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# An Introduction to McDonaldization

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**R**ay Kroc (1902–1984), the genius behind the franchising of McDonald’s restaurants, was a man with big ideas and grand ambitions. But even Kroc could not have anticipated the astounding impact of his creation. 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 in spite of McDonald’s recent and well-publicized economic difficulties, that impact is likely to expand at an accelerating rate.

However, this is *not* a book about McDonald’s, or even about the fast-food business, although both will be discussed frequently throughout these pages. I devote all this attention to McDonald’s (as well as the industry of which it is part and that it played such a key role in spawning) because it serves here as the major example of, and the paradigm for, a wide-ranging process I call *McDonaldization*—that is,

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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 education, work, the criminal justice system, health care, travel, leisure, dieting, politics, the family, religion, and 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.

The success of McDonald's (in spite of recent troubles; see the closing section of this chapter) itself is apparent: In 2002, its total sales was over \$41 billion, with operating income of \$2.1 billion. McDonald's, which first began operations in 1955, had 31,172 restaurants throughout the world as of early 2003. Martin Plimmer, a British commentator, archly notes: "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 on 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 the International Franchise Association, there were 320,000 small franchised businesses in the United States in 2000 and they did about \$1 trillion in annual sales. Although accounting for less than 10% of retail businesses, over 40% of all retail sales come from franchises and they employ more than 8 million people. Franchises are growing rapidly with a new one opening every 8 minutes in the United States. Over 57% of McDonald's restaurants are franchises.

2. In the restaurant industry, 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. Yum! Brands, Inc. operates nearly 33,000 restaurants in 100 countries under the Pizza Hut, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Taco Bell, A&W Root Beer, and Long John Silver's franchises and has more outlets than McDonald's, although its total sales (\$24 billion in 2002) are not nearly as high. Subway (with almost 19,000 outlets in 72 countries) is one of the fastest-growing fast-food businesses and claims to be—and may actually be—the largest restaurant chain in the United States.

3. Starbucks, a relative newcomer to the fast-food industry, has achieved dramatic success of its own. A local Seattle business as late as 1987,

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Starbucks had over 6,000 company-owned shops (there are no franchises) by 2003, more than ten times the number of shops in 1994. Starbucks has been growing rapidly internationally and is now a presence in Latin America, Europe (it is particularly omnipresent in London), the Middle East, and the Pacific Rim.

4. 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, Chili's, 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."

5. 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 Gap, Jiffy Lube, AAMCO Transmissions, Midas Muffler & Brake Shops, Great Clips, H&R Block, Pearle Vision, Bally's, Kampgrounds of America (KOA), KinderCare (dubbed "Kentucky Fried Children"), Jenny Craig, Home Depot, Barnes & Noble, PETsMART.

6. McDonald's has been a resounding success in the international arena. Over half of McDonald's restaurants are outside the United States (in the mid-1980s, only 25% of McDonald's were outside the United States). The majority (982) of the 1,366 new restaurants opened in 2002 were overseas (in the United States, the number of restaurants increased by less than four hundred). Well over half of McDonald's revenue comes from its overseas operations. McDonald's restaurants are now found in 118 nations around the world, serving 46 million customers a day. The leader, by far, is Japan with almost 4,000 restaurants, followed by Canada with over 1,300, and Germany with over 1,200. As of 2002, there were 95 McDonald's 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 been

laid bare to the invasion of fast-food restaurants. Great Britain has become the “fast-food capital of Europe,” and Israel is described as “McDonaldized,” with its shopping malls populated by “Ace Hardware, Toys ‘R Us, Office Depot, and TCBY.”

7. Many highly McDonaldized firms outside of the fast-food industry have also had success globally. Although most of Blockbuster’s 8,500 sites are in the United States, more than 2,000 of them are to be found in twenty-eight other countries. Wal-Mart is the world’s largest retailer with 1.3 million employees and \$218 billion in sales. Over three thousand of its stores are in the United States (as of 2002). It opened its first international store (in Mexico) in 1991, but it now has more than one thousand units in Mexico, Puerto Rico, Canada, Argentina, Brazil, China, Korea, Germany, and the United Kingdom. In any week, more than 100 million customers visit Wal-Mart stores worldwide.

8. Other nations have developed their own variants of this American institution. Canada has a chain of coffee shops, Tim Hortons (merged with Wendy’s not long ago), with 2,200 outlets (160 in the United States). 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 fifteen hundred restaurants that, in addition to the usual fare, sells Teriyaki chicken burgers, rice burgers, and “Oshiruko with brown rice cake.” 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.” Most recently, in the immediate wake of the 2003 war with Iraq, clones of McDonald’s (sporting names like “MaDonal” and “Matbax”) opened in that country complete with hamburgers, french fries, and even golden arches.

9. 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, as of early 2003, over nineteen hundred shops in fifty nations, of which three hundred were in the United States. Furthermore, American firms are now opening copies of this British chain, such as Bath & Body Works. Pret A Manger, a chain of sandwich shops that also originated in Great Britain (interestingly, McDonald’s purchased a 33% minority share of the company in 2001), has over 130 company-owned and -run restaurants, mostly in the United Kingdom but now also in New York, Hong Kong, and Tokyo.

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10. Ikea, a Swedish-based (but Dutch-owned) home furnishings company, did about 12 billion euros in business in 2002 derived from the over 286 million people (equal to about the entire population of the United States) visiting their 150-plus stores in 29 countries. Purchases were also made from the 118 million copies of their catalog printed in over 45 languages. In fact, that catalog is reputed to be the second largest publication in the world, just after the Bible. An international chain to watch in the coming years is H&M clothing, founded in 1947 and now operating over 900 stores in 17 countries with plans to open another 110 stores by the end of 2003. It currently employs over 39,000 people and sells more than 500 million items a year.

### MCDONALD'S AS A GLOBAL ICON

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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 legendary television show *Saturday Night Live* satirized specialty chains by detailing the hardships of a franchise that sells nothing but Scotch tape. In the movie *Coming to America* (1988), Eddie Murphy plays an African prince whose introduction to America includes a job at "McDowell's," a thinly disguised McDonald's. In *Falling Down* (1993), Michael Douglas vents his rage against the modern world in a fast-food restaurant dominated by mindless rules designed to frustrate customers. *Moscow on the Hudson* (1984) has Robin Williams, newly arrived from Russia, obtain a job at McDonald's. H. G. Wells, a central character in the movie *Time After Time* (1979), finds himself transported to the modern world of a McDonald's, where he tries to order the tea he was accustomed to drinking in Victorian England. In *Sleeper* (1973), Woody Allen awakens in the future only to encounter a McDonald's. *Tim Men* (1987) ends with the early 1960s heroes driving off into a future represented by a huge golden arch looming in the distance. *Scotland, PA* (2001) brings *Macbeth* to the Pennsylvania of the 1970s. The famous murder scene from the Shakespeare play involves, in this case, plunging a doughnut king's head into the boiling oil of a deep fat fryer. The McBeths then use their ill-gotten gains to transform the king's greasy spoon café into a fast-food restaurant featuring McBeth burgers.

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 rebuilt according to the original blueprints and 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." When Pizza Hut opened in Moscow in 1990, a Russian student said, "It's a piece of America." 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." On the popularity of Kentucky Fried Chicken in Malaysia, the local owner said, "Anything Western, especially American, people here love. . . . They want to be associated with America."

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 officiating at the opening of the first McDonald's in Jerusalem wearing a baseball hat with the McDonald's golden arches logo:

An Israeli teen-ager 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 teen-ager 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 different nations. In the 2003 survey, a Big Mac in the United States cost an average of \$2.71; in China it was \$1.20; in Switzerland it cost \$4.52. This measure indicates, at least roughly, where the cost of living is high or low, as well as which currencies are undervalued (China) 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 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 sixteen McDonald's as of 2002.

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.'" Kowinski argues that indoor shopping malls, which almost always encompass fast-food restaurants, are the modern "cathedrals of consumption" to which people go to practice their "consumer religion." 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

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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 more 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-Élysées in Paris. Soon after it opened in 1992, the McDonald's in Moscow sold almost thirty thousand hamburgers a day and employed a staff of twelve hundred young people working two to a cash register. (Today McDonald's controls an astounding 83% of the fast-food market in Russia.) In early 1992, Beijing witnessed the opening of the world's largest McDonald's, with seven hundred seats, twenty-nine cash registers, and nearly one thousand employees. On its first day of business, it set a new one-day record for McDonald's by serving about forty thousand customers.

Small satellite, express, or remote outlets, opened in areas that cannot support full-scale fast-food restaurants, are also expanding rapidly. They are found in small storefronts 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 not long ago over the placement of a McDonald's in the new federal courthouse in Boston. Among the more striking sites for a McDonald's restaurant are the Grand Canyon, the world's tallest building (Petronas Towers in Malaysia), a ski-through on a slope in Sweden, and in a structure in Shrewsbury, England, that dates back to the 13th century.

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 (and it's no wonder, given that campus food service is a \$9.5 billion-a-year business). In conjunction with a variety of "branded partners" (for example, Pizza Hut and Subway), Marriott now supplies food to many colleges and



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universities. The apparent approval of college administrations puts fast-food restaurants in a position to further influence the younger generation.

We no longer need to leave many highways to obtain fast food quickly and easily. Fast food is now available at many, and in some cases all, convenient rest stops along the road. 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, and airports.

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; over 20% of school cafeterias offer popular brand-name fast foods such as Pizza Hut or Taco Bell at least once a week. 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. 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 As 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. Although 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. There are even cookbooks—for example, *Secret Fast Food Recipes: The Fast Food Cookbook*—that allow one to prepare “genuine” fast food at home. Then there is also home delivery of fast foods, especially pizza, as revolutionized by Domino’s.

Another type of expansion involves what could be termed “vertical McDonaldization.” That is, the demands of the fast-food industry, as is well documented in Eric Schlosser’s *Fast Food Nation*, have forced industries that service it to McDonaldize in order to satisfy its insatiable demands. Thus, potato growing and processing, cattle ranching, chicken raising, and meat slaughtering and processing have all had to McDonaldize their operations, and this has led to dramatic increases in production. However, that growth has not come without costs. Meat and poultry are more likely to be

disease-ridden, small (often non-McDonaldized) producers and ranchers have been driven out of business, and millions of people have been forced to work in low-paying, demeaning, demanding, and sometimes outright dangerous jobs. For example, in the meatpacking industry, relatively safe, unionized, secure, manageable, and relatively high-paying jobs in firms with once-household names like Swift and Armour have been replaced by unsafe, nonunionized, insecure, unmanageable, and relatively low-paying positions with largely anonymous corporations. While some (largely owners, managers, and stockholders) have profited enormously from vertical McDonaldization, far more have been forced into a marginal economic existence.

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," describing the newspaper *USA TODAY*.

McDonald's is not always enamored of this proliferation. Take the case of We Be Sushi, a San Francisco chain with a half dozen outlets. A note appears on the back of the menu explaining why the chain was not named "McSushi":

The original name was *McSushi*. Our sign was up and we were ready to go. But before we could open our doors we received a very formal letter from the lawyers of, you guessed it, McDonald's. It seems that McDonald's has cornered the market on every McFood name possible from McBagle [sic] to McTaco. They explained that the use of the name McSushi would dilute the image of McDonald's.

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 *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 is cut back severely 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 was 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 (or Internet chat rooms) that permit erotic conversations between total strangers. The advent of the webcam now permits people even to see (though still not touch) the person with whom they are having virtual sex. 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

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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 its settings. However, the focus here is 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 two observers of contemporary American culture put it, "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 "super-size" 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 (best exemplified by McDonald's current "dollar menu"). This calculation does not take into account an important point, however: The high profit margin of fast-food chains indicates that the owners, not the consumers, get the best deal.

People also 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 LensCrafters, 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 third managers. In many cases, what they do, and even what they say, is highly predictable. McDonaldized organizations often have scripts (perhaps the best-known is McDonald's, "Do you want fries with that?") 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. As Robin Leidner argues,

McDonald's pioneered the reutilization 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. Technology that increases control over workers helps McDonaldized systems assure customers that their products and service will be consistent.

### THE ADVANTAGES OF McDONALDIZATION

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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; an enviable record of hiring and promoting minorities; and a social responsibility program with social goals improving the environment and animal welfare.

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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 even get better quality 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.
- ◆ 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

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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. Another way of saying this is that rational systems serve to deny human reason; rational systems are often unreasonable. 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.

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 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 many respects is decades behind the United States:



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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-roam-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 even 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.

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 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 not 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?

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This chapter should give you a sense not only of the advantages and disadvantages of McDonaldization but also of the range of phenomena 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 or expanded, 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 would 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.

#### McDONALD'S TROUBLES: IMPLICATIONS FOR McDONALDIZATION

McDonald's has been much in the news in the early 21st century, and most of the time, the news has been bad (at least for McDonald's)—bombings (some involving fatalities) and protests at restaurants overseas, lawsuits claiming that its food made people obese and that it mislabeled some food as vegetarian, declining stock prices, and its first-ever quarterly loss. McDonald's has responded by withdrawing from several nations, settling lawsuits, closing restaurants, reducing staff, cutting planned expansions, replacing top officials, and remodeling restaurants.

It is hard to predict whether the current situation is merely a short-term downturn to be followed by renewed expansion or the beginning of the end of McDonald's (after all, even the Roman Empire, to say nothing of A&P and Woolworth's, among many others, eventually declined and disappeared).

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For the sake of discussion, let's take the worst-case scenario—McDonald's imminently turning off the griddles in the last of its restaurants.

This would clearly be a disastrous event as far as stockholders, franchisees, employees, and devotees of Big Macs and Chicken McNuggets are concerned, but what of its broader implications for the McDonaldization of society? The hypothetical demise of McDonald's would spell the end of the model for this process, but it would be of *no consequence* to the process itself. We might need to find a new model and label—"Starbuckization" suggests itself at the moment because of Starbucks' great current success and its dramatic expansion around the globe—but whatever we call it, the process itself will not only continue but grow more powerful. Can we really envision an alternative future of increasing inefficiency, unpredictability, incalculability, and *less* reliance on new technology?

In the restaurant industry, the decline and eventual disappearance of McDonald's would simply mean greater possibilities for its competitors (Subway, Wendy's) and open the way for more innovative chains (In-N-Out Burger). However, which fast-food chains dominate would be of little consequence to the process of McDonaldization since *all of them* are highly McDonaldized and all are based on the model pioneered by McDonald's. What would be of consequence would be a major revival of old-fashioned, non-McDonaldized alternatives like cafes, "greasy spoons," diners, cafeterias, and the like. However, these are not likely to undergo significant expansion unless some organization finds a way to successfully McDonaldize them. And if they do, it would simply be the McDonaldization of yet another domain.

What is certainly *not* going to happen is a return to the pre-McDonald's era dominated by the kinds of alternatives mentioned above. Can we really envision the approximately 13,000 sites currently occupied by McDonald's restaurants in the United States being filled by a like number of independently owned and operated cafes and diners? The problem of finding skilled short-order cooks to staff them pales in comparison to the difficulty in finding people who will frequent them. It's been nearly fifty years since the franchise revolutionized the fast-food industry with the opening of the first of the McDonald's chain. The vast majority of Americans have known little other than the McDonaldized world of fast food, and for those born before 1955, the alternatives are increasingly dim memories. Thus, McDonaldized systems for the delivery of fast food (e.g., drive-through lanes, home-delivered pizzas), and the McDonaldized food itself (Whoppers, Taco Bell's watered-down version of the taco), have become the standards for many people. A hamburger made on the grill at a diner or a taco from an authentic taco stand are likely to be judged inferior to the more McDonaldized versions. Furthermore, those who are accustomed to the enormous efficiency of the

fast-food restaurant are unlikely to put up with the relative inefficiencies of diners or taco stands. Those who have grown used to great predictability are not likely to be comfortable with food served in wildly different quantities and shapes. The greater human involvement in preparing and serving food in non-McDonaldized alternatives is likely to be off-putting to most consumers who have grown acclimated to the dehumanization associated with the nonhuman technologies and scripted counter people found throughout today's fast-food industry. The key point is that McDonald's current difficulties do not auger a return to earlier non-McDonaldized alternatives or even to the widespread creation (if one could even envision such a thing) of some new non-McDonaldized form.

McDonald's is doing better outside the United States, and it is there that we are likely to see a continued expansion of it, and other American fast-food chains, for the foreseeable future (by all accounts, the American market for fast-food restaurants is saturated, and this is a big source of McDonald's problems). More important, as pointed out earlier, many other nations have witnessed the emergence of their own fast-food chains modeled, naturally, after McDonald's. Not only are they expanding within their own borders, but they are also increasingly interested in global expansion (Britain's Pizza Express is expanding into Eastern European countries as San Marzano restaurants), even into the American market. Interesting recent examples include the opening in Manhattan of a number of Pret A Manger (the British chain that, as we have seen, is partly owned by McDonald's) shops offering higher-quality, prewrapped sandwiches, and Polio Capero (from Guatemala) fried-chicken restaurants in Los Angeles and Houston (with plans for big expansion in the United States). In fact, the center of McDonaldization, as was previously the case with many forms of factory production, is increasingly shifting outside the United States. Whether it occurs under the name of Mos Burger (Japan) or Nirula's (India), it is still McDonaldization.

If the principles have proven successful and have proliferated so widely, why is McDonald's in trouble? There are obviously a number of reasons, including many bungled opportunities and initiatives such as efforts to be more attractive to adults, to create new menu items, and to restructure restaurants as well as the chain as a whole. While McDonald's could have done better, the fact is that in the end it has been undercut by its own success. Many competitors have adopted its principles and entered the niche created by McDonald's for fast food. Like many other innovators, McDonald's now finds itself with many rivals who learned not only from McDonald's successes but also from its failures. (One could say that these competitors are "eating McDonald's lunch.") McDonald's, too, may now be better able to overcome its problems and learn from the hot new companies

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in the fast-food industry. However, whether or not it does, fast-food restaurants and, more generally, the process of McDonaldization are with us for the foreseeable future.

### Thinking Critically

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1. Is there really any such thing as McDonaldization?
2. Is McDonald's the best example of McDonaldization? In light of its problems, and the rise of Starbucks, would the latter now be a better example? Should we relabel the process "Starbuckization"?
3. Is the fast food-restaurant really as important as is suggested here?
4. Can you think of any other dimensions of McDonaldization?
5. Can rationality ever really be irrational?

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*This chapter, from The McDonaldization of Society, deals with the precursors to the fast-food restaurant and the concept of McDonaldization. The key figure in this history is the German social theorist Max Weber (1864–1920), who pioneered the contemporary sociological conception of the bureaucracy and created the best-known theory of rationalization. The bureaucracy was the paradigm for the rationalization process in Weber’s day. That process is described here using the same dimensions as were used in Chapter 1 to define the essence of McDonaldization. This should not be surprising because my theory of McDonaldization is based on, and closely related to, Weber’s theory of rationalization. One key difference, however, is that whereas Weber focused largely on production, the focus of McDonaldization is consumption, which has come to rival, even exceed, the importance of production, especially in highly developed nations like the United States. It is this that leads to the conclusion that the fast-food restaurant, whose home is obviously in the realm of consumption, is a better paradigm today for the rationalization or McDonaldization of society than the bureaucracy.*

*I also explore Weber’s famous idea that rationalization (now McDonaldization) creates an “iron cage” from which it is increasingly difficult for us to escape. Although this continues to be a useful image, I reexamine it in Chapter 3, which offers another way of thinking about the structure of McDonaldization.*

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