

1

An Introduction to McDonaldization

George Ritzer

McDonald's is the basis of one of the most influential developments in contemporary society. Its reverberations extend far beyond its point of origin in the United States and in the fast-food business. It has influenced a wide range of undertakings, indeed the way of life, of a significant portion of the world. And that impact is likely to expand at an accelerating rate.

However, this is not . . . about McDonald's, or even about the fast-food business. . . . Rather, McDonald's serves here as the major example, the paradigm, of a wide-ranging process I call *McDonaldization*—that 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.

As you will see, McDonaldization affects not only the restaurant business but also . . . virtually every other aspect of society. McDonaldization has shown every sign of being an inexorable process, sweeping through seemingly impervious institutions and regions of the world.

Editor's Note: Excerpts from "An Introduction to McDonaldization," pp. 1–19 in *The McDonaldization of Society*, 3rd ed., by George Ritzer. Copyright © 2000, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA. Used with permission.

8 Basics, Studies, Applications, and Extensions

The success of McDonald's itself is apparent. . . . "There are McDonald's everywhere. There's one near you, and there's one being built right now even nearer to you. Soon, if McDonald's goes to expanding at its present rate, there might even be one in your house. You could find Ronald McDonald's boots under your bed. And maybe his red wig, too."

McDonald's and McDonaldization have had their most obvious influence on the restaurant industry and, more generally, on franchises of all types:

1. According to one estimate, there are now about 1.5 million franchised outlets in the United States, accounting for about a third of all retail sales. Franchises are growing at a rate of 6% a year. Over 60% of McDonald's restaurants are franchises.

2. Sales in fast-food restaurants in the United States rose to \$116 billion by the end of 1998. In 1994, for the first time, sales in so-called quick-service restaurants exceeded those in traditional full-service restaurants, and the gap between them grew to more than \$10 billion in 1998.

3. The McDonald's model has been adopted not only by other budget-minded hamburger franchises, such as Burger King and Wendy's, but also by a wide array of other low-priced fast-food businesses. Tricon operates over 29,000 restaurants worldwide under the Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, and Taco Bell franchises and has more outlets than McDonald's, although its total sales figure (\$20 billion) is not nearly as high. Subway (with nearly 13,000 outlets), considered the fastest growing fast-food business, is aiming to "match and surpass franchising giant McDonald's unit for unit throughout the world."

4. Starbucks, a relative newcomer to the fast-food industry, has achieved dramatic success of its own. A local Seattle business as late as 1987, Starbucks had over 1,668 company-owned shops (there are no franchises) by 1998, more than triple the number of shops in 1994. Starbucks planned on having 200 shops in Asia by the year 2000 and 500 shops in Europe by 2003.

5. Perhaps we should not be surprised that the McDonald's model has been extended to "casual dining"—that is, more "upscale," higher-priced restaurants with fuller menus (for example, Outback Steakhouse, Fuddrucker's, Chili's, The Olive Garden, and Red Lobster). Morton's is an even more upscale, high-priced chain of steakhouses that has overtly modeled itself after McDonald's: "Despite the fawning service and the huge wine list, a meal at Morton's conforms to the same dictates of uniformity, cost control and portion regulation that have enabled American fast-food chains to rule the

world.” In fact, the chief executive of Morton’s was an owner of a number of Wendy’s outlets and admits, “My experience with Wendy’s has helped in Morton’s venues.” To achieve uniformity, employees go “by the book”: “an ingredient-by-ingredient illustrated binder describing the exact specifications of 500 Morton’s kitchen items, sauces and garnishes. A row of color pictures in every Morton’s kitchen displays the presentation for each dish.”

6. Other types of business are increasingly adapting the principles of the fast-food industry to their needs. Said the vice chairman of Toys R Us, “We want to be thought of as a sort of McDonald’s of toys.” The founder of Kidsports Fun and Fitness Club echoed this desire: “I want to be the McDonald’s of the kids’ fun and fitness business.” Other chains with similar ambitions include Jiffy Lube, AAMCO Transmissions, Midas Muffler & Brake Shops, Hair Plus, H&R Block, Pearle Vision Centers, Kampgrounds of America (KOA), KinderCare (dubbed “Kentucky Fried Children”), Jenny Craig, Home Depot, Barnes & Noble, Petstuff, and Wal-Mart.

7. McDonald’s has been a resounding success in the international arena. Just about half of McDonald’s restaurants are outside the United States (in the mid-1980s, only 25% of McDonald’s restaurants were outside the United States). The vast majority of the 1,750 new restaurants opened in 1998 were overseas (in the United States, restaurants grew by less than 100). Well over half of McDonald’s profits come from its overseas operations. McDonald’s restaurants are now found in 115 nations around the world. The leader, by far, is Japan with almost 2,852 restaurants, followed by Canada with 1,085 and Germany with 931. As of 1998, there were 45 McDonald’s restaurants in Russia, and the company plans to open many more restaurants in the former Soviet Union and in the vast new territory in Eastern Europe that has now been laid bare to the invasion of fast-food restaurants. Great Britain has become the “fast-food capital of Europe,” and Israel has been described as “McDonaldized,” with its shopping malls populated by “Ace Hardware, Toys R Us, Office Depot, and TCBY.”

8. Many highly McDonaldized firms outside the fast-food industry have also had success globally. In addition to its thousands of stores in the United States, Blockbuster now has just over 2,000 sites in 26 other countries. Although Wal-Mart opened its first international store (in Mexico) only in 1991, it now operates about 600 stores overseas (compared with just over 2,800 in the United States, including supercenters and Sam’s Club).

9. Other nations have developed their own variants of this American institution. Canada has a chain of coffee shops, Tim Hortons (recently merged

10 Basics, Studies, Applications, and Extensions

with Wendy's), that planned on having 2,000 outlets by the year 2000. Paris, a city whose love for fine cuisine might lead you to think it would prove immune to fast food, has a large number of fast-food *croissanteries*; the revered French bread has also been McDonaldized. India has a chain of fast-food restaurants, Nirula's, that sells mutton burgers (about 80% of Indians are Hindus, who eat no beef) as well as local Indian cuisine. Mos Burger is a Japanese chain with over 1,500 restaurants that in addition to the usual fare sells teriyaki chicken burgers, rice burgers, and "Oshiruko with brown rice cake." Russkoye Bistro, a Russian chain, sells traditional Russian fare such as *pirogi* (meat and vegetable pies), *blini* (thin pancakes), Cossack apricot curd tarts, and, of course, vodka. Perhaps the most unlikely spot for an indigenous fast-food restaurant, war-ravaged Beirut of 1984, witnessed the opening of Juicy Burger, with a rainbow instead of golden arches and J. B. the Clown standing in for Ronald McDonald. Its owners hoped that it would become the "McDonald's of the Arab world."

10. And now McDonaldization is coming full circle. Other countries with their own McDonaldized institutions have begun to export them to the United States. The Body Shop, an ecologically sensitive British cosmetics chain, had over 1,500 shops in 47 nations in 1998, of which 300 were in the United States. Furthermore, American firms are now opening copies of this British chain, such as Bath and Body Works.

McDonald's as a Global Icon

McDonald's has come to occupy a central place in American popular culture, not just the business world. A new McDonald's opening in a small town can be an important social event. Said one Maryland high school student at such an opening, "Nothing this exciting ever happens in Dale City." Even big-city newspapers avidly cover developments in the fast-food business.

Fast-food restaurants also play symbolic roles on television programs and in the movies. A skit on the television show *Saturday Night Live* satirized specialty chains by detailing the hardships of a franchise that sells nothing but Scotch tape. . . . In *Falling Down*, Michael Douglas vents his rage against the modern world in a fast-food restaurant dominated by mindless rules designed to frustrate customers. . . . In *Sleeper*, Woody Allen awakens in the future only to encounter a McDonald's.

Further proof that McDonald's has become a symbol of American culture is to be found in what happened when plans were made to raze Ray

Kroc's first McDonald's restaurant. Hundreds of letters poured into McDonald's headquarters, including the following:

Please don't tear it down! . . . Your company's name is a household word, not only in the United States of America, but all over the world. To destroy this major artifact of contemporary culture would, indeed, destroy part of the faith the people of the world have in your company.

In the end, the restaurant was not only saved but turned into a museum. A McDonald's executive explained the move: "McDonald's . . . is really a part of Americana."

Americans aren't the only ones who feel this way. At the opening of the McDonald's in Moscow, one journalist described the franchise as the "ultimate icon of Americana." . . . Reflecting on the growth of fast-food restaurants in Brazil, an executive associated with Pizza Hut of Brazil said that his nation "is experiencing a passion for things American."

One could go further and argue that in at least some ways McDonald's has become *more important* than the United States itself. Take the following story about a former U.S. ambassador to Israel who was officiating at the opening of the first McDonald's, in Jerusalem wearing a baseball hat with the McDonald's golden arches logo:

An Israeli teenager walked up to him, carrying his own McDonald's hat, which he handed to Ambassador Indyk with a pen and asked, "Are you the Ambassador? Can I have your autograph?" Somewhat sheepishly, Ambassador Indyk replied, "Sure. I've never been asked for my autograph before."

As the Ambassador prepared to sign his name, the Israeli teenager said to him, "Wow, what's it like to be the ambassador from McDonald's, going around the world opening McDonald's restaurants everywhere?"

Ambassador Indyk looked at the Israeli youth and said, "No, no. I'm the American ambassador—not the ambassador from McDonald's!" Ambassador Indyk described what happened next: "I said to him, 'Does this mean you don't want my autograph?' And the kid said, 'No, I don't want your autograph,' and he took his hat back and walked away."

Two other indices of the significance of McDonald's (and, implicitly, McDonaldization) are worth mentioning. The first is the annual "Big Mac Index" (part of "burgernomics") published by a prestigious magazine, *The Economist*. It indicates the purchasing power of various currencies around the world based on the local price (in dollars) of the Big Mac. The Big Mac is used because it is a uniform commodity sold in many (115) different nations. In the 1998 survey, a Big Mac in the United States cost \$2.56; in Indonesia and Malaysia it cost \$1.16; in Switzerland it cost \$3.87. This measure indicates, at least roughly, where the cost of living is high or low,

12 Basics, Studies, Applications, and Extensions

as well as which currencies are undervalued (Indonesia and Malaysia) and which are overvalued (Switzerland). Although *The Economist* is calculating the Big Mac Index tongue-in-cheek, at least in part, the index represents the ubiquity and importance of McDonald's around the world.

The second indicator of McDonald's global significance is the idea developed by Thomas J. Friedman that "no two countries that both have a McDonald's have ever fought a war since they each got McDonald's." Friedman calls this the "Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention." Another half-serious idea, it implies that the path to world peace lies through the continued international expansion of McDonald's. Unfortunately, it was proved wrong by the NATO bombing of Yugoslavia in 1999, which had 11 McDonald's restaurants as of 1997.

To many people throughout the world, McDonald's has become a sacred institution. At that opening of the McDonald's in Moscow, a worker spoke of it "as if it were the Cathedral in Chartres, . . . a place to experience 'celestial joy.'" . . . Similarly, a visit to another central element of McDonaldized society, Walt Disney World, has been described as "the middle-class hajj, the compulsory visit to the sunbaked holy city."

McDonald's has achieved its exalted position because virtually all Americans, and many others, have passed through its golden arches on innumerable occasions. Furthermore, most of us have been bombarded by commercials extolling McDonald's virtues, commercials tailored to a variety of audiences and that change as the chain introduces new foods, new contests, and new product tie-ins. These ever-present commercials, combined with the fact that people cannot drive very far without having a McDonald's pop into view, have embedded McDonald's deeply in popular consciousness. A poll of school-age children showed that 96% of them could identify Ronald McDonald, second only to Santa Claus in name recognition.

Over the years, McDonald's has appealed to people in many ways. The restaurants themselves are depicted as spick-and-span, the food is said to be fresh and nutritious, the employees are shown to be young and eager, the managers appear gentle and caring, and the dining experience itself seems fun-filled. People are even led to believe that they contribute through their purchases, at least indirectly, to charities such as the Ronald McDonald Houses for sick children.

The Long Arm of McDonaldization

McDonald's strives to continually extend its reach within American society and beyond. As the company's chairman said, "Our goal: to totally dominate

the quick service restaurant industry worldwide. . . . I want McDonald's to be more than a leader. I want McDonald's to dominate."

McDonald's began as a phenomenon of suburbs and medium-sized towns, but in recent years, it has moved into smaller towns that supposedly could not support such a restaurant and into many big cities that are supposedly too sophisticated. You can now find fast-food outlets in New York's Times Square as well as on the Champs Elysées in Paris. Soon after it opened in 1992, the McDonald's in Moscow sold almost 30,000 hamburgers a day and employed a staff of 1,200 young people working 2 to a cash register. In early 1992, Beijing witnessed the opening of the world's largest McDonald's restaurant with 700 seats, 29 cash registers, and nearly 1,000 employees. On its first day of business, it set a new one-day record for McDonald's by serving about 40,000 customers.

Small satellite, express, or remote outlets, opened in areas that cannot support full-scale fast-food restaurants, are also expanding rapidly. They have begun to appear in small store fronts in large cities and in nontraditional settings such as department stores, service stations, and even schools. These satellites typically offer only limited menus and may rely on larger outlets for food storage and preparation. McDonald's is considering opening express outlets in museums, office buildings, and corporate cafeterias. A flap occurred recently over the placement of a McDonald's in the new federal courthouse in Boston.

No longer content to dominate the strips that surround many college campuses, fast-food restaurants have moved onto many of those campuses. The first campus fast-food restaurant opened at the University of Cincinnati in 1973. Today, college cafeterias often look like shopping-mall food courts. In conjunction with a variety of "branded partners" (for example, Pizza Hut and Subway), Marriott now supplies food to many colleges and universities. The apparent approval of college administrations puts fast-food restaurants in a position to further influence the younger generation.

More recently, another expansion has occurred: People no longer need to leave the highway to obtain fast food quickly and easily. Fast food is now available at convenient rest stops along the highway. After "refueling," we can proceed with our trip, which is likely to end in another community that has about the same density and mix of fast-food restaurants as the locale we left behind.

Fast food is also increasingly available in hotels, railway stations, airports, and even on the trays for in-flight meals. The following advertisement appeared in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* a few years ago: "Where else at 35,000 feet can you get a McDonald's meal like this for your kids? Only on United's Orlando flights." Now, McDonald's so-called

14 Basics, Studies, Applications, and Extensions

Friendly Skies Meals are generally available to children on Delta flights. Similarly, in December 1994, Delta began to offer Blimpie sandwiches on its North American flights and Continental now offers Subway sandwiches. How much longer before McDonaldized meals will be available on all flights everywhere by every carrier? In fact, on an increasing number of flights, prepackaged “snacks” have already replaced hot main courses.¹

In other sectors of society, the influence of fast-food restaurants has been subtler but no less profound. Food produced by McDonald’s and other fast-food restaurants has begun to appear in high schools and trade schools; 13% of school cafeterias are serving branded fast food. Said the director of nutrition for the American School Food Service Association, “Kids today live in a world where fast food has become a way of life. For us to get kids to eat, period, we have to provide some familiar items.” Few lower-grade schools as yet have in-house fast-food restaurants. However, many have had to alter school cafeteria menus and procedures to make fast food readily available. Apples, yogurt, and milk may go straight into the trash can, but hamburgers, fries, and shakes are devoured. Furthermore, fast-food chains are now trying to market their products in school cafeterias. The attempt to hook school-age children on fast food reached something of a peak in Illinois, where McDonald’s operated a program called “A for Cheeseburger.” Students who received A’s on their report cards received a free cheeseburger, thereby linking success in school with rewards from McDonald’s.

The military has also been pressed to offer fast food on both bases and ships. Despite the criticisms by physicians and nutritionists, fast-food outlets increasingly turn up inside hospitals. Though no homes yet have a McDonald’s of their own, meals at home often resemble those available in fast-food restaurants. Frozen, microwavable, and prepared foods, which bear a striking resemblance to meals available at fast-food restaurants, often find their way to the dinner table. Then there is also home delivery of fast foods, especially pizza, as revolutionized by Domino’s.

McDonald’s is such a powerful model that many businesses have acquired nicknames beginning with Mc. Examples include “McDentists” and “McDoctors,” meaning drive-in clinics designed to deal quickly and efficiently with minor dental and medical problems; “McChild” care centers, meaning child care centers such as KinderCare; “McStables,” designating the nationwide racehorse-training operation of Wayne Lucas; and “McPaper,” designating the newspaper *USA TODAY*. . . .

So powerful is McDonaldization that the derivatives of McDonald’s in turn exert their own influence. For example, the success of *USA TODAY*

has led many newspapers across the nation to adopt, for example, shorter stories and colorful weather maps. As one *USA TODAY* editor said, "The same newspaper editors who call us McPaper have been stealing our McNuggets." Even serious journalistic enterprises such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* have undergone changes (for example, the use of color) as a result of the success of *USA TODAY*. The influence of *USA TODAY* is blatantly manifested in *The Boca Raton News*, which has been described as "a sort of smorgasbord of snippets, a newspaper that slices and dices the news into even smaller portions than does *USA TODAY*, spicing it with color graphics and fun facts and cute features like 'Today's Hero' and 'Critter Watch.'" As in *USA TODAY*, stories in *The Boca Raton News* usually start and finish on the same page. Many important details, much of a story's context, and much of what the principals have to say, are severely cut back or omitted entirely. With its emphasis on light news and color graphics, the main function of the newspaper seems to be entertainment.

Like virtually every other sector of society, sex has undergone McDonaldization. In the movie *Sleeper*, Woody Allen not only created a futuristic world in which McDonald's restaurants were an important and highly visible element, but he also envisioned a society in which people could enter a machine called an "orgasmatron" to experience an orgasm without going through the muss and fuss of sexual intercourse.

Similarly, real-life "dial-a-porn" allows people to have intimate, sexually explicit, even obscene conversations with people they have never met and probably never will meet. There is great specialization here: Dialing numbers such as 555-FOXX will lead to a very different phone message than dialing 555-SEXY. Those who answer the phones mindlessly and repetitively follow "scripts" that have them say such things as "Sorry, tiger, but your Dream Girl has to go. . . . Call right back and ask for me." Less scripted are phone sex systems that permit erotic conversations between total strangers. As Woody Allen anticipated with his "orgasmatron," participants can experience an orgasm without ever meeting or touching one another. "In a world where convenience is king, disembodied sex has its allure. You don't have to stir from your comfortable home. You pick up the phone or log onto the computer and, if you're plugged in, a world of unheard of sexual splendor rolls out before your eyes." In New York City, an official called a three-story pornographic center "the McDonald's of sex" because of its "cookie-cutter cleanliness and compliance with the law." These examples suggest that no aspect of people's lives is immune to McDonaldization.

The Dimensions of McDonaldization

Why has the McDonald's model proven so irresistible? Eating fast food at McDonald's has certainly become a "sign" 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 their settings. However, what will be focused on here are 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.

Efficiency

One important element of McDonald's success is *efficiency*, or the optimum method for getting from one point to another. For consumers, McDonald's offers the best available way to get from being hungry to being full. In a society where both parents are likely to work or where a single parent is struggling to keep up, efficiently satisfying hunger is very attractive. In a society where people rush from one spot to another, usually by car, the efficiency of a fast-food meal, perhaps even a drive-through meal, often proves impossible to resist.

The fast-food model offers, or at least appears to offer, an efficient method for satisfying many other needs as well. Woody Allen's *Orgasmatron* offered an efficient method for getting people from quiescence to sexual gratification. Other institutions fashioned on the McDonald's model offer similar efficiency in losing weight, lubricating cars, getting new glasses or contacts, or completing income tax forms.

Like their customers, workers in McDonaldized systems function efficiently following the steps in a predesigned process. They are trained to work this way by managers, who watch over them closely to make sure that they do. Organizational rules and regulations also help ensure highly efficient work.

Calculability

Calculability is an emphasis on 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 a culture, we tend to believe deeply that in general 'bigger is better.'" Thus,

people order the Quarter Pounder, the Big Mac, the large fries. More recent lures are the “double this” (for instance, Burger King’s “Double Whopper with Cheese”) and the “triple that.” People can quantify these things and feel that they are getting a lot of food for what appears to be a nominal sum of money. This calculation does not take into account an important point, however: The high profits of fast-food chains indicate that the owners, not the consumers, get the best deal.

People also tend to calculate how much time it will take to drive to McDonald’s, be served the food, eat it, and return home; then, they 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 time saving. A notable example of time saving in another sort of chain is Lens Crafters, which promises people “Glasses fast, glasses in one hour.”

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 five minutes, or it, too, will be free.

Workers in McDonaldized systems also tend to 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.”

The workers in McDonaldized systems also behave in predictable ways. They follow corporate rules as well as the dictates of their managers. In

18 Basics, Studies, Applications, and Extensions

many cases, what they do, and even what they say, is highly predictable. McDonaldized organizations often have scripts that employees are supposed to memorize and follow whenever the occasion arises. This scripted behavior helps create highly predictable interactions between workers and customers. While customers do not follow scripts, they tend to develop simple recipes for dealing with the employees of McDonaldized systems. . . .

McDonald's pioneered the routinization of interactive service work and remains an exemplar of extreme standardization. Innovation is not discouraged . . . at least among managers and franchisees. Ironically, though, "the object is to look for new, innovative ways to create an experience that is exactly the same no matter what McDonald's you walk into, no matter where it is in the world."

Control Through Nonhuman Technology

The fourth element in McDonald's success, *control*, 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 leads 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 things in precisely the way they are told to do them. The technologies used and the way the organization is set up reinforce this control. Managers and inspectors make sure that workers toe the line.

McDonald's also controls employees by threatening to use, and ultimately using, technology to replace human workers. No matter how well they are programmed and controlled, workers can foul up the system's operation. A slow worker can make the preparation and delivery of a Big Mac inefficient. A worker who refuses to follow the rules might leave the pickles or special sauce off a hamburger, thereby making for unpredictability. And a distracted worker can put too few fries in the box, making an order of large fries seem skimpy. For these and other reasons, McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants have felt compelled to steadily replace human beings with machines, such as the soft drink dispenser that shuts itself off when the glass is full, the French fry machine that rings and lifts the basket out of the oil when the fries are crisp, the preprogrammed cash register that eliminates the need for the cashier to calculate prices and

amounts, and perhaps at some future time, the robot capable of making hamburgers. Technology that increases control over workers helps McDonaldized systems assure customers that their products and service will be consistent.

The Advantages of McDonaldization

This discussion of four fundamental characteristics of McDonaldization makes it clear that McDonald's has succeeded so phenomenally for good, solid reasons. Many knowledgeable people such as the economic columnist, Robert Samuelson, strongly support McDonald's business model. Samuelson confesses to "openly worship[ing] McDonald's," and he thinks of it as "the greatest restaurant chain in history." In addition, McDonald's offers many praiseworthy programs that benefit society, such as its Ronald McDonald Houses, which permit parents to stay with children undergoing treatment for serious medical problems; job-training programs for teenagers; programs to help keep its employees in school; efforts to hire and train the handicapped; the McMasters program, aimed at hiring senior citizens; and an enviable record of hiring and promoting minorities.

The process of McDonaldization also moved ahead dramatically, undoubtedly because it has led to positive changes. Here are a few specific examples:

- A wider range of goods and services is available to a much larger portion of the population than ever before.
- Availability of goods and services depends far less than before on time or geographic location; people can do things, such as obtain money at the grocery store or a bank balance in the middle of the night, that were impossible before.
- People are able to get what they want or need almost instantaneously and get it far more conveniently.
- Goods and services are of a far more uniform quality; at least some people get better goods and services than before McDonaldization.
- Far more economical alternatives to high-priced, customized goods and services are widely available; therefore, people can afford things they could not previously afford.
- Fast, efficient goods and services are available to a population that is working longer hours and has fewer hours to spare.
- In a rapidly changing, unfamiliar, and seemingly hostile world, the comparatively stable, familiar, and safe environment of a McDonaldized system offers comfort.
- Because of quantification, consumers can more easily compare competing products.
- Certain products (for example, diet programs) are safer in a carefully regulated and controlled system.

20 Basics, Studies, Applications, and Extensions

- People are more likely to be treated similarly, no matter what their race, gender, or social class.
- Organizational and technological innovations are more quickly and easily diffused through networks of identical operators.
- The most popular products of one culture are more easily diffused to others.

A Critique of McDonaldization: The Irrationality of Rationality

Although McDonaldization offers powerful advantages, it has a downside. Efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through nonhuman technology can be thought of as the basic components of a rational 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. The basic idea here is that rational systems inevitably spawn irrational consequences. Another way of saying this is that rational systems serve to deny human reason; rational systems are often unreasonable.

For example, McDonaldization has produced a wide array of adverse effects on the environment. One is a side effect of the need to grow uniform potatoes from which to create predictable French fries. The huge farms of the Pacific Northwest that now produce such potatoes rely on the extensive use of chemicals. In addition, the need to produce a perfect fry means that much of the potato is wasted, with the remnants either fed to cattle or used for fertilizer. The underground water supply in the area is now showing high levels of nitrates, which may be traceable to the fertilizer and animal wastes. Many other ecological problems are associated with the McDonaldization of the fast-food industry: the forests felled to produce paper wrappings, the damage caused by polystyrene and other packaging materials, the enormous amount of food needed to produce feed cattle, and so on.

Another unreasonable effect is that fast-food restaurants are often dehumanizing settings in which to eat or work. Customers lining up for a burger or waiting in the drive-through line and workers preparing the food often feel as though they are part of an assembly line. Hardly amenable to eating, assembly lines have been shown to be inhuman settings in which to work.

Such criticisms can be extended to all facets of the McDonaldizing world. For 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.”

As you have seen, McDonaldization offers many advantages. However, this book will focus on the great costs and enormous risks of McDonaldization. McDonald's and other purveyors of the fast-food model spend billions of dollars each year outlining the benefits of their system. However, critics of the system have few outlets for their ideas. For example, no one is offering 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 and 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 people were freer, and when one was more likely to deal with a human being than a robot or a computer. 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.

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 in Havana. 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.

22 Basics, Studies, Applications, and Extensions

It is more valid to critique McDonaldization from the perspective of the future. Unfettered by the constraints of McDonaldized systems, but using the technological advances made possible by them, people would have the potential to be far more thoughtful, skillful, creative, and well-rounded than they are now. In short, if the world were less McDonaldized, people would be better able to live up to their human potential.

We must therefore look at McDonaldization as both “enabling” and “constraining.” McDonaldized systems enable us to do many things that we were not able to do in the past. However, these systems also keep us from doing things we otherwise would do. McDonaldization is a “double-edged” phenomenon. We must not lose sight of that fact, even though this book will focus on the constraints associated with McDonaldization—its “dark side.”

What Isn't McDonaldized?

This chapter should be giving you a sense not only of the advantages and disadvantages of McDonaldization but also of the range of phenomena that will be discussed throughout this book. In fact, such a wide range of phenomena can be linked to McDonaldization that you may be led to wonder what isn't McDonaldized. Is McDonaldization the equivalent of modernity? Is everything contemporary McDonaldized?

Although much of the world has been McDonaldized, at least three aspects of contemporary society have largely escaped the process:

- Those aspects traceable to an earlier, “premodern” age. A good example is the mom-and-pop grocery store.
- New businesses that have sprung up, at least in part, as a reaction against McDonaldization. For instance, people fed up with McDonaldized motel rooms in Holiday Inns or Motel 6s can instead stay in a bed-and-breakfast, which offers a room in a private home with personalized attention and a homemade breakfast from the proprietor.
- Those aspects suggesting a move toward a new, “postmodern” age. For example, in a postmodern society, “modern” high-rise housing projects make way for smaller, more livable communities.

Thus, although McDonaldization is ubiquitous, there is more to the contemporary world than McDonaldization. It is a very important social process, but it is far from the only process transforming contemporary society.

Furthermore, McDonaldization is not an all-or-nothing process. There are degrees of McDonaldization. Fast-food restaurants, for example, have been heavily McDonaldized, universities moderately McDonaldized, and mom-and-pop groceries only slightly McDonaldized. It is difficult to think of social phenomena that have escaped McDonaldization totally, but some local enterprise in Fiji may yet be untouched by this process.

Note

1. Of course, as a result of the plane crashes on September 11, 2001, all meals on most flights within the United States have been eliminated.