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McDonaldization: An Analysis of George Ritzer's Theories and Assertions

INTRODUCTION

Globalization is a massively powerful force in the 21st century. Defined as 'the world-wide diffusion of practices, expansion of relations across continents, organization of social life on a global scale, and growth of a shared global consciousness' (Ritzer, 2008: 164), globalization is perhaps the most noticeable feature of this Information Age. The growing influence of the ever-expanding technologies and influences stemming from this globalizing phenomenon are irrefutable. In *McDonaldization: the Reader* and *The McDonaldization of Society*, George Ritzer addresses the issue of 21st century globalization in terms of McDonaldization, a concept built on Max Weber's ideas of rationalization and bureaucratization of society. Ritzer focuses on McDonaldization, and by association globalization, as a negative force, or globalization, one built on dehumanizing and often ultimately irrational principles. However, Ritzer pushes his argument too far, venturing into the realm of inanity.

Ritzer cites Zygmunt Bauman's *Modernity and the Holocaust*, an analysis of the forces of rationality and modernization, and their uses in the perpetration of the Holocaust. Bauman makes the argument that rationality and bureaucratization were essential to the Nazis' plans, and that the Holocaust would not have been possible without them. This argument alone is a contentious one, as to whether the Holocaust can really be considered the logical product, rather than the obscene perversion, of modern principles. Ritzer takes Bauman's assessment as accurate and links it to his own theory of McDonaldization, describing the Holocaust as 'a precursor of McDonaldization' (Ritzer, 2008: 29). This claim

is both frivolous and incongruous. In making such an assertion Ritzer succeeds not only in weakening his own already tenuous arguments against McDonaldization, but also in trivializing the significance of the Holocaust.

The question Ritzer raises is supremely simple: are we facing a future of unprecedented cultural dialogue and sharing through a global community, or are we facing a sterile, homogeneous fast food nation? The truth of course is very different from what Ritzer claims. Globalization, or McDonaldization as Ritzer would have it, offers many opportunities for trade, both economic and cultural. As described by Les Back, in 'Local/Global,' a section of *Core Sociological Dichotomies*, there are innumerable benefits brought about by globalization. Ritzer's grim view of the global marketplace is contrary to observable realities. Globalization has proven to be the way forward to a more prosperous, peaceful world. This paper will address the validity of Ritzer's assessment of globalization and of his comparisons with the Holocaust, and will discuss as a counterargument Back's view of the many positive effects of globalization as a whole.

I. McDONALDIZATION: RITZER'S GLOBAL NIGHTMARE

A. *Defining McDonaldization*

According to Ritzer, McDonaldization is 'the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more the sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world' (Ritzer, 2008: 1). Ritzer uses this concept of McDonaldization in the context of Weber's theory of rationality. According to Weber, there are four major components to the theory of rationalization: 'the modern world managed to become increasingly rational—that is, dominated by efficiency, predictability, calculability, and nonhuman technologies that control people' (Ritzer, 2004: 26).

Ritzer highlights how these four concepts apply to McDonald's by means of numerous examples. He describes the supreme efficiency of McDonald's service as a testament to the assembly lines of Henry Ford, 'speeding the way from secretion to excretion' (Ritzer, 2008: 59). McDonaldized institutions seek constantly to raise efficiency through streamlining production and distribution, simplifying the products themselves, and keeping customers' transactions to a minimum possible time. Coupled with this drive for efficiency is the concept of calculability.

According to Ritzer, McDonaldization values quantification over subjectivity: 'Quantity tends to become a surrogate for quality...emphasis on quantity tends to affect adversely the quality of both the process and the result' (Ritzer 2008, 79). This concept of calculability, Ritzer contends, transforms everything into numbers, simple and impersonal. Profits and quotas become paramount in this distant, rigid form.

Also keyed to McDonaldization is the notion of predictability. The stark uniformity imposed on production and service in McDonaldized industries, Ritzer claims, is sterile and unexciting. This predictability offers customers and workers alike a sense of security:

‘Predictability makes for much peace of mind in day-to-day dealings...predictability makes tasks easier’ (Ritzer, 2008: 97). Predictability may prove dull, but it also provides a sanctuary to those feeling lost, to people who feel like blades of grass hurled indifferently into an uncaring wind.

The final component of the Ritzer-Weber rationalist scheme is the concept of control. By use of non-human technologies, the McDonaldized organization exerts an extraordinary degree of control over its employees and its customers. By deliberately limiting choices, the McDonaldized organization prevents both human error and individual judgment: ‘The more that is done by nonhuman technologies...the less workers need to do and the less room they have to exercise their own judgment and skill’ (Ritzer 2008, 117). Ritzer’s model of McDonaldization is one that is enormously adaptable, capable of being utilized in a virtually unlimited number of areas. For Ritzer, it is this McDonaldizing influence that is propagating itself across the world. The McDonald’s model is endemic in all areas of the economy in hundreds of countries. Yet Ritzer claims, albeit spuriously, to identify key flaws in this unchecked globalizing influence.

B. Alienation and Irrationality

According to Ritzer, there are inherent flaws in the super-rationality of McDonaldization. Most noticeable of these flaws is the intrinsic irrationality of the super-rational system of McDonaldization; inefficiency springs up even in the most rationalized set-up. Ritzer gives numerous examples of this apparent contradiction: ‘In fast-food restaurants, long lines of people often form at the counters, or parades of cars idle in the drive-through lanes’ (Ritzer, 2008:142). These logical irrationalities spring up as the supposedly efficient or convenient system becomes overwhelmed by customers wishing to partake of that very efficiency. McDonaldization appears to be a victim of its own success. Much like a Ponzi scheme in economics, the price of greater efficiency and expansion eventually weighs the system down until it collapses under its own bloated weight, or so Ritzer claims. Ritzer further claims that this inefficiency generally harms the consumer rather than the producer:

‘Those at the top of an organization impose efficiencies not only on consumers but also on those who work at or near the bottom of the system...the owners, franchisees, and top managers want to control subordinates, but they want their own positions to be as free of rational constraints—as inefficient—as possible.’ (Ritzer, 2008: 143)

What Ritzer is describing is a hierarchical double standard entrenched in the institution of McDonaldization. Those individuals in power seek irrational work because it is not only more liberating, but also not nearly as soul-destroying. For Ritzer, the monotonous, supremely rational and efficient world of McDonaldization leaves little or no room for creativity. For Ritzer, it is the ambition of the organizers of McDonaldized institutions to limit this ability for self-expression as much as possible. Paradoxically, Ritzer argues that in this forced rationality are the seeds of irrationality: ‘Employees are seldom allowed to use anything approaching all their skills and are not allowed to be creative on the job’ (Ritzer, 2008:153). The dehumanizing nature of this

tedious and repetitive work style, Ritzer argues, results in an irrational underutilization of talent. Ritzer contends that McDonaldization's aim is, in essence, to automatize the working classes to the greater benefit of the managerial elite. The globalizing influence of McDonaldization thus works to expand its influence across the planet to encapsulate the lives of as many individuals as its grease-stained, trans-fat coated fingers can reach.

C. *Glocal/Grobal*

The exceedingly dark picture of globalization painted by Ritzer in the previous section is far from the observable realities of the global marketplace. It is clear that Ritzer recognizes this fact, as he tries to unify his theory of globalization with the evidence by fabricating a dichotomy in the globalization process. He engineers a distinction between, what he calls, two discrete forms of globalization: grobalization and glocalization. Grobalization 'focuses on the imperialistic ambitions of nations, corporations, organizations...and their desire...to impose themselves on various geographic areas' (Ritzer, 2008:167). This is the globalization concept that Ritzer compares most closely with McDonaldization. This concept seems to fit with Ritzer's prior assertions, that McDonaldization is exploitive of both employees and customers, and is concerned only with expansion and profit: 'The ability of McDonaldized systems to increase profits continually is based on the need to steadily expand markets throughout the world' (Ritzer, 2008: 168). Ritzer asserts that grobalization, and by extension McDonaldization as a whole, is exploitive, profit seeking, and homogenizing: 'Its standard fare and its basic operating principles tend to threaten, and in many cases replace, local fare and principles of operation' (Ritzer, 2008:182). In essence, Ritzer asserts that McDonaldization destroys local culture as well as alienates its employees and customers. Evidently Ritzer considers his opinion of what sorts of goods and services people consume to be more important than that of the public actively demonstrating its desires through the framework of the market.

Ritzer's vision of corporate imperialism is very difficult to accept, as it flies in the face of a wealth of evidence to the contrary. In point of fact, globalization is far from the monstrosity destructive force that Ritzer describes. Contrary to Ritzer's rather bleak assessment of globalization, Les Back offers a much more supportive, and believable case. He essentially argues, in 'Local/Global,' that globalization is a process of glocalization, which according to Ritzer, "emphasizes the integration of the global and the local and involves far more heterogeneity than homogeneity" (Ritzer, 2008: 166). Ritzer asserts that grobalization is larger and more powerful than glocalization. Back begs to differ. Back argues that globalization leads to greater spreading of culture, that every culture, both the importer and importee, are affected and changed, yet retain separate cultural identities: 'Global interconnection cannot completely integrate human societies that remain spatially dispersed. Something distinctly local remains, or may even be being fostered, within the global circuits of capital and culture' (Back, 1998: 64). Back asserts that this globalization, or glocalization as Ritzer would call it, is a two-way street. As new ideas are imported from the West to developing countries, those countries' cultures are changed, but they are not erased or homogenized. Rather, the addition of new material simply adds greater

diversity to the social milieu. Back gives the example of his home town, Deptford, which experienced a massive influx of immigrants during the era of imperialism:

‘Such diverse communities give this part of London an intensely multicultural and international resonance, and the combination of these differences refashioned the social landscaped yet took on a distinctly local form.’ (Back, 1998: 71)

For Back, the amalgamation of many cultures is the result of globalization, whereas Ritzer sees globalization as a destructive influence on individual cultures. Back does not see changes in culture as a reaction to new ideas as destruction. He recognizes that culture and custom is in a constant state of change and flux, and that change is often a good thing. The heart of Back’s argument is that globalization and cultural identity need not be mutually exclusive or antagonistic, while Ritzer fails to see past the specter of global homogeny.

II. RATIONALITY AND THE HOLOCAUST: BAUMAN’S ARGUMENT AND RITZER’S FALLACY

A. *Modernity and the Holocaust*

In *Modernity and the Holocaust*, Zygmunt Bauman argues that the Holocaust was a logical product of the modernization process and scientific rationality:

‘The Holocaust was as much a product, as it was a failure, of modern civilization. Like everything else done in the modern—rational, planned, and scientifically informed, expert, efficiently managed, co-ordinated way, the Holocaust left behind and put to shame all its alleged pre-modern equivalents, exposing them as primitive, wasteful and ineffective by comparison.’ (Bauman, 1989: 89)

Bauman argues that the rational, bureaucratic execution of the Holocaust sets it apart from past genocides. The purely logical implementation of the death camps, gas chambers, ovens, and firing squads are for Bauman, testaments of the modern rational world that puts such emphasis on efficiency. There is no doubt that the Holocaust ‘stands alone and bears no meaningful comparison with other massacres, however gory’ (Bauman, 1989: 32). The view of the coldly rational Holocaust Bauman presents is a terrifying one, but more terrifying is the conclusion that it was a product, rather than an aberration of modernity. This is where Bauman’s arguments grow thin. The core of Bauman’s argumentation is that the Holocaust was the result of modernization and scientific reason: ‘It was the rational world of modern civilization that made the Holocaust possible’ (Bauman, 1989: 13). It is true that the technology available to the perpetrators of the Holocaust was more advanced, and the bureaucratic networks more refined, which allowed for the sheer scale and speed of the genocide. However, the tools used to enact the Holocaust cannot be blamed for causing it, no more than a car can be blamed for the death of a pedestrian. The driver is the guilty party. Bauman fails to make this distinction. He refuses to recognize that the horror of the Holocaust was not the product of modernity, but of modern tools in the hands of madmen (Moses, 1997).

Bauman further argues that the rational scientific worldview is also to blame for the Holocaust: 'At best, the cult of rationality, institutionalized as modern science, proved impotent to prevent the state from turning into organized crime; at worst, it proved instrumental in bringing the transformation about' (Bauman, 1989: 110). In essence, Bauman accuses scientific reasoning of being an impetus for the Holocaust. This is manifestly false. Bauman attempts to support this assertion by describing how popular scientific methods promoted belief in racial superiority, thus providing a 'rational' impetus for the Holocaust: 'Phrenology (the art of reading the character from the measurements of the skull)...captured most fully the confidence, strategy and ambition of the new scientific age' (Bauman, 1989: 69). The argument that scientific methods were a rational reason for the Holocaust is absolutely absurd. Phrenology was debunked as a science in the 19th century (Sabbatini, 1997). The Nazis used it, not as a scientific source, but as a justification for the distinctly irrational behavior of genocide. Had real scientific rationality been in use, the Nazi 'scientists' would have been unable to make conclusions so favorable to the Nazi cause (Sabbatini, 1997). Bauman further cites the works of Carl Linnaeus as motivation for the Holocaust: 'Linnaeus, recorded the division between the residents of Europe and inhabitants of Africa with the same scrupulous precision as that which he applied while describing the differences between crustacea and fishes' (Bauman, 1989: 69). Evidently Bauman does not realize that an enormous amount of research has been done on taxonomy since 1735, when Linnaeus wrote *Systema Naturae*. He also neglects to recall that Linnaeus was writing in a time when casual racism was a part of life (Ereshefsky, 2000). If scientific reasoning is in fact a cause of the Holocaust, Bauman has failed to show it with all his examples dating to a century before its perpetration.

Matching Bauman's ignorance of scientific achievement since the 19th century is his clear misunderstanding of the benefits of technological achievement and discovery: 'Without modern civilization and its most central essential achievements, there would be no Holocaust' (Bauman, 1989: 87). Bauman is correct in insisting that the technological superiority of the Nazis in comparison with previous genocidal groups is a significant part of the Holocaust. However, it is not modernity that is to blame for this. To suggest that the rationale for the Holocaust exists in a society's access to the advanced technology necessary to perpetrate it is to confuse cause and means, to identify 'the efficient and not the final, causes of the Holocaust' (Moses, 1997: 443). Bauman's Luddism is clear especially when he disparages scientific and technological discovery as a device for producing new demands: 'Technological developments produce means beyond the demands, and seek the demands in order to satisfy technological capacities' (Bauman, 1989: 220). Beyond any shadow of a doubt, this is Bauman's most fatuous statement. It is often the case that demand does not exist before the means because there was until then no product to satisfy the demand. Before penicillin was discovered, there was no demand for it because there was until then no concept of anti-biotics (Chemical Heritage Foundation, 2009). Once discovered however, the desire to survive illness created a demand. Before the Haber-Bosch process was invented to enrich soil with nitrogen, the world food supply could sustain 600 million people (Hager, 2008). With the advent of new technology providing the means, the demand grew with the population. Bauman ignores these simple examples,

just few of many, recognizing only the most negative aspect of technology, the ability to destroy.

A final assertion by Bauman is that modern civilization retains the necessary factors for the Holocaust, or something very like it, to happen again: 'If there was something in our social order which made the Holocaust possible in 1941, we cannot be sure that it has been eliminated since then' (Bauman, 1989: 86). For Bauman, modernity is the root cause of the Holocaust, not simply a prerequisite. Thus he insists the risk of another such event cannot be averted so long as society has its basis in rational scientific reasoning. This notion of the Holocaust as a natural result of rational society is clearly absurd. If it were the case, then surely another Holocaust would already have happened as the logical course of events. Bauman attempts to defuse this possibility by suggesting that the type of modernity necessary for the Holocaust no longer exists and the correct mix of factors have not come together since then to precipitate another Holocaust:

It was the combination of growing potency of means and the unconstrained determination to use it in the service of an artificial, designed order, that gave human cruelty its distinctively modern touch and made the Gulag, Auschwitz and Hiroshima possible, perhaps even unavoidable. The signs abound that this particular combination is now over. (Bauman, 1989: 219)

Effectively, Bauman claims the factors that precipitated the Holocaust were modernity, but only a special combination of modern elements. He rejects the much simpler notion that the Holocaust was the result of evil decision-makers, statist groups with centralized power, with access to unusually efficient killing methods.

Bauman reaches the crux of the argument, and inadvertently succeeds in directly contradicting himself, when he professes that, 'every 'ingredient' of the Holocaust...was normal...being in full keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world' (Bauman, 1989: 8), while at the same time asserting that the 'German bureaucratic machinery was put in the service of a goal incomprehensible in its irrationality' (Bauman, 1989: 136). Bauman insists that the Holocaust can be explained in rational terms; yet at his own admission the goals of the Holocaust, the expunging of an entire race from the earth and the development of a 'master race', were inherently irrational. Even if every 'ingredient' of the Holocaust can be described in rational terms, the fact that the goal is irrational makes the entire process irrational: 'The Nazi will to kill, the Holocaust's final cause, cannot be reduced to instrumental reason, science, or any other factor' (Moses, 1997: 443). Bauman becomes so concerned with the inherent rationality of the killing process that he fails to recognize the glaring irrationality of the killing drive.

B. Ritzer's Trivialization of the Holocaust

Ritzer describes the Holocaust as 'a precursor of McDonaldization' (Ritzer, 2008: 29). Such an assertion is a serious one. To describe the dominant social paradigm of the 21st century

in terms of the most heinous event in human history requires an enormous amount of substantiation. Ritzer gives three arguments for this claim, citing Bauman as his principal source: he describes their mutual reliance on rationality and bureaucracy, their mutual connection to the factory system, and the rationality spread by McDonaldization that Bauman argues could precipitate another Holocaust. Each of these assertions is weak at best, and fatuous at worst. Neither of the first two claims need be associated with the Holocaust in order to describe their historical significance, nor is the third, as described in the previous section, a significant issue.

It is certainly true that the mechanisms of both McDonaldization and the Holocaust are based in bureaucracy and rationality: 'The industrial potential and technological know-how boasted by our civilization has scaled new heights in coping successfully with a task of unprecedented magnitude' (Bauman, 1989: 9). The technology and bureaucratic organization necessary to implement the Holocaust shares some similarities with that used to implement the massive organizations involved in McDonaldization and globalization. However, this is where the resemblance ends with regard to this trait. Like Bauman, Ritzer neglects the purpose for the method. The unparalleled evil and scale of destruction unleashed by the Holocaust cannot be adequately compared to a service industry of any scale or magnitude.

The cursory similarity of the factory models of the Holocaust and McDonaldization must come under similar criticism. The Holocaust was nothing short of 'mass-produced death' (Ritzer, 2008: 27). The similarity to McDonaldization again can only be a superficial one. The shared factory model cannot be used to describe the Holocaust as a precursor of McDonaldization. At best it could be said that they share a common ancestor in the Ford car factories, which Ritzer acknowledges as a precursor of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2008). The similarity between McDonaldization and the Holocaust is shallow at best. The last comparison Ritzer suggests is that 'the spread of formal rationality today, through the process of McDonaldization, supports Bauman's view that something like the Holocaust could happen again' (Ritzer, 2008: 29). Ritzer appears to completely misunderstand Bauman's assessment of the dangers of another Holocaust. Bauman does claim that it is almost certain that the root societal causes of the Holocaust still remain in the modern social structure of rationality and modernity (Bauman, 1989). However, he also mentions the forces of globalization as a check to the danger:

'To be sure, thanks to the late modern surfeit of mutually cancelling authorities and due to the irredeemable polyvocality which goes together with political democracy and the weakening grip of state powers, the chances of such players gaining an upper hand and deploying the absolute powers of the state to set a Holocaust-style 'solution' in motion are slim and remote.' (Bauman, 1989: 231)

Ritzer's argument is torn down by the very source he cites. His fear of a globalized world is what Bauman himself acknowledges as a force in opposition to a resurgent Holocaust. In essence, Ritzer misconstrues Bauman's argument: He uses him to hold up one pillar of his argument, that of rationality, while ignoring him when he unceremoniously knocks down

the other, that of globalization.

Ritzer's attempt to equate McDonaldization with the Holocaust, or at least to tar it with the same brush, is as absurd as it is petty. He readily recognizes other historical trends and practices as much more closely connected to McDonaldization than the Holocaust, yet still he tries to compare the two. It seems very likely that he does so purely for gratuitous reasons, as there is nothing to be gained from trivializing the Holocaust by describing it as the natural ancestor of contemporary practices. As much as Ritzer may dislike the McDonaldization of society, it neither is the Holocaust, nor bears any closer resemblance to it than numerous other industrial practices. The key feature that Ritzer fails to realize is that regardless of their superficial similarities of technique, the rationality of goals is what sets them apart. Ritzer claims that the Holocaust was rational because it was the Nazis' means to creating a 'perfectly rational society' (Ritzer, 2008: 28). Yet the Nazis' vision was inherently irrational, as all wanton destruction is, setting it apart from the clearly rational goal of McDonaldization, which is to produce goods efficiently for consumption by society. This difference in goal-orientation is what Ritzer, and to some extent Bauman, fail to realize is a key distinction of the Holocaust. Rather than settling for a coherent argument, Ritzer chooses to take a cheap shot, trivializing both his case and the memory of the Holocaust. Bauman actually warns against such flippant use of the Holocaust:

'Overt, and hence superficial similarity is a poor guide to causal analysis...having to choose between conformity and bearing the consequences of disobedience does not necessarily mean living in Auschwitz, and the principles preached and practiced by most contemporary states do not suffice to make their citizens into Holocaust victims.' (Bauman, 1989: 87) Bauman recognizes the latent power that the memory of the Holocaust still holds and rightly cautions against using it as an example out of hand. Describing the process of globalization, or McDonaldization, as something as horrendous as the Holocaust is to forget its significance and horror.

III. CONCLUSION

Once analyzed, George Ritzer's dismal predictions about globalization through the lens of McDonaldization, come up short. He repeatedly expounds the dehumanizing effects and inherent flaws of the McDonaldization process. While happy to attack McDonaldization ruthlessly for its potential flaws, he pays only lip service to the great gains it and other trends of globalization have brought. He apparently assigns little benefit to the tremendous economic and social growth that has been precipitated by world trade and free markets, as well as the decentralizing effect it has had on state power, rendering such things as the Holocaust far less likely.

In comparison to Ritzer, Les Back's assessment of globalization is both even-handed, and reasonable. As a force of globalization, global forces have developed a means of working together, as societies blend and share ideas, and the global tapestry becomes more tightly woven through trade in the worldwide marketplace of knowledge and products. This

pattern of global trade and interconnectedness has also succeeded largely in increasing dialogue between communities while simultaneously decreasing violence and war.

Ritzer's last-ditch effort to drag McDonaldization through the mud is to compare it, ineffectively, to the Holocaust. He uses Zygmunt Bauman's erroneous assessment that the Holocaust was a logical product of modernization, while failing to realize, as even Bauman does, that the globalizing aspect of McDonaldization is one of the major factors preventing another Holocaust. Ultimately, Ritzer's arguments founders under its in-built contradictions and gross unrealities.

It is also clear that scientific advancement and reasoning and progress in technology are not bad things, as both Ritzer and Bauman seem steadfastly to proclaim. It is not technology or science that causes bad things. A gun cannot kill someone of its own accord. An evil person with a gun, however, is more dangerous than one without one. More dangerous still is a government-sponsored killer. This is the distinction both Ritzer and Bauman fail to make. Modernity and rational advancement are not bad processes. In fact, they have brought about an unprecedented increase in wealth and living standards across the world. Unscrupulous individuals with evil intentions can turn any force to evil, especially if they have the backing of a coercive government.

The inherent values of McDonaldization are clear: it provides an efficient, simple, and profitable business model, as well as contributing to greater international dialogue and peace. Though the process of globalization has really only just begun, we can be hopeful and excited for a brighter, better-connected, and more diverse world culture.

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