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McDonaldization:

A Case of Process Over Paradigm

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McDonald's. The word alone, not to mention the actual restaurant itself, elicits a wide range of responses from those who hear it. Some think of yummy hamburgers and delicious french fries, others think of the recent blockbuster hit Super Size Me and the health risks associated with greasy fast food, others think of the terrors of the corporate world, Americanization, and an unstoppable force of cultural homogenization. George Ritzer, however, thinks of Max Weber and sees the modern day paradigm of a force he described nearly a century ago – rationalization.

Weber's theory of rationalization used the model of bureaucracy as its exemplar. Weber was particularly concerned with the spread of bureaucracies as he saw them denying people's inherent humanity and increasingly trapping them in an "iron cage" of rationality. Although the bureaucracy is an apt model to describe this process, Ritzer (2004/forthcoming) has presented an updated thesis using the paradigm of the fast food restaurant, namely McDonalds. 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" (2004:1). These principles include efficiency (utilizing a drive-thru in order to get your food in the quickest possible manner), calculability (with an emphasis on quantity over quality – eating Big Macs), predictability (knowing that the hamburger you order at a McDonalds in Amsterdam will taste the same as the one you order in Munich), control (using robots to cook the french fries and dispense the soft drinks), and, the all too frequent result of these four – the irrationality of rationality (customers doing work for no pay such as bussing tables, adding their own condiments, or getting their own drinks).



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One can find evidence of the McDonaldization thesis all around us. For example, many universities now offer online courses (or are entirely online such as Phoenix Online) in order to teach the maximum number of students with the least number of professors, teams of doctors now routinely perform surgeries in an assembly line manner, vacations more often consist of prepackaged tours where much of the "local" is staged rather than authentic, and it is often frustrating and difficult to reach a human being when calling customer support for nearly any service (and if you do manage to reach one they are increasingly likely to be in India because of lower costs). What one is less likely to find are examples of non-McDonaldized settings. There are fewer and fewer mom-and-pop stores, students getting individualized attention from a professor, doctors who spend more time than allotted by an Health Maintenance Organization (HMO) with their patients, or vacations to settings not owned and operated by Disney. The bars of the iron cage seem to be closing in on a grander, and more all-inclusive scale.

McDonaldization, therefore, is not just about McDonald's. Many who have done research in this area have argued against the thesis pointing to variations in menu items or cultural practices offered by and associated with McDonald's in various places around the world, and even within the

United States itself. McDonald's in the Philippines, for example, offers McSpaghetti while McDonald's in France offers croissants. This does not, however, defeat, or even defray the thesis of McDonaldization. While menu items might vary and cultural rituals associated with the restaurant of McDonalds itself might change from one place and one time to another, the process of McDonaldization based on the principles outlined above, often does not. McDonald's, like Weber's notion of the bureaucracy, is a paradigm of trends at the structural level. It is not meant to reflect homogenizing trends at the symbolic or cultural level. Thus, although McDonalds is the paradigm, it is not the process.

This point can be further elaborated by taking the now (more?) popular chain of Starbucks. Named for the first mate in the classic novel, *Moby Dick*, by Herman Melville Starbucks has, as of February 2007, 6,010 company-operated coffee houses and 3,391 licensed locations (unlike McDonald's, Starbucks does not franchise its stores in the United States¹). In addition, after opening its first shop outside the U.S. in 1996 (in Japan- there are now more than 660 there), there are now Starbucks in 38 countries outside the United States (1,511 company-operated and 2,256 that are either joint venture or licensed).² In fact, its longer term plan is 40,000 shops worldwide (divided roughly equally between the U.S. and the rest of the world). Could it be, as one customer suggested, that "Starbucks is the new

McDonald's"?³ And more relevant to the point at hand, given their great success, might it be more appropriate to think of the "Starbuckization" of society?

While there is much to support the view that Starbucks is perhaps a better paradigm of rationalization, in the end one must conclude that it is also in many ways derivative of McDonald's- it represents the McDonaldization of the coffee shop business. Because of that, because McDonald's in the pioneer and the model, it continues to make sense to focus most of the attention on McDonald's rather than Starbucks. It was McDonald's that set in motion the series of changes that led, among many other things, to Starbucks. Starbucks has certainly made some important innovations, some that McDonald's and other chains are now emulating (the latter is now focusing on the quality of their coffee while the former is expanding their breakfast food selection), but in the end they are simply relatively minor additions to the McDonald's model.

Perhaps the most important response to the question of which paradigm to use, however, is the more benign – namely, that it would not make much of a difference. The strength of the theory is the *process*, not the paradigm. Whether you call it McDonaldization, Starbuckization, or Wal-Martization, understanding the exemplar of the process is not nearly as crucial as understanding the process itself. The connection to Weber lies in the update on the idea that the iron cage of rationality is closing in around us and more and more sectors of society and aspects of our daily lives are coming to be increasingly rationalized. Thus, whether it is McDonald's, Starbucks, or another chain yet to emerge as a global leader, the real concern for scholars, activists, and lay people alike still remains the same – Weber's classic formulation of the process of rationalization, whatever form its paradigm might take.

Notes:

- ¹ The exception is ex-basketball star Magic Johnson who has a 50% stake in about 75 Starbucks coffee shops.
- ² <http://www.starbucks.com/aboutus/overview.asp>
- ³ Janet Adamy, "Starbucks bets on China's new social mobility." Associated Press Financial Wire, November 29, 2006

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GEORGE RITZER
**The McDonaldization
of Society**
Revised New Century Edition

