THE MCDONALDIZATION OF SOCIETY

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An Introduction to McDonaldization

Ray 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. That impact is likely to continue to expand in the early 21st century.¹

However, this is not a book about McDonald’s, or even about the fast-food business,² although both will be discussed frequently throughout these pages. I devote all this attention to McDonald’s (as well as to the industry of which it is a 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 McDonaldization³—that is,

the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world.⁴

McDonaldization has shown every sign of being an inexorable process, sweeping through seemingly impervious institutions (e.g., religion) and regions (e.g., European nations such as France) of the world.⁵

¹Notes may be found at the back of the book, beginning on p. 186.
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From the Iron Cage to the Fast-Food Factory and Beyond

McDonaldization did not emerge in a vacuum; it was preceded by a series of social and economic developments that not only anticipated it but also gave it many of the basic characteristics touched on in Chapter 1. In the first half of this chapter, I will look briefly at a few of these developments. First, I will examine the notion of bureaucracy and Max Weber's theories about it and the larger process of rationalization. Next, I will offer a discussion of the Nazi Holocaust, a method of mass killing that can be viewed as the logical extreme of Weber's fears about rationalization and bureaucratization. Then, I will look at several intertwined socioeconomic developments that were precursors of McDonaldization: scientific management as it was invented at the turn of the century by F. W. Taylor, Henry Ford's assembly line, the mass-produced suburban houses of Levittown, the shopping mall, and Ray Kroc's creation of the McDonald's chain. These are not only of historical interest; most continue to be important to this day.

The second half of the chapter will shift to a focus on the present, as well as some thoughts on the future of McDonaldization. I begin with several of the forces driving McDonaldization today, including that it is profitable, we value it, and it fits with a range of other ongoing changes. Then I turn to the relationship between McDonaldization and three of the most important social changes of our time—the rise of postindustrial society, which we have examined in the previous chapter. The discussion then shifts to a consideration of McDonaldization because it seems to indicate that this is a metaphor for the collective unconscious of our society.

Bureaucratization: Making Bureaucracies

A bureaucracy is a large-scale organization of power that is based on rules, written regulations, and the separation of labor. In these offices, people have certain positions that are defined and filled by those who occupy higher-level positions. The bureaucracy is largely a Westphalian institution, or a method of organizing society in which the power of the state is invested in the hands of a few officials who perform their tasks because of the respect and legal authority they are granted by the state. The officials are subject to heavy regulations that limit their discretion and expand their power. The modern state has an archaic character in that it lacks a sense of hierarchy and authority, and officials gain a position.

Ultimately, the bureaucracy did not emerge as a method of organizing society or as a method of organizing society. It emerged as a method of organizing society. A given task is broken down into a distinct portion of the larger task of the task, usually following a predetermined sequence. When each required part, the task is completed, and the bureaucracy has used what its past history has shown it to be.

Weber's Theory of Rationalization

The roots of modern thinking about the modern world are found in the writings of the century German sociologist Max Weber, who embedded his broader theory of rationalization in his broader theory of rationalization. Weber described how the modern world is largely rational—that is, dominated by human technologies that control the world largely failed to ration...
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Bureaucratization: Making Life More Rational

A bureaucracy is a large-scale organization composed of a hierarchy of offices. In these offices, people have certain responsibilities and must act in accordance with rules, written regulations, and means of compulsion exercised by those who occupy higher-level positions.

The bureaucracy is largely a creation of the modern Western world. Although earlier societies had organizational structures, they were not nearly as effective as the bureaucracy. For example, in traditional societies, officials performed their tasks because of a personal loyalty to their leader. These officials were subject to personal whim rather than impersonal rules. Their offices lacked clearly defined spheres of competence, there was no clear hierarchy of positions, and officials did not have to obtain technical training to gain a position.

Ultimately, the bureaucracy differs from earlier methods of organizing work because of its formal structure, which, among other things, allows for greater efficiency. Institutionalized rules and regulations lead, even force, those employed in the bureaucracy to choose the best means to arrive at their ends. A given task is broken down into components, with each office responsible for a distinct portion of the larger task. Incumbents of each office handle their part of the task, usually following preset rules and regulations and often in a predetermined sequence. When each of the incumbents has, in order, handled the required part, the task is completed. By handling the task this way, the bureaucracy has used what its past history has shown to be the optimum means to the desired end.

Weber's Theory of Rationality

The roots of modern thinking on bureaucracy lie in the work of the turn-of-the-century German sociologist Max Weber. His ideas on bureaucracy are embedded in his broader theory of the rationalization process. In the latter, Weber described how the modern Western world managed to become increasingly rational—that is, dominated by efficiency, predictability, calculability, and nonhuman technologies that control people. He also examined why the rest of the world largely failed to rationalize.
McDonaldization is an amplification and extension of Weber's theory of rationalization, especially into the realm of consumption. For Weber, the model of rationalization was the bureaucracy; for me, the fast-food restaurant is the paradigm of McDonaldization.

Weber demonstrated in his research that the modern Western world had produced a distinctive kind of rationality. Various types of rationality had existed in all societies at one time or another, but none had produced the type that Weber called formal rationality. This is the sort of rationality I refer to when I discuss McDonaldization or the rationalization process in general.

According to Weber, formal rationality means that the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures. Individuals are not left to their own devices in searching for the best means of attaining a given objective. Weber identified this type of rationality as a major development in the history of the world. Previously, people had been left to discover such mechanisms on their own or with vague and general guidance from larger value systems (religion, for example). After the development of formal rationality, they could use institutionalized rules that help them decide—or even dictate to them—what to do. An important aspect of formal rationality, then, is that it allows individuals little choice of means to ends. In a formally rational system, virtually everyone can (or must) make the same, optimal choice.

Weber praised the bureaucracy, his paradigm of formal rationality, for its many advantages over other mechanisms that help people discover and implement optimum means to ends. The most important advantages are the four basic dimensions of rationalization (and of McDonaldization).

First, Weber viewed the bureaucracy as the most efficient structure for handling large numbers of tasks requiring a great deal of paperwork (now often computer work). As an example, Weber might have used the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), for no other structure could handle millions of tax returns as well.

Second, bureaucracies emphasize the quantification of as many things as possible. Reducing performance to a series of quantifiable tasks helps people gauge success. For example, an IRS agent is expected to process a certain number of tax returns each day. Handling less than the required number of cases is unsatisfactory performance; handling more is excellence. The quantitative approach presents a problem, however: little or no concern for the actual quality of work. Employees are expected to finish a task with little attention paid to how well it is handled. For instance, IRS agents who receive positive evaluations from their superiors for managing large numbers of cases may actually handle the cases poorly, costing the government thousands or even millions of dollars in uncollected revenue. Or the agents may handle cases so aggressively that taxpayers become angered.

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Irrationality and the "Iron C"

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Third, because of their well-entrenched rules and regulations, bureaucracies also operate in a highly predictable manner. Incumbents of a given office know with great assurance how the incumbents of other offices will behave. They know what they will be provided with and when they will receive it. Outsiders who receive the services that bureaucracies dispense know with a high degree of confidence what they will receive and when they will receive it. Again, to use an example Weber might have used, the millions of recipients of checks from the Social Security Administration know precisely when they will receive their money and exactly how much they will receive.

Finally, bureaucracies emphasize control over people through the replacement of human judgment with the dictates of rules, regulations, and structures. Employees are controlled by the division of labor, which allocates to each office a limited number of well-defined tasks. Incumbents must do those tasks, and no others, in the manner prescribed by the organization. They may not, in most cases, devise idiosyncratic ways of doing those tasks. Furthermore, by making few, if any, judgments, people begin to resemble human robots or computers. Bureaucracies can then consider replacing humans with machines. This replacement has already occurred to some extent: In many settings, computers have taken over bureaucratic tasks once performed by people. Similarly, the bureaucracy’s clients are also controlled. They may receive appropriate services in certain ways and not others. For example, people can receive welfare payments by check or direct deposit, not in cash.

Irrationality and the “Iron Cage”

Despite the advantages it offers, bureaucracy suffers from the irrationality of rationality. Like a fast-food restaurant, a bureaucracy can be a dehumanizing place in which to work and by which to be served. Ronald Takaki characterizes rationalized settings as places in which the “self was placed in confinement, its emotions controlled, and its spirit subdued.” In other words, they are settings in which people cannot always behave as human beings—where people are dehumanized.

In addition to dehumanization, bureaucracies exhibit other irrationalities. Instead of remaining efficient, bureaucracies can become increasingly inefficient because of tangles of red tape and other pathologies. The emphasis on quantification often leads to large amounts of poor-quality work. Bureaucracies often become unpredictable as employees grow unclear about what they are supposed to do and clients do not get the services they expect. Because of these and other inadequacies, bureaucracies begin to lose control over those who work within and are served by them. Anger at the nonhuman technologies that replace them often leads employees to undercut or sabotage the operation of these technologies. All in all, what were designed as highly rational operations often end up being quite irrational.
Although Weber was concerned about the irrationalities of formally rationalized systems, he was even more animated by what he called the “iron (or steel) cage” of rationality. In Weber’s view, bureaucracies are cages in the sense that people are trapped in them, their basic humanity denied. Weber feared most that bureaucracies would grow more and more rational and that rational principles would come to dominate an increasing number of sectors of society. He anticipated a society of people locked into a series of rational structures, who could move only from one rational system to another—from rationalized educational institutions to rationalized workplaces, from rationalized recreational settings to rationalized homes. Society would eventually become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalized structures; there would be no escape.

A good example of what Weber feared is found in the contemporary rationalization of recreational activities. Recreation can be thought of as a way to escape the rationalization of daily routines. However, over the years, these escape routes have themselves become rationalized, embodying the same principles as bureaucracies and fast-food restaurants. Among the many examples of the rationalization of recreation are cruises and cruise lines, chains of campgrounds, and package tours. Take, for example, a 7-day Mediterranean cruise. The ship sails around at least a part of the Mediterranean, stopping briefly at major tourist attractions and towns along the coast of, say, southern Europe. This route allows tourists to glimpse the maximum number of sites in the 7-day period. At particularly interesting or important sights, the ship docks for a few hours to allow individuals to disembark, have a quick local meal, buy souvenirs, and take some pictures. Then a quick trip back to the ship, and it is off to the next locale. The cruise goers sleep during the overnight trips to these locales and take most of their meals on board ship. They awaken the next morning, have a good breakfast, and then they are at the next site. It’s all very efficient. With the rationalization of even their recreational activities, people do come close to living in Weber’s iron cage of rationality.

The Holocaust: Mass-Produced Death

Weber wrote about the iron cage of rationalization and bureaucratization in the early 1900s. Zygmunt Bauman argues that Weber’s worst fears about these processes were realized in the Nazi Holocaust, which began within a few decades of Weber’s death in 1920.

Bauman contends that “The Holocaust may serve as a paradigm of modern bureaucratic rationality.” Like bureaucracy, the Holocaust was a distinctive product of Western civilization, was not an aberration but “in civilization, its guiding spirit, its.

That is, the Holocaust required not have occurred in premodern pogroms that had occurred in allow for the systematic murder of the Holocaust.

The Holocaust can also be seen in which the goal was a perfectly free of Jews, as well as Hitler himself defined the Jews as from Nazi society.

The Holocaust had all the McDonaldization. It was an effective number of human beings, bullets were inefficient; the Nazis means of destroying people. The of the Jewish community to perform the next stage of victims) that it themselves. Many Jews cooperated to do (they might be able to save the system.

The Holocaust emphasized killing in the shortest time. The reality of life, or even of the death gas chambers.

In another quantitative sense, being seen as the most extreme o

Like everything else done in informed, expert, efficiently man to shame all its alleged premodern wasteful and ineffective by comp past genocidal episodes.

The Holocaust involved an efficient process had an assembly-line que the concentration camps; victim. Once the process was complete, it for systematic disposal.