

# Resisting McDonaldization

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# Contents

<i>Notes on Contributors</i>	vii
1 Resisting McDonaldization: Theory, Process and Critique <i>Barry Smart</i>	1
2 Golden Arches and Iron Cages: McDonaldization and the Poverty of Cultural Pessimism at the End of the Twentieth Century <i>Christiane Bender and Gianfranco Poggi</i>	22
3 Have You Had Your Theory Today? <i>John O'Neill</i>	41
4 McDonaldization Enframed <i>Deena Weinstein and Michael A. Weinstein</i>	57
5 Rich Food: McDonald's and Modern Life <i>Joanne Finkelstein</i>	70
6 McCitizens: Risk, Coolness and Irony in Contemporary Politics <i>Bryan S. Turner</i>	83
7 Theme Parks and McDonaldization <i>Alan Bryman</i>	101
8 The McDonaldization of Sport and Leisure <i>David Jary</i>	116
9 McDonaldized Culture: The End of Communication? <i>Richard Münch</i>	135
10 Art Centres: Southern Folk Art and the Splintering of a Hegemonic Market <i>Gary Alan Fine</i>	148
11 Dennis Hopper, McDonald's and Nike <i>Norman K. Denzin</i>	163
12 Theorizing/Resisting McDonaldization: A Multiperspectivist Approach <i>Douglas Kellner</i>	186

## 2

## **Golden Arches and Iron Cages:**

### McDonaldization and the Poverty of Cultural Pessimism at the End of the Twentieth Century

*Christiane Bender and Gianfranco Poggi*

Let it never be said again that sociology is an abstraction-mad discipline, incapable of capturing cognitively the lived reality of everyday experience! For lately George Ritzer has proven the contrary, by dealing with an everyday phenomenon, in evidence in nearly all major and many minor locales in Western countries and elsewhere, and for that very reason, paradoxically, not often subject to sustained observation – the fast-food restaurant. Since reading Ritzer's book, we have found ourselves watching our respective neighbourhood's McDonald's with keen interest; and we have occasionally allowed ourselves to still our hunger with an excellent Big Mac while feeling that we were practising the honourable professional method of participant observation in the field.

Most other customers seem to ignore what we have read in Ritzer's book, or at any rate consider it of no significance.<sup>1</sup> Yet since the first McDonald's opened in the USA in the 1950s, they have continued to sprout all over the place, in America and in all other parts of the planet, in what amounts to a colossal success story, as shown by continuously increasing turnover figures. We read in Ritzer's book that by 1993 there were already 14,000 McDonald's around the world, a third of these outside the USA, and that the Corporation's aggressive policy of expansion continues. Having conquered North America and Western Europe, the chain is now arousing in Eastern Europe, Asia and the Arab countries a growing taste for fast-food, catered to in a uniform manner through franchise arrangements.<sup>2</sup> Perhaps on this account, McDonald's, with its diversified offerings, its striking logo, its distinctive ambiance, has become the symbol of a self-standing universe, a world of its own, connected (especially for young people) with the stimulus and the promise of a participation in 'the American way of life'. McDonald's have become, for the young, a place to meet and to gather, among other reasons, because even they can afford it.

The greatest part of its customers, young and old, have no objection to what Ritzer conveys about McDonald's – the fact that what it offers is a machine-produced commodity, of relatively poor quality, and that not just

its production (as in the times of Taylor and Ford) but also its consumption, are organized according to the assembly line model. What this entails (for Ritzer and for others) is the standardization, the functionalization and the control of the whole process, which render it predictable and calculable. Such forms of organization of human activity well deserve, in certain circumstances, to be considered inhuman.

If we adopt these positions of Ritzer's (whether or not they are grounded on Weber's own: we offer some remarks on this question below) on which he bases his own description of McDonaldization, we may declare some surprise that the chain's customers (which occasionally, as we have already said, include also the authors of this chapter) allow themselves to enter cheerfully and willingly (or so it seems) into a kind of 'iron cage', in which they become alienated from themselves. According to Ritzer this phenomenon acquires dramatic significance because its impact goes way beyond the question of fast food and the related environment, and affects strategies and forms of conduct relating to markets and consumption *in general*, in towns as well as in the country, marginalizing the local suppliers of products and services and colonizing and suppressing the sociocultural settings where they used to operate. In fact, matters are even more dramatic and threatening: such tendencies control the evolution of modern societies in general, as well as of those located in the third world.

'McDonaldization', then, comes to signify for Ritzer a set of menacing and probably inescapable tendencies toward de-humanization. Such tendencies are seen as part of an overriding trend toward the rationalization, modernization and globalization of social life at large, and as such they enjoy not only the special attention of sociologists, but the approval and legitimation bestowed by broader publics. Ritzer's description of the McDonaldization of birth and death imparts particular credibility to his own view of McDonaldization as a master trend toward impersonally configured social organization. Furthermore, he seeks to establish the ubiquitousness of the McDonaldization and standardization of processes of commercialization affecting such further realms as child care, higher education or sexual conducts. The recourse to technology, in particular, is condemned by him as an expression of alienation, of the loss of personal relations.

One can easily see this argument's precedents in Neil Postman's (1992) thesis of the imperialism of the technopoly, or in previous exercises in the critique of modern culture such as Adorno's pessimistic interpretation of late capitalism as a 'total complex of blindness' or, in its more moderate version, 'the colonization of the life-world by the system' theorized by Habermas from a position half-way between Luhmann and Adorno. Ritzer's favourite source, however, is Max Weber, who at the beginning of our century made remarks oriented to 'cultural pessimism' in the context of his own view, which saw a particular form of rationalization as the central dynamic of modern societies. The advance of such a process within the central realms of work and occupation was accompanied, according to

Weber, by a decrease in freedom and in the meaningfulness of existence. But the critique of rationalization expressed a standpoint not derivable from the spirit of modernity itself – and again here Ritzer follows him.

As the twentieth century comes to a close, isn't it possible to develop new insights, to identify aspects of rationalization which contrast with the world-wide emergence of 'iron cages'? Is the only alternative to this phenomenon the recourse to utterly informal interpersonal relations? We do not think so. However, it is possible to think one's way out of the 'iron cage' only if one does not follow Ritzer in his one-dimensional characterization of current conditions, if one recognizes instead their ambivalences and subjects to critique the categories of the critique of rationalization themselves. We will have to see, at some point, to what extent Weber's own thinking can assist in this task.

### **The Industrialization of the 'Service Society' (*Dienstleistungsgesellschaft*) and its Social Background**

Ritzer describes a phenomenon the emergence of which presupposes that Western societies have been changing from industrial societies to post-industrial societies and especially to *service societies*.<sup>3</sup> Against the hopes of several theoreticians of the post-industrial society (Jean Fourastié, Alan Gartner/Frank Riessman and Daniel Bell among others) who had envisaged a society in the process of becoming more civilized and more humane, the change in question did not remove the basic features of the organization of industrial processes previously identified by Marx and Weber among others. The connection both of these had posited between the enterprise's orientation to profit and the effort to rationalize those processes had maintained its validity also outside the sector expressly identified as industrial (although it had never quite managed to establish its rule over all aspects of social life at large). However, there developed new needs, new consumer expectations were aroused and new markets were created. In so far as these were not provided for by industrial production of material goods, one could speak of a 'service society' (*Dienstleistungsgesellschaft*) – a concept to which one could easily relate other characterizations of modern society, such as 'the knowledgeable society' or 'the information society' (see Stehr and Ericson, 1992). In any case, in so far as the required services were provided for by private suppliers, in the long run their provision was subjected to the principles of capitalist valorization.

In thus extending its territory, capitalism – in contrast both to Marx's expectations of its breakdown and to Daniel Bell's vision of a post-industrial society – confirmed its persistent ability to develop new material and ideal resources, to elaborate them, and to capitalize upon them.<sup>4</sup> While, on the one hand, everything is done in order to subdivide, standardize and control the labour process, also within the sphere of services performed for individuals, it remains clear that capitalism depends enormously on creative

ideas and operations. At the end of the twentieth century, one can summarily say the following: within modern societies (for all the differences they present) individuals are more and more involved in performing services, and such performances are increasingly consumed by individuals and by collective entities; this entails a continuous growth in activities that relate to persons (as against things), whether this growth takes place in public offices, in firms, in the context of commerce or of welfare work. However, this development has not fulfilled the positive expectation which many theoreticians of the post-industrial *service societies* had connected with this phenomenon – the expectation that the development would be characterized, in the long run, by particularly humane principles in the organization of work and consumption. Baumol (1967) and Gershuny (1983), in particular, have confronted the ‘optimists of the service society’ with different objections, whose pessimism was inspired by analyses of the trends concerning costs and of the tendency toward the growing reliance upon technology in the provision of services to individuals. And Ritzer articulates this disappointing realization.

However, if we are to understand correctly the relationship between industrial society and service society to which Ritzer’s McDonaldization thesis refers (by using as paradigmatic the specific example of the commercialized consumption of foods), it is necessary to analyse some socio-cultural and socio-economic aspects of the phenomenon. And the analysis must refer in the first place to the differentiations established by industrial society between work and family, between labour time and leisure time, between the public and the private sphere.

At the heart of these differentiations lies a specific ordering of gender relations, which, on the one hand, institutionalized in economic, social and cultural terms the nuclear family (as a unit characterized by married love, parenthood and partnership) and, on the other, established industrial organizations as the site of paid labour. A significant aspect of this process was that the domains of work and occupation, and the public sphere, were to be occupied by men, while the realms of family and leisure and the private sphere were assigned to women, while both genders were committed to the nuclear family as an institutionalized form of existence.

While in the tradition shared by Marx and Weber sociologists paid particular attention to the conditions typical of the fully employed, bread-winning male, thematizing his deplorable alienation within the ‘iron cage’ of industrial society, for a long time one assumed that within the family social relations did not involve domination and were authentic. However, research was to reveal the compulsion involved in the fact that women were locked within the family domain, made solely responsible for assisting its members, for the provision of food, for housework, for raising the children and (where necessary) for the care of close relatives needing assistance. Among the components of this compulsion were the positive moral evaluation of these circumstances by conservative and Christian parties, their legal sanction by official codes, and the stubborn and successful opposition

of workers' organizations controlled by men to alternative models which might reduce the inferiority of women. Women were therefore long excluded from the more secure and rewarding positions within productive organizations.

Because women remained largely excluded from the 'iron cage' of occupational organizations, the family was turned into their own iron cage, from which they could not escape (see Clegg, 1994: 50). However, both men and women could and had to conduct their own existence within and between two iron cages. But if one accepts this perspective, and views the family also as a form of social organization resting on domination, which imposes forms of conduct closely determined, variously controlled and sanctioned, and thus made calculable, it behoves one not to criticize the impersonal consumption of food at a McDonald's purely as an aspect of a colonized life-world without reflecting on the contrasting model, implicit in this critique, of a wife and mother who in the past willingly and lovingly cared for the material well-being of her dear associates. Sure, she may have done so; but did she have any choice?

Ritzer identifies an uncheckable dynamic of rationalization, which locks the actors it involves into the 'iron cage', leaving them no way out. However – here as in Neil Postman's (1992) thesis the determinants which control that dynamic, and whose outcomes are to be viewed as irrational since they diminish the human element, are left unclear. On this point, Weber had more to say. In his analysis of the growing rationality of mastery as a central component of the spirit of capitalism (see Schluchter, 1980), he did not seek to identify one single cause of this phenomenon, but he did emphasize the role played by ideas, images of the world, and concepts of ethics and morality centrally associated with Protestantism. The latter constituted for Weber an essential socio-cultural resource which, via actors' understandings of meaning, became a driving force behind capitalist rationalization.<sup>5</sup>

If we ask a parallel question concerning the driving socio-cultural determinants of the socio-economic structural change constituted by the service society, we are not able to give a satisfactory answer in this chapter. Yet, with reference to Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization, it seems possible to make some suggestions relevant to its focal object, the production and consumption of food, and to related changes occurring in the position of the family and role of women.

In the twentieth century a significant debate over the social position of women has taken place, without producing a solution. However, ideas implying the inferiority of women in general terms have lost legitimacy, and the notion of the equal entitlement of women has gained growing acceptance. This notion has influenced the changes occurring in the institutions of modern societies – the family to begin with, but also educational establishments, the state institutions dealing with welfare, as well as intermediate institutions operating between the state and the market, such as churches and foundations. Structural changes in the family, such as the

de-institutionalization of specific, tradition-bound interaction forms concerning love relationships, biological or social parenthood, and companionship, as well as the diffusion of alternative patterns such as 'singlehood', communal residences or 'phased marriage', are not entirely due to changes in the role of women, but the latter have certainly played a very significant part.

However, the structural changes in the family, and the growing integration of women in productive organizations, have taken place largely without changes of the same magnitude in the role of the full-time employed male breadwinner in respect of participation in housework. We would argue that this is a key reason why tasks previously performed by the family have had to be increasingly performed through societal arrangements, whether market- or state-centred – the very phenomena which Ritzer emphasizes and dramatizes. We are thinking of such tasks as those concerning the upbringing of children (child minding, child care, pre-primary education); the nutrition of family members, which conventionally took place chiefly through the family meal; the management of leisure time; the assistance to close relatives needing care; and the conduct of body-based interactions relating to sexuality, eroticism and emotionality.

A look both at this set of themes and at Ritzer's book suggests that over the course of our century these tasks have been increasingly performed by means of services rendered by organizations active in the public domain: the state, private suppliers, and intermediate organizations (O'Connor, 1996). One can easily assume that changes in the quality of such services have been associated with their being rendered by 'public' organizations, rather than by the family. Yet to assume that this has always implied the much deplored 'loss of human warmth' would be to ignore the costs previously imposed on women by structures of patriarchal domination. One may catch a glimpse of those costs, as it happens, by perusing Guenther Roth's current studies of the Weber family history (Roth, 1995).

It is important to note that tasks which were previously performed in the context of the family undergo a new definition when they are performed or put on offer by public or private suppliers. They lose thereby that personal, intimate character which – at any rate in ideal terms – they possessed before. Cost considerations compel the organization to rationalize their performance, and as a consequence they come to constitute an impersonal, standardized provision. At the same time, the need for legitimacy and acceptance attending on their supply compels the organization to adopt professional standards in their performance, and to take into account the normative standards of the persons to whom they are directed, in so far as these are in a position to choose to a greater extent than family members who are not in such a position.<sup>6</sup>

In any case we are not willing simply to assume that, for example, the offerings of a fast-food chain are necessarily of lower quality than those of a private household. Whether that assumption applies depends on politics, and in particular on the extent to which the public sphere is aware of the



potentially damaging impact on health of certain substances and certain processes involved in the preparation of food. (We need only mention the recent concern over 'mad cow disease', [BSE].) Obviously the preparation of food for family members – an unduly neglected research theme – depends very closely on what the household's resources are, beginning with the people involved, the time and knowledge available to them, and so on. It is true, as Ritzer remarks, that the individual customer of a fast-food restaurant cannot control what he or she is being served; but the restaurant is subject to public regulations concerning food. And at the other end from the fast-food restaurant, in one decorated with three stars by a food guide, sometimes it is only the astronomical figure the customer finds on the bill (and normally pays by credit card) which forbids her to make critical remarks on the quality of the ingredients. To do so would increase her suspicion that her own cost-and-benefit calculation is based, if not on irrational, at any rate on absurd assumptions. In certain cases (such as those of lobsters) it would make hardly any sense to turn certain delicacies into mass commodities, since this would endanger the survival of the species in question.

Yet we take very seriously Ritzer's critical aspersions, and would add to them some considerations relating to socio-economic changes in the structure of the service society, and again in particular to the family and the role of women. Empirical data suggest both that the increasing significance of the service sector of the economy (relative to the directly productive sector) is a world-wide phenomenon, *and* that the various modern societies show remarkable differences in the size and the internal configuration of that sector, especially as concerns services rendered to individuals.<sup>7</sup> In Germany, for instance, there seems to be considerable resistance to having various forms of activity pushed out of the domestic sphere and handed over to private or public suppliers; in particular, fast-food chains do not play a role in nutrition comparable to the one they play in the USA, where the recourse to fast-food for lunch seems to be roughly equal across social strata. Why? Because Germans are more knowledgeable and sensitive about what they eat, or because in Germany family relations are more harmonious than elsewhere? Hardly!

Comparative analysis, we suggest, indicates a cause in the fact that the rate of female participation in the labour force remains lower in Germany and that in the judgement of Germans (or rather of the leadership of the parties, the unions, the churches) the chief responsibilities of women continue to be centred on the household (Borchorst, 1996; Schmidt, 1993).

A look at developments in Germany confirms Gershuny's (1983) pessimistic prognosis: in private households the provision of capital- and technology-intensive consumer goods has increased in response to the demand for personal services. In the post-war period the family kitchen has been slowly transformed into a factory with its own set of domestic machines. Refrigerators, freezers, washers and dryers, microwaves, and electric ovens, impose even on the domestic environment of average-income families

the observance of Taylorist and Fordist principles of the division of labour, the economy of time and the use of mass-produced commodities. In Germany the persistence of conservative value conceptions functions to limit the technical rationalization of housework by virtue of the fact that women remain committed (and self-committed) to domestic duties. For this reason the technicization of private households in post-war Germany took care first of the needs of men, while the modernization of the kitchen – following the American example – took place later and hesitantly.

This technical rationalization of households placed women in a difficult position. The maintenance of the standards of family provision depends more and more, for the funding of its requirements on the income earned through employment. Premodern forms of provision (for instance, maintaining a vegetable garden) have become too expensive in terms of time and money. At the same time, however, the already mentioned value conceptions represented by such opinion-making agencies as parties, unions and churches contribute to keeping women out of secure positions of employment which would provide them with the income flow necessary to equip the household. Given this difficult position, many women end up accepting wholesale the traditional role of the housewife – a choice which sets limits to a thoroughgoing McDonaldization and technologization of housework and particularly of the everyday workings of the kitchen. In no way does this situation become, thereby, more humane and less alienated.

In the current German discussion on employment policies, the models of occupation, such as part-time work, proposed for women would leave with them (and not with men) the responsibility for coupling together occupational and family work, condemning them to the consequent 'double burden' and to diminished opportunities for occupational success. It is on this account that strategies of McDonaldization oriented to the service sectors have a lower probability than elsewhere of asserting themselves. A set of conservative cultural images stands in their way, at considerable cost for women, who generally find themselves alone in performing housework and still struggle to get themselves accepted as members of paid occupations. Yet the expansion of the fast-food chains, which alone are able to command the best sites in the middle of towns, is unmistakable. In particular, those commercial temples of the *Erlebnisgesellschaft* (a recent German expression sometimes translated as 'fun society') exercise a strong attraction on young people, who no longer prefer to locate their leisure-time activities in the household and to whom impoverished local authorities cannot offer publicly funded recreational centres.

After reunification, Germans find themselves on unsteady ground, confronting, on the one hand, the Scylla of the public provision of services (represented in the public mind chiefly by the unfortunate example of state socialism as understood in the former GDR) and, on the other, the Charybdis of McDonaldized, private, commercialized suppliers, whose activities Ritzer justly criticizes. Critics inspired by conservative values, and who – in the tradition of Émile Durkheim – view modernization and

individualization as societal processes which loosen up social bonds and erode feelings of belonging, demand that the family should remain responsible in the future for the provision of its members' needs.

Weber has shown that distinctive cultural visions have constituted at one point the immaterial determinants of capitalist rationalization; to an extent, they continue to orient structural change in an economy currently characterized by the growing significance of the service sector, with its own trend toward rationalization. Those who disapprove of both the two great models for the provision of services – the state socialist model and the market-centred model – unless they are willing to subscribe to the conventional confinement of women to the domestic sphere, with sole responsibility for many of the services required by individuals, must be ready to jettison the standard arrangement of the relations between the occupational sphere and that of the family. Much has already been done in this direction by the growing access of women to the former sphere; but this needs to be complemented by a growing involvement of men in the latter.

To sum up: the phenomenon of McDonaldization described by Ritzer represents an important viewpoint concerning the rationalization of work within the frameworks of the service society and of the private household. However, the societal causes of the rationalization tendencies Ritzer criticizes for their impact on person-related activities lie deeper than he himself sees. Among those causes we would place cultural conceptions of the division of labour between the genders. From this viewpoint, 'resisting McDonaldization' would require the development of novel ideas concerning the organization of domestic work. A consideration of those determinants, and in turn of their socio-cultural components, might blunt the critical edge of Ritzer's account; for the structural conditions under which personal services were rendered in the pre-McDonaldized world were not as humane as all that, if one takes notice of the toll of inferiority and subjection they imposed on women.

### **A Few Conceptual and Empirical Questions**

Having thus clarified some of the determinants of the McDonaldization phenomenon, and some of its value implications, we shall make a few broader comments on the theoretical structure of Ritzer's argument and on its empirical basis. In conceptual terms, the argument presents some weaknesses that may deserve to be brought to the reader's attention; particularly, it does not sufficiently differentiate various social and cultural domains, and some of its concepts are inadequately defined. These theoretical failures induce some empirical difficulties: essentially, Ritzer overstates the significance of McDonaldization for contemporary society. These lines of criticism are expounded in the comments that follow.

(1) Ritzer puts forward McDonaldization as *the* master process of contemporary society. This view we find objectionable, on various grounds. It may be true that McDonaldization has a logic of its own, a relatively autonomous dynamic; it may be true that, once it has been applied to a unit operating within a given sphere it confers upon that unit competitive advantages which compel others, willy-nilly, to imitate it lest they 'go to the wall', as Weber would phrase it. But this should not make us forget that McDonaldization is a *policy*; it is a process set in motion by binding decisions. And the locus of those decisions is left relatively unexplored by Ritzer, whose analysis focuses on those affected by those decisions, and neglects those making them.

A symptom of this neglect, or perhaps a source of it, is (as we see the matter) Ritzer's inadequate rendering of Weber's views on bureaucracy. Ritzer forgets that Weber's theory of bureaucracy is conceptually located chiefly within his analysis of politics and domination. Also, he does not reflect on Weber's express argument that bureaucracy itself is not a system of domination, but an aspect (however significant, quantitatively and qualitatively) of a system of domination that is not, itself, entirely bureaucratic. Simply put: 'bureaucracy' characterizes a specific way of confronting the administrative phase and dimension of (political) domination.

A symptom of Ritzer's lack of attention to this point is that in his analysis the theme of the organization of productive and distributive activities is very closely (in our judgement, *too* closely) associated with the theme of control. In other terms, bureaucracy becomes a particular way of configuring the division of labour, not a particular way of shaping and exercising power. In fact, the power phenomenon itself plays a very minor role, if any, in Ritzer's book, where it is largely subsumed under the notion of control. There is some legitimate overlap between these two concepts, but on the whole 'control' points in another direction from 'power'.

If we regret this conceptual imbalance, it is not simply in order to be bloody-minded and stress the hold of the powerful on the powerless. 'Power' has a correlate concept in 'resistance' (at least as a potentiality, in one of Weber's definitions of power). This suggests the possibility of a dialectical relationship, wherein those subject to power can raise the price of their subjection, or attempt to balance it by imposing some dependency on those who exercise power.

We may give as an example a point Ritzer himself makes when he cites someone's comment on Vatican television: 'The big advantage to the Vatican of having its own television operation is that they can put their own spin on anything they produce. If you give them the cameras and give them access, they are in control' (Ritzer, 1996a: 119). We would say: up to a point, Ritzer does not sufficiently reflect on some implications of 'the Vatican . . . having its own television operation'. One implication is that it will have to accommodate itself, to some extent or other, to aspects of televisual technology *and culture* which are totally foreign to the Catholic tradition, and are going to impinge on it and distort it. Put otherwise, the

church cannot 'get into the media' without, to some extent, the media 'getting into the church'.

(2) There is a whole dimension of contemporary social reality not reducible to McDonaldization but complementary to it, and located, so to speak, upward of it. This applies first and foremost to the economic system itself, which is strongly structured by power relations, and where McDonaldization seems to apply primarily to the lower levels in the resulting hierarchy. In particular, at the end of the twentieth century the global economy seems to be dominated chiefly by three overlapping components: financial businesses; business dealing with the production and distribution of knowledge and information and with the transformation of knowledge into technology; and businesses operating within the 'cultural industry', and thus addressing individuals' need for the formation and maintenance of personal identity and/or for entertainment. If this is so, then one should not overstate the societal significance of McDonaldization, which for the time being is not strongly present in these three kinds of businesses, although increasingly the distribution of their products at the local and the mass level is being McDonaldized. These and similar considerations suggest that, at the end of the millennium, the realms most affected by McDonaldization are *not* 'where the action is'.

We may briefly articulate this critique with reference to something we all know quite a bit about: the educational realm, and higher education in particular. Ritzer speaks knowledgeably and enlighteningly of the advances McDonaldization has made in that realm. However, his remarks do not throw sufficient light on other aspects of higher education which are complementary to those he analyses.

In particular, the deterioration of pre-university education (itself the regrettable result of wrong policy choices) *requires* that academic institutions, in the first years of their students' education, take charge of educational needs that can be effectively addressed through McDonaldized practices, such as computerized grading and the employment of graduate students as first-line teachers.

Furthermore, some demanding and creative educational processes are shifted to the context of graduate education, which has not been McDonaldized to the same extent: typically, smaller classes and seminars prevail over large classes, less qualified teachers are not involved, essays rather than exams and quizzes are the favourite mode of examination. This applies in spades to particularly significant, elite educational settings such as the great schools of business administration or of engineering, which still place great demands on both students and teachers, and involve the latter in practices, such as consultancies and the design and conduct of research projects, which are hardly McDonaldized.

Finally, Ritzer ignores the fact that, within the world-wide academic system, some economically significant aspects of the educational and research enterprise are more and more the exclusive domain of a small minority of universities, which recruit faculty and students from the world

at large and compete for research funds allocated by the great international corporations. It is the other universities, those which political and economic decision-makers consider less significant for the great global game of knowledge creation and technological innovation, that continue to cater to local constituencies *and* that increasingly McDonaldize their operations.

(3) As we suggested earlier, the dynamics of contemporary society continue to show the peculiar strength of capitalism – the coupling of an irresistible tendency to standardize and uniformize most kinds of productive and distributive processes, with a spectacular capacity to produce innovation. The latter capacity, we suggest, is still cultivated and put to work chiefly within contexts relatively resistant to the former tendency. There is little awareness of this persistent ‘layering’ of socio-economic structures within Ritzer’s vision of an all-encompassing McDonaldization trend. Yet that layering finds expression also at the local level, with microcontexts.

Let us give an example. Every theatre, no matter how small, has its own apparatus for arranging and handling the lights as required by the script and/or its interpretation by the director. This apparatus is operated by one or more skilled technicians, working to the director’s specifications. However, over the last couple of decades or so, those operations have been taken over, in many instances, by a computer tape, which needs only to be activated at the beginning of the play and thereafter activates and moves the lights in a (more-or-less) fixed sequence – which may be the same not just from one performance to another but even from one theatre to another. There is much to be regretted in this form of McDonaldization – particularly the de-skilling of the personnel involved and the decreasing opportunity for creatively rearranging the lighting from performance to performance or from theatre to theatre. But one might also note that the new process involves the emergence of new and much more sophisticated skills involved not just in lighting but in programming the lighting; a new level of theatrical intelligence, located upstream of the local theatrical experience, and thanks to which at least one aspect of stage action is much less exposed to the vagaries of chance and of inadequate training.

(4) One may also suggest that Ritzer not only overestimates the significance of realms where McDonaldization is rampant, but neglects some significant aspects of those realms which do not fit his picture of them. Consider the question of food itself. One of us, who has visited the United States many times over several decades, has been struck from the 1980s on by the growing attention of Americans to that question, by their increasing concern with (to use a hackneyed expression) *the quality of the eating* (and drinking) *experience*, by the sheer amount of energy, sophistication, and imagination many Americans have learned to invest in that experience. Where, what, how one eats (and drinks) seems to have become, at any rate for Americans of a certain age and income level, a matter relevant to their self-definition, or at the very least to the image of themselves they try to construct and to project. But if this is so, then the tremendous success of

fast-foods is definitely *not* the whole story of food in America in the second half of the century: that story presents other aspects the disregard of which unbalances Ritzer's account. We are thinking of the increase in the variety of ingredients and of modes of preparing food associated with the middle classes' growing interest in eating.

So far we have chiefly criticized Ritzer for overstating the empirical significance of those phenomena on which his key concept throws light, by failing to explore complementary and counter-balancing phenomena. Turning now more expressly to conceptual matters, let us refer again to Ritzer's use of Weber's views. As we see the matter, Ritzer extends to the development of the service sector in contemporary economies some aspects of the theory of economic rationalization developed by Weber with reference to industrial capitalism. This worthwhile – and largely successful – attempt lends itself to a few critical comments.

To begin with, Weber himself emphasizes not only the irrational *consequences* of the rationalization process (as one might infer from Ritzer's use of Weberian arguments) but also its irrational *premises*. According to him, the Western choice for rationality is not itself rational – nor is the choice for a particular *kind* of rationality, that aiming at *mastery* over the world instead of *harmony* with or *adaptation* to it. Otherwise put: irrationality for Weber lies both *upstream* and *downstream* of the rationalization process.

Apart from this, Ritzer's application of Weber's theory of bureaucracy to McDonaldization appears to overstretch that theory. Basically, it's been a long time (relatively speaking) since *significant* economic units have typically been bureaucratically organized in Weberian terms. As Burns and Stalker (1994) argued long ago, those units have had to acknowledge the limitations the bureaucratic model meets in the fact of highly turbulent technological and competitive environments; they have had expressly to *de-bureaucratize* themselves. Overstating the point a bit, one might say that firms that are bureaucratic do not matter, while firms that matter are not bureaucratic. Perhaps already the strategy of divisionalization applied by Alfred Sloan to General Motors expressed this contrast; Ritzer mentions it, but does not acknowledge this implication.

One final comment on 'Ritzer on Weber on bureaucracy'. Weber himself had, we think, a more sophisticated sense of the ambivalence of the bureaucratic phenomenon than we recognize in Ritzer, for whom basically 'bureaucracy' is only a term of abuse. Perhaps because, as we have already suggested, he conceptualized that phenomenon chiefly within his political sociology, Weber was aware of the human advance the bureaucratic mode of administration represented not only in terms of the efficiency and calculability of public action, but also in its bearing upon such liberal values as the security of individual rights, the rule of law, and citizenship. Although of course it could be instituted and employed in a very different spirit, and in particular in the direction of totalitarianism, bureaucracy was

for Weber a necessary though not a sufficient component of constitutional politics. Little if anything in Ritzer's multiple statements on bureaucracy, many of which refer explicitly or implicitly to Weber, conveys his own recognition of this aspect of the phenomenon.

As we have already noted, to validate his concept of McDonaldization, Ritzer directs our attention to the processes taking place in the service sector at the bottom level within the firms he discusses – at the point of delivery, as it were. This is of course a perfectly valid concern. But it is not complemented by a concern (which we consider equally legitimate) with the broader institutional environment wherein those processes take place. If Ritzer had asked himself some questions about the nature of the firms in question – 'What is the McDonald's Corporation like *as a whole*?' for example – he might have confronted phenomena of some theoretical relevance which cannot be easily subsumed under the 'bureaucracy' concept.

Nothing indicates Ritzer's lack of concern with this level of discourse as clearly as does the astonishingly summary manner in which he deals with the *franchise* phenomenon, which is mentioned but not discussed. (The expression 'franchise', incidentally, does not appear in the index.) How bureaucratic can a firm be where the key couplings between the units-on-the-ground and the corporate level are typically represented by franchise relationships? For that matter, in what sense *is* McDonald's one firm?

We would like to emphasize this question for three reasons. First, it is probably of considerable empirical significance: as complex a juridical phenomenon as a franchise arrangement is likely to vary in its nature from one national setting to another, simply because the respective legal systems are likely to vary, to a greater or lesser extent; however, Ritzer has simply nothing to tell us on this realm of variation.

Second, we feel that Ritzer displays a similar – and equally disconcerting – lack of interest in the makings and consequences of technical juridical arrangements – and their variations – in the companion book to *McDonaldization*, that is, *Expressing America* (Ritzer, 1995).

Finally, in our view, what amounts to Ritzer's wilful disregard for questions of law, and of sociology of law, instances a serious theoretical weakness in one of his broader arguments – the argument to the effect that McDonaldization entails the progressive replacement/displacement of (to use his own terms, for the time being) human by non-human technology. Franchising, and more generally legal arrangements, are institutional matters through and through; there simply is *nothing* intrinsically non-human about them – yet they are virtual to the whole realm Ritzer explores, and on that very account he can sustain that argument only by (basically) ignoring them, or by giving an unacceptable account of their nature.

A very good (although inadvertent – or, indeed, good *because* inadvertent) example of such an account is the following sentence relating to Taylor's scientific management: 'managers were to take a body of *human skills*, abilities and knowledge, and transform them into a set of *non-human rules*, regulations, and formulas' (Ritzer, 1996a: 25, original emphasis). One



does not need to be a Wittgensteinian or a Winchian to wonder: what can be more human than rules?

Ritzer may not have sufficiently reflected on the results of recent – and less recent – work on organizations: for instance, on the distinction between material and social technology, a distinction whose relevance is suggested by historical reflection on the role played, respectively, in the military field by the invention of the musket and by the invention of the drill. Ritzer replaces such a distinction, as we have noted, with one between human and non-human technology. This distinction, apart from generating the problem we have just noted concerning legal arrangements, is worded in such a way as to suggest a strong normative bias. We have no objection to such a bias, as long as it is self-consciously adopted and declared, and as long as it has no misleading consequences.

We detect such a consequence, in particular, in the following sentence: ‘most of the messages in the “virtual community” of cyberspace are impersonal; communication via the “net” is thus dehumanizing’ (Ritzer, 1996a: 147). Our reaction on reading this was – hold it! The equation of ‘impersonal’ with ‘dehumanizing’ is categorically unacceptable. The ability to de-personalize relationships underlies such essential and distinctive human achievements as – among other things – the role phenomenon. That facile equation betrays a normative bias of Ritzer’s which, respectable as it may be in moral terms, is analytically misleading.

One final suggestion. Ritzer occasionally acknowledges but does not sufficiently analyse the vital causal role played in the story he recounts by the massification of the relationships he discusses – by the sheer fact that these involve, and affect, increasingly large, and in the end huge, numbers of people. This is most obvious, we think, in the field of higher education. We find it difficult to imagine how else it could have been opened up to millions without streamlining and standardizing it to a large extent – and thus McDonaldising it.

In sum, some phases of Ritzer’s argument indicate a somewhat inadequate reflection on its conceptual and theoretical foundations, as well as a neglect of aspects of contemporary society which complement and to some extent balance out those thematized as McDonaldisation.

### **The Critique of Alienation and its Political Aspects**

We shall bring our contribution to a close with some general remarks concerning the relationship between critique and theory. The critique of dehumanization is connected with the critique of the division of labour and of alienation – a recurrent motif of sociological theory, common to Marx, Weber and Durkheim at one end, and Adorno, Habermas and Ritzer at the other.<sup>8</sup>

In Weber, we find aspects of a critique of dehumanization, especially in his pessimistic statements about the cultural condition of modern man.

Particularly in connection with the 'Protestant Ethic' thesis, Weber lamented the structural constraints which modern organizations impose upon professional work, leading the atomized protagonist of the latter to a painful loss of meaning and of connection with the world. But also in Weber this situation lends itself to a political solution: a constitutional nation state exercises its domination upon societal forces with legal means and imposes on society a specific ordering through bureaucratization. In the context of the nation-state Weber views bureaucracy as the ideal-type of control and order, to which such different social systems as science, the economy, the churches or private households must orient themselves. Bureaucracy ensures order and within such order guarantees functionality and effectiveness. Thus the system of political domination constitutes also a way to express and to realize the will of individuals who articulate their interests within various levels of politics. The nation-state as Weber knew it had at its disposal mechanisms (however constituted) for imposing constraints on the configuration of working relationships.

At the close of the twentieth century, modern and modernizing societies see their future shaped by the breakdown of political blocs, and by the opening of their local systems to communication, to exchange, and to the formation of networks on a global scale. At this point a critique of dehumanization and the division of labour which takes as its premise the vision of expressly unitary ways of working and living becomes anachronistic. It is, in any case, utopic, for not even in the past has there ever existed an autarkic society, without division of labour, without power and domination. Yet the concept is not surrendered because of the critical implications it still possesses, and indeed it seems to gain relevance in the face of globalization.

To conclude this chapter, we would like to stress the political dimension of the phenomena in question. In his *Work of Nations*, Robert B. Reich (1991) speaks of the differentiation between the national system of political domination and socio-economic change, which takes place at both the national and the global levels. He stresses the uncoupling which has taken place between financial markets, on the one hand, and national economies, on the other. As a result, the state is no longer able to control and make use of the valorization process, and on this account is less and less in a position to keep the welfare state in existence. If one compares it with Reich's depiction of a possible future for American society, Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis gains an extraordinary significance.

According to Reich, public investments fall farther and farther behind, and something like a secession takes place under the impact of such tendencies as the following. The occupational sphere encompasses three main groups of occupations: routine production services, client-focused services and services oriented to 'symbolic analysis'. The first two groups embrace the great majority of the employed, who, however, are trained by an educational system which imparts to them only lowly qualifications. In the future those who currently ride the trend toward the increasing

significance of information and knowledge within national systems will also find themselves in one of these two groups; and here Reich mentions expressly lawyers, accountants and professors, in so far as they operate in a more and more routine fashion.

Over against these, a decreasing proportion of people, professionally involved in symbolic analysis – above all lawyers, top managers, investment bankers, brokers, traders – present a staggering productivity, and find at their disposal enormous resources of education and capital. Between the top-level symbolic analysts, who always seek new ways of defining and solving problems, and who command quality working positions of the highest significance, and the rest of the employed, who occupy by far the greatest number of work places, there develop colossal differences in economic security, cultural capital and capacity to exercise influence. Such differences are liable to remain relatively stable over the life course of individuals: the respective family conditions, educational experiences, memberships, experiences of sociability, material belongings, residential patterns, life standards, medical provisions, and arrangements for old age, vary systematically in predictable fashion. Taking schooling as an example: those meant to become symbolic analysts are trained to abstraction, to systems thinking, to experiment, and to work in teams. For the overwhelming majority of other pupils the school is like a factory school, which trains them in what Ritzer would call McDonaldized fashion, at low cost.

A dismaying implication of this picture is the drastic reduction of the role of politics and the state. Symbolic analysts take into account the state exclusively as a cost factor, because the components of this group do not depend on the services it renders. But the impoverished Leviathan no longer has much to give the rest of the population. The welfare state is no longer affordable.

Within this scenario, the countries of South-East Asia are slowly entering the twentieth-century stage, the century during which were built up the welfare states of the Western hemisphere, whereas now these very states threaten to fall back to the level of the nineteenth century. How can one resist this global process, which one can designate unwittingly as McDonaldization? Resistance can only come from nation-states which retain and/or regain the capacity to exercise political domination by means of international agreements and arrangements. The reformulation of national identities, according to Reich, must find expression in a renewed sense of political responsibility.

So our message is: *resisting McDonaldization requires in the first place that we do not lose and indeed that we reinforce the political power of the democratic state.* It is not inevitable that education, welfare, and culture, should follow the logic of economic processes associated with a completely McDonaldized world, one that would concern itself exclusively with minimizing related costs. The policy inspired by neo-classical economics seeks to reduce the state, even if this entails a neglect of the conditions under which the great majority of people live and work, and the loss of

their ability to give political expression to their interests. Those who find this unacceptable should confront the big challenge posed by globalization: how to preserve and to enhance the people's democratic right to organize themselves, to formulate demands, to influence and shape public policy.

## Notes

1 The references that follow are to Ritzer (1996a).

2 We may characterize franchising as follows. The term designates an agreement which a producer of (in this case food) articles makes with self-standing traders. These commit themselves to adopt a pre-conceived arrangement concerning the product and the related organization, and are assisted in doing this by the producer. For the latter, the investment costs are kept to a minimum, while there is an adaptation to the local markets. The other party, in turn, can rely on the fact that the products in question are known and accepted, and gains from becoming inserted into a global strategy.

3 We will not, at this point deal with the problems – not even the basic ones – concerning the concept itself of the post-industrial or service society. We refer the reader to the following writings: Bell (1973), Fourastié (1949), Gartner and Riessman (1974).

4 Below, we shall pay some attention to these innovation processes, contrasting them with the rationalization processes on which Ritzer fastens his attention.

5 Such different authors as Fourastié, Bell and Gartner/Riessman agree in perspectiving civilizing processes associated with post-industrial society, and affecting needs, value perspectives, forms of the organization of work and of consumption.

6 For the question of professionalization, see Ritzer and Walczak (1988) and Ritzer (1996b).

7 Differences appear, for instance, in respect of the proportion of the gainfully active population in a given country represented by those employed in the service sector: the most frequently discussed cases are those of the USA, Sweden and Germany. For example, services to consumers account for 42.4 per cent of the active population in Sweden, 38.8 per cent in the USA, and as little as 29.1 per cent in Germany. See the data from the OECD Labour Force Statistics given in Häussermann and Siebel (1995: 51ff).

8 Marx derived it from a particular rendering of Hegelian philosophy, which he transposed to the relationship between the human person and work in the context of the division of labour and of capitalistic wage labour. Hegel had thought that work and objectification, as inescapable liabilities of the formation of human self-consciousness, could only be superseded within the constitutional state, whose legal foundation lay in the freedom of the individual, but not within the relationships of the civil society (*bürgerliche Gesellschaft*), necessarily mediated through work. As against this, Marx characterized as alienation the expropriation of producers from the product of their work, wage labour, and the commodification of that work. Here the concepts of division of labour and of alienation apply both to the activity of work and to social relations. On the other hand, for Marx there is also a political dimension, which does not constitute ideological alienation (superstructure), but rather the future dictatorship of the proletariat as the beginning of the supersession of alienated work.

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