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# The McDonaldization Thesis:

## *Is expansion inevitable?*

## George Ritzer
### *University of Maryland*

**abstract:** The issue addressed here is whether the spread of rationalization, or what I have termed 'McDonaldization', is inexorable. That issue is examined spatially and temporally. Spatially, what we are witnessing is the increasingly global dissemination of rationalization, much of it emanating from the United States. The temporal growth is discussed from the point of view of the expansion of McDonaldization to birth and before and death and beyond; rationalization is coming to contain the entire life course (and more). Evidence of expansion does not, of course, necessarily mean that growth is inevitable. There are some hopeful social developments and there are some things that individuals can do, but it is difficult at this point to envision anything powerful enough to stem the tide in the direction of rationalization.

**keywords:** birth ✦ death ✦ globalization ✦ McDonaldization ✦ rationalization

The 'McDonaldization thesis' (Ritzer, 1983; 1993; 1996) is derived, most directly, from Max Weber's (1968[1921]) theory of the rationalization of the Occident and ultimately the rest of the world (Kalberg, 1980). Weber tended to see this process as inexorable, leading, in the end, to the iron cage of rationalization from which there was less and less possibility of escape. Furthermore, with the corresponding decline in the possibility of individual or revolutionary charisma, Weber believed that there was a decreasing possibility of the emergence of a revolutionary counter-force.

Time has been kind to the Weberian thesis, if not to the social world. Rationalization has progressed dramatically in the century or so since Weber developed his ideas. The social world does seem to be more of an iron cage and, as a result, there does seem to be less possibility of escape.

And, it does appear less likely that any counter-revolution can upset the march toward increasing rationalization.

It is this theory and empirical reality that forms the background for the development of what has been termed the 'McDonaldization thesis'. This thesis accepts the basic premises of rationalization as well as Weber's basic theses about the inexorable character of the process. Its major point of departure from the Weberian theory of rationalization is to argue that the paradigm of the process is no longer, as Weber argued, the bureaucracy, but it is rather the fast-food restaurant. The fast-food restaurant has combined the principles of the bureaucracy with those of other rationalized precursors (for example, the assembly line, scientific management) to create a particularly powerful model of the rationalization process. It is a relatively new paradigm, traceable to the opening of the first of the McDonald's chain in 1955. While there were a number of predecessors to the first McDonald's outlet in the fast-food industry, it is McDonald's that was the truly revolutionary development in not only that industry, but in the history of the rationalization process.

Embodying perfectly the principles of rationalization, McDonald's became the model to be emulated first by other fast-food chains and later by other types of chain stores. It was not long before the success of McDonald's caught the eye of those in other types of businesses, and ultimately in virtually every other sector of society. Today, not only is McDonald's a worldwide success, but it offers an alluring model to those in a wide variety of leadership positions. It is in this role that McDonald's is playing the key role in the still-further expansion of the process of rationalization. Indeed its participation is so central that the contemporary manifestations of this process can be aptly labelled 'McDonaldization'.

Like Weber I have tended to view this process as inexorable in a variety of senses. First, it is seen as migrating from its roots in the fast-food industry in America to other types of businesses and other social institutions. Second, McDonaldization is spreading from its source in the United States to affect more and more societies around the world. Third, McDonaldization is viewed as having first concentrated on the rationalization of processes central to life itself, but more recently it has moved to encompass the birth process (and before) as well as the process of death (and beyond).

To put this expansionism in more contemporary theoretical terms, McDonaldization is expanding in both space and time (Giddens, 1984; Harvey, 1989). Spatially, McDonaldization is encompassing more and more chains, industries, social institutions and geographic areas of the world. Temporally, McDonaldization has moved from the core of life itself both backward to the birth process as well as the steps leading up to it and forward to the process of dying and its aftermath.

The evidence on the spatial and temporal advance of McDonaldization

is overwhelming. However, in this essay I want to do more than review this evidence, I want to reexamine the issue of inexorability. Do its past and present successes mean that McDonaldization is truly inexorable? Is there no hope that the process can be slowed down or even stopped? Is it possible to avoid an iron cage of rationalization that encompasses time (from birth and before to death and beyond) and space (geographic areas within the United States and throughout the world)? Before getting to these issues, I need to review the basic parameters of the McDonaldization thesis.

# McDonaldization

I begin with a foundational definition:

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

The nature of the McDonaldization process may be delineated by outlining its five basic dimensions: efficiency, calculability, predictability, control through the substitution of non-human for human technology and, paradoxically, the irrationality of rationality.

First, a McDonaldizing society emphasizes *efficiency*, or the effort to discover the best possible means to whatever end is desired. Workers in fast-food restaurants clearly must work efficiently; for example, burgers are assembled, and sometimes even cooked, in an assembly-line fashion. Customers want, and are expected, to acquire and consume their meals efficiently. The drive-through window is a highly efficient means for customers to obtain, and employees to dole out, meals. Overall, a variety of norms, rules, regulations, procedures and structures have been put in place in the fast-food restaurant in order to ensure that *both* employees and customers act in an efficient manner. Furthermore, the efficiency of one party helps to ensure that the other will behave in a similar manner.

Second, there is great importance given to *calculability*, to an emphasis on quantity often to the detriment of quality. Various aspects of the work of employees at fast-food restaurants are timed and this emphasis on speed often serves to adversely affect the quality of the work, from the point of view of the employee, resulting in dissatisfaction, alienation and high turnover rates. Only slightly over half the predominantly part-time, teenage, non-unionized, generally minimum wage work force remains on the job for one year or more (Van Giezen, 1994). Similarly, customers are expected to spend as little time as possible in the fast-food restaurant. In fact, the drive-through window reduces this time to zero, but if the customers desire to eat in the restaurant, the chairs are designed to impel them to leave after about twenty minutes. All of this emphasis on speed clearly

has a negative effect on the quality of the 'dining experience' at a fast-food restaurant. Furthermore, the emphasis on how fast the work is to be done means that customers cannot be served high-quality food which, almost by definition, requires a good deal of time to prepare.

Third, McDonaldization involves an emphasis on *predictability*. Employees are expected to perform their work in a predictable manner and, for their part, customers are expected to respond with similarly predictable behavior. Thus, when customers enter, employees will ask, following scripts (Leidner, 1993), what they wish to order. For their part, customers are expected to know what they want, or where to look to find what they want, and they are expected to order, pay and leave quickly. Employees (following another script) are expected to thank them when they do leave. A highly predictable ritual is played out in the fast-food restaurant and it is one that involves highly predictable foods that vary little from one time or place to another.

Fourth, there is great *control* in a McDonaldizing society, and a good deal of that control comes from non-human technologies. While these non-human technologies currently dominate employees, increasingly they will be replacing human technologies. Employees are clearly controlled by such non-human technologies as french-fry machines that ring when the fries are done and even automatically lift the fries out of the hot oil. For their part, customers are controlled both by the employees who are constrained by such technologies as well as more directly by the technologies themselves. Thus, the automatic fry machine makes it impossible for a customer to request well-done, well-browned fries.

Finally, both employees and customers suffer from the various *irrationalities of rationality* that seem inevitably to accompany McDonaldization. Many of these irrationalities involve the opposite of the basic principles of McDonaldization. For example, the efficiency of the fast-food restaurant is often replaced by the inefficiencies associated with long lines of people at the counters or long lines of cars at the drive-through window. While there are many others, the ultimate irrationality of rationality is dehumanization. Employees are forced to work in dehumanizing jobs and customers are forced to eat in dehumanizing settings and circumstances. In Harry Braverman's terms, the fast-food restaurant is a source of degradation for employees and customers, alike (Braverman, 1974).

## Expansionism

McDonald's has continually extended its reach, within American society and beyond. As McDonald's Chairman put the company's objective, 'Our goal: to totally dominate the quick service restaurant industry worldwide ... I want McDonald's to be more than a leader. I want McDonald's to dominate' (Papiernik, 1994).

McDonald's began as a suburban and medium-sized-town phenomenon, but in recent years it has moved into big cities and smaller towns (Kleinfeld, 1985; Shapiro, 1990) that supposedly could not support such a restaurant, not only in the United States but also in many other parts of the world. A huge growth area is in small satellite, express or remote outlets opened in areas that are not able to support full-scale fast-food restaurants. These are beginning to appear in small store fronts in large cities, as well as in non-traditional settings like department stores and even schools. These satellites typically offer only limited menus and may rely on larger outlets for food storage and preparation (Rigg, 1994). McDonald's is considering opening express outlets in such locations as museums, office buildings and corporate cafeterias.

Another significant expansion has occurred as fast-food restaurants have moved onto college campuses (the first such facility opened at the University of Cincinnati in 1973), instead of being content merely to dominate the strips that surround many campuses. In conjunction with a variety of 'branded partners' (for example, Pizza Hut and Subway), Marriott now supplies food to almost 500 colleges and universities (Sugarman, 1995).

Another, even more recent, incursion has occurred: we no longer need to leave the highway to dine in our favorite fast-food restaurant. We can obtain fast food quickly and easily at convenient rest stops along the highway and then proceed with our trip. Fast food is also increasingly available *in* service stations (Chan, 1994). Also in the travel realm, fast-food restaurants are more and more apt to be found in hotels (McDowell, 1992), railway stations and airports and their products are even appearing on the trays of in-flight meals. The following newspaper advertisement appeared a few years ago: 'Where else at 35,000 feet can you get a McDonald's meal like this for your kids? Only on United's Orlando flights'. Now, McDonald's so-called 'Friendly Skies Meals' are generally available to children on Delta flights. In addition, in December, 1994, Delta began offering Blimpie sandwiches on its North American flights (*Phoenix Gazette*, 1994). (Subway sandwiches are also now offered on Continental flights.) How much longer before McDonaldized meals will be available on all flights everywhere by every carrier? In fact, on an increasing number of flights, prepackaged 'snacks' have already replaced hot main courses.

In other sectors of society, the influence of fast-food restaurants has been more subtle, but no less profound. While we are now beginning to see the appearance of McDonald's and other fast-food restaurants in high schools and trade schools (Albright, 1995), few lower-grade schools as yet have in-house fast-food restaurants, but many have had to alter school cafeteria menus and procedures so that fast food is readily and continually

available to children and teenagers (Berry, 1995). We are even beginning to see efforts by fast-food chains to market their products in these school cafeterias (Farhi, 1990).

The military has been pressed into offering fast-food menus on its bases and on its ships. Despite the criticisms by physicians and nutritionists, fast-food outlets are increasingly turning up *inside* hospitals. No homes have a McDonald's of their own, but dining within the home has been influenced by the fast-food restaurant. Home-cooked meals often resemble those available in fast-food restaurants. Frozen, microwavable, and pre-pre-pared foods, also bearing a striking resemblance to McDonald's meals and increasingly modeled after them, often find their way to the dinner table. Then there is the home delivery of fast foods, especially pizza, as re-volutionized by Domino's.

As powerful as it is, McDonald's has not been alone in pressing the fast-food model on American society and the rest of the world. Other fast-food giants, such as Burger King, Wendy's, Hardee's, Arby's, Big-Boy, Dairy Queen, TCBY, Denny's, Sizzler, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Popeye's, Subway, Taco Bell, Chi Chi's, Pizza Hut, Domino's, Long John Silver, Baskin-Robbins and Dunkin' Donuts, have played a key role, as have the innumerable other businesses built on the principles of the fast-food restaurant.

Even the derivatives of McDonald's and the fast-food industry more generally are, in turn, having their own influence. For example, the success of *USA TODAY* has led to changes in many newspapers across the nation, for example, shorter stories and color weather maps. As one *USA TODAY* editor put it: 'The same newspaper editors who call us McPaper have been stealing our McNuggets' (Prichard, 1987: 232–3).

Sex, like virtually every other sector of society, has undergone a process of McDonaldization. In the movie *Sleeper*, Woody Allen not only created a futuristic world in which McDonald's was an important and highly visible element, but he also envisioned a society in which even sex underwent the process of McDonaldization. The denizens of his future world were able to enter a machine called an 'orgasmatron' that allowed them to experience an orgasm without going through the muss and fuss of sexual intercourse. In fact, we already have things like highly specialized pornographic movies (heterosexual, homosexual, sex with children, sex with animals) that can be seen at urban multiplexes and are available at local video stores for viewing in the comfort of our living rooms. In New York City, an official called a three-story pornographic center 'the McDonald's of sex' because of its 'cookie-cutter cleanliness and compliance with the law' (*New York Times*, 1986: 6). The McDonaldization of sex suggests that no aspect of our lives is immune to its influence.

# Is McDonaldization truly inexorable?

Given the preceding description of McDonaldization, the issue to be discussed in this closing section is whether or not the process is truly inexorable? I want to discuss this issue both spatially and temporally. First, there is the spatial issue of whether McDonaldization is destined to spread from its American roots and become a global phenomenon. Second, there is the temporal issue of whether McDonaldization will inevitably spread from its control over the core of life to colonize birth and before as well as death and beyond.

## Globalization

We can discuss the first issue under the heading of globalization, or the spread of McDonald's, and more importantly the principles of McDonaldization, around the world. However, in using the term globalization here, it should be pointed out that, as we will see below, there are some differences between its usage here and the way it has been used in the currently voguish globalization theory.

While there are significant differences among globalization theorists, most if not all would accept Robertson's advocacy of the idea that social scientists adopt 'a specifically global point of view', and 'treat the global condition as such' (Robertson, 1992: 61, 64). Elsewhere, Robertson (1990: 18) talks of the 'study of the world as a whole'. More specifically, Robertson argues that we need to concern ourselves with global processes that operate in relative independence of societal sociocultural processes. Thus, Robertson (1992: 60) argues, 'there is a general autonomy and "logic" to the globalization process, which operates in *relative* independence of strictly societal and other conventionally studied sociocultural processes'. Similarly, Featherstone (1990: 1) discusses the interest in processes that 'gain some autonomy on a global level'.

While the reach of McDonaldization is global, it does not quite fit the model proposed by globalization theorists. The differences between them are clear when we outline those things rejected by globalization theorists:

1. A focus on any single nation-state.
2. A focus on the West in general, or the United States in particular.
3. A concern with the impact of the West (westernization) or the United States (Americanization) on the rest of the world.
4. A concern with homogenization (rather than heterogenization).
5. A concern with modernity (as contrasted with postmodernity).
6. An interest in what used to be called modernization theory (Tiryakian, 1991).

The fact is that while McDonaldization *is* a global process, it has all of the characteristics *rejected* by globalization theorists: it does have its source in a single nation-state; it does focus on the West in general and the United States in particular; it is concerned with the impact of westernization and Americanization on the rest of the world; it is attentive to the homogeniz- ation of the world's products and services; it is better thought of as a modern than a postmodern phenomenon (because of its rationality, which is a central characteristic of modernity) and it does have some affinity with modernization theory (although it is not presented in the positive light modernization theory tended to cast on all western phenomena). Thus, McDonaldization is a global phenomenon even though it is at odds with many of the basic tenets of globalization theory.

The global character of this American institution is clear in the fact that it is making increasing inroads around the world (McDowell, B. 1994). For example, in 1991, for the first time, McDonald's opened more restaurants abroad than in the United States (Shapiro, 1992). This trend continues and as we move toward the next century, McDonald's expects to build twice as many restaurants each year overseas than it does in the United States. Already, by the end of 1993 over a third of McDonald's restaurants were overseas. As of the beginning of 1995, about half of McDonald's profits came from its overseas operations. As of this writing, one of McDonald's latest advances was the opening of a restaurant in Mecca, Saudi Arabia (*Tampa Tribune*, 1995).

Other nations have developed their own variants of this American insti- tution, as is best exemplified by the now large number of fast-food crois- santeries in Paris, a city whose love for fine cuisine might have led one to think that it would prove immune to the fast-food restaurant. India has a chain of fast-food restaurants, Nirula's, which sells mutton burgers (about 80% of Indians are Hindus who eat no beef) as well as local Indian cuisine (Reitman, 1993). Perhaps the most unlikely spot for an indigenous fast- food restaurant was then war-ravaged Beirut, Lebanon; but in 1984 Juicy Burger opened there (with a rainbow instead of golden arches and J.B. the clown replacing Ronald McDonald) with its owners hoping that it would become the 'McDonald's of the Arab world' (Cowan, 1984).

Other countries not only now have their own McDonaldized institutions, but they have also begun to export them to the United States. For example, the Body Shop is an ecologically sensitive British cosmetics chain with, as of early 1993, 893 shops in many countries; 120 of those shops were in the United States, with 40 more scheduled to open that year (Elmer-Dewitt, 1993; Shapiro, 1991). Furthermore, American firms are now opening copies of this British chain, such as the Limited, Inc.'s, Bath and Body Works.

This kind of obvious spread of McDonaldization is only a small part of that process's broader impact around the world. Far more subtle, and

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important, are the ways in which McDonaldization and its various dimensions have affected the way in which many institutions and systems throughout the world operate. That is, they have come to adopt, and adapt to their needs: efficiency, predictability, calculability and control through the replacement of human by non-human technology (and they have experienced the irrationalities of rationality).

How do we account for the global spread of McDonaldization? The first and most obvious answer is that material interests are impelling the process. That is, there is a great deal of money to be made by McDonaldizing systems and those who stand to profit are the major motor force behind it.

Culture is a second factor in the spread of McDonaldization. There appears to be a growing passion around the world for things American and few things reflect American culture better than McDonald's and its various clones. Thus, when Pizza Hut opened in Moscow in 1990, a Russian student said: 'It's a piece of America' (*Washington Post,* 1990: B10). Reflecting on the growth of Pizza Hut and other fast-food restaurants in Brazil, the president of Pepsico (of which Pizza Hut is part) said of Brazil that his nation 'is experiencing a passion for things American' (Blount, 1994: F1). Many people around the world identify strongly with McDonald's; in fact to some it has become a sacred institution (Kottak, 1983). On the opening of the McDonald's in Moscow, one journalist described it as the 'ultimate icon of Americana', while a worker spoke of it 'as if it were the Cathedral in Chartres . . . a place to experience "celestial joy"' (Keller, 1990: 12).

A third explanation of the rush toward McDonaldization is that it meshes well with other changes occurring in American society as well as around the world. Among other things, it fits in well with the increase in dual-career families, mobility, affluence and in a society in which the mass media play an increasingly important role.

A fourth factor in the spread of McDonaldization and other aspects of American culture (the credit card [Ritzer, 1995], for example), is the absence of any viable alternative on the world stage. The path to worldwide McDonaldization has been laid bare, at least in part, because of the death of communism. With the demise of communism the only organized resistance can come from local cultures and communities. While the latter can mobilize significant opposition, it is not likely to be nearly as powerful as one embedded in an alternate worldwide movement.

Given the spread of McDonaldization and the powerful reasons behind it, what can serve to impede this global development? First, there is the fact that many areas of the world offer little in the way of profits to those who push McDonaldization. Many economies are so poor that there is little to be gained by pushing McDonaldized systems on them. Other institutions within such societies may want to McDonaldize their operations, but they are likely to be so overwhelmed by day-to-day concerns that they will have

little time and energy to overhaul their systems. Furthermore, they are apt to lack the funds needed for such an overhaul. Thus their very economic weakness serves to protect many areas of the world from McDonaldization.

Second, we cannot overlook the importance and resilience of local cultures. Globalization theorists, in particular, have emphasized the strength of such cultures. While it is true that McDonaldization has the power to sweep away much of local culture, it is not omnipotent. For example, while the eating habits of some will change dramatically, many others will continue to eat much as they always have. Then, even if the eating habits of an entire culture change (a highly unlikely occurrence), other aspects of life may be partly or even wholly unaffected by McDonaldization. It is also likely that too high a degree of McDonaldization will lead to a counter-reaction and a reassertion of local culture. Also worth mentioning are the many ways in which local cultures affect McDonaldizing systems, forcing them to adapt in various ways to local demands and customs (for example, as discussed above, the mutton burgers in India).

The combination of a comparative lack of economic incentive to the forces behind McDonaldization and the opposition of local cultures will serve to impede the global spread of McDonaldization. However, when a given local culture advances economically, those who profit from McDonaldization will begin to move into that domain. In such cases, only local resistance will remain as a barrier to McDonaldization. It seems clear that while some local cultures will successfully resist, most will fail. In the end, and in the main, the only areas of the world that will be free of McDonaldization are those which lack the economic base to make it profitable.

The only hope on the horizon might be international groups like those interested in health and environmental issues. McDonaldized systems do tend to pose health risks for people and do tend to threaten the environment in various ways. There has, in fact, been some organized opposition to McDonaldized systems on health and environmental grounds. One could envision more such opposition, organized on a worldwide basis, in the future. However, it is worth noting that McDonaldized systems have proven to be quite adaptable when faced with opposition on these grounds. That is, they have modified their systems to eliminate the greatest threats to their customers' health and the greatest environmental dangers. Such adaptations have thus far served to keep health and environmental groups at bay.

## The Colonization of Life and Death

While spatial expansion is covered in the previous section under the heading of globalization, in this section I deal with temporal expansion.

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McDonaldization first focused on a variety of things associated with *life*. That is, it is the day-to-day aspects of living: food, drink, clothing, shelter and so on that were initially McDonaldized. Firmly ensconced in the center of the process of living, McDonaldization has pressed outward in both directions until it has come to encompass as many aspects as possible of both the beginning (birth) and the end of life (death). Indeed, as we will see, the process has not stopped there, but has moved beyond what would, on first glance, appear to be its absolute limits to encompass (again, to the degree that such a thing is possible) 'pre-birth' and 'post-death'. Thus, this section is devoted to what might be termed the 'colonization' (Habermas, 1987) of birth (and its antecedents) and death (and its aftermath) by the forces of McDonaldization.

In recent years a variety of steps have been taken to rationalize the process leading up to birth: burgeoning impotence clinics (chains [Jackson, 1995], or soon-to-be chains); artificial (or, better, 'donor' [Baran and Pannor, 1989]) insemination; in vitro fertilization (DeWitt, 1993); surrogate mothers (Pretorius, 1994); 'granny pregnancies' (*Daily Mail*, 1994); home pregnancy and ovulation-predictor home tests (Cain, 1995); sex-selection clinics (Bennett, 1983); sex-determination tests like amniocentesis (Rapp, 1994); and tests including chorionic villus sampling, maternal serum alpha-feto-protein and ultrasound to determine whether the fetus is carrying such genetic defects as Down's syndrome, hemophilia, Tay-Sachs and sickle-cell disease. All of these techniques are collectively leading to 'high-tech baby making' (Baran and Pannor, 1989) which can be used to produce what have been called 'designer pregnancies' (Kolker and Burke, 1994) and 'designer babies' (Daley, 1994).

The rationalization process is also manifest in the process of giving birth. One measure of this is the decline in the very human and personal practice of midwifery. In 1900 about half of American births were attended by midwives, but by 1986 that had declined to only 4 percent (Mitford, 1993). Then there is the bureaucratization of childbirth. In 1900, less than 5 percent of US births took place in hospitals, by 1940 it was 55 percent, and by 1960 the process was all but complete with nearly 100 percent of births taking place in hospitals (Leavitt, 1986: 190).

Hospitals and the medical profession developed standard, routinized (McDonaldized) procedures for handling childbirth. One of the best known viewed childbirth as a disease (a 'pathologic process') and its procedures were to be followed even in the case of low-risk births (Treichler, 1990). First, the patient was to be placed in the lithotomy position, 'lying supine with legs in air, bent and wide apart, supported by stirrups' (Mitford, 1993: 59). Second, the mother-to-be was to be sedated from the first stage of labor on. Third, an episiotomy[1] was to be performed to enlarge the area through which the baby must pass. Finally, forceps were to be used to make the

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delivery more efficient. Describing this type of procedure, one woman wrote 'Women are herded like sheep through an obstetrical assembly line [needless to say, one of the precursors of McDonaldization], are drugged and strapped on tables where their babies are forceps delivered' (Mitford, 1993: 61). This procedure had most of the elements of McDonaldization, but it lacked calculability, but that was added in the form of the 'Friedman Curve' created in 1978. This curve envisioned three rigid stages of labor with, for example, the first stage allocated exactly 8.6 hours during which cervical dilation went from 2 to 4 cms (Mitford, 1993: 143).

A variety of non-human technologies (e.g. forceps) have been employed in the delivery of babies. One of the most widespread is the scalpel. Many doctors routinely perform episiotomies during delivery so that the walls of the vagina are not stretched unduly during pregnancy.

The scalpel is also a key tool in caesareans. A perfectly human process has come, in a large number of cases, to be controlled by this non-human technology and those who wield it (Guillemin, 1989). The first modern caesarean took place in 1882, but as late as 1970 only 5 percent of all births involved caesareans. The use skyrocketed in the 1970s and 1980s, reaching 25 percent of all births in 1987 in what has been described as a 'national epidemic' (Silver and Wolfe, 1989). (By 1989 there had been a slight decline to just under 24%.)

Once the baby comes into the world, there is a calculable scoring system, Apgar, used on newborns. The babies are given scores of 0 to 2 on five factors (for example, heart rate, color), with ten being the top (healthiest) score. Most babies have scores between 7 and 9 after a minute of birth; 8 to 10 after five minutes. Babies with scores of 0 to 3 are in distress.

We move now to the other frontier; from the process of being born to that of dying. The McDonaldization of death begins long before a person dies; it commences in the efforts by the medical system to keep the person alive as long as possible: the increasing array of non-human technologies designed to keep people alive; the focus of medicine on maximizing the *quantity* of days, weeks or years a patient remains alive and the lack of emphasis on the *quality* of life during that extra time; computer systems that assess a patient's chances of survival – 90%, 50%, 10%, and so on; and the *rationing* in the treatment of the dying person.

Turning to death itself, it has followed much the same path as birth. That is, it has been moved out of the home and beyond the control of the dying and their family members and into the hands of medical personnel and hospitals. Physicians have played a key role here by gaining a large measure of control of death just as they won control over birth. And death, like birth, is increasingly likely to take place in the hospital. In 1900, only 20 percent of deaths took place in hospitals, in 1949 it was up to 50 percent, by 1958 it was at 61 percent, and by 1977 it had reached 70 percent. By 1993

the number of hospital deaths was down slightly (65%), but to that must be added the increasing number of people who die in nursing homes (11%) and residences such as hospices (22%) (National Center for Health Statistics, 1995). Thus, death has been bureaucratized, which means it has been rationalized, even McDonaldized. The latter is quite explicit in the growth of hospital chains and even chains of hospices, using principles derived from the fast-food restaurant, which are increasingly controlling death. One result of all of this is the dehumanization of the very human process of death as we are increasingly likely to die (as we are likely to be born) impersonally, in the presence of total strangers.

However, even the best efforts of modern, rationalized medicine inevitably fail and patients die. But we are not free of McDonaldization even after we die. For example, we are beginning to witness the development of the changeover from largely family-owned to chains of funeral homes (Corcoran, 1992; Finn, 1991). The chains are leaping into this lucrative and growing market often offering not only funeral services, but cemetery property and merchandise such as caskets and markers.

Perhaps the best example of the rationalization of death is the cremation. It is the parallel to caesareans in the realm of birth. Cremations are clearly more efficient than conventional funerals and burials. Ritual is minimized and cremations have a kind of assembly-line quality; they lead to 'conveyor belt funerals'. Cremations also lend themselves to greater calculability than traditional funerals and burials. For example, instead of lying in state for a day, or more, the city of London crematorium has the following sign: 'Please restrict service to 15 minutes' (Grice, 1992: 10). Then there is the irrationality of the highly rational cremation which tends to eliminate much of the human ceremony associated with a traditional funeral-burial.

The period after one dies has been rationalized in other ways, at least to some degree. There are, for example, the pre-arranged funerals that allow people to manage their affairs even after they are dead. Another example is the harvesting of the organs of the deceased so that others might live. Then there is cryogenics where people are having themselves, or perhaps just their heads, frozen so that they might be brought back to life when anticipated advances in the rationalization of life make such a thing possible.

Given the rationalization of birth and before as well as death and beyond, are there any limits to this expansion? Several are worth mentioning:

- The uniqueness of every death (and birth): 'Every life is different from any that has gone before it, and so is every death. The uniqueness of each of us extends even to the way we die' (Nuland, 1994: 3).

- The often highly non-rational character of the things that cause death (and cause problems at birth):

Cancer, far from being a clandestine foe, is in fact berserk with the malicious exuberance of killing. The disease pursues a continuous, uninhibited, circumferential, barn-burning expedition of destructiveness, in which it heeds no rules, follows no commands and explodes all resistance in a homicidal riot of devastation. Its cells behave like members of a barbarian horde run amok – leaderless and undirected, but with a single-minded purpose: to plunder everything within reach (Nuland, 1994: 207).

- Similarly, cancer is described as an 'uncontrolled mob of misfits', 'a gang of perpetually wilding adolescents', and the 'juvenile delinquents of cellular society' (Nuland, 1994: 208). If ever there was a daunting non-rational enemy of rationalization, cancer (and the death it often causes), is it.

- Midwifery has enjoyed a slight renaissance *because* of the dehumanization and rationalization of modern childbirth practices. When asked why they have sought out midwives, women complain about things like the 'callous and neglectful treatment by the hospital staff', 'labor unnecessarily induced for the convenience of the doctor', and 'unnecessary caesareans for the same reason' (Mitford, 1993: 13).

- The slight decline in caesareans is reflective of the growing concern over the epidemic of caesareans as well as the fact that the American College of Obstetricians came out for abandoning the time-honored idea, 'once a caesarean, always a caesarean'.

- Advance directives and living wills that, among other things, tell hospitals and medical personnel what they may or may not do during the dying process.

- The growth of suicide societies and books like Derek Humphrey's *Final Exit* that, among other things, give people instructions on how to kill themselves; on how to control their own deaths.

- The growing interest in euthanasia, most notably the work of 'Dr Death', Jack Kevorkian. Kevorkian's goal is to give people back control over their own deaths.

## Conclusion

I have sought in this paper to discuss the spatial and temporal expansion of McDonaldization under the headings of globalization and the colonization of birth and death. It is abundantly clear that McDonaldization is expanding dramatically in terms of both time and space. However, there remains the issue of whether or not this growth is inexorable. A number of the barriers to, and limits on, the expansion of McDonaldization have been

discussed in this paper. There clearly are such limits and perhaps more importantly, McDonaldization seems to lead to various counter-reactions that serve to limit this spread. The issue, of course, is whether or not these counter-reactions can themselves avoid being McDonaldized.

While there is some hope in all of this, there is not enough to allow us to abandon the Weberian hypothesis about the inexorable march toward the iron cage of, in this case, McDonaldization. In spite of this likely scenario, I think there are several reasons why it is important for people to continue to try to contain this process. First, it will serve to mitigate the worst excesses of McDonaldized systems. Second, it will lead to the discovery, creation and use of niches where people who are so inclined can escape McDonaldization for at least a part of their day or even a larger portion of their lives. Finally, and perhaps most important, the struggle itself is ennobling. As a general rule, such struggles are nonrationalized, individual, and collective activities. It is in such struggles that people can express genuinely human reason in a world that in virtually all other ways has set up rationalized systems to deny people the ability to behave in such human ways; to paraphrase Dylan Thomas, instead of going gently into that next McDonaldized system, rage, rage against the way it's destroying that which makes life worth living.

# Note

1. An episiotomy is an incision between the vagina and the anus to enlarge the opening needed for a baby to pass.

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***Biographical Note:*** George Ritzer is Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland. Among his many books are *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science* (1975), *Metatheorizing in Sociology* (1991), *Expressing America: A Critique of the Global Credit Card Society* (1995), as well as the book from which this essay is derived, *The McDonaldization of Society*, revised edition (1996), which has been, or soon will be, translated into 10 languages.

***Address:*** Department of Sociology, University of Maryland, College Park, MD 20742, USA.