

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society: 20th Anniversary Edition*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2013, 237 pp., \$46.00 paper (978-1-4522-2669-9).

Over the past few decades, George Ritzer's work on McDonaldization has effectively become a franchise operation in its own right. Since his initial formulation of the term in a short article in the *Journal of American Culture* in 1983, the so-called "McDonaldization thesis" has spawned a score of related books and academic articles by Ritzer and others, generated an extensive secondary literature, become a pedagogical staple in countless university courses, and established itself as part of the popular lexicon in ways that few sociological concepts ever have. The recent publication of a special 20th anniversary edition of Ritzer's *The McDonaldization of Society* presents us with an opportunity to reflect appreciatively but critically upon this impressive legacy, and to assess how well Ritzer's long-established theoretical framework has been able to adapt to or withstand the shifting winds of intellectual and historical change.

Although this seventh edition of Ritzer's classic text has updated its range of topical references and ventured to address a range of new issues, it is also — somewhat counter-intuitively — notably shorter and more concisely argued than the previous edition. Ritzer's decision to condense and combine previously separate chapters and to significantly pare back his analysis of topics such as globalization threatens to amplify the book's preexisting tendency toward intellectual simplification and over-generalization, but it arguably enhances the book's already considerable appeal as an undergraduate teaching text. While his fellow professional scholars might understandably wish that Ritzer had afforded himself the space to reformulate and defend the McDonaldization thesis with greater nuance, precision, and responsiveness to his critics, it would be remiss of them not to appreciate his unique ability to make otherwise daunting theoretical material accessible, relevant, and exciting for a lay audience.

Indeed, in the context of undergraduate sociology courses in which many students often remain quite suspicious of or outright hostile to the ostensibly musty and irrelevant domain of "theory," Ritzer's book provides an excellent initiation into the sweep and excitement of theoretical thinking. Drawing upon a broadly conceived version of the Weberian

theory of rationalization, all editions of this book have helped students to draw vital connections between far-flung historical events such as the emergence of modern state bureaucracy and the development of Taylorized factory production, the fast food industry, and the “McDonaldizing” tendencies at work in education, leisure, travel, sports, religion, family life, shopping, popular entertainment, the news media, social work, and many other spheres of contemporary social life. While acknowledging the quasi-democratic and populist appeal of many McDonaldized institutions and experiences, Ritzer — as ever — retains a strong emphasis upon the irrational, destructive, disenchanting, and dehumanizing consequences of formally rational systems. This provides him with a means of establishing a common thread between an array of pressing social, environmental, psychological and health-related risks and pathologies in contemporary society.

Ritzer’s basic conceptualization of McDonaldization as an insidious, tentacular, and ultimately irrational social process driven by the pursuit of maximum efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control remains intact in this latest edition of his book; he is, however, at pains to freshly address a variety of recent social, cultural, economic, technological, and intellectual developments that seem to either validate or challenge the ongoing salience of this process. In the first instance, this entails addressing McDonald’s own ongoing efforts to rebrand and reposition itself in an era of economic uncertainty, insurgent competition from other restaurant chains, and growing public disaffection with the fast food sector, understood as both the chief emblem of an unhealthy, unsustainable, and morally suspect industrial food system, and as a powerful symbol of the malaise of consumer capitalism more generally. Beyond the immediate challenges of McDonald’s direct business operations, Ritzer also acknowledges the growing social influence of competing business models (those of IKEA, Starbucks, and eBay, for example) and technological developments (such as social media and flexible production systems) that are relatively “DeMcDonaldized” in some respects. By acknowledging such countervailing trends, and briefly situating his arguments in relation to the seemingly contradictory claims embedded in extant debates over post-Fordism, postindustrialism, postmodernity and so on, Ritzer on occasion pulls back from an overly grandiose and totalizing view of McDonaldization’s role in the contemporary world, portraying it as merely one influential process among others in a complex and contradictory social field.

In many instances, however, Ritzer’s effort to accommodate his theoretical framework to new social realities amounts to little more than a cursory acknowledgement of emergent trends that seem to confound

some aspect of the McDonaldization thesis, followed by a round-about account of how such trends are actually explicable within its familiar terms. Efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control, of course, are terms which are abstract and flexible enough to loosely define aspects of almost any social phenomenon. While this way of defusing outliers and counter-examples inoculates Ritzer against the need for a more thoroughgoing process of theoretical reformulation, it steers him away from a more nuanced account of McDonaldization's complex and contradictory relationship to other large-scale social processes. This perhaps accounts for his failure to address the large corpus of ongoing sociological work on reflexive modernization, risk society, and liquid modernity, for instance, whose emphasis upon the precariousness of control and predictability today runs counter in key respects to his vision of the McDonaldized society.

Given Ritzer's eminent status within the sociology of consumption, and the sheer amount of interesting work undertaken in this field over the past few decades, it is also unfortunate that this flagship book, after seven editions, has not developed a more refined theory of popular tastes and consumer motivations *vis-à-vis* top-down McDonaldization, or a more complex understanding of the displaced aspirations, meanings, and enchantments at play within consumer culture more generally. If Ritzer's account of the inexorable, pervasive, and systemic nature of McDonaldization often veers toward reification if not outright fatalism, his emphasis on small-scale, apolitical, local, and individualized modes of resistance to it (staying at quaint B&B's instead of corporate hotel chains, for instance) also seems rather perfunctory and underwhelming, smacking of self-help culture and an unreflective valorization of ostensibly authentic and nonstandardized upper middle class cultural tastes.

The various updates and refinements incorporated into this new edition of *The McDonaldization of Society* are timely and welcome in some respects, although it is debatable whether they go far enough to safeguard the book's continued academic influence in the wake of its landmark anniversary.

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