



The Disenchanted Kingdom

George Ritzer On The Disappearance Of Auth

an interview by DERRICK JENSEN



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Photo: Suzi Q. Varin

Several years ago, while baby-sitting my nieces, I asked where they wanted to go for dinner. The four-year-old said she wanted to go to McDonald's and have a "Happy Meal." The way she stressed the word happy caught my attention; it seemed to imply that we couldn't have a happy meal at home. Stunned that a child had come to equate fast food with happiness, I wondered: Is this mere advertising hyperbole, or is it really true that McDonald's makes people happy? If so, what does that say about our culture?

Few would argue with the fact that McDonald's has entered into our collective psyche. We all can recognize its trademarks and slogans. To the rest of the world, it's come to represent all things American. But sociologist George Ritzer argues that the relationship between McDonald's and our society runs even deeper. Beyond its commercial propaganda and symbolism, Ritzer says, McDonald's is a potent manifestation of the rational processes that define modern society.

Whether the task at hand is making hamburgers or losing weight or caring for the sick, we strive to approach it rationally, breaking it down into repetitive steps that can be handled quickly

and efficiently. Ritzer warns that the spread of such “rationalized systems” has had irrational consequences, not least of which is the “disenchantment of the world,” a situation in which rationality takes over, leaving no room for the mysterious, unpredictable qualities that make us human.

Born in New York City, Ritzer saw his first McDonald’s when he and his friends made a car trip through Massachusetts in 1958. He was struck by the sight of the golden arches and remembers thinking that they “represented something new and important.” After college, he worked for the highly rationalized Ford Motor Company, but it didn’t take him long to realize that the job wasn’t for him. A year later, he went on to graduate school to get his Ph.D. in sociology.

Ritzer’s scholarly work has been heavily influenced by German sociologist Max Weber, who feared that bureaucracy would spread until society became a seamless web of rationalized institutions from which there would be no escape. At the time when Weber wrote, in the early twentieth century, totalitarianism was the biggest threat to individual freedom. In the 1980s, Ritzer thought to apply Weber’s theories about rational systems to a very different threat: the proliferation of fast-food chains.

When Ritzer began writing and talking about the dangers of “McDonaldization,” he struck a nerve: some agreed with him, but many others rushed to defend the pop-culture institution. He went on to write a social critique on the subject, applying sociological theories to the culture in a way that lay readers would understand. *The McDonaldization of Society* (Pine Forge/Sage Publications) was successful enough that he wrote several follow-ups, including *The McDonaldization Thesis and Enchanting a Disenchanted World* (both Sage Publications).

Ritzer’s most recent book is *Explorations in the Sociology of Consumption: Fast Food, Credit Cards, and Casinos* (Sage Ltd.). In addition to writing about sociology for a general audience, he teaches at the University of Maryland, where he is a distinguished professor with numerous academic awards and volumes to his credit.

We met for this interview on a beautiful fall day at Ritzer’s home in Maryland. A breeze blew outside, picking up red and yellow leaves and twirling them across the grass while we sat inside discussing the disenchantment of the world.

Jensen: What is “McDonaldization”?

Ritzer: It’s the process by which the principles of the fast-food industry — efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through technology — are being applied to more and more sectors of society in more and more parts of the world.

Let’s take those principles one at a time. Efficiency: The fast-food model offers — or, at least, appears to offer — an efficient way to get from being hungry to being full. You drive up, grab a meal, eat, and go. Workers, too, are supposed to be efficient, following prescribed steps in a process overseen by managers. Even the choice of menu items has to do with efficiency: McDonald’s founder Ray Kroc toyed with several alternatives before settling on hamburgers as his main product. Hot dogs, for example, come in too many



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varieties. It’s more efficient to limit choice.

Predictability: An Egg McMuffin in New York will be the same as an Egg McMuffin in Chicago. Customers can expect no surprises, neither pleasant nor unpleasant. Workers, too, behave in predictable ways. Those who interact with customers have actual scripts to follow. Customers end up behaving predictably in return.

Calculability: The emphasis is on quantifiable aspects of the food and service — size of portions, cost, time of delivery — as opposed to quality. Workers are generally judged on how quickly they accomplish specific tasks, and not on the quality of their work.

Control through technology: Because the greatest source of uncertainty, unpredictability, and inefficiency in any rationalized system is the people who work in it or are served by it, technology is used to control both customers and employees. For example, customers are controlled through uncomfortable seats, which lead diners to do what management wants them to do: eat quickly and leave. And, of course, wherever possible, workers are restricted — or replaced — by technology: a worker might overcook the hamburger or put on too much special sauce. It’s much better to get a machine to do it.

These rationalizing principles have been employed widely for many decades, even centuries. Some of them can be traced to early capitalism. Certainly Henry Ford’s assembly line was an effort to produce automobiles in a highly rational way: efficiently, predictably, and using technology to replace human workers.

At the same time that Ford was implementing rationaliza-

tion in the automobile industry, systems engineer Frederick W. Taylor was articulating his famous notion of “scientific management”: studying workers and then routinizing and systematizing what they do so that they will operate in an efficient, predictable, calculable way — and using technology to achieve these ends.

Those are just two examples of the existence of rationalization before McDonald’s even arrived on the scene in 1955. So McDonald’s didn’t really create anything new. It just applied these principles to the realm of food production and consumption. *That’s* the real McDonald’s revolution.

Jensen: Working within a rationalized system like McDonald’s seems degrading to me. It has to do with the machine-like quality of the work.

Ritzer: I think the key issue here is that work should involve creativity. Cooking should involve creativity. Even consumption should involve creativity. But what Ford and Taylor and Kroc did is limit — if not eliminate — creativity and force people to operate the way the system wants them to operate, using only a small fraction of their abilities. To the person who puts the hubcap on the car every thirty

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seconds, the owners of the assembly line are saying, in effect, “You are just an extension of the machine.” The same goes for the people who work behind the counters at fast-food restaurants. They’re not permitted to work using their full capabilities. In fact, people who try to be creative are likely to get fired because, from the point of view of the system, they are more likely to mess things up. One of the irrationalities of rational systems is that the system — a nonliving thing — takes priority over living beings such as workers and consumers.

The same constraints apply to the consumer. Picture this: you walk into a McDonald’s and say, “I’d like a ham-

burger, but I want it cooked rare, and I’d like the tomatoes in quarters instead of slices.” The system cannot accommodate even that level of creativity on the part of the consumer.

Jensen: So consumers are in the same boat as the workers.

Ritzer: In fact, consumers have increasingly *become* workers. One of the ways fast-food restaurants succeed is by turning consumers into unpaid workers by making them bus their own tables or fill their own drinks. And, of course, you don’t have to pay consumers for their work. So you pay workers minimum wage, and you pay consumers nothing. The result is higher profits. Businesses might claim to pass these savings on to the customer, and there might be some initial cutting back of prices, but inevitably prices go back up to where they were before, or even higher.

Jensen: You say that McDonaldization involves limiting choice, but I’m not sure that our choices as consumers have been limited. I can go online and buy CDs, printers, books, and lots of other things without even leaving home.

Ritzer: We *have* seen a massive expansion in the availability of consumer goods, and in the capacity of the consumer to mix and match goods. In the main, however, the type of goods and the mechanisms through which they are sold to us are controlled by large companies. So we *do* have a range of choice, but it is constrained by organizational forms. And, of course, the more McDonaldized the setting, the more limited the choice.

Jensen: But anywhere I go in America, I’ve got a good portion of the world in the space of three blocks: I can go to Taco Bell for Mexican food, Pizza Hut for Italian, and Arthur Treacher’s for English.

Ritzer: It’s true that vast stretches of the country that never had access to, say, Italian or Mexican food now have at least simulations of these ethnic cuisines. But the foods themselves are McDonaldized. They’ve been put through the corporate wringer to produce a fake version of the original that is marketable to a large percentage of the population.

More importantly, though, you see an overall elimination of choice through the increasing dominance of a few fast-food giants. If you drive the highway between Maryland and New York, as I often do, you discover that all of the rest stops along the way are now dominated by these chains. Even if you leave the highway, it can be difficult to find an alternative. What has been driven out is the small, independent provider who produced a product that was subtly different from everyone else’s. In the past, the local diner may have been the only game in town, but it was different from town to town.

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