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The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life

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The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life, by George Ritzer. Newbury Park, CA: Pine Forge Press (Sage), 1993. 221 pp. \$9.95 paper text ed. ISBN 0-8039-9000-6.

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Postmodernism, postindustrialism, post-Fordism views (see Chap. Eight) hold that a new society is emerging and replacing the old routinized modernist one. On the contrary, sociologist Ritzer finds routinization (called McDonaldization—because of the burger chain’s well-known standardization of product and process) is spreading into all of our social institutions and around the world. The appeals of this mass consumer, fast-food, quick news, franchised, entertainment-oriented, shopping mall world are many. Ritzer wants the apt undergraduate and general reader to think about the more negative aspects—lack of information behind the headlines, poor quality products and service, routine and deskilled jobs, lack of creativity and autonomy in work and leisure, and the cultural values of greed and short-sightedness being promoted. He shares Weber’s “iron cage” view of the coming polar night of icy darkness and hardness.

The first two chapters introduce the basic principles of a modernist society. Weber’s concept of rationality (technical, instrumental, formal), his characteristics of modern bureaucracy, Taylor’s scientific management, and Henry Ford’s expansion of the assembly line are discussed, along with a little historical context. The contributions of Marx to the analysis of the effects of routinization of work on human beings are not mentioned in the text, but his “affinity” to the subject is alluded to in the end notes on page 191.

Chapters Three, Four, Five, and Six discuss the four main dimensions of technical rationality: efficiency, calculability and quantification, predictability, and control. Examples within each of these areas are cited from the realms of food production and franchise marketing, education, news, politics, medicine, religion, tract house construction, sports, entertainment, packaged travel, dieting, car repair, etc. In juxtaposing examples from seemingly different fields, Ritzer challenges readers to think about underlying commonalities. This is a major contribution toward critical thinking.

Chapters Seven and Eight (“The Irrationality of Rationality” and “The Iron Cage of McDonaldization?”) underline what the above processes may be doing to “us.” Are we “amusing ourselves to death,” being manipulated, losing our potential creativity, becoming deskilled and underpaid, performing “trivial

pursuits,” buying into quick-bite-photo-op “info” instead of real background information, becoming isolated and disengaged from other human beings in our communities?

Chapter Nine, however, gives the individual a few ideas on resisting a dehumanized society. Two of his thirty specific suggestions are to organize in your own workplace or school to protest corporate practices. The other suggestions are to try to save your individual sanity by carving out niches of autonomy in your own work and leisure life. His main emphasis is on not doing business with national franchises but with locally owned stores. Some suggestions are serious and some appear a little tongue-in-cheek (such as blindfold your child if you have to go into a fast-food place on the highway). If Ritzer has lost much optimism, at least he has maintained a sense of humor. His message appears to be consider where you are spending your money, organize, read critical materials, and think.

There are some minor details the classroom teacher might want to consider when using this text. (1) Readers will possibly be put off by the repetitious nature of some of the examples. How many times must we be told about McDonald's' standard procedures, menus, personnel training, customers run through an assembly line for “refueling” food or a few seconds of Disneyland amusements after an hour's wait in line before being shunted out of the way to make room for the next buyer? Perhaps if warned ahead of time, readers will smile in recognition instead of quitting in disgust when they read something for the third time by the middle of the book.

(2) Weber's “substantive” rationality (*Wertrational*, which deals with human implications of values and goals) could have been introduced along with instrumental, technical, formal rationality (*Zweckrational*). Instrumental rationality becomes dysfunctional when it does not lead to human-oriented rational ends. This would save us from the odd terminology that any philosophy or organization with human considerations is “irrational” or “nonrational.” There is more than one kind of rationality, as Weber noted, and teachers might want to bring this to students' attention. Ritzer comes close to saying this but it is buried in an end note on page 191. Weber is not given a by-line for observing the rationality of humanist goals and Marx's humanist goals are relegated to an end note which I expect few readers will find.

(3) The suggestions in the last chapter on how to resist the dehumanizing effects of McDonaldization could have been expanded. Ritzer fears that most of us will find this society a “velvet cage” instead of Weber's “iron cage,” but he could have alerted us to more of the work being done to resist entrapment. Perhaps Chapter Nine should have mentioned twenty-eight types of organizations to work with and two individual things to do (pay attention to where you buy and talk to

your kids about what society is telling them on TV and in the store, skipping the blindfolds). For example, Ritzer points out that some companies have had to make their products safer or more nutritious or processes less polluting because of external pressure. (So let's hear it for the wide variety of community, consumer, and environmental groups that chip away at these problems all across the country every day. These groups don't always agree with each other on tactics or even what are humanitarian ends.)

With regard to humanizing the workplace, Ritzer notes Saab and Volvo reorganized part of the auto assembly line into workteam production. Also mentioned are Peters and Waterman's "skunk works," which use semi-autonomous teams to obtain flexibility and creativity within large organizations, and examples of socially responsible corporations with new management practices and philosophies, such as Ben and Jerry's. However, readers need to know there is a large body of literature out there regarding the theory and practice of human resources management and alternative organization (as opposed to Taylorism, routinization, etc.). Alert business schools (and Malcolm Baldrige Award hopefuls) are stressing decentralization, teamwork, attention to customer and community needs, and employee participation in decision-making and ownership. While such talk is only hype and lip service in some corporations, others that try it with sincerity find that it works. Readers do not have to start from scratch when making demands of their own McDonaldised workplaces.

A starter list of types of advocacy groups which readers might examine includes: environmental (Native Americans for a Clean Environment, Greenpeace, for example); minority and women's rights (too many to name); community grassroots (Texas alone has 300 such groups networked under the Texas Industrial Areas Foundation); consumer protection (Ralph Nader spin-offs in every part of the country); employee ownership (National Center for Employee Ownership, Industrial Cooperative Assn.); democratic unions (Association for Union Democracy); microbusiness lending (the Grameen Bank model in Bangladesh has been copied in the U. S. and elsewhere); international human rights (Amnesty International); stockholder protest; cleaner politics (Common Cause); and religious organizations bent on the betterment of community and society along humanist lines (CARITAS, the Friends, Maryknolls, etc.). At present, environmentalist issues offer an opportunity for common cause among many of the different types of groups.

(4) The end-note documentation system is a problem—no numbers in the text to tell readers there is documentation on an idea or an expanded discussion on some point. The average reader is not likely to turn to the back of the book at the end of every page. This is where the best comments on human-oriented (substan-

tive) rationality and one mention of Marx's contributions are located. Obviously the index should also have included the footnotes. (On the other hand, the bibliography of related works is useful.)

Undergraduate students, teachers (sociology, cultural anthropology, business school, social psychology, coordinators of student internships), organizational analysts, managers, and the concerned public will profit from this analysis. The avid reader and teacher will want to go on from here. Ritzer has written a readable monograph to get people started in lively discussion.

Occupational Subcultures in the Workplace, by Harrison M. Trice. Ithaca, N.Y.: ILR Press, 1993. 286 pp. \$16.95 paper. ISBN 0-87546-303-7.

Rosemarie Livigni

The Fielding Institute

Trice starts his book by discussing the now common belief that organizations form distinct cultures. He then goes on to state that organizational cultures are really made up of subcultures. These subcultures can be much stronger than an overall organizational culture.

Occupations are seen as subcultures. Occupations are designed to include any grouping of people that share common socialization, education, and shared knowledge to perform a specific task and the control over that knowledge. This knowledge base and control are "in a constant state of flux." Trice sees occupations moving through a life cycle, where some live, some change, and some die. Some occupations survive while others are "de-skilled" (i.e., die out because management or the administration fracture, reassign, or render the occupation obsolete).

In chapters One and Two there are some very basic definitions of "culture." Cultures share values, visions, practices, knowledge, "consciousness," and a primary reference group. Trice introduces a grid dimension as a tool to position an occupational subculture's adherence to its common values. The first position describes the subculture's adherence to group norms (i.e., the depth of identification). The second position reflects adherence to the norms relating to structure or interaction within the occupational subculture. The grid is split into four quadrants: weak/weak, weak/strong, strong/weak and strong/strong.

The main focus of Chapter Three is the ideology associated with specific subcultures. Two ideologies are discussed. These are unionism and professionalism. The author discusses how ideologies can be dysfunctional to the organiza-