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Islands of the Living Dead

The Social Geography of McDonaldization

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Two images of the social geography of the McDonaldization of society suggest themselves: Weber's "iron cage" and Foucault's "carceral archipelago." Although both are helpful in understanding McDonaldization, neither is satisfactory. On one hand, although the cage-like image fits to a degree, it is certainly not an iron cage because escape remains an easy (if not often taken) option for most people. On the other hand, the idea of an archipelago of McDonaldized settings is very attractive, but again, because escape is easy, it cannot be considered a carceral system. It is argued that it is best to see today's McDonaldized systems as "islands of the living dead." Building on George Romero's sci-fi cult classic, the author contends that although there is much life on these islands, they are also in many senses "dead." Although it is in the interest of the owners of these settings to make them as dead as possible, those in them often struggle to create as much life as possible.

Keywords: *McDonaldization; rationalization; iron cage; carceral archipelago; social geography*

Although there have been notable exceptions (especially the Chicago School of urban ecology and its famous concentric zone theory), sociologists have not been much concerned with issues relating to human (or social) geography (for an overview of that field, especially some of its most recent developments, see Dear & Flusty, 2002). However, in the last several decades, a number of major social theorists have devoted increasing attention to space and spatial images. This is most explicit in Giddens's (1984) focus on space (and time) in structuration theory, but it is also clear in Bourdieu's (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) notion of "field" and in Habermas's (1987) thinking on system and life world and the colonization of the latter by the former. Although these and other works in sociology and social theory lead us in the direction of social geography, they are notably abstract and generally lack an effort to "map" at least a part of the social world (Bourdieu's "maps" of various "fields" are exceptions, although they remain highly abstract).

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Another trend within sociology (and many other fields) that points in the direction of a social geography is increasing attention to globalization (Robertson, 1992). Clearly, works on globalization involve either explicit or implicit concerns with space and changes in the way space is used throughout the world. More specifically, the work of Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) and his many followers (Chase-Dunn & Hall, 1994) on world-system theory involves an even greater sense of global space and its mapping.

When one turns to the field of social geography itself, one is struck by the fact that many of the same historical trends and contemporary developments in social theory that have been, and are, of influence in sociology also are having an impact on the theory and practice of social geography. Thus, for example, one finds a powerful impact of such theories as Marxism, post-Marxism, poststructuralism, postmodernism, feminism, actor-network theory, and many others in both social geography and sociology. There is not much difference, at least theoretically, between the two fields; the major difference is in the empirical¹ foci of their theoretically informed works.

All of this indicates that it would be relatively easy for sociologists, especially those trained in social theory, to turn their attention to issues of social geography. There is a long tradition in the field of interest in such matters and the current explosion of theoretical work on spatial issues is in accord with such a focus. In addition, the work of leading thinkers in social geography such as Henri Lefebvre (1991), David Harvey (1989), and Edward Soja (1989) are well-known to social theorists in sociology. Thus, there are strong reasons for at least some sociologists to devote more attention to social geographic issues and there is every reason to believe that they can make important contributions to this field.

With this as background, I want to focus in the remainder of this article on the social geography of one of my focal concerns—the McDonaldization of society (Ritzer, 2000). This, of course, is based on Max Weber's famous work on rationalization and his vision of the social world as being increasingly encased in an "iron cage" of rationalization. This metaphor can be interpreted in various ways, but one that has not been explored systematically is from the perspective of social geography.

On the surface, when examined from this geographic point of view, the image of an iron cage seems to convey the sense of an entire society, or even world, enclosed by an overarching system of rationalization. Although this is one geographic image, the fact is that Weber famously lacked a sense of society (let alone the world) as a whole but instead focused on specific structures, institutions, and domains. Thus, it could be argued that it would be more accurate to say that Weber envisioned a series of iron cages rather than a single, overarching cage. He did see such cages growing more numerous with more and more sectors of society coming to be rationalized. In addition, he believed that the bars on these cages were growing stronger, thicker, and harder. However, this does not yield a view of a society as a whole (or the world) growing increasingly

rationalized. Indeed, to Weber, one of the great advantages of capitalism over socialism is that gaps inevitably remain between the individual cages in capitalist systems, allowing people, if they so wish, to escape rationalization. In contrast, the goal in socialism was the creation of an overarching rational system, a truly “gapless”² iron cage at the societal level. The innumerable problems associated with the efforts of the socialist societies to create such an iron cage (the death of millions of people and the other human rights abuses associated with the Gulag Archipelago), and the gaps that provided safety valves in capitalism and helped prevent most of those problems, may help to explain the failure of the former and the triumph of the latter.

Several important issues are raised by this discussion: Why did Weber offer an image of an iron cage? Why was it interpreted as being all-encompassing? Why does such an all-embracing view not fit the contemporary situation, or at least that portion of it being analyzed here?

Similar to so many social theorists of his day, Weber had a productivist bias, with the result that he tended to focus on workplace settings, especially the bureaucracy. People employed in the bureaucracy, as well as those who required its services, were, and to some degree still are, likely to find themselves in a setting that could be considered an iron cage. The bureaucracies that attracted much of Weber’s attention also were those associated with the state and the legal system. Weber’s cage-like image of the nature of these systems has much in common with that offered by Franz Kafka in novels such as the *The Trial* and *The Castle*. In addition, Weber was interested in these settings for many specific reasons and not just for their broad implications for work and politics. For example, he was interested in the rationalization of law itself and its movement in the direction of a “gapless” system. Thus, in various settings, and for many different reasons, Weber does present an image of an iron cage, or at least of a series of such cages, and it is this continuity in his work that led at least some of his interpreters to think in terms of an overarching iron cage.

It is important to note that one thing that Weber, because of his productivist bias, devoted little or no attention to was the issue of consumption or the ways in which the settings of concern to him rationalized consumption. Of course, in the era in which Weber wrote, issues of consumption were far less significant than many other topics, especially those related to production and the state.³ It was, and is, easy to view the settings of concern to Weber (and Kafka)—the bureaucracy, the state, the courts—as iron cages. Those involved with them as employees or even as clients were, more or less, forced to be so involved. This is well illustrated by both the defendants in Kafka’s *The Trial* as well as those employed by the courts in which they were ensnared. However, the focus in this article, and arguably in the contemporary world, is on settings associated with consumption, and those involved cannot be seen as coerced in the same way that employees of the bureaucracy or defendants in a legal case are coerced. Customers have far more freedom, at least on the surface, to choose their consumption sites and to leave when they wish. They can even opt to avoid most, if not all, consumption

sites. Although the iron cage image might continue to work, at least to some degree, for employees of consumption settings, it is not an apt description of the situation confronting consumers who are largely free to come and go as they wish.

Although the image of an iron cage is not appropriate today, at least for society as a whole, that is not to say that it may not someday come to pass, even in a world dominated by consumption and consumption settings. Such a futuristic vision is to be found in Neal Stephenson's (1992) science fiction novel *Snow Crash*. Envisioned here is a world dominated by a bewildering variety of McDonaldized franchise systems (even prisons and churches have been franchised) that have come together to form one continuous system: a near-iron cage.

The franchise and the virus work on the same principle: what thrives in one place will thrive in another. You just have to find a sufficiently virulent business plan, condense it into a three-ring binder—its DNA—Xerox [sic] it, and embed it in the fertile lining of a well-traveled highway, preferably one with a left-turn lane. Then the growth will expand until it runs up against the property lines . . . this parking lot is linked with that of a Chop Shop franchise next door . . . which in turn flows into the lot of a neighborhood strip mall. A dedicated thrasher could probably navigate from L.A. to New York by coasting from one parking lot into the next. (Stephenson, 1992, pp. 190-193)

Whatever the real possibilities of such a seamless system of McDonaldized consumption sites arising in the future, the fact remains that today it is more accurate to think of those sites as islands of McDonaldization.

In fact, Weber's actual image of the social geography of rationalization comes closer to another social geography—Foucault's (1979) sense of a "carceral archipelago"—to which it is often contrasted. On the surface, the image of an iron cage communicates a totally enclosed system, whereas that of a "carceral archipelago" conveys a sense of relatively individual, even isolated, rationalized systems with great gaps—the relatively free and open "seas"—between them. However, as we have already seen, Weber, like Foucault, envisions just such a series of "islands" of rationalization and the iron cage imagery is clearly in line, at least on each of the islands, with Foucault's carceral vision of what those islands are like. For his part, Foucault, especially in his thoughts on "discipline," has a rationalized view of the world—or at least of the islands in the archipelago—not unlike that of Weber.

However, when we turn to the contemporary rationalized world—one that I have described in terms of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2000, 2002)—the issue arises as to whether either of these images—iron cage (at least in the totalistic sense in which it is usually interpreted) or carceral archipelago—is an adequate description of it. In fact, it is clear almost immediately that both are inadequate. In no way can we think of society as a whole as an iron cage of rationality. Although we can certainly think in terms of islands of McDonaldization, those

islands lack bars; they are not carceral in any sense of the term; people⁴ are *not* locked into these islands.⁵ Thus, I would like to use this article as an occasion to develop a vision of the social geography of McDonaldization that, although it is related to Weber's "iron cage" and Foucault's "carceral archipelago," differs from both in significant ways.

One vision that immediately suggests itself, based on other aspects of my work, is that of an "archipelago of fantasy islands."⁶ That is, the new "means of consumption," one example of which is the franchised, McDonaldized system, are worlds of enchantment, or at least settings where great efforts have been made to enchant them (Ritzer, 1999). That enchantment often stems from a variety of processes—implosion, simulation, and manipulations of time and space. In addition, in at least some senses, enchantment can be traced to the rationalized character of franchises and the other new means of consumption. It is these characteristics of enchantment that led me to accord these settings an additional label—"cathedrals of consumption." Because these cathedrals are relatively isolated from one another (think of the various fast food restaurants on a typical suburban strip or the malls scattered throughout suburbia), it is possible in this context to think of them as forming an archipelago of fantasy islands.

As attractive as this imagery might be, representing a view that builds on Foucault's vision of an archipelago (and Weber's that there are gaps between rationalized systems), it suffers from a problem that is the obverse of Foucault's vision in this context. Although the metaphor of a carceral archipelago suffers because it offers a too negative and overly constraining vision of McDonaldized systems, the image of an archipelago of fantasy islands is clearly too positive and inadequately constraining.

Walter Benjamin's (1999) notion of *phantasmagoria* is far closer than "fantasy" to the vision to be offered in this essay. Although Benjamin is describing various phenomena found in 19th-century Paris, he is primarily concerned with the then-new means of consumption—especially the arcades—that can be seen as forerunners of the cathedrals of consumption mentioned above and, more specifically, of the McDonaldized systems devoted to consumption. What is attractive about this notion of phantasmagoria is that it communicates a multifaceted and ambivalent image—the most pleasant of dreams and the worst of nightmares.

Trying to put together both the positive and negative aspects of McDonaldized systems, but retaining the critical edge desired in a work such as this, it is suggested that the appropriate phantasmagoric social geographic image, with a bow to Hollywood and its "B" movies, is islands of the living dead. Notable sources for this view are George Romero's movies "The Night of the Living Dead" (1968) and especially its sequel "Dawn of the Dead" (1979). The latter, in fact, takes place in what will be described as one of the most important of these islands: a shopping mall (Loudermilk, 2002).

Each of the three key terms associated with the image of the islands of the living dead indicates something of great importance about McDonaldized systems:

1. They are *islands*. Although there are attractions to Baudrillard's (1986/1989) desert imagery,⁷ I think the island-sea metaphor works better. We may want to think of the islands as deserts but it is preferable to think of that which surrounds them as being vibrant with (sea) life. However, it is the case that the desert islands are expanding and steadily encroaching on the lively sea; that is, in a society in which there remain vast areas that have not yet been, or may never be, McDonaldized, we find islands that are McDonaldized to a high degree. Also envisioned here is the idea that more and more of these islands are being McDonaldized, some to a high degree, making it harder for the "voyager," who desires an alternative, to find one that is free of the process.
2. They are *alive*. Clearly, people are alive on these islands and, more important, enjoying a quite lively existence on them. Indeed, people are eager to visit these islands and in some cases to spend as much time as possible on them. The islands are characterized by nonstop carnivals,⁸ or at least the imagery associated with carnivals. Many people like, even love, these McDonaldized islands. They would like to spend even more time on them and to see those islands that have not yet been transformed grow increasingly and progressively McDonaldized. One need only observe what is taking place at such McDonaldized cathedrals of consumption as McDonald's, Disney World, the Venetian casino-hotel in Las Vegas, or the Destiny cruise ship to see that they are brimming with life.
3. They are *dead*. It is here that the critical orientation toward the islands of the living dead is made clear. Although they are vibrant with life, these McDonaldized islands are simultaneously "dead" in many senses of the term. Such an image has roots in Weber's thinking on the iron cage of rationality and the idea that people in that cage, especially in terms of their erotic relationships, are embraced by its "cold skeleton hands" (Weber, 1921/1968, p. 347).

Given this introduction, the remainder of this article is devoted to a discussion of the social geography of McDonaldization as islands of the living dead. We will discuss this under the three headings iterated above: islands, living, and dead.

ISLANDS

Foucault's vision of an archipelago is far closer to the metaphor being developed here than the image conveyed by those who interpret Weber as offering a sense of an overarching iron cage. It is clear that there is no way that we can think of society today in terms of an iron cage and, furthermore, it is almost impossible to envision a scenario—especially one involving the increasing prevalence and preeminence of consumption settings—in which the result is such an all-embracing phenomenon in the future. The abysmal failure of the Soviet Union to create such a system would seem to make it clear that its successful development and implementation is, to put it mildly, unlikely. Developments in

capitalist societies indicate that McDonaldized systems are likely to grow more numerous, and the “bars” that surround them are likely to grow thicker and stronger, but they are likely to remain enclaves of rationalization in a larger society that is less—or even not—rationalized.

It is far more accurate to think in terms of islands of rationalization or McDonaldization:

- Factories are increasingly rare in the United States and those comparatively few that continue to exist are likely to be surrounded by decaying and destroyed remnants of the far greater number of factories that used to dot the American landscape;
- in the city, any given block might have a fast food restaurant or a Gap store, but in between we are still likely to find traditional, individually owned and operated, small shops and businesses and even abandoned shops or empty lots;
- the suburbs are likely to be dotted with highly rationalized shopping malls composed almost exclusively of McDonaldized shops and businesses;
- small towns are likely to see their downtown business areas decimated by fast food restaurants and a Wal-Mart, all built on the road out of town or on its periphery;
- every 20 miles or so on the main highway from Washington, D.C., to New York City (and many other highways) one finds rest stops now exclusively offering food from one of the many fast food franchise systems that are so increasingly prevalent;
- even on the Las Vegas Strip with its famous, and highly McDonaldized, casino-hotels, there are numerous non-McDonaldized small businesses remaining in the spaces between them;
- on a cruise ship, the tourist may be trapped on a McDonaldized “island,” and may visit the areas of “real” islands along the way that are almost as McDonaldized, but just beyond the ship’s railing, as well as the borders of the island enclaves that are visited, are far less rationalized, even non- or irrational, worlds; and
- Disney World is clearly a McDonaldized⁹ island and innumerable other such islands have grown up around it in Orlando, Florida (as well as around the other Disney theme parks in California, Japan, and France), but there remain areas in the environs that have not yet been McDonaldized.

One could extend such examples but it is obvious that in none of these locales do we find an iron cage of McDonaldization but rather many islands defined by their high degree of rationalization. Although it is true that there are an increasing number of such islands, and that number is likely to increase even further in the future, this allows us to see that there remain non-McDonaldized areas, often quite vast in scope, in the interstices that exist between the islands. These interstices can be undeveloped land; non-McDonaldized settings: nonrational or irrational domains; areas that once were, but are no longer, McDonaldized; as well as areas that have not-yet-been, but likely soon will be, McDonaldized. Thus, it is not only possible but remains quite easy, at least from a social geographic point of view, for those who so wish to avoid the McDonaldized islands and seek out and find non-McDonaldized alternatives.

Of course, that leads, almost immediately, to the issue of why so many people are increasingly drawn to the McDonaldized islands and, conversely, are so

unwilling to venture off into the non-McDonaldized spaces that offer alternatives to them. There is clearly a kind of magnetism associated with McDonaldized settings and consumers are increasingly drawn to them. That magnetism comes, of course, from the clever, attractive, and aggressive marketing and advertising campaigns undertaken by the firms that own McDonaldized settings. Thus, the magnetism is not intrinsic to the systems but manufactured by them, especially their public relations, marketing, and advertising arms or firms hired by them. The non-McDonaldized alternatives—for example, independently owned business—lack the resources to make themselves similarly magnetic. Thus, although the “sea” of settings continues to be overwhelmingly populated by non-McDonaldized systems, many consumers are drawn to the islands of rationalization and routinely bypass the numerous nonrationalized or less-rationalized alternatives along the way. Why people do this is also linked to the next section of this analysis: the “living” that takes place on these islands.

LIVING

There is a great deal of living taking place on the McDonaldized islands being analyzed here; there is much that is lively, full of life, associated with them. This is often lost sight of in the focus on the critiques of rationalization and McDonaldization, especially the irrationalities of rationality intimately associated with them. We must attend to the fact that large numbers of people are drawn to these islands and seem to derive a great deal of pleasure from their visits. For example, people seem to enjoy the food at fast food chains such as McDonald's, Burger King, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, and Starbucks. Egg McMuffins, burgers, tacos, pizzas, and double espressos are downed with great gusto and in huge quantities. Furthermore, in many senses, it is more the fun associated with fast food restaurants than the food consumed in them that attracts consumers (Luxenburg, 1985). This is most obvious in the case of children drawn by the toy and movie promotions and the carnival-like atmosphere of at least some fast food restaurants. Adults seem to enjoy watching their children having fun and, in addition, derive their own gratifications from visiting fast food restaurants. Similarly, the shoppers at the Gap, Old Navy, and the Banana Republic arrive in droves and joyously grab clothing from the racks, try on various garments, and bring them home in great numbers. Whatever scholars may say of a critical character about such settings—how they manipulate customers, the mediocre quality of what they have to offer—we cannot ignore the fact that so many people seem to be having such a terrific time in them and in consuming what they have to offer (Twitchell, 2000).

This is even more true of the large and famous islands in the archipelago of McDonaldized consumption. The Mall of America, Disney World, the Las Vegas Strip, and the Destiny cruise ship are among the most desired destinations for not only American consumers, travelers, and tourists but those from much of

the rest of the world as well. Disney World's self-designation as "the happiest place on earth" also could be employed by these other settings, and the behavior of visitors to these settings does little to belie such claims. At the Mall of America, people seem to be having a great time shopping and shuttling between the mall and the amusement park found under the same roof. For children, and their parents, a visit to Disney World seems like the culmination of a lifelong ambition. Joyous faces abound on the rides, in the attractions, and in the various hotels, shops, and restaurants. Gamblers in Las Vegas are in the world mecca of gambling, and they act like it (at least until they have to tote up the inevitable losses), and the transformation of the town into more of a family tourist attraction makes even the nongamblers happy as they can visit indoor malls attached to casino-hotels, see circus acts at Circus Circus, watch a sea battle at Treasure Island, view the water show at Bellagio, and take a gondola ride at the Venetian.

Thus, a great deal of living takes place on these McDonaldized islands; there is a lot of life to them. The critical orientation to be discussed in the following section should not cause us to lose sight of this fact. There is certainly a paradox here; a paradoxical relationship between the life of these islands and the "death" we are about to discuss, a paradox we will deal with in the conclusion to this article.

DEATH

In what senses can we think of McDonaldized islands as "dead," as being associated with "death"? Of interest, Jean Baudrillard (1976/1993) focuses on the cemetery, which in the terms of this article can be considered a means of consuming death and the dead. Indeed, at least some cemeteries (the famous Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles) have, similar to other cathedrals of consumption, sought to become spectacular to attract a larger "clientele." However, the key point is that modern cemeteries represent the separation of death from life, whereas in earlier societies the two were intimately related. Cemeteries were (and are) "ghettos" for the dead and, in a sense, the McDonaldized islands being discussed here are similar ghettos separated from life. According to Baudrillard (1976/1993), death is controlled "in anticipation of the future confinement of life in its entirety" (p. 130). We can think of McDonaldized islands as settings in which large portions of life have come to be confined—in which some of life has clearly come to be separated from the rest of life. Furthermore, Baudrillard is making it clear here (as we have above) that the confinement of life in its entirety—Weber's iron cage—is not yet a reality. Baudrillard seems to believe unequivocally that such a fully carceral system is an inevitability, but at this point, such a reality only looms in the distance. Regardless of whether Baudrillard is right about the future, his vision of the present is consistent with the island metaphor being employed here.

People are, as we have seen, living on these islands, but it is a life that, by definition, is clearly separated from the rest of existence (the “sea” surrounding the islands). Separation implies alienation, and it could be argued that life in those settings is alienated from the rest of life. Instead of life flowing naturally into and out of these islands, the living that takes place on them tends rather to take place in largely autonomous settings; it is a relatively segregated form of living that takes place in these settings. Furthermore, the life on one island is different and separated from the living that is to be found on other islands. Thus, one is virtually forced to leave one’s everyday life to participate in the living found on the Vegas Strip, Disney World, or Mall of America. This is even true of more local and everyday islands such as the nearby mall, superstore, or even franchise restaurant. Furthermore, one must leave the life experienced in one setting to experience the form of living to be found on another island. All of this is certainly living, but it is a ghettoized form of living taking place in a similarly ghettoized context. It is living, but a form of living separated from the rest of life.

Although there is life on McDonaldized islands, it is arguably at least a different form of life, if not less of a form of life, than that found in at least some of the non-McDonaldized interstices between the islands. One way of looking at what is different about life on McDonaldized islands is Weber’s conception of life in the rationalized world and its cold skeletal hands. Clearly, Weber associates death with rationalization in general and, more specifically, with the death of the life-affirming character of sex.¹⁰ However, we need not go back to Weber for a theoretical resource on this—Baudrillard (1976/1993) offers a similar view in his discussion of the segregated world of death and cemeteries as “a meticulously regulated universe” (p. 177). Thus, McDonaldized islands fit Baudrillard’s (1976/1993) view that life “is no longer anything but a doleful, defensive bookkeeping, locking every risk into its sarcophagus” (p. 178). Thus, in contrast to Ulrich Beck’s (1992) view that we live in a risk society and the fact that risk undoubtedly remains a reality in the interstices between the islands, life on McDonaldized islands is virtually risk free.¹¹ Although in some senses this is highly desirable, in many other senses it is undesirable, especially in leading to a dull, boring, routine form of existence. This is at least one of the senses in which we can say that those who “live” on these islands are “dead.” This is clearly the case for the workers who do nothing but dull, boring, and routine work. Furthermore, the workers spend a considerable part of their day on the islands. However, it is also true for customers, although they spend far less time there. For example, the food that they eat, and what they are required to do to get the food, are well described as being dull, boring, and routine.

Following Baudrillard, death characterizes life on these islands in another way. McDonaldized settings seek to optimize rationalization; according to Baudrillard, they seek “perfection.” That is, they seek to be all positivity, to eliminate all negativity. However, such an approach renders a world in which everything resembles “the smile of a corpse in a funeral home” (Baudrillard, 1990/1993, p. 45).¹² A more lively setting would permit positivity and negativity to

coexist. To put it in other Baudrillardian terms, McDonaldized systems are dead because they lack “evil” (as well as “seduction” and “symbolic exchange”). Therefore, what they need is an injection of such evil. That is, they need more of the things associated with life—instability, seduction, ambivalence, “the natural disorder of the world” (Baudrillard, 1990/1993, p. 109).

McDonaldized systems are also, again in Baudrillard’s terms, “ecstatic” systems. That is, they are hypertelic, expanding in a seemingly limitless manner (see Stephenson’s association of franchises with viruses). Expansion seems out of control with the result that the system as a whole “shines forth in its pure and empty form” (Baudrillard, 1983/1990, p. 9). One of Baudrillard’s major examples of ecstasy is cancer, and thus, the association of McDonaldization with this process clearly also links it to death. The ecstatic expansion of the growth of McDonaldization not only means more islands of McDonaldization but also more empty, dead, or dying settings.

Furthermore, in Baudrillard’s (1976/1993) view, the dead are transformed into a “stuffed simulacrum of life” (p. 181). One is tempted to describe the diners who have finished their massive “value meals” in fast food restaurants in similar terms, but the idea of simulacra has broader applicability to the islands of McDonaldization. That is, these islands are characterized, even dominated, by simulations (Ritzer, 1999). Examples are legion, including the various casino-hotels in Las Vegas (Paris, Mandalay Bay), all of the “worlds” in Disneyland, “eatertainment” sites such as Rainforest Cafe, and so on. Is real life going on there, or is the living that we find there merely a faint copy of what life should be all about? If we answer yes to the second question then this is a second sense in which we can associate what transpires on the islands as being associated with death. That is, it is nothing more than a simulation of life, not life itself. Furthermore, living, at least for a time, in these simulated worlds, can people do anything but live a life dominated by simulation?

The most direct association between the geographic settings of concern here and death is Kowinski’s (1985) work on the shopping mall and what he calls the “Zombie Effect.” That is, the structure of malls induces consumers to wander about them for hours in a near-endless pursuit of goods and services. Of course, the idea of zombies brings us back to the living dead, specifically the movies of George Romero. In *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), Romero’s zombie-consumers are set loose in a Cleveland shopping mall. This image can be extended to all consumers in all McDonaldized settings who are simultaneously alive and dead: the living dead—zombies.

THE SOCIAL GEOGRAPHY OF McDONALDIZATION

Thus, in the preceding sections, we have made the case for a social geography of McDonaldized settings that envisions them as “islands of the living dead.” This has both happy and scary implications. Happily, this metaphor offers the

view that there is life on these islands. Furthermore, for those who emphasize the death associated with these settings, there is comfort in the fact that the islands remain relatively few and far between and that there are still plenty of interstitial spaces left for those who want to be more fully human—less zombie-like. Frighteningly, those islands that are so attractive to so many are also death-producing; we seem hell-bent on going to, and spending more time in, those settings that are designed to destroy us as human beings. And, more and more of those islands are being colonized by McDonaldized settings all the time. Each of those newly McDonaldized settings is more attractive than the last and more alluring to us. Furthermore, older islands are continually being refurbished to allow them to approximate the allure of the newer settings.

Although the island metaphor offers some solace to those concerned about McDonaldization, it is also the case that we are more and more likely to actually live in those islands. Suburban communities (they appear in *Snow Crash* as “Burbclaves”), or an even better example—the newer ones that are gated, are the homes for increasing numbers of Americans, as well as those in other countries.¹³ These communities are McDonaldized in many different ways. There is, for example, the predictability of the houses and the freedom from risk provided by the alarm systems, gates, and guards. Even the most upscale of these communities are characterized by the building of so-called “McMansions”—expensive houses constructed in much the same McDonaldized way as the houses that were built in the pioneering community of Levittown. More modest developments have houses that more obviously resemble the assembly-line homes that characterized Levittown and other early communities of its ilk.

Not only do many of us live on these islands but many other day-to-day activities are carried on in them and not on isolated and remote islands. Thus, for example, many people exercise in health clubs that have many of the characteristics of McDonaldization. They attend sporting events in highly McDonaldized and consumer-oriented athletic stadia. They go to churches that John Drane (2002) has described as being McDonaldized. Even sex, as we have seen, is increasingly McDonaldized, as are the settings in which sex is increasingly likely to take place (Hausbeck & Brents, 2002).

All of these can, of course, be seen as still more islands of McDonaldization, but they are islands that are much closer to home—and may even be the communities and homes in which we live. It is one thing to visit islands, especially quite distant islands, that are highly McDonaldized. It is quite another to live on such islands and to find that most, if not all, of the islands that we visit regularly are also highly McDonaldized. We certainly live lives, sometimes quite lively lives, on these islands, but it is also the case that death is brought ever closer to us on these islands.

The paradigmatic life on a McDonaldized island might be a home in a planned community such as Disney’s Celebration in Florida. In planned and gated communities, one is likely to live in a McHouse and, if one is lucky, in a McMansion. The house is likely to be one of several pre-set styles available to

residents of the community. Some variations are possible, but even those are likely to be selected from a limited range of available options. There are apt to be tight restrictions on what a resident can do to the house and its grounds. For example, house colors might be limited and there might be regulations concerning the frequency of lawn mowing and the length of the grass on the lawn. Whether a McHouse or a McMansion, the domicile is likely to be in a tightly controlled, perhaps even gated, community offering a limited number of options to the homeowner. The community itself is likely to have elaborate rules and regulations, and those are proliferated in settings, should they exist, such as clubhouses, exercise facilities, golf courses, and tennis courts.

Such communities, and the houses in them, can be viewed as islands of the living dead. One is struck by the island-like character of modern planned communities, especially if they are gated. They are set apart from other communities as well as from everything else.¹⁴ Just as clearly, people are living, often quite happily, in these communities and many who do not live in them would dearly love to be able to enjoy such a lifestyle. But these communities are also dead in various senses of the term. They are, for example, “ghettos” cut off, sometimes quite dramatically, from the life that surrounds them. And they are quite rationalized in the sense that there is an almost ruthless effort to remove all negativity from them—to render them totally positive. They are also often simulated communities—most often simulating a community, frequently imagined,¹⁵ that might have existed at an earlier point in our history. And the houses might be simulations of traditional housing styles. Thus, they are more simulacra of life than life itself.

In any case, the problems associated with the islands of the living dead are amplified when people live on those islands. Rather than spending relatively brief periods on a number of McDonaldized islands, such people spend a good portion of their lives on one McDonaldized island. Of course, in addition to that, they spend time on a number of other McDonaldized islands. In the end, such people spend the vast majority of their time on such islands. The sheer amount of time on McDonaldized islands, as well as the fact that their home is on one of these islands, amplifies the problems associated with the islands of the living dead for such people.

CREATING LIFE ON McDONALDIZED ISLANDS

One problem with the preceding discussion is that it presents an overly static and deterministic image of the islands of the living dead. This is especially true in the case of life on these islands. Although the islands are constraining—even deadening—in the end they can, at least potentially, become whatever people make of them. Thus, people can take the most “deadening” of these McDonaldized islands and endow them with great liveliness. Although the “deadness” of the structures makes this difficult and they are likely to be resistant,

much life can be injected into the most moribund of these islands. Yet this leaves us with the question: Why struggle to make dead structures come to life when we can create structures that are alive from beginning and be endowed with life at their very base?

The answer, at least in part, is that there is a divergence of interest between those who are most likely to create such structures and those who inhabit them as customers, employees, homeowners, and so on. It is almost always in the interest of those who create these settings to make them as “dead” as possible, whereas those who frequent them have, at least some of the time, an interest in injecting some life, or in Baudrillard’s terms “evil,” into them. Entrepreneurs and managers are interested in creating dead structures because such structures are easier to control and, perhaps more important, they tend to make those who inhabit these structures easier to manage. This hearkens back to Foucault’s (1979) argument about the early and quite lively forms of public torture (for example, horses tearing victims apart) and the degree to which they tended to incite spectators who viewed them. In contrast, later, more rationalized, “deader” forms of punishment were preferred for many reasons, not the least of which is the fact they muted or even eliminated (because they became invisible) public incitement. In the realms being analyzed here, early carnivalesque consumption settings were likely to foster unanticipated, even deviant, forms of behavior on the part of consumers. However, newer consumption settings have sought to eliminate the carnivalesque by creating deadened structures. A good example of the latter is Disneyland, which purposely sought to eliminate the carnivalesque atmosphere that characterized early amusement parks such as Coney Island and often led to disorder in them. Consider the “insanitarium” that marked the end of the Barrel of Love ride at the old Steeplechase Park in Coney Island: “Suddenly a gust of wind whipped the young lady’s skirt around her ears while the clown aimed a rod producing an electric shock between the legs of her beau” (Adams, 1991, p. 45). One could imagine such a thing producing great disorder among both participants and viewers, and one could never imagine anything remotely like this being permitted at a Disney theme park.

Although owners and managers have good reasons to create deadened, if not dead, settings, those who are drawn to them are often moved to invigorate them, to breath some life into them. Invested with human creativity, people are likely to balk at dead structures and their demands and to seek to bring as much life to them as possible. This, of course, assumes that such structures and those like them have not, over the years, done their work and reduced or eliminated this urge to live. The family, schools and universities would be major sources of this effort to deaden this urge and may themselves be seen as McDonaldized and therefore dead structures.

CREATING AND RECREATING DEATH ON McDONALDIZED ISLANDS

As mentioned above, although people tend to be inclined to find and/or create life on McDonaldized islands, other forces, especially those at the disposal of owners and managers, have a vested interest in death. For example, fast food restaurants need teenage customers, but they worry that too many of them hanging out too long will eventually lead to trouble. Thus, they have created an atmosphere in which teenagers (and everyone else) feel unwelcome or, at best, welcome for only a short period of time. The drive through is especially unwelcoming and very effective at keeping teenagers (and others) out of the restaurant and on the move. Those who use the drive through have little, if any, opportunity to cause trouble for the fast food restaurant. For those few teenagers who enter the restaurant and linger for even a short period of time, the atmosphere is so sterile and antiseptic that it does little to stimulate customers and in fact acts as a damper on them. More extremely, at least one 7-11 has been known to broadcast the saccharine, and to most (especially teenagers) deadly, music of Mantovani into adjacent parking lots to discourage teenagers from lingering and possibly creating trouble.

Actually, these structures do not want to kill off life completely but rather to limit and constrain the amount of life that takes place within them and that they, in fact, might be stimulating. Structures that excite consumers can be dangerous. Thus, for example, at Disney World, the height and the speed of the roller coaster, and many other rides, is limited to contain excitement and enthusiasm. Great efforts are made to maintain surveillance over visitors to be sure that things do not grow out of hand. And, of course, there are plenty of security guards to enforce Disney's rules and regulations. In the case of Las Vegas casino-hotels, there are no efforts to limit the excitement level but there are extremely powerful efforts, both visible and invisible, to watch over patrons and to act to restrain and contain even the slightest outbursts, unless they happen to be demonstrations of glee by the rare winner.

Of course, there is a dialectic here as patrons seek to create life while those who control these structures seek to minimize or eliminate it. Thus, consumers may be determined to have some real fun, engage in mischief, or even behave illegally and immorally in these settings. Those in charge of these settings closely monitor such behaviors and alter their methods to better limit them or prevent them from occurring again. Las Vegas casinos abound with efforts by visitors to do things that those in charge of casinos are determined to prevent. Cheating is the obvious example, but each new method of trying to cheat "the house" is closely monitored and, most of the time, caught by security personnel. In those rare cases where such efforts are successful, the casino will study the event and put in place controls to prevent it from occurring again.

Card counting in blackjack is an especially good example of this dialectic. Counting cards that have been played so that the gambler has a better idea what cards are likely to come up next seems like a good technique and there is nothing illegal about it. Yet, casinos do not like card counters because the technique greatly increases the likelihood that they will win money. Thus, surveillance people and technologies closely monitor players to uncover card counters and known card counters are unwelcome at casinos. If they make their way in and are discovered, they will be asked unceremoniously to leave.

But the main point is that those in control do not want things to “get out of hand” and they often have a very restrictive sense of what that means. The ideal would be consumers who move through the system quickly and efficiently. Although they might be allowed a smile on their face, too much raucousness is deemed dangerous. Thus, structures are created that limit such a possibility. For example, most of the attractions at Disney World involve riding through the park seated in conveyances of one type or another. This has many advantages (swift and efficient movement of many visitors), but another of the things that it accomplishes is that it keeps people moving and totally unable to congregate in the heart of an attraction and even begin to think about engaging in raucous behavior. People, of course, do find ways to evade all of this and engage in behaviors that may be perceived as threatening, and thus the dialectic continues.

CONCLUSION

This article has made the case not only for a social geography of the McDonaldized world but a specific social geographic image—“islands of the living dead.” This is seen as a more accurate image, at least for the time being, of the state of McDonaldization in society. It may be that at some point in the future, Foucault’s vision of a “carceral” archipelago or even the view mistakenly associated with Weber of an all-encompassing “iron cage” might be more accurate, but that remains to be seen. The strength of the image presented here is that it accurately conveys a sense of still-isolated “islands” of McDonaldization; it makes it clear that there is much that is positive about these islands (the “living” that takes place on them); and it offers a critical orientation toward them, their “dead” structures, and their tendency to deaden the life that transpires within their confines.

NOTES

1. Social geography does have some distinctive methods, although it faces many of the same issues that confront empirical sociology, such as the debate between positivists and antipositivists.
2. Weber (1921/1968) uses this term to describe the rationalized legal system.

3. Of course, Veblen (1899/1994) managed to write about consumption in the same era in which Weber did his most important work.
4. However, it might be possible to think of employees as being incarcerated on these islands. In fact, Kowinski (1985) describes employees in shopping malls as "prisoners of the mall" (p. 343).
5. Foucault could think in carceral terms because he, like Weber, did not concern himself with consumption settings where consumers are generally free to come and go as they please.
6. A similar vision is offered by John Hannigan (1998) in *Fantasy City*. However, it suffers not only from the same problem to be discussed below but it also focuses solely on the city. In addition, there was an old television series *Fantasy Island*.
7. While we have employed the metaphors here of islands and sea, Baudrillard (1986/1989) offers a vision of America as a desert with more specific locations such as Los Angeles being thought of as desert fragments. If we wanted to use this metaphor, it would be a mistake to think of America as a whole as a desert because the position being argued here is that it is not the entirety of the United States, or any other nation, that is McDonaldized but rather that there are pockets of such rationalization. Thus, in these terms, we could think of the McDonaldized world as a series of desert-like islands. This leads us to an ensuing section and the image of these islands as being "dead." Clearly, a desert is a place where it is difficult to live—where there is much death. However, people do "live" in the desert, although it is a hard, dusty, and dry form of life—a life close to death.
8. But they are not "carnavalesque" (Bakhtin, 1968; Chaney, 1993; Stallybrass & White, 1986) because they lack the possibility of excess; today's carnivals are tightly controlled; they are rationalized.
9. Or, in Bryman's (2003 [this issue]) terms, "Disneyized."
10. For a discussion of the rationalization (McDonaldization) of sex, see Hausbeck and Brents (2002).
11. At least it is predictable. The fact is that there are great risks on McDonaldized islands, such as, for example, the food offered in fast food restaurants that poses various health risks to regular consumers.
12. Adding to the utility of this view is the fact that the funeral business is increasingly dominated by large franchise systems.
13. On a trip not too long ago to China, I was struck by the emergence of such communities on the new highway to the equally new international airport near Shanghai.
14. Boca Raton, Florida, is a particularly good example of this because it is dominated by a number of independent, usually gated, communities.
15. Seaside Village in Florida is a good example of this.

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