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American Behavioral Scientist 2003; 47; 107

DOI: 10.1177/0002764203256178

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Introduction

McDonald's in Question: The Limits of the Mass Market

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The more dinners a man eats, the more comfort he possesses, the hungrier and more uncomfortable some part of him becomes.

—Randall Jarrell (1962)

The past decade has witnessed sustained interest in the process of McDonaldization (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002; Ritzer, 1998, 2002; Smart, 1999). When *The McDonaldization of Society* was first published (Ritzer, 1993), McDonald's was in the midst of a remarkable 40-year rise during which it changed the way America eats by pioneering the concept of fast food. By using factory-like techniques to serve a stripped-down menu of hamburgers, fries, and shakes more quickly than was possible at a traditional hamburger stand, and by acting on a business model that emphasized expansion through franchising, McDonald's grew from a single hamburger stand to an American institution in just a few decades. Today, McDonald's has more than 30,000 outlets worldwide, serves more than 40 million customers per day, and does \$40 billion in annual sales, making it by far the largest selling restaurant chain in the world.

Ironically, however, sustained interest in McDonaldization recently has been accompanied by the declining fortunes of the McDonald's Corporation. Stock shares that reached a height of \$49 per share in 1999 traded at about \$22 per share in the summer of 2003 (off about 55%). Earnings growth and same-store sales, key indicators of corporate health, have fallen for 3 years straight. In December 2002, McDonald's reported its first quarterly loss in more than 40 years of business. McDonald's reacted by announcing plans to end operations entirely in three countries, to close more than 700 other restaurants worldwide, and to lay off several hundred employees. Given that it continues to control about 40% of the fast food market, such bad news might be interpreted as a temporary setback, the joint result of one-time events (i.e., closing stores in Turkey) and world economic trends (i.e., the falling value of the dollar). Support for this interpretation can be found in the fact that McDonald's continues to grow, albeit

AMERICAN BEHAVIORAL SCIENTIST, Vol. 47 No. 2, October 2003 107-118

DOI: 10.1177/0002764203256178

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more slowly than a few years ago, opening a thousand new restaurants in 2002 with sales growing about 3% for the year.

Still, industry analysts have suggested that McDonald's faces more fundamental problems. Domestically, McDonald's has not kept pace with trends in eating habits toward healthier, upscale meals. The rise of fast-casual chains has steered customers away from burgers toward more expensive, better quality fare. Internationally, McDonald's has been the target of protestors who identify the golden arches with American cultural imperialism, economic domination, and political heavy-handedness. International consumers have begun to turn away from fast food as the novelty of American-style eating diminishes. The inescapable conclusion is that McDonald's faces serious long-term challenges to maintaining its position as the world's most popular fast food restaurant.

This introduction seeks to explain why consumers are turning away from McDonald's and mass culture more generally. For a long while, it appeared that a rising standard of living was balanced by a decline in the quality of culture because producers of culture were more concerned with reaching a mass market than they were with the quality of their goods. This seems to be changing. As the postindustrial age has blossomed, increasing educational attainment and rising social ambitions have come together to change many people's ideas about what they want to buy. Consequently, a style of consumer culture consisting of educational travel, organic foods, professional quality tools, and natural materials has become more salient, whereas fast food culture appears to be declining in influence. For educated consumers, both here and abroad, McDonald's has become a symbol of crass commercialism and lowbrow culture. Luxury consumption is a long-established phenomenon (Braudel, 1979). Yet the fact that it has become the principle alternative to McDonaldized consumption has transformed luxury consumption from glittery ostentation to an earthy traditionalism. Middle- and upper-middle-class consumers increasingly seek out craft-produced commodities as alternatives to mass-produced goods. Artisan cheeses, handmade sweaters, rustic antiques, and even independent films gain credibility from the fact that they are produced for small audiences of consumers who think of themselves as connoisseurs rather than the mass market.

MCDONALDIZATION

George Ritzer's theory of McDonaldization examines the organizational underpinnings of mass culture to show how an encompassing ideal of efficiency makes mass consumption possible and profitable. The theory extends Max Weber's (1968) rationalization thesis beyond the bureaucracy and the factory to other sectors of social life. Weber observed a set of changes in governmental and corporate administration that were undertaken to limit mistakes and increase efficiency by replacing personal authority with sets of written rules and clear-cut

hierarchies, effectively turning the workplace into a machine but squeezing out skill and expertise in the process. Although Ritzer draws examples from education, town planning, the media, and elsewhere, his special focus has been on the rationalized underpinnings of consumer society and the deep influence that McDonald's, as a successful exemplar, has had on the shape of almost all contemporary means of consumption (Ritzer, 1999).

According to the theory, McDonald's efficiency as a delivery system has made it the perfect vehicle for the expansion of mass culture around the world. The rapid and far-flung growth of McDonald's is a Darwinian tale of survival of the fittest. Its early success was attributable to the fact that its restaurants could offer lower prices, faster service, and more consistent quality than competitors. This high level of efficiency is adapted to the harried pace of modern life and suited to the efficient workplace. As garment factories, silicon chip manufactures, and call centers have proliferated overseas, McDonald's has followed in their wake, providing inexpensive meals to new consumers eager to experience the American way of life. It is fair to say that the principles of McDonaldization have played as great a part in the triumph of consumerism as did the factory in the triumph of mass production. Both of these rationalized systems have helped to make consumer goods more abundant and affordable as they move from factory to market to consumer.

The focus of the McDonaldization thesis on the organization of consumption strikingly illustrates the power to compete effectively by controlling costs. Ritzer has a variety of ideas about why consumers choose McDonaldized settings over other means of consumption. The theory implies that McDonald's customers value, or at least tolerate, efficiency in their means of consumption. McDonald's historical success is based on the fact that consumers want and admire a well-run operation and are impatient with slow service, high prices, or inconsistent products. Drawing on postmodern social theory, Ritzer also has presented a set of tactics McDonaldized settings use to attract consumers. He argues that the prevalence of themed settings in the contemporary consumer landscape provides a counterbalance to the tendency of McDonaldization to disenchant consumers (Ritzer, 1999). Finally, in his writings on globalization, Ritzer has shown that McDonaldization is a fairly adaptable process because the principles can be applied to the needs of consumers in a range of social settings (Ritzer & Malone, 2001). Yet the theory does not provide any clear guidance on the question of why consumers have begun to turn away from McDonald's.

THE REJECTION OF MASS CULTURE

Mass culture is a term that has been used to refer to the popular cultural artifacts of industrial society. Generally speaking, mass-produced and mass-marketed books, music, art, film, and food have gradually replaced traditional folk culture

over the past 200 years as people have turned to the market to satisfy their needs and desires. Hannah Arendt (1959) believed that the media products and commodities of industrial society are more accurately thought of as entertainment or amusement rather than culture in the sense of the enduring products of a civilization (p. 46). Indeed, the term mass culture carried the sense of products that serve as diversions that fill empty time in the cycle of labor but aim at nothing elevated or enduring. Similar to bread or meat, they are commodities destined to be used up and, therefore, a constant flow of new products is necessary to feed society's huge appetite for fresh amusement. To be widely distributed for the purposes of entertainment, such products are sanitized, market-tested, and cleverly packaged to make them more appropriate for mass sale.

There have been critiques of mass culture for as long as it has been with us. Such critiques attack the popular culture supplied by the mass media and consumer goods industries for their harmful effects on individuals and society as a whole. Although in the 19th century the workplace was known as the principal location of exploitation, alienation, and dehumanization, the 20th century felt the consequences of industrial society in the spheres of leisure and consumption. These critiques suggest that mass culture is "undesirable because it is mass-produced by profit-minded entrepreneurs solely for the gratification of a paying audience" (Gans, 1999, p. 29). The underlying theme is that the growth of consumer society and the rise of mass media have catastrophically reduced the diversity and richness of cultural forms. Moreover, people have lost the social foundations of local community and are cast adrift in an incoherent sea of commodities without an identity or a sense of belonging. According to such critiques, "it is the disposable character of mass culture that does the greatest harm by reducing the level of cultural quality of a society and creating a passive audience responsive to the techniques of mass persuasion used by demagogues" (Gans, 1999, p. 29). Manipulated by advertising and television to believe they are "really living," consumers become passive and their lives become monotonous and uninteresting.

Academic critics of mass culture tend to bemoan the diminishment of high culture (Arendt, 1959; Marcuse, 1966). But empirical studies have suggested that "snob" consumption is on the decline in certain sectors (Peterson & Kern, 1996). Consumers who are dissatisfied with mass culture are not very likely to adopt an exclusive diet of high culture either. Consumer critics of mass culture are far more likely to turn to natural products produced by traditional methods. As social critic David Brooks (2000) put it,

You will never spend large sums on things associated with the rich, like yachts, caviar or truffles. Instead, you will buy unpretentious items associated with the proletariat—except you'll buy pretentious versions of these items, which actual members of the proletariat would find preposterous. For example, you'll go shopping for a basic food like potatoes, but you won't buy an Idaho spud. You'll select one of those miniature potatoes of distinction that only grows in certain soils of northern France. (p. 404)

The trend is widespread. Over the past two decades, venues for upscale consumption of this sort have become fixtures on the landscape of consumption. Although McDonald's has seen its sales stagnate or decline, natural, craft-produced, traditional, and local products are becoming increasingly popular in spite of the recent economic downturn.

Natural. Whole Foods Market has grown tenfold in the past decade by taking advantage of America's embrace of healthier lifestyles. Whole Foods Market is a business committed to selling high-quality natural and organic foods. Concentrating stores in top metropolitan markets—where the elite meet to eat—Whole Foods projects having 300 stores and \$10 billion in sales by the end of the decade.

Craft-produced. Panera Bread Company is a bakery-cafe that "focuses on breads made with all natural ingredients and a craftsman's attention to quality and detail" (www.panerabread.com/pages/a_ir.php). Ranked as one of the top growth companies in the food industry, the company franchisees operate almost 500 stores in 30 states with sales of about \$1 billion a year.

Traditional. Restoration Hardware specializes in distinctive and high quality home furnishings. Its Web site announces, "The company focuses on products that have a sense of history or authenticity to which customers can relate, believing that customers have a strong desire to return to traditions or create traditions of their own." Since 1980, the brand has expanded into malls and metropolitan areas in the United States and Canada as well as creating a successful Web and catalog business.

Local. Ritzer also has noted that the ideals of the Slow Food movement represent an important alternative to McDonaldization. Slow Food is an organization dedicated to cultivating the art of living by rediscovering regional cooking. The movement today has about 550 chapters worldwide with about 65,000 members and has received extensive media attention.

On the surface, such rejections of mass culture appear to have taken the form of a romantic rebellion against the dehumanized aspects of a McDonaldized world with preferences for the natural and traditional taking center stage (Campbell, 1989). Similar to the 19th-century romantics who stood in opposition to the scientific thinking and technological developments of their time, these modern-day romantics oppose the rationalized characteristics of mass culture by developing tastes for authentic consumer goods. The new firms that cater to these tastes must walk a fine line between running a streamlined organization and catering to their customer's tastes. Although aspects of their businesses continue to reflect the processes of McDonaldization, they are blended with noncommodified, nonrationalized culture aspects.

CONSPICUOUS CONSUMPTION AND THE RESTAURANT

I have so far suggested that at least some consumers are rejecting mass culture in favor of a lifestyle built on natural, craft-produced, traditional, and local goods. Although this trend clearly indicates dissatisfaction with the blandness and homogeneity of mass culture, it also must be understood as a cultivation of taste in a market that threatens to democratize consumption and obliterate social distinctions. Although consumers are not buying high culture as such, they are engaging in the same sort of pretentious consumption as consumers of classical high culture. Thus, we need to attend to the role of social status in determining consumer tastes.

The term “conspicuous consumption” describes purchases made with the aim of increasing status and prestige. Theorists of conspicuous consumption are in agreement with theories of mass culture insofar as they also believe that cultural goods are seldom appreciated for their intrinsic beauty, truth, and value—for their contribution to richness of civilization. But instead of supposing that popular culture is becoming increasingly homogeneous, theories of conspicuous consumption see consumer products as stratified on the basis of class tastes. Instead of supposing that consumers are increasingly passive, theories of conspicuous consumption see them as engaging in individual and collective processes of class competition on the terrain of culture. In this view, culture is a social commodity that can buy access to higher social status and prestige (Bourdieu, 1984).

Thorstein Veblen formulated the classic expression of this view when he argued that class competition proceeds on the basis of individual-level “pecuniary emulation,” whereby consumers seek to emulate their social betters to improve their own social standing.

So long as the comparison is distinctly unfavorable to himself, the normal, average individual will live in chronic dissatisfaction with his present lot; and when he has reached what may be called the normal pecuniary standard of the community . . . this chronic dissatisfaction will give place to a restless straining to place a wider and ever-widening pecuniary interval between himself and this average standard. (Veblen, 1899/1967, p. 31)

Invidious comparisons push status-conscious consumers to buy more and more goods of higher and higher quality. The resulting cycle privileges spending on conspicuous goods such as clothing, houses, and cars that signal one’s social status to the wider community.¹ Although Veblen emphasized the motivation of prestige, his perspective is implicitly in accord with the mass culture perspective insofar as all consumers pursue the same goods for the same reasons; consumption is stratified by the ability to afford to consume well, but the canon of taste is similar across classes (Gartman, 1991). In fact, studies have suggested that the concept of pecuniary emulation obfuscates real differences in the tastes and

consuming styles of social classes (Bourdieu, 1984; Holt, 1998). For our purposes, however, it underscores the competition for status within a stratum of professionals and white-collar workers rather than for society as a whole.

Full-service restaurants have always been public space dedicated to conspicuous consumption.

By relocating culinary creativity and fine dining from private homes into public space, the restaurant offered an ideal semipublic venue for the display and affirmation of status in a bounded space that simultaneously defined nondiners as nonelite and marked all diners as members of the elite. (Ferguson, 1998, p. 606)

In the 19th century, patrons who could afford to eat in restaurants were fed multicourse meals and were lavishly attended to by the wait staff. The elaborate ceremony of these meals affirmed a social structure in which some people were born to serve and others were born to be served. On the other hand, the diner is the working-class counterpart to the haute cuisine of uptown kitchens. In diners, counter service is the norm, menus are often limited, and prices are kept low. Diners are favored by workers in need of a quick meal and families squeezed for time (Hurley, 1997). In diners, conspicuous consumption is far less important than calories and community.

McDonald's is much more like the diner than it is like the full-service restaurant. There are few opportunities for patrons of McDonald's to engage in any sort of status consumption. McDonald's has traded on the fact that consumers value efficiency, predictability, and low price when they want a quick meal. Unfortunately for McDonald's, some elements of the fast-casual niche have managed to satisfy these same values while also appealing to consumer's desires for organic, craft-produced, traditional, and local consumer goods. Chains such as Baja Fresh, Boston Market, and Panera all promise to satisfy one or more of these needs in addition to providing fast service. Patrons of these chains can eat a quick meal while also allaying their social anxiety. They can eat fresh bread like a European or ethnic food like a cosmopolitan or sample comfort food and remember the holiday meals of their childhood.

MCDONALDIZATION AFTER THE FAST FOOD ERA

In the decades since McDonald's began, there has been a major shift in the way people consume so that most new consumers, diverse as they are, differ from those of the 1950s and 1960s. While McDonald's operates on a principle of efficient production for a mass market, a more recent tendency has been to focus on the symbolic meaning of consumer goods for niches of consumers. This shift has made middle-class consumers more aware of alternatives to the mass market and has made for an explosion of lifestyle consumption. No single factor can

account for the shifting priorities of consumers, but it is possible to discern four more or less distinctive developments, each of which has informed the social aspirations of consumers and created a demand for a distinctive alternative to mass culture.

DIFFERENTIATION OF PRODUCTION

Contemporary cultural production and marketing are organized in a manner that exploits the consumer's pursuit of social distinction. Studies of culture-producing industries suggest that as the field of production has become crowded with competitors, the pressure to innovate has increased and new products have proliferated (DiMaggio, 1977). Culture-producing industries such as the music, publishing, fashion, and fast food industries have become increasingly differentiated. A countervailing trend toward isomorphism, the product of risk-averse management, results in the sort of fashion cycle described by Georg Simmel (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Simmel, 1957). For example, the success of the Jeep Cherokee launched the wave of imitators that became the SUV craze. In spite of this cycle, over the long term, culture-producing industries tend to differentiate as the pressure to compete pushes firms to cultivate market niches.

MARKETING

Marketers also have adopted a strategy of segmentation designed to concentrate on specific demographic segments of the market to increase the perception of difference between their own products and those of their competitors. Such a strategy enables smaller firms to compete with larger firms by chiseling away a portion of their customer base. Although mass-marketed products continue to control large segments of their markets, competitors find their niche by targeting the young, retirees, Blacks, or the affluent. As a consequence of the splintering of mass markets, Cohen (2003) argues that "individuals gained more opportunities to express their separate identities through their choices as consumers" (p. 309). Thus, the differentiated marketplace provides opportunities to express more individualized tastes.

THE POSTINDUSTRIAL AGE

In many ways, McDonaldization is an artifact of the industrial age. Its production process is modeled on the Fordist factory. Its formula appealed to a broad audience of unadventurous eaters.

The American working class entered the postwar era more homogenized than ever before. Participation in labor unions, the armed forces, public schools, and such class-based forms of mass leisure as bowling leagues and amusement parks

provided blue-collar families with a unifying set of experiences, institutions, and aspirations. (Hurley, 1997, p. 1286)

But the rise of the postindustrial age was characterized by a decline in many of the institutions that formed the basis of homogenization. As the industrial workforce declined and the service sectors of the economy grew, Americans began to place a premium on a university education as necessary for achieving social mobility. Moreover, workers in the service sectors of the economy cultivated cultural capital as a significant component of their success (Bell, 1976). As a result, people became better equipped to be more discerning consumers. Around the same time, there was a burgeoning of American high culture. Writing in the late 1970s, DiMaggio and Useem (1978) observed that “the number of museums and theaters has increased, the number of orchestras, opera companies, and dance companies has skyrocketed, and attendance at all of them is up” (p. 141). Postindustrial consumers have become much more aware of the symbolic meanings attached to the goods they consume.

GENERATIONS

Karl Mannheim argued that members of a generation become oriented to one another and begin to share common ideas (Mannheim, 1952; Ritzer, 1993). Naturally, the experiences of generations shape their ideas about what they consume. McDonald's and McDonaldization were the product of a generation that believed in better living through engineering. This generation saw the promise of modernity—the television set, air travel, single-family homes—and wholeheartedly embraced it. It was the era of the company man. But the baby boomer generation has been shaped by their experience of the countercultural 1960s. As a result, as they have matured, they have incorporated their youthful ideas about corporate culture into the way that they consume. Although the hippies may have grown up to be lawyers and doctors, their consumption patterns remained distinctively countercultural. As they have matured, they have increasingly become concerned with living well and suspicious of mass culture. Generation X is even more aware of the manipulations of mass culture than its parents. Although it often has been pointed out that members of this generation manipulate consumer and media culture ironically, it also seems clear that they often choose alternatives to mass culture whether it be alternative music, independent film, or microbrews. Recent generations are more acutely aware than their parents of the drawbacks of living in a consumer society and have used their buying power to try to maintain a sense of self, community, and tradition in spite of it.

McDonald's is out of step with these developments. An artifact of a homogeneous period of 20th-century history, it aims to rationalize the dining experience (and many other consumption experiences) in the same way the workplace is rationalized. Although people work in rationalized workplaces out of necessity, if given a choice, many of them will choose to express their disdain for the

dehumanizing effects of rationalization, their need for individual distinction, and their desire to live a simpler life. Such values have gained momentum in recent years. They indicate that McDonald's faces an uphill battle.

But the processes of McDonaldization are adaptable to these new consumer demands. Even though the products differ significantly from the lowest common denominator of mass culture, appeals to natural, craft-produced, traditional, and local products are not necessarily incommensurate with standardization and efficiency. Entrepreneurs and managers will soften the principles of McDonaldization to counter elite distaste for mass consumption. Firms such as Whole Foods Market broker a marriage between capitalistic growth, organizational efficiency, and emergent consumer tastes for products free from the blandness and sterility that tinges fast food culture. This suggests that, in the future, the principles of McDonaldization will be more selectively applied than they have been in the fast food industry. Moreover, the principles will be used to fill niches rather than monopolize entire markets. Thus, this trend appears to pose a greater threat to the McDonald's Corporation than to the process of McDonaldization.

McDONALDIZATION AND THE WORLD

To understand the difficulties McDonald's has had in overseas operations, it is useful to recall Weber's conception of status groups. Weber emphasized the competitive use of symbolic goods by collective actors. Collective groups develop sets of styles, traits, and skills that are accorded social status in society. When successful, these groups can leverage their cultural resources to enhance their overall prestige. DiMaggio (1994) notes, "Because status cultures must enable members to recognize peers and detect imposters, they are relatively stable; that is, their elements are slow to change lest they fail to convey reliable information about membership" (p. 43). The Weberian perspective on status groups provides insight into the resistance McDonald's has met when expanding into the markets of rigidly traditional national cultures.

Because globalization heightens awareness of differences, it is likely that the status cultures on which such differences are based is somewhat strengthened by an interaction with the forces of McDonaldization and global capitalism. We know this to be true insofar as the 20th century was characterized by the rise of nationalism and religious fundamentalism in response to the expansionism of capitalism. Although global culture puts more on the menu for people to choose from, it is not yet clear that in the long run the world will choose rationalization. Weber suspected as much. Many of his historical writings are dedicated to explaining why capitalism grew in the West but failed to take root in other cultures. Although it is impossible to do justice to this subject in this space, it has become clear that the McDonaldization of society often hits a roadblock when it is exported abroad. Although there are certain cultures that have embraced

McDonaldization—Japan comes to mind—there are many others where McDonald's, fast food, and/or rationalization have failed to gain traction. In the developing world, traditional street foods often make more sense than hamburgers, and traditional ways often make more sense than modern systems.

This special issue explores the many facets of the historical development and global reach of McDonaldization. The articles are united by their efforts to detail the mechanisms through which McDonald's has become a part of the fabric of our world. Together, they suggest a more nuanced understanding of global culture that can take us beyond a simplistic portrayal of encroaching mass culture. These articles suggest more interesting processes than this introductory article manages to capture. Ritzer and his interlocutors take pains to point to empirical evidence that suggesting that the principles of efficiency, calculability, quantifiability, and control are sufficiently flexible to be applied to different sectors of the economy and to be adapted to different locales and circumstances. The range of situations to which McDonaldization can be applied and the adaptability of the model assures that the direst visions of global homogenization go unrealized. It also means that efficiency is destined to remain with us for the foreseeable future.

The worldwide spread of McDonaldization has had an undeniable effect on traditional ways of life, often to the detriment of local practices, and its influence is likely to be with us for quite some time as the world continues to industrialize. Nevertheless, the triumph of McDonaldization is not a certain model for the future. Many regions of the world remain untouched by McDonaldization. And, as we become more affluent, ours is rapidly losing its taste for it. It is one thing to note that McDonaldization may have helped usher in the era of mass consumption, it is another thing to suggest that this was the end of history. Because the process of McDonaldization has been instrumental in shaping the landscape of consumption, we need to understand how it is being adapted to suit new locales and changing times.

NOTE

1. The details of Veblen's perspective have been widely critiqued as at odds with contemporary opinions that do favor ostentatious display (Ritzer, Wiedenhoft, & Murphy, 2001).

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