

The Weberian Theory of Rationalization and the McDonaldization of Contemporary Society

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■ In this chapter, I apply one of the most famous and important theories in the history of sociology, Max Weber's (1864-1920) theory of rationalization, to contemporary society.

In Weber's view, modern society, especially the Western world, is growing increasingly rationalized. As the reader will see, Weber regarded bureaucracy as the ultimate example of rationalization. Thus, Weber can be seen as being

focally concerned with the rationalization of society in general and, more specifically, its bureaucratization.

This chapter is premised on the idea that whereas the processes of rationalization and bureaucratization described by Weber have continued, if not accelerated, the bureaucracy has been supplanted by the fast-food restaurant as the best exemplification of this process. Furthermore, we will see that the rational principles that lie at the base of the fast-food restaurant are spreading throughout American society as well as the rest of the world. On the basis of Weber's ideas on the rationalization process, in this chapter I describe the continuation and even acceleration of this process, or what I have termed the "McDonaldization" of society.¹

Four types of rationality lie at the heart of Weber's theory of rationalization.² *Practical rationality* is to be found in people's mundane, day-to-day activities and reflects their worldly interests.³ In Weber's terms, through practical rationality people seek the "methodical attainment of a definitely given and practical end by means of an increasingly precise calculation of adequate means."⁴ Therefore, actors calculate all possible means available to them, choose the alternative that best allows them to reach their ultimate end, and then follow that line of action. All human beings engage in practical rationality in attempting to solve the routine and daily problems of life.⁵

Theoretical rationality involves "an increasingly theoretical mastery of reality by means of increasingly precise and abstract concepts."⁶ Among other things, it involves logical deduction, the attribution of causality, and the arrangement of symbolic meanings. It is derived from the inherent need of actors to give some logical meaning to a world that appears haphazard.⁷ Whereas practical rationality involves action, theoretical rationality is a cognitive process and has tended to be the province of intellectuals.

Substantive rationality involves value postulates, or clusters of values, that guide people in their daily lives, especially in their choice of means to ends. These clusters of values are rational when they are consistent with specific value postulates preferred by actors.⁸ Substantive rationality can be linked more specifically to economic action. To Weber, economic action is substantively rational to "the degree to which the provisioning of given groups of persons with goods is shaped by economically oriented social action under some criterion (past, present, or potential) of ultimate values, regardless of the nature of these ends."⁹ Thus, substantive rationality involves a choice of means to ends guided by some larger system of human values.

Formal rationality involves the rational calculation of means to ends based on universally applied rules, regulations, and laws.¹⁰ Formal rationality is

institutionalized in such large-scale structures as the bureaucracy, modern law, and the capitalist economy. The choice of means to ends is determined by these larger structures and their rules and laws.

In looking for the best means of attaining a given objective under formal rationality, we are not left to our own devices but rather we use existing rules, regulations, and structures that either predetermine the optimum methods or help us discover them. This, clearly, is a major development in the history of the world. In the past, people had to discover such mechanisms on their own or with only vague and general guidance from larger value systems. Now, we no longer have to discover for ourselves the optimum means to some given end, because that optimum means has already been discovered: It is incorporated into the rules, regulations, and structures of our social institutions.

Formal rationality often leads to decisions that disregard the needs and values of actors, implying that substantive rationality is unimportant. One example is a formally rational economic system. The needs that come to be emphasized and realized are those for which actors are able to outbid others because they have an abundance of money, not because those needs are of greater importance or of more human value. Profits are the primary focus rather than issues of humanity. Weber stresses this disregard for humanity in a formally rational economic system when he writes, "decisive are the need for competitive survival and the conditions of the labor, money and commodity markets; hence matter-of-fact considerations that are simply nonethical determine individual behavior and interpose impersonal forces between the persons involved."¹¹ The primary concern of the entrepreneur within a formally rational economic system that is capitalist is such nonethical objectives as continuous profit making. The workers, in turn, are dominated by the entrepreneurs who subject the workers to "masterless slavery" in the formal rational economic system.¹² In other words, the formally economic system robs the workers of their basic humanity by enslaving them in a world denuded of human values.

Unlike the first three types of rationality, formal rationality has not existed at all times and in all places. Rather, it was created in, and came to dominate, the modern, Western, industrialized world. Weber believed that formal rationality was coming to overwhelm and to supplant the other types of rationality within the Western world. He saw a titanic struggle taking place in his time between formal and substantive rationality. Weber anticipated, however, that this struggle would end with the erosion of substantive rationality in the face of the forward march of formal rationality. The fading

away of substantive rationality was regretted by Weber because it “embodied Western civilization’s highest ideals: The autonomous and free individual whose actions were given continuity by their reference to ultimate values.”¹³ Instead of people whose actions were guided by these high ideals, we were to be left in the modern world with people who simply followed the rules without regard to larger human values.

Weber saw bureaucracy as the epitome of formally rational domination. Weber links bureaucracies and rationalization as follows:

Bureaucratic rationalization . . . revolutionizes with *technical means*, in principle, as does every economic reorganization, “from without”: It *first* changes the material and social orders, and *through* them the people, by changing the conditions of adaptation, and perhaps the opportunities for adaptation, through a rational determination of means to ends.¹⁴

The bureaucracy “strongly furthers the development of ‘rational matter-of-factness’ and the personality type of the professional expert.”¹⁵ These “experts” possess a “spirit of formalistic impersonality . . . without hatred or passion, and hence without affection or enthusiasms.”¹⁶ The top officials of the bureaucracy develop rules and regulations that lead lower-level officials to choose the best means to ends already chosen at the highest levels. The rules and regulations represent the bureaucracy’s institutional memory that contemporaries need only to use (and not invent and continually reinvent) to attain some end.

The bureaucracies themselves are structured in such a way as to guide or even to force people to choose certain means to ends. Each task is broken up into a number of components, and each office is responsible for a separate portion of the larger task. Employees in each office handle only their own part of the task, usually by following rules and regulations in a predetermined sequence. The goal is attained when each incumbent has completed his or her required task in proper order. The bureaucracy thereby utilizes what its past history has shown to be optimum means to the end in question.

Weber’s overall theoretical perspective was that it was largely the unique development of formal rationality that accounted for the distinctive development of the West. Weber suggests that it was key to the development of the Western world, that it came into conflict with the other types of rationality, especially substantive rationality, and that it acted to reduce them in importance and ultimately to subordinate, if not totally eliminate, them in terms of their importance to Western society.

For Weber, the bureaucracy was the height of (formal) rationality, which he defined in terms of the five elements of efficiency, predictability, quantifiability (or calculability), control through substituting nonhuman technology for human judgment, and the irrationality of rationality.

Bureaucracies operate in a highly predictable manner. Incumbents in one office understand very well how the incumbents of other offices will behave. They know what they will be provided with and when they will receive it. Recipients of the service bureaucracies know with a high degree of assurance what they will receive and when they will receive it. Because bureaucracies quantify as many activities as possible, employees perform their duties as a series of specified steps at quantifiable rates of speed. As with all rationalized systems that focus exclusively on quantity, however, the handling of large numbers of things is equated with excellence, and little or no evaluation is made of the actual quality of what is done in each case. Bureaucracies control people by replacing human judgment with nonhuman technology. Indeed, bureaucracy itself may be seen as one huge nonhuman technology that functions more or less automatically. The adaptability of human decisions vanishes into the dictates of rules, regulations, and institutional structures. The work to be done is divided up so that each office is allocated a limited number of well-defined tasks. Incumbents must do those tasks and no others. The tasks must be done in the manner prescribed by the organization; idiosyncratic performance will get one demoted or even fired. The idea is to get the job done in a certain way by a certain time without mistakes. The bureaucracy’s clients are also controlled. The organization provides only certain services, and not others; one must apply for the services on a specific form by a specific date, and one will receive those services only in a certain way.

Weber praised bureaucracies for their advantages over other mechanisms for discovering and implementing optimum means to ends, but at the same time he was painfully aware of the irrationalities of formally rational systems. Instead of being efficient systems, bureaucracies often become inefficient as the regulations that are used to make them rational degenerate into “red tape.” Bureaucracies often become unpredictable as employees grow unclear about what they are supposed to do and clients do not get the services they expect. The emphasis on quantifiability often leads to large amounts of poor quality work. Anger at the nonhuman technologies that are replacing them often leads employees to undercut or sabotage the operation of these technologies. By then, bureaucracies have begun to lose control over their workers as well as their constituents, and what was

designed to be a highly rational operation often ends up irrational and quite out of control.

Although Weber was concerned about the irrationalities of formally rational systems, he was even more deeply disturbed by what he called the “iron cage of rationality.” Weber saw the bureaucracy as a rationalized cage that encased increasing numbers of human beings. He described bureaucracies as “escape proof,” “practically unshatterable,” and among the hardest institutions to destroy once they are created. The individual bureaucrat is seen as “harnessed” into this bureaucratic cage and unable to “squirm out” of it. Given its strength, and our inability to escape, Weber concludes resignedly and with considerable unease, to put it mildly, that “the future belongs to bureaucratization.”¹⁷ He feared that more sectors of society would come to be dominated by rationalized principles so that people would be locked into a series of rationalized workplaces, to rationalized recreational settings, and to rationalized homes. Society would become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalized structures.

Weber has a highly pessimistic view of the future. He saw no hope in the socialistic movements of his day that he felt (and time has borne him out) would only succeed in increasing the spread of bureaucratization and formal rationality.

There is little question that the process of rationalization has spread further and become even more firmly entrenched than it was in Weber’s day. The fast-food restaurant, of which McDonald’s is the best-known chain, has employed all the rational principles pioneered by the bureaucracy and is part of the bureaucratic system because huge conglomerates now own many of the fast-food chains. McDonald’s utilized bureaucratic principles and combined them with others, and the outcome is the process of McDonaldization.

Several years ago, I wrote a paper titled “The McDonaldization of Society.” The main thesis of that essay was that Max Weber was right about the inexorable march of formal rationality, but that his paradigm case of that type of rationality and the spearhead in its expansion, the bureaucracy, have been superseded in contemporary American society by the fast-food restaurant. It is the fast-food restaurant that today best represents and leads the process of formal rationalization and its basic components—efficiency, predictability, quantification, control through the substitution of nonhuman for human technology,¹⁸ as well as the ultimate irrationality of formal rationality. A decade after the original essay, as we had begun progressing through the 1990s, I once again examined the process of McDonaldization. I was astounded by the forward progress of McDonaldization during the

past decade and the degree to which it has spread its tentacles ever farther into contemporary society.

The most obvious, and perhaps least important, extension is that fast-food restaurants themselves have grown and expanded. The McDonald’s chain, which began operation in 1955, opened its 12,000th branch in 1991; the leading 100 restaurant chains operate more than 110,000 outlets in the United States alone.¹⁹ No longer restricted to the good old American hamburger, fast-food chains now traffic in pizza and Italian, Mexican, Chinese, and Cajun food, among others. Nor are the fast-food chains limited any longer to low-priced restaurants—now there are “upscale” chains, such as Sizzler (steaks), Red Lobster (seafood), and Fuddrucker’s (gourmet burgers), as well as trendy saloons such as Bennigan’s and TGI Fridays. There is also the geographic expansion of American fast-food restaurants throughout the world, with the most notable examples being the world’s largest McDonald’s in Beijing and the slightly smaller, but hugely successful, McDonald’s in Moscow. In addition to the expansion of American chains, many other countries are developing their own, most notably the fast-food *croissanteries* spreading throughout one of the most unlikely of locations for such a phenomenon, the center of gourmet dining: Paris.

Instead of being content to surround college campuses, fast-food chains are increasingly found on those campuses. There is also more involvement by the chains in the food served at the nation’s high schools and grade schools.²⁰ Once characterized by an odd and unpredictable mix of restaurants, the nation’s interstate highways are coming to be increasingly populated by fast-food chains. A similar thing is happening at the nation’s airports, and United Airlines has begun serving McDonald’s meals on some of its flights. The military has been forced to serve fast food at its bases and on its ships. Fast-food outlets are turning up increasingly in hospitals, despite the innumerable attacks on the nutritional value of the food. The latest, but undoubtedly not the last, incursion of the fast-food chains is into the nation’s baseball parks and other sports venues.

Still another element involves the degree to which a wide array of other kinds of businesses are coming to be operated on the basis of the principles pioneered by the fast-food chains. For example, the vice chairman of one of these chains, Toys “R” Us, said, “We want to be thought of as a sort of McDonald’s of toys.”²¹ Other chains with a similar model and similar ambitions include Jiffy-Lube, AAMCO Transmissions, Midas Muffler, Hair Plus, H&R Block, Pearle Vision Centers, Kampgrounds of America (KOA), Kinder Care (dubbed “Kentucky Fried Children”), Nutri/System, Jenny Craig, and many more.

McDonald's influence is also felt in the number of social phenomena that have come to be prefaced by "Mc." Examples include McDentists, McDoctors, McChild care centers, McStables (for the nationwide racehorse training operation of Wayne Lucas), and McPaper²² (for *USA Today*; its short news articles are sometimes called "News McNuggets"). When *USA Today* began an aborted television program modeled after the newspaper, it was immediately dubbed "News McRather."²³ With the latter kinds of extensions, we get to the real core of the expansion of McDonaldization and the real reason for revisiting the process. In the past decade, McDonaldization has extended its reach into more and more regions of society, and those areas are increasingly remote from the heart of the process in the fast-food business. As the previous examples make clear, dentistry, medicine, child care, the training of racehorses, newspapers, and television news have come to be modeled after food chains. Thus, McDonaldization is the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of society.

Even the derivatives of McDonald's are, in turn, having their own influence. The success of *USA Today* ("McPaper") has led to changes (shorter stories and color weather maps) in many newspapers across the nation. One *USA Today* editor stated, "The same newspaper editors who call us McPaper have been stealing our McNuggets."²⁴ The influence of *USA Today* is manifest most blatantly in the *Boca Raton News*, a Knight-Ridder newspaper. This newspaper is described as "a sort of smorgasbord of snippets, a newspaper that slices and dices the news into even smaller portions than does *USA Today*, spicing it with color graphics and fun facts and cute features like 'Today's Hero' and 'Critter Watch.'"²⁵ As in *USA Today*, stories in the *Boca Raton News* do not usually "jump" from one page to another; they start and finish on the same page. To meet this need, long and complex stories often have to be reduced to a few paragraphs. Much of a story's context, and much of what the principals have to say, are severely cut back or omitted entirely. The main function of the newspaper seems to be to entertain, with its emphasis on light and celebrity news, color maps, and graphics.

The objective of the remainder of this chapter is to demonstrate the continued relevance of Weberian theory by attempting to get at the full reach of McDonald's influence throughout society. I will do this by breaking McDonaldization down into its key elements (Weber's five dimensions of rationalization) and then demonstrating how each of these elements is being manifest in more and more sectors of society.

■ Efficiency

The first element of McDonaldization is efficiency, or the choice of the optimum means to an end. Many aspects of the fast-food restaurant illustrate efficiency, especially from the viewpoint of the restaurant, but none better than the degree to which the customer is turned into an unpaid laborer. The fast-food restaurant did not create the idea of imposing work on the consumer, getting the consumer to be what is, in effect, an unpaid employee, but it institutionalized and expedited this development. Customers are expected to stand in line and order their own food (rather than having a waiter do it) and to "bus" their own paper, plastic, and styrofoam (rather than having it done by a busperson). Fast-food chains have also pioneered the movement toward handing the consumer little more than the basics of the meal. The consumer is expected to take the naked burger to the "fixin bar" and there turn it into the desired sandwich by adding such things as lettuce, tomatoes, and onions. We all are expected to log a few minutes a week as sandwich makers. In a recent innovation, we are now handed an empty cup and expected to go to the fountain and fill our glasses with ice and a soft drink, thereby spending a few moments as what used to be called a "soda jerk." In some ultramodern fast-food restaurants, customers are met by a computer screen when they enter and they must punch in their own order. In these and other ways, the fast-food restaurant has grown more efficient.

The salad bar, also popularized if not pioneered by the fast-food restaurant, is a classic example of putting the consumer to work. The customer buys an empty plate and then loads up on the array of vegetables (and other foods) available. Quickly seeing the merit in all this, many supermarkets have now instituted their own salad bars with a more elaborate array of alternative foods available to the consumer. The salad lover can now work as a salad chef at lunch hour in the fast-food restaurant and then do it all over again in the evening at the supermarket by making the salad for the evening meal. All this is very efficient from the perspective of the fast-food restaurant and the supermarket because only a very small number of employees are needed to keep the various compartments well stocked.

There are many other examples of this process of imposing work on the consumer. Virtually gone are gas station attendants who filled gas tanks, checked oil, and cleaned windows. We now put in a few minutes a week as unpaid gas station attendants pumping gas, checking oil, and cleaning windows. Instead of having a readily available attendant to pay for gasoline,

we must trek into the station to pay for our gas. In the latest “advance” in this realm, customers put their own credit cards in a slot, they pump the gas, their account is automatically charged the correct (we hope) amount for the gas pumped, and finally the receipt and the card are retrieved with no contact with, or work done by, anyone working in the gas station.

The latter development was pioneered in the banking industry with the advent of the cash machine, which allows us all to work for at least a few moments as unpaid bank tellers.

When calling many businesses these days, instead of dealing with a human operator who makes the desired connection for us, we must deal with “voice mail” and follow a series of instructions from a computer voice by pushing a bewildering array of numbers and codes before we get, it is hoped, to the desired extension.²⁶

Efficiency has been extended to the booming diet industry, which encompasses diet drugs, diet books, exercise videotapes, diet meals, diet drinks, weight loss clinics, and “fat farms.”²⁷ Diet books promising all kinds of efficient shortcuts to weight loss are often at the top of the best-seller lists. Losing weight is normally difficult and time-consuming. Hence the lure of various diet books that promise to make weight loss easier and quicker—that is, more efficient. For those on a diet, and many people are on more or less perpetual diets, the preparation of low-calorie food has been made more efficient. Instead of cooking diet foods from scratch, an array of pre-prepared diet foods are available in frozen or microwavable form. For those who do not wish to go through the inefficient process of eating these diet meals, there are diet shakes such as Slimfast that can be mixed and consumed in a matter of seconds.

In addition, there is the growth of diet centers such as Nutri/System and Jenny Craig.²⁸ Dieters at Nutri/System are provided (at substantial cost) with prepackaged freeze-dried food. The dieter needs only to add water when it is time for the next meal. Freeze-dried foods are efficient not only for the dieter but also for Nutri/System because they can be efficiently packaged, transported, and stored. Furthermore, the dieter’s periodic visit to a Nutri/System center is efficiently organized. A counselor is allotted 10 minutes with each client. During that brief time period, weight, blood pressure, and measurements are taken, routine questions are asked, a chart is filled out, and some time is devoted to “problem solving.” If the session extends beyond the allotted 10 minutes, and other clients are waiting, the receptionist will buzz the room. Counselors learn their techniques at Nutri/System University (NSU), where, after a week of training (no inefficient years of matriculation here), they earn certification and an NSU diploma.²⁹

■ Calculability

The second dimension of McDonaldization is calculability. McDonaldization involves an emphasis on things that can be calculated, counted, and quantified. In terms of the latter, it means a tendency to emphasize quantity rather than quality. This leads to a sense that quality is equal to certain, usually large, quantities of things.

As in many other aspects of its operation, McDonald’s emphasis on quantity (as reflected in the Big Mac) is mirrored by the other fast-food restaurants. The most notable is Burger King, which stresses the quantity of the meat in its hamburger, called the “Whopper,” and of the fish in its sandwich called the “Whaler.” At Wendy’s, we are offered a variety of “Biggies.” Similarly, 7-Eleven offers its customers a hot dog called the “Big Bite” and a large soft drink called the “Big Gulp” and now, the even larger, “Super Big Gulp.” This emphasis on quantity in a McDonaldized society is not restricted to fast-food restaurants. United Airlines boasts that it serves more cities than any other airline.

What is particularly interesting about all this emphasis on quantity is the seeming absence of interest in communicating anything about quality. Thus, United Airlines does not tell us anything about the quality (passenger comfort) of their numerous flights. The result is a growing concern about the decline or even the absence of quality in society as a whole.³⁰

As with efficiency, calculability has been extended from eating in food chains to many settings, including dieting. Given its very nature, the diet industry is obsessed with things that can be quantified. Weight, weight loss (or gain), and time periods are measured precisely. Food intake is carefully measured and monitored. Diet foods detail number of ounces of food, number of calories, and many other things.

Another interesting extension of the emphasis on quantity rather than quality is found in *USA Today*. This newspaper is noted for its “junk-food journalism”—the lack of substance in its stories.³¹ Instead of offering detailed stories, *USA Today* offers a large number of short, easily and quickly read stories. One executive stated, “*USA Today* must sell news/info at a fast, hard pace.”³² One observer underscored the newspaper’s corresponding lack of concern for quality and, in the process, its relationship to the fast-food restaurant: “Like parents who take their children to a different fast food every night and keep the refrigerator stocked with ice cream, *USA Today* gives its readers only what they want, no spinach, no bran, no liver.”³³

There is a growing emphasis on the number of credentials one possesses. For example, people in various occupations are increasingly using long lists

of initials after their names to convince prospective clients of their competence. Said one insurance appraiser with ASA, FSV, FAS, CRA, and CRE after his name, “the more [initials] you tend to put after your name, the more impressed they [potential clients] become.”³⁴ The sheer number of credentials, however, tells us little about the competence of the person sporting them.

The emphasis on quantity rather than quality of publications among academics led to an announcement not too long ago by the president (since departed) of Stanford University, Donald Kennedy, that there would be a change in the university’s emphasis on the quantity of publications in the decision to hire, promote, or grant tenure to faculty members. He was disturbed by a report that indicated “that nearly half of faculty members believe that their scholarly writings are merely counted—not evaluated—when personnel decisions are made.”³⁵ Kennedy stated,

First, I hope we can agree that the quantitative use of research output as a criterion for appointment or promotion is a bankrupt idea. . . . The overproduction of routine scholarship is one of the most egregious aspects of contemporary academic life: It tends to conceal really important work by sheer volume; it wastes time and valuable resources.³⁶

To deal with this problem, Kennedy proposed to limit the number of publications used in making personnel decisions. He hoped that the proposed limits would “reverse the appalling belief that counting and weighing are the important means of evaluating faculty research.”³⁷ It remains to be seen whether Stanford, to say nothing of the rest of American academia, will be able to limit the emphasis on quantity rather than quality.

■ Predictability

Rationalization involves the increasing effort to ensure predictability from one time or place to another. In a rational society, people want to know what to expect in all settings and at all times. They neither want nor expect surprises. They want to know that when they order their Big Mac today it is going to be identical to the one they ate yesterday and the one they will eat tomorrow.

The movie industry is increasingly characterized by predictability. One manifestation of this is the growing reliance on sequels to successful movies rather than producing completely new movies based on new concepts, ideas, and characters. The Hitchcock classic *Psycho*, for example, was followed by

several sequels (of course, not made by Hitchcock), as have other less artistically successful horror films such as *Halloween* and *Nightmare on Elm Street*. Outside of the horror movie genre, a range of other movies have been succeeded by one or more sequels, including *Star Wars*, *Godfather*, *Back to the Future*, *Terminator*, and many more.

The routine use of sequels is a relatively new phenomenon in Hollywood. Its development parallels, and is part of, the McDonaldization of society. The attraction of sequels is their predictability. From the point of view of the studios, the same characters, actors, and basic plot lines can be used over and over. Furthermore, there seems to be a greater likelihood that sequels will be successful at the box office than completely original movies; profit levels are more predictable. From the viewer’s perspective, there is great comfort in knowing that they will once again encounter favorite characters played by familiar actors who find themselves in accustomed settings. Moviegoers seem more willing to shell out money for a safe and familiar movie than for a movie that is completely new to them. Like a McDonald’s meal, these sequels are typically not as high quality as the originals, but at least the consumers know what they are getting.

One of the early manifestations of predictability, the TV dinner, has now been joined, and in some cases superseded, by even more rational meals eaten at home. The microwavable dinner is more efficient to store and cook. To this list of advances, we can now add the freeze-dried foods that blossom into predictable dishes merely through the addition of water.

A similar process can be seen in camping. Although some people still “rough it,” many others have sought to eliminate most, if not all, of the unpredictability from camping. We have witnessed the development of “country-club campgrounds,” spearheaded by such franchises as KOA.³⁸ Instead of simple tents, modern campers might venture forth in an RV to protect them from the unexpected thunderstorms, tick bites, and snakes. Of course, “camping” in an RV also tends to reduce the likelihood of catching sight of the wandering deer or bear.³⁹ Furthermore, the Winnebago carries within it the predictable video recorder, stereo, and so on. One camper, relaxing in his air-conditioned 32-foot trailer, stated, “We’ve got everything right here. . . . It doesn’t matter how hard it rains or how the wind blows.”⁴⁰

Much of the attraction of the shopping mall is traceable to its predictability. The unpredictabilities of weather are eliminated:

One kid who works here told me why he likes the mall. . . . It’s because no matter what the weather is outside, it’s always the same in here. He likes that. He doesn’t want to know it’s raining—it would depress him.⁴¹

The malls, like fast-food restaurants, are virtually the same from one place or time to another. One finds the same chains represented in malls throughout the country. Finally, those who spend their days wandering through malls are relatively free from the unpredictabilities of crime that beset them when they wander through city streets.

Part of the success of *USA Today* is traceable to its predictability. Because it is a national newspaper, travelers are reassured by the fact that the familiar masthead and contents will be available wherever they go. The structure and makeup of the newspaper is highly predictable from one day to another. The stories are all predictably short and easily digestible. There are as few surprises in one's daily *USA Today* as in one's nightly Big Mac; in fact, they are best consumed together.

I close this discussion of predictability in a McDonaldized society with the example of modern, suburban housing. Many of Steven Spielberg's movies take place in these rationalized and highly predictable suburbs. Spielberg's strategy is to lure the viewer into this highly predictable world and then to have a highly unpredictable event occur. For example, in *ET* the extraterrestrial wanders into a suburban development of tract houses and is discovered by a child who lives in one of those houses and who, up to that point, has lived a highly predictable suburban existence. The unpredictable ET eventually disrupts not only the lives of the child and his family but also those of the entire community. Similarly, *Poltergeist* takes place in a suburban household, and the evil spirits ultimately disrupt its predictable tranquility. The great success of Spielberg's movies may be traceable to our longing for some unpredictability, even if it is frightening and menacing, in our increasingly predictable lives.

■ Replacing People With Nonhuman Technologies

I combine the discussion of two elements of McDonaldization—increased control and the replacement of human by nonhuman technology. The reason for the combination is that these two elements are closely linked. Specifically, replacement of human by nonhuman technology is often oriented toward greater control. The great sources of uncertainty and unpredictability in any rationalizing system are people—either the people who work within those systems or the people who are served by them. McDonald's seeks to exert increasing control over both its employees and its customers. It is most likely to do this by steadily replacing people with nonhuman technologies. After all, technologies like robots and computers are far easier to control than

humans. In addition to eliminating some people by replacing them with technologies, those who continue to labor within McDonald's are better controlled by these new technologies. These nonhuman technologies also exert increasing control over people served by the system.

As in the production and consumption of food in the fast-food restaurant, the production of some of the raw materials required by such restaurants—bread, fish, meat, and eggs—has also come to be characterized by increasing control through replacing people with nonhuman technologies. In the case of raising animals for food, relatively small, humanized family-run farms are being rapidly replaced by “factory farms,” in which people and animals are controlled by nonhuman technologies.⁴² One of the first animals to find its way into the factory farm was the chicken. Among its other advantages, chicken farms allow one person to manage more than 50,000 chickens. Raising chickens in this way involves a series of highly predictable steps. The chickens themselves will be far more predictable in size and weight than free-ranging chickens. It is also obviously far more efficient to “harvest” chickens confined in this way than it is to catch chickens that are free to roam over large areas.

Confining chickens in such crowded quarters, however, creates such unpredictabilities as violence and even cannibalism. These irrational “vices” are dealt with in a variety of ways, such as dimming the light as the chickens approach full size and the “debeaking” of chickens so that they cannot harm one another.

The replacement of people with nonhuman technology, and the consequent increase in control, is found not only in food production and the fast-food restaurant but also in home cooking. Technologies such as the microwave or conventional oven with a temperature probe “decide” when food is done rather than leaving that judgment to the cook. Ovens, coffee makers, and other appliances are now able to turn themselves on and off. The instructions on all kinds of packaged foods dictate precisely how the food is to be prepared and cooked. Even the now old-fashioned cookbook was designed to take creativity away from the cook, who would be inclined to flavor to taste, and put it in the hands of the rigid guidelines laid down by the cookbook.

A very similar development has taken place in supermarkets. In the past, prices were marked on food products and the supermarket checker had to read the price and enter it into the cash register. As with all human activities, there was a chance for human error. In recent years, to counter this problem, many supermarkets have installed optical scanners. Instead of the human checker reading the price, the mechanical scanner “reads” the code and the

price for a given code number that have been entered into the computer, which is the heart of the modern cash register. This nonhuman technology has eliminated some of the human uncertainty from the job of supermarket checker. It has also reduced the number, and level of sophistication, of the tasks performed by the checker. The checker no longer needs to read the amount and enter it in the cash register. Left are less skilled tasks such as scanning the food and bagging it. In other words, the supermarket checker has undergone *deskilling*—a decline in the amount of skill required on the job.

The next step in this development is to have the customer do the scanning, thereby eliminating the need for a checkout person. In fact, a nearby Safeway recently instituted such a system. To make things easier, Safeway is providing its customers with a brochure titled “Checkout for Yourself Just How Easy It Is.” (Of course, one might ask, easy for whom?) The following are three “easy” steps as described in the brochure:

1. Pass the item’s barcode over the scanner. Wait for beep. Place item on conveyor belt.
2. When you are finished scanning all items, touch END ORDER button on screen.
3. Pick up receipt at the end of the lane. Proceed to the pay station.

Such military-like orders exert great control over the customer, and they allow for the elimination of the checkout person. The next “advance” may be a technology that permits the insertion of the customer’s credit card in the scanning system, thereby avoiding the need to move on to a human cashier and pay for the food.

The supermarket scanners permit other kinds of control over customers. Prior to the scanner, customers could examine their purchases and see how much each cost; they could also check to be sure that they were not being overcharged at the cash register. With the advent of the scanner, prices no longer appear on goods, only bar codes. This change has given the supermarket greater control over customers; it is almost impossible for the consumer to keep tabs on the checkers. When the scanners were instituted at my local market, management announced that it was issuing markers to customers who were interested in writing the price on each item. This, again, is consistent with the trend toward getting the consumer to do work historically done by others, in this case by grocery clerks who worked deep into the night to mark each item. In any case, the supermarkets did not keep the markers very long because few hurried shoppers had the desire to spend several additional minutes a day as grocery clerks.

Telemarketing is increasingly ubiquitous in modern society. Many of us are called several times a day in efforts to get us to buy something. Those who work in these telemarketing “factories” are rigidly controlled. They often have scripts that they follow mindlessly. Furthermore, there are a range of alternative scripts designed to handle most foreseeable contingencies. Those doing the phoning are often listened in on by supervisors to be sure the correct procedures are followed. There are rigid demands for numbers of calls and sales required in a given time period. If employees fail to meet the quotas, they are summarily fired. Following the usual progression, instead of having people solicit us over the phone, some companies are now using computer calls. Computer voices are far more predictable than even the most rigidly controlled human operator. Not only do we have computer calls but also we are now seeing the utilization of computers that respond to the human voice. A person receiving a long-distance collect call might be asked whether he or she will accept the charges. The computer voice demands, “Say yes or no” or “Press one for no, zero for yes.” Although efficient and cost saving, such a system is anonymous and dehumanizing:

The person senses that he cannot use free-flowing speech. He’s being constrained. The computer is controlling him. It can be simply frustrating. . . . People adapt to it, but only by filing it away subconsciously as another annoyance of living in our technological world.⁴³

An even more extreme version of this is found in the educational variant of the fast-food restaurant, Kinder-Care. Kinder-Care tends to hire short-term employees with little or no training in education. What these employees do in the “classroom” is determined by a uniform “instruction book” that includes a preset, ready-made curriculum. All that is required is that the staff member open up the manual to the appropriate place where all activities are spelled out in detail on a day-by-day basis. Clearly, a skilled, experienced, and creative teacher is not the kind of person McChild care centers seek to hire. Rather, relatively untrained employees are more easily controlled by the nonhuman technology of the omnipresent instruction book.

The modern, computerized airplane, such as Boeing’s 757 and 767, represents an interesting case of substituting nonhuman for human control. Instead of flying “by the seat of their pants” or using old-fashioned autopilots for simple maneuvers, modern pilots “can push a few buttons and lean back while the plane flies to its destination and lands on a predetermined runway.”⁴⁴

Said one Federal Aviation Administration official, “We’re taking more and more of these functions out of human control and giving them to

machines.”⁴⁵ The new, automated airplanes are in many ways safer and more reliable than older, less technologically advanced models. There is a fear, however, that pilots dependent on these technologies will lose the ability to find creative ways of handling emergency situations. An airline manager stated, “If we have human operators subordinated to technology, then we’re going to lose that creativity. I don’t have computers that will do that [be creative]; I just don’t.”⁴⁶

■ Irrationality of Rationality

There are great gains involved in increasing rationalization, resulting from increases in efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through the substitution of nonhuman for human technology. I enumerate some of the advantages of the fast-food restaurant and, more generally, of other elements of McDonaldized society. The fast-food restaurant has expanded the alternatives available to consumers: more people now have ready access to Italian, Mexican, Chinese, and Cajun foods; the salad bar enables people to make salads exactly the way they want them; microwave ovens and microwavable foods allow us to have dinner in minutes or even seconds; for those with a wide range of shopping needs, supermarkets and shopping malls are efficient sites and home shopping networks allow us to shop even more efficiently without ever leaving home; today’s high-tech, for-profit hospitals are likely to provide higher-quality medical care than their predecessors; we can get almost instantaneous medical attention at our local, drive-in McDoctors; computerized phone systems allow people to do things (like getting a bank balance in the middle of the night) that were impossible before and automated bank teller machines allow people to obtain money any time of the day or night; package tours permit large numbers of people to visit countries that they would otherwise be unable to see; diet centers such as Nutri/System allow people to lose weight in a carefully regulated and controlled system; Winnebagos let the modern camper avoid excessive heat, rain, insects, and the like; and suburban tract houses have permitted large numbers of people to afford single-family homes.

The rational systems also allow us to avoid the problems created by nonrational systems in other societies. The following is a description of a recent visit to a pizzeria in Havana, Cuba:

The pizza’s not much to rave about—they scrimp on tomato sauce, and the dough is mushy.

It was about 7:30 p.m., and as usual the place was standing-room only, with people two deep jostling for a stool to come open and a waiting line spilling out onto the sidewalk.

The menu is similarly Spartan. . . . To drink, there is tap water. That’s it—no toppings, no soda, no beer, no coffee, no salt, no pepper. And no special orders.

The waiter wears a watch around his belt loop, but he hardly needs it; time is evidently not his chief concern. After a while, tempers begin to fray.

But right now, it’s 8:45 p.m. at the pizzeria, I’ve been waiting an hour and a quarter for two small pies.⁴⁷

Few would prefer such irrational systems to the rationalized elements of our society.

Although there are many advantages to a McDonaldized society, there are also great costs associated with McDonaldization that can be dealt with largely under the heading of the irrationality of rationality. In other words, it is my thesis, following Weber, that rational systems inevitably spawn a series of irrationalities that serve to limit, ultimately compromise, and perhaps even defeat, their rationality.

We can conceive of the irrationality of rationality in several ways. At the most general level, it is simply the overarching label for all the negative aspects and effects of McDonaldization. More specifically, it can be seen as the opposite of rationality and its several dimensions. That is, McDonaldization can be viewed as leading to inefficiency, unpredictability, incalculability, and loss of control. Most specifically, irrationality means that rational systems are unreasonable systems. By that, I mean they serve to deny the basic humanity, the human reason, of the people who work within or are served by them. Rational systems are dehumanizing systems. Although in other contexts rationality and reason are often used interchangeably, here they are employed to mean antithetical phenomena.

The most obvious manifestation of the inefficiency of the fast-food restaurant is the long lines of people that are often found at the counters or the long lines of people that are often found at the drive-through windows. What is purported to be an efficient way of obtaining a meal turns out to be quite inefficient. The fast-food restaurant is far from the only aspect of the McDonaldization society that operates inefficiently. Columnist Richard Cohen described the inefficiencies of the Automated Teller Machines (ATMs) as follows:

Oh Lord, with each advance of the computer age, I was told I would benefit. But with each “benefit,” I wind up doing more work. This is the ATM rule of life. . . . I was told—nay promised—that I could avoid lines at the bank and

make deposits or withdrawals any time of the day. Now, there are lines at the ATMs, the bank seems to take a percentage of whatever I withdraw or deposit, and of course, I'm doing what tellers (remember them?) used to do. Probably, with the new phone, I'll have to climb telephone poles in the suburbs during ice storms.⁴⁸

At least three different irrationalities are being underscored in the previous quotation: Rational systems are not less expensive, they force us to do a range of unpaid work, and most important from the point of view of this discussion, they are often inefficient. It might be more efficient to deal with a human teller, either in the bank or drive-through window, than to wait in line at an ATM machine, perhaps on a cold, snowy night. For many, it would be far more efficient to prepare a meal at home than to load the family in the car, drive to McDonald's, fill up on food, and then drive home again. This may not be true of some meals cooked at home from scratch, but it is certainly true of TV dinners, microwave meals, or full-course meals brought in from the supermarket. Many people, however, persist in the belief, fueled by endless propaganda from the fast-food restaurants, that it is more efficient to eat there than to eat at home.

The main reason that we think of McDonaldization as irrational, and ultimately unreasonable, is that it tends to become a dehumanizing system that may become antihuman or even destructive of human beings. In terms of the latter, there are a number of ways in which the health, and perhaps the lives, of people have been threatened by progressive rationalization.⁴⁹ One example is the high calorie, fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar content of the food served at fast-food restaurants. Such meals are the last things the vast majority of Americans need. Many suffer from being overweight or have high cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, and perhaps diabetes. The kinds of meals typically served at fast-food restaurants only serve to make these health problems much worse. Even more worrisome, they help to create eating habits in children that contribute to the development of these, and other, health problems later in life. It can be argued that, with their appeal to children, fast-food restaurants are creating not only lifelong devotees of fast food but also people who will grow addicted to diets high in salt, sugar, and fat.

The fast-food industry has run afoul of not only nutritionists but also environmentalists. It produces an enormous amount of trash, some of which is nonbiodegradable. Many people have been critical of the public eyesore created by litter from innumerable fast-food meals strewn across the coun-

tryside. Almost two decades ago, prior to much of its enormous expansion, it was estimated that it took 315 square miles of forest to provide the paper needed by McDonald's.⁵⁰ That figure must be far greater today than it was in 1972, even though some paper containers have been replaced by styrofoam and other products. Even greater criticism has been leveled at the widespread use of virtually indestructible styrofoam. Styrofoam debris piles up in landfills, creating mountains of waste that simply remain there for years, if not forever.

McDonaldized institutions have a negative effect not only on our health and on the environment but also on some of our most cherished institutions, most notably the family. A key technology in the destruction of the family meal is the microwave oven and the vast array of microwavable foods it helped generate.⁵¹ A recent *Wall Street Journal* poll indicated that Americans consider the microwave their favorite household product.⁵² In fact, the microwave in a McDonaldizing society is seen as an advance over the fast-food restaurant. One consumer researcher stated, "It has made even fast-food restaurants not seem fast because at home you don't have to wait in line."⁵³ Consumers are demanding meals that take no more than 10 minutes to microwave, whereas in the 1970s people were more willing to spend a half hour cooking dinner, and in the early 1970s they were more willing to spend as much as an hour on dinner. This emphasis on speed has, of course, brought with it poorer taste and lower quality, but people do not seem to mind this loss: "We're just not as critical of food as we used to be."⁵⁴

The speed of microwave cooking, as well as the wide variety of foods available in that form, makes it possible for family members to eat at different times and places. To give even children independence, companies are marketing products such as Kid's Kitchen, Kid Cuisine, and My Own Meals. As a result, "Those qualities of the family meal, the ones that imparted feelings of security and well-being, might be lost forever where food is 'zapped' or 'nuked' instead of cooked."⁵⁵

The advances in microwave cooking continue. There are already plastic strips on some foods that turn blue when the food is done. The industry is promising strips that communicate cooking information directly to the microwave oven:

With cooking reduced to pushing a button, the kitchen may wind up as a sort of filling station. Family members will pull in, push a few buttons, fill up and leave. To clean up, all we need do is throw away plastic plates.⁵⁶

What is lost, of course, is the family meal, and we must decide whether we can afford the loss:

The communal meal is our primary ritual for encouraging the family to gather together every day. If it is lost to us, we shall have to invent new ways to be a family. It is worth considering whether the shared joy that food can provide is worth giving up.⁵⁷

Thus, it is my argument that contrary to McDonald's propaganda, and the widespread belief in it, fast-food restaurants, as well as the innumerable other McDonaldized institutions, are not truly rational systems. They spawn all kinds of problems for the health of their customers and the well-being of the environment, they tend to be dehumanizing and therefore unreasonable in various ways, and they often lead to the opposite of what they are supposed to create—for example, they lead to inefficiency rather than increased efficiency. All this is not to deny the many advantages of McDonald's mentioned previously, but it is to point to the fact that there are counterbalancing and perhaps even overwhelming problems associated with the fast-food society.

Perhaps the ultimate irrationality of McDonaldization is the possibility that people could ultimately lose control over the system and it would come to control us. Already, many aspects of the lives of most of us are controlled by these rational systems. It at least appears, however, that these systems are ultimately controlled by people. These rational systems, however, can spin beyond the control of even the people who occupy the highest level positions within those systems. This is one of the senses in which we can, following Weber, talk of an "iron cage of McDonaldization." It can become a system that comes to control all of us.

There is another fear: that these interlocking rational systems can fall into the hands of a small number of leaders who, through them, can exercise enormous control over all society. Thus, there are authoritarian and totalitarian possibilities associated with the process of McDonaldization. We may come to be increasingly controlled by the rational systems themselves or by a few leaders who master those systems.

This kind of fear has animated many science fiction writers and is manifest in such sci-fi classics as 1984, *Brave New World*, and *Fahrenheit 451*. The problem is that these novels described a feared and fearsome future world, whereas McDonaldization is with us now, has been with us for awhile, and is extending its reach throughout society.

■ Conclusion

The objective in this chapter has been to show the continued, if not increasing, relevance of Max Weber's theory of rationalization to the modern world. Although the bureaucracy may have been replaced by the fast-food restaurant as the ultimate example of a rational structure, and bureaucratization by McDonaldization as the heart of the process, the rationalization that undergirds both sets of structures and processes remains at least as powerful a force today as it was in Weber's day. In fact, the old sites remain rationalized while new ones are coming under the sway of the rationalization process. In this sense, we seem closer to the iron cage of rationalization today than was the case in Weber's day.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Weber thought that the overly bureaucratized, overrationalized world was, to use his image, a huge “iron cage” from which it appeared we could not escape. In what ways do you see yourself and your peers trapped in a McDonaldized world? Do young people perceive such a world to be something like a prison? What are the chances of resisting this trend—of escaping from the new iron cage?
2. One of the key elements of McDonaldization is predictability. Why do consumers place such a high premium on predictability? What are some of the social consequences of an increasingly predictable world?
3. This article identifies some of the negative consequences of McDonaldization. What do you think the main positive consequences of such a process are? Do the positives outweigh the negatives, or is the reverse the case? Defend your argument.