fourth element in the success of McDonald's, *control*,¹¹⁶ is exerted over the people who enter the world of McDonald's. Lines, limited menus, few options, and uncomfortable seats all lead diners to do what management wishes them to do—eat, quickly and leave. Furthermore, the drive-through (in some cases, walk-through) window invites diners to leave before they eat. In the Domino's model, customers never enter in the first place.

The people who work in McDonaldized organizations are also controlled to a high degree, usually more blatantly and directly than customers. They are trained to do a limited number of tasks in precisely the way they are told to do them. This control is reinforced by the technologies used and the way the organization is set up to bolster this control. Managers and inspectors make sure that workers toe the line.

A Critique of McDonaldization: The Irrationality of Rationality

McDonaldization offers powerful advantages. In fact, efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through nonhuman technology (that is, technology that controls people rather than being controlled by them) can be thought of not only as the basic components of a rational system¹¹⁷ but also as the powerful advantages of such a system. However, rational systems inevitably spawn irrationalities. The downside of McDonaldization will be dealt with most systematically under the heading of the irrationality of rationality; in fact, paradoxically, the irrationality of rationality can be thought of as the fifth dimension of McDonaldization (see Chapter 7).

Criticism, in fact, can be applied to all facets of the McDonaldizing world. As just one example, at the opening of Euro Disney, a French politician said that it will "bombard France with uprooted creations that are to culture what fast food is to gastronomy."¹¹⁸ McDonald's and other purveyors of the fast-food model spend billions of dollars each year detailing the benefits of their system. Critics of the system, however, have few outlets for their ideas. For example, no one sponsors commercials between Saturday-morning cartoons warning children of the dangers associated with fast-food restaurants.

Nonetheless, a legitimate question may be raised about this critique of McDonaldization: Is it animated by a romanticization of the past, an impossible desire to return to a world that no longer exists? Some critics do base their critiques on nostalgia for a time when life was slower and offered more surprises, when at least some people (those who were better off economically) were freer, and when one was more likely to deal with a human being than a robot or a computer.¹¹⁹ Although they have a point, these critics have undoubtedly exaggerated the positive aspects of a world without McDonald's, and they have certainly tended to forget the liabilities associated with earlier eras. As an example of the latter, take the following anecdote about a visit to a pizzeria in Havana, Cuba, which in some respects is decades behind the United States:

The pizza's not much to rave about—they scrimp on tomato sauce, and the dough is mushy.

It was about 7:30 P.M., and as usual the place was standing-room-only, with people two deep jostling for a stool to come open and a waiting line spilling out onto the sidewalk.

The menu is similarly Spartan. . . . To drink, there is tap water. That's it—no toppings, no soda, no beer, no coffee, no salt, no pepper. And no special orders.

A very few people are eating. Most are waiting. . . . Fingers are drumming, flies are buzzing, the clock is ticking. The waiter wears a watch around his belt loop, but he hardly needs it; time is evidently not his chief concern. After a while, tempers begin to fray.

But right now, it's 8:45 P.M. at the pizzeria, I've been waiting an hour and a quarter for two small pies.¹²⁰

Few would prefer such a restaurant to the fast, friendly, diverse offerings of, say, Pizza Hut. More important, however, critics who revere the past do not seem to realize that we are not returning to such a world. In fact, fast-food restaurants have begun to appear even in Havana (and many more are likely after the death of Fidel Castro).¹²¹ The increase in the number of people crowding the planet, the acceleration of technological change, the increasing pace of life—all this and more make it impossible to go back to the world, if it ever existed, of home-cooked meals, traditional restaurant dinners, high-quality foods, meals loaded with surprises, and restaurants run by chefs free to express their creativity.

It is more valid to critique McDonaldization from the perspective of a conceivable future.¹²² Unfettered by the constraints of McDonaldized systems, but using the technological advances made possible by them, people could have the potential to be far more thoughtful, skillful, creative, and well-rounded than