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Book Reviews : George Ritzer: The McDonaldization of Society. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1993. George Ritzer: Expressing America. A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1995

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George Ritzer: *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1993.

George Ritzer: *Expressing America. A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society*. Thousand Oaks: Pine Forge Press, 1995.

George Ritzer, known as the writer of voluminous textbooks in sociological theory, has recently produced two smaller, engaging books, written for the general public. Both books forcefully demonstrate the relevance of classical sociological theory to contemporary society and social criticism. They are excellent appetizers as far as sociology is concerned. As such they can be recommended for introductory courses in sociology. *The McDonaldization of Society* demonstrates the relevance of Max Weber's theory of rationalization to modern societies. In *Expressing America* Ritzer relies on several perspectives. Besides Max Weber he also brings in C. Wright Mills, Karl Marx but most of all Georg Simmel. Several similarities between the books make it useful to present them together.

In *The McDonaldization of Society* Ritzer claims that the fast-food restaurant has replaced bureaucracy as the paradigm case of formal rationality, as described by Weber. Bureaucracies still exist and are of great importance in the modern world, in line with other precursors of McDonaldization, like scientific management (Taylorism) and the assembly line (Fordism). These

precursors provide the principles on which the chains of fast-food restaurants are built, and they contribute some of the structural bases needed for these chains to thrive. Yet, compared to its precursors, Ritzer maintains that McDonald's and the other manifestations of McDonaldization, such as shopping malls, Seven Eleven, Disneyland, and others, represent a quantum leap in the process of rationalization. McDonaldization is defined as '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.' Ritzer holds that there are four elements behind Weber's formal rationality, which are also constitutive of McDonaldization: efficiency, predictability, calculability and control over people through the replacement of human with non-human technology.

However, I must add that Ritzer is not particularly explicit on what McDonaldization brings along that was not already present in bureaucracy, Taylorism or Fordism. Accordingly, the reader is never sure where this particular manifestation of rationalization ends and other manifestations start. If there is no such distinction, the concept seems superfluous and may be understood simply as a fancy synonym for rationalization. On the other hand, if such a distinction can be established, the McDonaldization concept may contribute with new insight. Through a friendly reading of his presentation I find the concept of McDonaldization useful for the description of rationalization processes in interactive service industries, while bureaucracies, Taylorism and Fordism are more relevant to administrative and thing-producing work. As these earlier manifestations involve the activities of employees and their relations to machines and superiors, McDonaldization also involves the interface between customers and employees. This way customer activities, and consumer culture in general are more fundamentally influenced by McDonaldization than by other manifestations of rationalization. Citing Allen Shelton, Ritzer makes a point that may be attributed to such an interpretation of the concept: McDonald's has done to consumers what Fordism did to workers – it has succeeded in automating the customers. But by making this qualification of the concept, some of Ritzer's own examples of McDonaldization make less sense, like suburban tract houses, the 24-second clock in professional basketball, the use of microwave ovens in the home. None of these involve interactive services. They may be examples of the general process of rationalization, but make less sense as McDonaldization in this narrow interpretation of the concept.

Ritzer does not deny that the development towards rational systems has its advantages. The headlong dissemination of these systems is in itself a confirmation of the fact that they do meet important needs and wants of consumers. Ritzer's aim, is however, in line with Weber, to warn against the *irrationality* of such systems that serve to limit, compromise and undermine their rationality. He argues, for instance, that the efficiency of such systems is often illusive, based on the use of the consumer as an unpaid worker. The time saved in the internal production and delivery of the services is often exceeded by the time consumers spend in traffic jams and check-out lines. Ritzer criticizes McDonaldization for forwarding theatrical, false and deceptive environments for the enactment of pseudo-events. He further argues that McDonaldization is irrational from the point of view of the employees, who are controlled in detail, doing a limited number of routine tasks. This leads to high levels of resentment, job dissatisfaction, alienation, absenteeism and turnover in establishments such as fast-food restaurants.

According to Ritzer this irrationality can be attributed to 'the iron cage of McDonaldization' and brings society towards a dehumanized 'polar night of darkness'. **Three driving forces make it difficult, if not impossible, to back away**

from further institutionalization of McDonaldization: First, profit-making enterprises pursue McDonaldization because it leads to lower costs and higher profits. Second, McDonaldization is driven by our cultural system. It has become something we value in and of itself. Third, McDonaldization is well attuned to other changes taking place in contemporary western society, such as, for example, the hurried life of an increasing number of dual-career families, the mobile way of life of an automobile-based society and numerous technological advances that have spurred, but which are also spurred by McDonaldization. Even though Ritzer finds McDonaldization inescapable, he reflects upon some counter-strategies, collective as well as individual, which might modify McDonaldization or carve out non-rationalized niches in the otherwise rationalized systems. He is, however, rather pessimistic: 'Although I would not argue against such activities, I do not (. . .) think that they are likely to be very successful'.

According to Ritzer, McDonaldization is a modern, not a postmodern phenomenon. As such he contrasts several writers, such as Jean-Francois Lyotard, who explicitly labels McDonald's a postmodern phenomenon. Ritzer does not deny the fact that society has changed dramatically in the last twenty years or so, but maintains that these are superficial changes in the appearance of capitalism. Accordingly, there has been no radical disjuncture between modernity and postmodernity. This implies that even though postmodern traits have emerged in the modern world, elements of modernism still persist and show no sign of disappearing. To Ritzer this opens a seeming paradox: that McDonaldization is a modern project expanding in a postmodern world.

One question which is hardly touched upon is whether deskilling and automation, as described by Ritzer, are unanimous in all sorts of interactive service work. For instance, Ritzer never discusses the price sensitivity of different services and how this may have an influence on differences in McDonaldization between sectors and services. One objection to Ritzer's description is that most of his examples refer to 'trivial' services that seem to be highly price-sensitive, such as for example fast-food. If this is so, one should ask whether there can be other tendencies within less 'trivial', and less price-sensitive sectors, where the quality of the services or goods offered prevail as the benchmark of the relevant industries.

Another objection concerns the negative picture of the fast-food industry from a consumer point of view. Ritzer compares the fast-food restaurant with the home-made meal, and finds it to be more expensive and less pleasant. One could also compare it to the traditional cuisine-restaurant. By comparison fast-food restaurants are obviously cheaper, more informal and more accessible to more people. In such a comparison the fast-food restaurants may be seen as a kind of democratization of restaurant services. This way the growth of the fast-food industry has also been one of the factors both enabling and resulting from growth in female out-of-home paid employment, a point Ritzer does not explicitly address.

In *Expressing America. A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society*, Ritzer dives deeper into one particular sector of the American society: the credit card, its 'pushers', 'addicts', driving forces and consequent social problems. *Expressing America* owes a lot to C. W. Mills, as it seeks to demonstrate the public relevance of personal troubles. This way it offers a corrective to the tendency to individualize and medicalize social problems. Ritzer discusses a broad domain of contemporary shapes of money. The main focus of the book is on the general credit card, while debit cards and electronic funds transfers are treated in a separate appendix. According to Ritzer, the credit card is the most important American icon, because it means to obtain the other American icons. In line

with Simmel's 'relationism', Ritzer uses the credit card as a window to get a better view of American society and culture. Hence, the title of the book carries a double meaning: First, in line with Simmel's relationism, the credit card expresses something about America. Secondly, its speedy dissemination around the world gives other cultures and societies an American 'express' or appearance. Through the use of the cards other cultures, according to Ritzer, are Americanized. Though the credit card has its virtues, Ritzer focuses on its darker side and attendant problems – on consumerism and debt, fraud, invasion of privacy, rationalization and homogenization in the shape of Americanization.

Expressing America owes a lot to Simmel's analysis of money in *The Philosophy of Money* (1990). Ritzer uses several of Simmel's ideas as 'sensitizing concepts' in his analysis: First, compared to its precursors, such as barter, the money economy is associated with a 'temptation to imprudence', and a resulting greater risk of overspending and going deeply into debt. According to Ritzer, both the intangibility of money (and hence the distance between people and value) and the swiftness of transactions increase with the use of credit cards. Consequently, credit cards will lead to even greater levels of imprudence. Ritzer shows that credit card debt has become the most common form of financial liability in the US. Even though the risks of imprudence are more or less 'intrinsic' to the cards, he also blames the credit card industry for luring people even deeper into debt problems.

The second idea taken from Simmel concerns the fact that money makes possible many types of unethical and criminal acts that were more difficult to perpetrate in earlier economies. Ritzer lists a lot of fraudulent activities committed against the credit card companies and against consumers. The financial loss to consumers due to fraud is limited by US law to \$50, so most attention has been directed to the industry's losses. Ritzer shows, however, that these losses involve small amounts of money compared to the total turnover. Instead, he focuses on the exploitative practices of the industry. The industry profits greatly on such indebtedness, through fees and high interest rates. For instance, returns on the credit card are five times higher than benchmark in the banking industry for good profitability! He calls out for public action on this issue, either by the industry altering its practices or, more likely, through legislative initiatives.

The third idea taken up from Simmel concerns secrecy and privacy. Simmel claims that 'money, more than any other form of value, makes possible secrecy, invisibility and silence of exchange'. Since cash leaves no physical traces, transactions may be carried through secretly. Simmel implies that there is a historical progression on this point corresponding to the increasing abstraction in the form of money. On this point Ritzer finds Simmel to be wrong because the use of credit cards leaves an electronic as well as a paper trail. Hence, cash is the preferred medium of criminals. Ritzer claims that one of today's greatest threats to privacy comes from the credit card companies and their accompanying credit bureaus. Problems arise both from transparency due to the automatic recording and storing of every transaction, and from erroneous information finding its way into these registers. As for the latter, Ritzer points to the industry's lack of concern with correcting erroneous information. The concentration of credit information, erroneous or not, makes unauthorized apprehension as well as the sale of such information to direct-marketing agencies, employers, banks and government agencies into a growing problem. Accordingly, Ritzer calls out for further legal measures to protect consumers.

Also central to *Expressing America* are two issues at the heart of *The McDonaldization of Society*: the rationalization of society and the homogenization or Americanization of societies throughout the world. Regarding the first of these issues, Ritzer relies on both Weber and Simmel, pointing to their

agreement on this issue. This discussion contributes little that is new compared to the discussion in the previous book, with the exception of empirical examples from the credit card industry. One exception, however is the reference to Simmel's ideas on the blasé attitude to things, resulting from the quantitative obsession of rationality.

Ritzer's discussion of homogenization as Americanization is more elaborate in *Expressing America* than in the previous book. Here he picks up elements from globalization theory, like the idea that the credit card 'world' to some degree is part of what has been called 'third cultures', 'ethnoscapes' or 'technoscapes' – partially autonomous cultures/systems that transcend national boundaries and exist on a global basis, by the movement of people through tourism and/or as a technological system girdling the world. His main point, however, is that the credit card is an American phenomenon. Its origin and epicentre are in the US, and it disseminates around the world leaving unmistakably American footprints. The global industry is also heavily dominated by a few American companies and widely associated with America and the American way of life. Thus, until now, Ritzer contends, the homogenization process is not a globalization process, but really an Americanization process. However, this process may later become a true globalization process, mingling elements from different cultures all around the world. Ritzer admits that there are limits to the Americanization process: the credit card is unlikely to become more than a significant part of 'everyone's second culture'. At the end of his book he even discusses the fact that American credit cards can be used to buy, e.g., French and Japanese goods as well as American. In other words, these cards can be used both as a treat to other cultures and as a means by which other cultures can be nurtured and sustained. As such, credit cards can also foster heterogeneity, he concludes. This way Ritzer ends *Expressing America* by leaving some doubt concerning the direction and determinism of his own argument.

Owing to its richer empirical texture, the discussion in *Expressing America* is more convincing than that offered in *The McDonaldization of Society*. Social actors, notably the credit card industry, are more present in this story than in the previous book. Ritzer convincingly lays out the malaise of the American consumer society, criticizing the credit card companies for their exploitative conduct and the American government for their unwillingness to regulate industry and to give consumers adequate protection. As such, it is a strong consumerist manifesto.

The themes of rationalization and globalization are the common dominator of the two books. However, this is also where his argument is least convincing. The individual's appropriation of credit cards, BigMacs and Disney is never questioned in either book. Do McDonald's and AmEx-cards mean the same thing to different people? Are credit cards incorporated in the household economy in the same way in different families, in different countries? Do Disney and McDonald's have the same 'functions' and meanings in France, Russia and the US? Building exclusively on the classical writers Ritzer ignores the growing literature, e.g. in the field of economic sociology (e.g. Smelser & Swedberg 1994), that explicitly and through fieldwork studies deals with the issues of rationalization and globalization. Furthermore, the author ignores contributions within the STS-tradition (Science and Technology Studies, e.g. Jasanoff et al. 1995) that discuss the heterogeneity inherent in appropriation and interpretation of artefacts and technology. Important contributors in these fields hold that they have not found unanimous indications of the rationalization processes Ritzer claims to evolve. Though Ritzer may be right in implying that the dissemination of such structures as the credit card or the McDonald's restaurant represents a sort of globalization, or even Americanization on the level of appearance, the local

appropriation and interpretation of these phenomena may differ considerably. Ritzer never opens a discussion of what room these phenomena offer for local interpretation and adjustment. These are empirical questions that can only be illuminated through extensive fieldwork in different countries and milieus. In a footnote, Ritzer refers to Viviana Zelizer (1994) who disagrees with him on one particular point, the levelling of money. Ritzer does not refer to any other fieldwork studies of consumers' own coping strategies and conceptualizations of these issues. In this way consumers are mostly portrayed as passive, possibly desperate, victims, and not as active, innovative subjects in their own right.

A similar criticism can also be directed towards a great many undocumented generalizations that are made throughout the two books. Ritzer holds, for example, that there is a greater risk of imprudence using credit cards than debit/ATM cards, or that debit cards do increase the number and rapidity of economic transactions. Even though these and similar statements seem reasonable, references to empirical studies would have strengthened his argument. Ritzer states in the preface of *Expressing America* that the presentation is 'not weighted down by the requirements of scholarly monographs'. Even if we accept this, a more humble attitude towards the empirical field would have given his account even greater credibility.

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Stephen P. Turner & Regis A. Factor: *Max Weber. The Lawyer as Social Thinker*. London and New York: Routledge, 1994.

It is surprising to find something new in the stream of literature over Max Weber. It is especially surprising to find something both new and plausible in the numerous and mostly Icarian attempts at a *Gesamtdeutung* of Weber's oeuvre, the search for an all-inclusive Key that would explain everything that used to appear as fragmented and elusive. Probably one basis for this is that this book is not really an attempt at an all-inclusive interpretation, in the sense of claiming to have found any concealed intellectual vision. It is rather a well-argued attempt with lucid and unequivocal theses to place Weber within a tradition and understand him in his context – and what emerges is an atheoretical Weber, much less a sociologist than is generally supposed in the Anglo-Saxon discourse and in sociological textbooks. Instead, we find a legal 'formalist' with his basic intellectual legacy from Roman law. Turner & Factor would not deny that Weber