

Controlling the Process of Dying: Designer Deaths

We have now found ways to rationalize the dying process, giving us at least the illusion of control. Consider the increasing array of nonhuman technologies designed to keep people alive long after they would have expired had they lived at an earlier time in history. In fact, some beneficiaries of these technologies would not want to stay alive under those conditions (a clear irrationality). Unless the physicians are following an advance directive (a living will) that explicitly states “do not resuscitate” or “no heroic measures,” people lose control over their own dying process. Family members, too, in the absence of such directives, must bow to the medical mandate to keep people alive as long as possible.

Computer systems may be used to assess a patient’s chances of survival at any given point in the dying process—90%, 50%, 10%, and so on. The actions of medical personnel are likely to be influenced by such assessments.

Death has followed much the same path as birth; that is, the dying process has been moved out of the home and beyond the control of the dying and their families and into the hands of medical personnel and hospitals.¹⁵³ Physicians have gained a large measure of control over death, just as they won control over birth. Death, like birth, is increasingly likely to take place in the hospital. In 1900, only 20% of deaths took place in hospitals; by 2007, 32% of U.S. deaths occurred in hospitals, 20% occurred in nursing homes, and still another 38.5% occurred in hospices (2008 data).¹⁵⁴ The growth of hospital chains and chains of hospices, using principles derived from the fast-food restaurant, signals death’s bureaucratization, rationalization, and even McDonaldization.

The McDonaldization of the dying process, as well as of birth, has spawned a series of counterreactions—efforts to cope with the excesses of rationalization. Advance directives and living wills tell hospitals and medical personnel what they may or may not do during the dying process. Suicide societies and books such as Derek Humphry’s *Final Exit*¹⁵⁵ give people instructions on how to kill themselves. There is the growing interest in and acceptance of euthanasia,¹⁵⁶ most notably the work of “Dr. Death,” Jack Kevorkian, whose goal was to return to people control over their own deaths. Finally, many people are choosing to die at home, and some are even opting to be buried there as well.¹⁵⁷

However, these counterreactions themselves have elements of McDonaldization. For example, Dr. Kevorkian (who died in 2011) used a nonhuman technology, a “machine,” to help people kill themselves. More generally, and strikingly, he was an advocate of a “rational policy” for the planning of death.¹⁵⁸ The rationalization of death is thus found even in the efforts to counter it.¹⁵⁹

Overall, the future will bring with it an increasing number of nonhuman technologies with ever-greater ability to control people and processes. However, more and more people will lose the opportunity, and perhaps the ability, to think for themselves.

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The Irrationality of Rationality

Traffic Jams on Those “Happy Trails”

McDonaldization has swept across the social landscape because it offers increased efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control. Despite these assets, as the preceding chapters have shown, McDonaldization has some serious drawbacks. Rational systems inevitably spawn irrationalities that limit, eventually compromise, and perhaps even undermine their rationality.

At the most general level, the irrationality of rationality is simply a label for many of the negative aspects of McDonaldization. More specifically, irrationality can be seen as the opposite of rationality. That is, McDonaldization can be viewed as leading to inefficiency, unpredictability, incalculability, and loss of control.¹ Other irrationalities of rationality to be discussed in this chapter include false friendliness, excessively high cost, health and environmental dangers, and homogenization. Irrationality also means that rational systems are disenchanting; they have lost their magic and mystery. Most important, rational systems are unreasonable systems that deny the humanity, the human reason, of the people who work within them or are served by them. In other words, rational systems are dehumanizing. Please note, therefore, that although the terms *rationality* and *reason* are often used interchangeably, in this discussion, they are antithetical phenomena²: Rational systems are often unreasonable.

Inefficiency: Long Lines at the Checkout

Rational systems, contrary to their promise, often end up being quite inefficient. For instance, in fast-food restaurants, long lines of people often form at the

counters, or parades of cars idle in the drive-through lanes. What is purported to be an efficient way of obtaining a meal often turns out to be quite inefficient.

The problem of inefficiency at drive-throughs in the United States is, interestingly, among the greatest at McDonald's. While its goal is a maximum of a 90-second wait in the drive-through line, it averaged 152.5 seconds in 2004 and 167.9 seconds in 2005.³ By 2009, the wait had increased further to 174.2 seconds. In fact, McDonald's ranked only seventh in 2009 in the average time waiting in its drive-throughs. The leader, with an average of 134 seconds per vehicle, was Wendy's.⁴ Of course, to some degree, McDonald's is the victim of its own success, especially of the growth in its drive-through business. The paragon of efficiency, however, cannot hide behind its success and must deliver efficiency, even in the face of its burgeoning drive-through business. Furthermore, problems at the drive-through at McDonald's are not restricted to long waits—there are also many inaccuracies in their drive-through orders. In fact, in 2005, McDonald's ranked *last* among 25 fast-food chains in terms of accuracy. Said one customer, "McDonald's is the worst at getting things right. . . . McDonald's always gets at least one thing wrong."⁵ And, it takes time to correct errors, further increasing the problem of inefficiency at McDonald's. Furthermore, time is money, and the increased time required to get an order right means higher costs and lower profits. In fact, one franchisee explicitly recognizes the irrational consequences of the rational emphasis on speed: "With continued emphasis on speed, accuracy suffers."⁶

While efficiency is a problem in the United States, it is a more serious problem elsewhere. A Hong Kong restaurant serves about 600,000 people a year (versus 400,000 in the United States). To handle long lines, 50 or more employees move along the lines taking orders with handheld computers. The orders are transmitted wirelessly to the kitchen.⁷

In the United States, a few McDonald's began experimenting with the use of handheld tablet PCs in mid-2011. An employee stands outside with the tablet taking orders from cars as soon as they get in line. The orders are transmitted wirelessly to the kitchen and are ready, at least theoretically, as soon as the car reaches the pick-up window. While this should speed things up, the initial experience was that the wait was "slow and frustrating."⁸

The fast-food restaurant is far from the only aspect of a McDonaldized society that exhibits inefficiency. Even the once-vaunted Japanese industry has its inefficiencies. Take the "just-in-time" system discussed in Chapter 2. Because this system often requires that parts be delivered several times a day, the streets and highways around a factory often became cluttered with trucks. Because of the heavy traffic, people were often late for work or for business appointments, resulting in lost productivity. But the irrationalities go beyond traffic jams and missed appointments. All these trucks used a great deal of fuel, very expensive in Japan, and contributed greatly to air pollution. The situation grew even

worse when Japanese convenience stores, supermarkets, and department stores also began to use a just-in-time system, bringing even greater numbers of delivery trucks onto the streets.⁹

Here is the way columnist Richard Cohen describes another example of inefficiency in the McDonaldized world:

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 [automated teller machine] 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.¹⁰

Cohen underscores at least three different irrationalities: (1) Rational systems are not less expensive, (2) they force people to do unpaid work, and, of most importance here, (3) they are often inefficient. It might be more efficient to deal with a human teller, either in the bank or at a drive-through window, than to wait in line at an ATM.

Similarly, preparing a meal might be more efficient at home than packing the family in the car, driving to McDonald's, loading up on food, and then driving home again. Meals cooked at home from scratch might not be more efficient, but certainly TV dinners and microwave meals are. They may even be more efficient than full-course meals picked up at the supermarket or Boston Market. Yet many people persist in the belief, fueled by propaganda from the fast-food restaurants, that eating there is more efficient than eating at home.

Although the forces of McDonaldization trumpet greater efficiency, they never tell us for whom the system is more efficient. Is it efficient for supermarket consumers who need only a loaf of bread and a carton of milk to wend their way past thousands of items they don't need? Is it efficient for consumers to push their own food over the supermarket scanner, swipe their own credit or debit cards, and then bag their groceries themselves? Is it efficient for people to pump their own gasoline? Is it efficient for them to push numerous combinations of telephone numbers before they hear a human voice? Most often, consumers find that such systems are *not* efficient for them. Most of the gains in efficiency go to those who are pushing rationalization.

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 assembly-line workers, the counter persons, the call-center staff. 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. Subordinates are to follow blindly the rules, regulations,

and other structures of the rational system, while those in charge remain free to be "creative."

High Cost: Better Off at Home

The efficiency of McDonaldization (assuming it *is* efficient) does not ordinarily save consumers money. For example, some years ago, a small soda was shown to cost one franchise owner 11 cents, but it was sold for 85 cents.¹¹ A fast-food meal for a family of four might easily cost \$28 (less if a few "Happy Meals" are in the mix) these days. Such a sum would go further if spent on ingredients for a home-cooked meal. For example, a meal for four (or even six) people, including a roast chicken, vegetables, salad, and milk, would cost about half that amount.¹² While oats, and real oatmeal, are very inexpensive, the relatively new oatmeal at McDonald's (see below) sells for \$2.38, more than a double-cheeseburger. In fact, it is 10 times as expensive as the real thing.¹³ A nutrition adviser points out that a Dollar Menu is "least economical" from the point of view of the nutrients obtained.¹⁴

As Cohen demonstrated with ATMs, people must often pay extra to deal with the inhumanity and inefficiency of rationalized systems. The great success of McDonaldized systems, the rush to extend them to ever-more sectors of society, and the fact that so many people want to get into such businesses indicate that these systems generate huge profits.

Bob Garfield noted the expense of McDonaldized activities in his article, "How I Spent (and Spent and Spent) My Disney Vacation."¹⁵ Garfield took his family of four to Walt Disney World, which he found might more aptly be named "Expense World." The 5-day vacation cost \$1,700 in 1991; admission to Disney World alone cost \$551.30. And the prices keep going up. (Today, the cost of admission for 5 days for a family of four is about double that.) He calculates that, during the 5 days, they had less than 7 hours of "fun, fun, fun. That amounts to \$261 c.p.f.h. (cost per fun hour)." Because most of his time in the Magic Kingdom was spent riding buses, "queuing up and shlepping from place to place, the 17 attractions we saw thrilled us for a grand total of 44 minutes."¹⁶ Thus, what is thought to be an inexpensive family vacation turns out to be quite expensive.

False Friendliness: "Hi, George"

Because fast-food restaurants greatly restrict or even eliminate genuine fraternization, what workers and customers have left is either no human relationships or "false fraternization." Rule Number 17 for Burger King

workers is, "Smile at all times."¹⁷ The Roy Rogers employees who used to say "Happy trails" to me when I paid for my food really had no interest in what happened "on the trail." This phenomenon has been generalized to the many workers who say "Have a nice day" as customers depart. In fact, of course, they usually have no real interest in, or concern for, how the rest of a customer's day goes. Instead, in a polite and ritualized way, they are really saying, "Get lost," or move on so someone else can be served.

While they have declined dramatically in recent years as a result of e-mail and spam, we still receive computer-generated letters, or "junk mail" (of course, much more junk mail is now associated with our e-mail accounts). Great pains are sometimes taken to make a message seem personal.¹⁸ (Similarly, I still get calls from telemarketers who start out by saying, "Hi, George.") In most cases, it is fairly obvious that a computer has generated the message from a database of names. These messages are full of the kind of false fraternization practiced by Roy Rogers workers. For example, they often adopt a friendly, personal tone designed to lead people to believe that the head of some business has fretted over the fact that they haven't, for example, shopped in his or her department store or used his or her credit card in the past few months. For example, a friend of mine received a letter from a franchise, The Lube Center, a few days after he had his car lubricated (note the use of the first name and the "deep" personal concern): "Dear Ken: We want to THANK YOU for choosing The Lube Center for all of your car's fluid needs. . . . We strongly recommend that you change your oil on a regular basis. . . . We will send you a little reminder card. . . . This will help *remind* you when your car is next due to be serviced. . . . We spend the time and energy to make sure that our employees are trained properly to give you the service that you deserve" (*italics added*).

Several years ago, I received the following letter from a congressman from Long Island, even though I live in Maryland. The fact that I had never met the congressman and knew nothing about him didn't prevent him from writing me a "personal" letter: "Dear George: It is hard to believe, but I am running for my NINTH term in Congress! When I think back over the 8,660 votes I've cast. . . . I realize how many battles *we've shared*. Please let me know that I can count on *you*" (*italics added*).

A *Washington Post* correspondent offers the following critique of false friendliness in junk mail:

By dropping in people's names and little tidbits gleaned from databases hither and yon in their direct mail pitches, these marketing organizations are trying to create the illusion of intimacy. In reality, these technologies conspire to *corrupt and degrade intimacy*. They cheat, substituting the insertable fact for the genuine insight. These pitches end up with their own synthetic substitutes for the real thing.¹⁹

However false it may be, such junk mail is designed to exert control over customers by getting them to take desired courses of action.

Mention should also be made in this context of the false friendliness that defines greeting cards as well as e-cards.

Disenchantment: Where's the Magic?

One of Max Weber's most general theses is that, as a result of rationalization, the Western world has grown increasingly disenchanted.²⁰ The "magical elements of thought" that characterized less rationalized societies have been disappearing.²¹ Thus, instead of a world dominated by enchantment, magic, and mystery, we have one in which everything seems clear, cut-and-dried, logical, and routine. As Schneider puts it, "Max Weber saw history as having departed a deeply enchanted past en route to a disenchanted future—a journey that would gradually strip the natural world both of its magical properties and of its capacity for meaning."²² The process of rationalization leads, by definition, to the loss of a quality—enchantment—that was at one time very important to people. Although we undoubtedly have gained much from the rationalization of society in general, and from the rationalization of consumption settings in particular, we also have lost something of great, if hard to define, value. Consider how the dimensions of McDonaldization work against enchantment.

Efficient systems have no room for anything smacking of enchantment and systematically seek to root it out. Anything that is magical, mysterious, fantastic, dreamy, and so on is considered inefficient. Enchanted systems typically involve highly convoluted means to ends, and they may well have no obvious goals at all. Efficient systems do not permit such meanderings, and their designers and implementers will do whatever is necessary to eliminate them. The elimination of meanderings and aimlessness is one of the reasons that Weber saw rationalized systems as disenchanted systems.

Enchantment has far more to do with quality than with quantity. Magic, fantasies, dreams, and the like relate more to the inherent nature of an experience and the qualitative aspects of that experience rather than, for example, to the number of such experiences one has or the size of the setting in which they occur. An emphasis on producing and participating in a large number of experiences tends to diminish the magical quality of each of them. Put another way, it is difficult to mass produce magic, fantasy, and dreams. Such mass production may be common in the movies, but "true" enchantment is difficult, if not impossible, to produce in settings designed to deliver large quantities of goods and services frequently and over great geographic spaces. The mass production of such things is virtually guaranteed to undermine their enchanted qualities.

No characteristic of rationalization is more inimical to enchantment than predictability. Magical, fantastic, dreamlike experiences are almost by definition unpredictable. Nothing will destroy an enchanted experience more easily than having it become predictable or having it recur in the same way time after time.

Both control and the nonhuman technologies that produce control tend to be inimical to enchantment. As a general rule, fantasy, magic, and dreams cannot be subjected to external controls; indeed, autonomy is much of what gives them their enchanted quality. Fantastic experiences can go anywhere; anything can happen. Such unpredictability clearly is not possible in a tightly controlled environment. For some people, tight and total control could be a fantasy, but for many, it would be more of a nightmare. Much the same can be said of nonhuman technologies. Cold, mechanical systems are usually the antithesis of the dream worlds associated with enchantment. Again, some people have fantasies associated with nonhuman technologies, but they, too, tend to be more nightmarish than dreamlike.

As you can see, McDonaldization is related to, if not inextricably intertwined with, disenchantment. A world without magic and mystery is another irrational consequence of increasing rationalization.

Health and Environmental Hazards: A Day's Calories in One Fast-Food Meal

Progressive rationalization has threatened not only the fantasies but also the health, and perhaps the lives, of people. One example is the danger posed by the content of most fast food: a great deal of fat, cholesterol, salt, and sugar. Such meals are the last things Americans need, suffering as many of them do from obesity, high cholesterol levels, high blood pressure, and perhaps diabetes. In fact, there is much talk these days of an obesity epidemic (including children), and many observers place a lot of the blame on the fast-food industry—its foods and their contents—and its (continuing) emphasis on "supersizing" everything (even though they are now chary about using that term).²³

The fast-food industry spent \$4.2 billion in 2009 on advertising designed to convince people to consume its food. Furthermore, their processed food has an addictive quality. According to a former Food and Drug Administration commissioner, the industry created food that was "energy-dense, highly stimulating, and went down easy. They put it on every street corner and made it mobile, and they made it socially acceptable to eat anytime and anyplace. They created a food carnival . . . [we're] used to self-stimulation every 15 minutes."²⁴

The negative impact of fast food on health is not restricted to the United States. The growth of fast-food restaurants, as well as the emphasis on ever-larger portions, is helping to lead to escalating health problems (e.g., diabetes)

in various parts of the world, including the Far East in general and Vietnam in particular.²⁵ A comparative study of 380 regions in Ontario, Canada, showed that the regions with more fast-food services were likely to have higher rates of acute coronary syndrome and a higher mortality rate from coronary disease.²⁶

Fast-food restaurants contribute to the development of various health problems later in life by helping create poor eating habits in children. By targeting children, fast-food restaurants are creating not only lifelong devotees of fast food but also people who are addicted to diets high in salt, sugar, and fat.²⁷ An interesting study discovered that the health of immigrant children deteriorates the longer they are in the United States, in large part because their diet begins to more closely resemble the junk-food diet of most American children.²⁸ In fact, Disney ended its long-term, cross-promotional relationship with McDonald's because of the growing concern about the link between fast food and childhood obesity.²⁹ A sociologist associated with the study of immigrant children stated, "The McDonaldization of the world is not necessarily progress when it comes to nutritious diets."³⁰

Attacks against the fast-food industry's harmful effects on health have mounted over the years. Many of the franchises have been forced to respond by offering more and better salads, although the dressings for them are often loaded with salt and fat. They have also been forced to list nutritional information for all products in their stores and online. Still, most consumers never consult these lists and continue to order the typical McDonald's meal of a Big Mac, large fries, and a shake, which totals more than 1,500 calories, few of them of great nutritional value. The trend toward larger and larger portions has only increased the problem (McDonald's Big Breakfast with hotcakes and a large biscuit has 1,150 calories). The substitution of a chocolate triple shake (with 1,160 calories) for a regular shake in that McDonald's meal raises the total to 2,290 calories.³¹ Burger King's Double Whopper with cheese alone has 976 calories (and 6 grams of fat).³² Recommended calorie intake per day for women is less than 2,000 calories and just above 2,500 calories for men. Thus, just the typical McDonald's meal with the triple shake exceeds the recommended daily calorie intake for women and is close to the recommended amount of daily calories for men.

McDonald's new oatmeal is called a "bowl full of wholesome."³³ In itself, unadulterated oatmeal is a healthy food, but predictably McDonald's has done "everything it can to turn oatmeal into yet another bad choice."³⁴ One observer described the ingredients as "oats, sugar, sweetened dried fruit, cream and 11 weird ingredients you would never keep in your kitchen."³⁵ It contains more sugar than a Snickers candy bar. The observer wonders why McDonald's would take a healthy food like oats "and turn it into expensive junk food? Why create a hideous concoction of 21 ingredients, many of them chemical and/or unnecessary?"³⁶

Although McDonald's (and others) has responded to its critics by changing its menu a bit and by offering publicly available nutritional facts about its products, it also reacted, predictably, with an ad campaign. In one ad, Ronald McDonald is seen as a "sports dude," juggling vegetables and dodging strawberries, without a burger in view. Experts, however, see such ads for what they are—publicity—while McDonald's continues to push fatty, high-calorie foods and huge portion sizes. Given the epidemic of childhood obesity, the huge sums spent on the marketing of such foods to children have to be of particular concern.³⁷

McDonaldization poses even more immediate health threats. Regina Schrambling links outbreaks of diseases such as *Salmonella* to the rationalization of chicken production: "Salmonella proliferated in the poultry industry only after . . . Americans decided they wanted a chicken in every pot every night. But birds aren't like cars: you can't just speed up the factory line to meet demand. . . . Birds that are rushed to fryer size, then killed, gutted, and plucked at high speed in vast quantities are not going to be the cleanest food in the supermarket."³⁸ Schrambling also associates *Salmonella* with the rationalized production of eggs, fruit, and vegetables.³⁹

Outbreaks of *Escherichia coli* infections have also been increasing in recent years, and the fast-food industry has taken note of this fact. Indeed, the first reported outbreak in the United States was traced to McDonald's in 1982. In 1997, Hudson Foods, a meatpacking company that supplied meat to McDonald's and Burger King, among others, was forced out of business because an outbreak of *E. coli* was traced to its frozen hamburgers.⁴⁰ Taco Bell experienced an outbreak of *E. coli* in 2006 that was traced to contaminated lettuce. Hamburger is a particular culprit because *E. coli* can be passed from steer to steer, and ultimately the hamburger from many steers, some of it infected, is mixed together. That meat is then turned into patties and frozen, and those frozen patties are distributed widely. The fast-food industry did respond to the danger of *E. coli* by cooking its hamburgers at a higher temperature to kill the bacterium, but *E. coli* is finding its way into an ever-larger number of highly McDonaldized foods (e.g., bagged salad and spinach).⁴¹ *E. coli* remains a great concern today, especially in McDonaldized foods of all types.⁴²

The fast-food industry has run afoul not only of nutritionists and epidemiologists but also of environmentalists; McDonald's and McDonaldization have produced a wide array of adverse effects on the environment. For example, the fast-food industry is directly linked to an enormous increase in meat production (projected to grow from 275 million tons in 2007 to 465 million tons in 2050⁴³) and consumption. This increase in meat production is associated with a number of environmental problems such as land degradation, climate change, water and air pollution, water shortage, and a decline in biodiversity.⁴⁴ Large-scale hog farms, for example, produce a huge amount of manure that ultimately

finds its way into our waterways and then our drinking water; people have been made ill and women have had miscarriages as a result of drinking water contaminated in this way.⁴⁵ The dosing of factory-farmed animals with antibiotics may lead to bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics, thereby putting people at risk.⁴⁶ Aquaculture creates a similar set of environmental problems and health risks to humans.⁴⁷

Another adverse environmental effect stems from the need to grow uniform potatoes from which to create predictable French fries. The huge farms of the Pacific Northwest that now produce such potatoes rely on the extensive use of chemicals. In addition, the need to produce a perfect fry means that much of the potato is wasted, with the remnants either fed to cattle or used for fertilizer. The underground water supply in the area is now showing high levels of nitrates, which may be traceable to the fertilizer and to animal wastes.⁴⁸

The fast-food industry produces an enormous amount of trash, some of which is non-biodegradable. The litter from fast-food meals is a public eyesore. Innumerable square miles of forest are sacrificed to provide the paper needed each year by McDonald's alone.⁴⁹ Whole forests are being devoured by the fast-food industry. For a time, paper containers were replaced by Styrofoam and other products. However, the current trend is back to paper (and other biodegradable) products; Styrofoam, virtually indestructible, piles up in landfills, creating mountains of waste that endure there for years, if not forever. Overall, despite various efforts to deal with its worst abuses, the fast-food industry contributes to global warming, destruction of the ozone layer, depletion of natural resources, and destruction of natural habitats.

Of course, the above merely scratches the surface of the ecological problems associated with the McDonaldization of the fast-food industry. To take another specific example, great inefficiency and huge environmental effects are associated with the care and feeding of immense herds of cattle. That is, it would be far more efficient for us to consume the grain ourselves than it is to consume the much smaller amount of beef derived from cattle that are grain-fed. More generally, this is all part of a fast-paced, highly mobile, and vast energy-consuming way of life that is having untold negative effects on the ecology of the world. While it is impossible to calculate exactly what they contribute to the problem, there is no question that the fast-food industry and McDonaldized systems in general are significant causes of a number of potential global calamities.⁵⁰

The automobile assembly line has been extraordinarily successful in churning out millions of cars a year. But all those cars have wreaked havoc on the environment. Their emissions pollute the air, soil, and water; an ever-expanding system of highways and roads have scarred the countryside; and we must not forget the thousands of people killed and the far greater number injured each year in traffic accidents. It was the widespread use of the automobile that helped lead to the fast-food industry, and the nature of fast-food restaurants

(their locations and their drive-through windows) encourages ever-greater use of the automobile.

Homogenization: It's No Different in Paris

Another irrational effect of McDonaldization is increased homogenization. Anywhere you go in the United States and, increasingly, throughout the world, you are likely to find the same products offered in the same way. The expansion of franchising across the United States means that people find little difference between regions and between cities.⁵¹ On a global scale, travelers are finding more familiarity and less diversity. Exotic settings are increasingly likely sites for American fast-food chains and other McDonaldized settings.

Furthermore, in many nations, restaurant owners are applying the McDonald's model to native cuisine. In Paris, tourists may be shocked by the number of American fast-food restaurants but even more shocked by the incredible spread of indigenous forms, such as the fast-food *croissanterie*. One would have thought that the French, who seem to consider the *croissant* a sacred object, would resist rationalizing its manufacture and sale, but that is just what has happened.⁵² The spread of such outlets throughout Paris indicates that many Parisians are willing to sacrifice quality for speed and efficiency. And, you may ask, if the Parisian *croissant* can be tamed and transformed into a fast-food success, what food is safe?

The spread of American and indigenous fast food causes less and less diversity from one setting to another. In the process, the human craving for new and diverse experiences is being limited, if not progressively destroyed. It is being supplanted by the desire for uniformity and predictability.

In general, McDonaldized institutions have been notably unsuccessful in creating new and different products. Please recall Ray Kroc's failures in this realm, notably the *Hulaburger*. Such systems excel instead at selling familiar products and services in shiny new settings or packages that can be easily replicated. For instance, the fast-food restaurant wraps that prosaic hamburger in bright packages and sells it in a carnival-like atmosphere that differs little from one locale to another. This point extends to many other manifestations of McDonaldization. For example, *Jiffy Lube* and its imitators sell people nothing more than the same old oil change and lube job.

Just as the franchises are leveling differences among goods and services, online consumption sites and online and mail-order catalogs are eliminating temporal and seasonal differences. When columnist Ellen Goodman received her Christmas catalog at the beginning of the fall, she offered this critique: "The creation of one national mail-order market has produced catalogues without the slightest respect for any season or region. Their holidays are now

harvested, transported and chemically ripened on the way to your home. . . . I refuse to fast forward through the fall."⁵³

Dehumanization: Getting Hosed at "Trough and Brew"

The main reason to think of McDonaldization as irrational, and ultimately unreasonable, is that it tends to be dehumanizing. For example, the fast-food industry offers its employees "McJobs."⁵⁴ One "McTask" at McDonald's is known as HBO—"Hand Bag Out."⁵⁵ As a Burger King worker has noted, "A moron could learn this job, it's so easy," and "Any trained monkey could do this job."⁵⁶ Workers can use only a small portion of their skills and abilities. The minimal skill demands of the fast-food restaurant are irrational.

From the employee's perspective, McJobs are irrational because they don't offer much in the way of either satisfaction or stability. Employees are seldom allowed to use anything approaching all their skills and are not allowed to be creative on the job. The result is a high level of resentment, job dissatisfaction, alienation, absenteeism, and turnover.⁵⁷ In fact, the fast-food industry has the highest turnover rate—approximately 300% a year⁵⁸—of any industry in the United States. That means that the average fast-food worker lasts only about 4 months; the entire workforce of the fast-food industry turns over approximately three times a year.

Although the simple and repetitive nature of the jobs makes it relatively easy to replace workers who leave, such a high turnover rate is undesirable from the organization's perspective, as well as the employee's. It would clearly be better to keep employees longer. The costs involved in turnover, such as hiring and training, greatly increase with extraordinarily high turnover rates. In addition, failure to use employees' skills is irrational for the organization, for it could obtain much more from its employees for the money (however negligible) it pays them.

The automobile assembly line is well known for the way it dehumanizes life on a day-to-day basis for those who work on it. Although Henry Ford felt, as we saw earlier, that he personally could not do the kind of repetitive work required on the assembly line, he believed that most people, with their limited mental abilities and aspirations, could adjust to it quite well. Ford said, "I have not been able to discover that repetitive labour injures a man in any way. . . . The most thorough research has not brought out a single case of a man's mind being twisted or deadened by the work."⁵⁹ Objective evidence of the destructiveness of the assembly line, however, is found in the high rates of absenteeism, tardiness, and turnover among employees. More generally, most people seem to find assembly-line work highly alienating. Here is the way one

worker describes it: "I stand in one spot, about a two—or three—[foot] area, all night. The only time a person stops is when the line stops. We do about thirty-two jobs per car, per unit, forty-eight units an hour, eight hours a day. Thirty-two times forty-eight times eight. Figure it out, that's how many times I push that button."⁶⁰

Another worker offers a similar view: "What's there to say? A car comes, I weld it; a car comes, I weld it; a car comes, I weld it. One hundred and one times an hour." Others get quite sarcastic about the nature of the work: "There's a lot of variety in the paint shop. . . . You clip on the color hose, bleed out the color and squirt. Clip, bleed, squirt; clip, bleed, squirt, yawn; clip, bleed, squirt, scratch your nose."⁶¹ Another assembly-line worker sums up the dehumanization he feels: "Sometimes I felt just like a robot. You push a button and you go this way. You become a mechanical nut."⁶²

Alienation affects not only those who work on the automobile assembly line but also people in the wide range of settings built, at least in part, on the principles of the assembly line.⁶³ In our McDonaldized society, the assembly line has implications for many of us and for many different settings. The demands in the meatpacking industry (which is heavily dependent on the business provided by fast-food restaurants) are responsible, at least in part, for increasing dehumanization—inhuman work in inhumane conditions. Workers are reduced to fast-moving cogs in the assembly-line killing and butchering of animals. They are forced to perform repetitive and physically demanding tasks on animals that may, at least initially, not even be dead. They are often covered in, and forced to stand in pools of, blood. They wield very sharp knives at great speed in close proximity to other workers. The result is an extraordinarily high injury (and even death) rate, although many injuries go unreported out of fear of being fired for being injured and unable to perform at peak levels. Because they are often undocumented immigrants, workers are almost totally at the whim of a management free to hire and fire them at will. Management is also able to ignore the horrid working conditions confronted by these powerless employees or able to make those conditions even more horrific.⁶⁴

The fast-food restaurant also dehumanizes consumers. By eating on a sort of assembly line, diners are reduced to automatons rushing through a meal with little gratification derived from the dining experience or from the food itself. The best that can usually be said is that the meal is efficient and is over quickly. Typical diners at a McDonald's in Washington, D.C., are described as "slouching toward a quick and forgettable meal."⁶⁵

Some customers might even feel as if they are being fed like livestock on an assembly line. This point was made on TV a number of years ago in a *Saturday Night Live* parody of a small fast-food chain called "Burger and Brew." In the skit, some young executives learn that a new fast-food restaurant called "Trough and Brew" has opened, and they decide to try it for lunch. When they

enter the restaurant, bibs are tied around their necks. They then discover what resembles a pig trough filled with chili and periodically refilled by a waitress scooping new supplies from a bucket. The customers bend over, stick their heads into the trough, and lap up the chili as they move along the trough, presumably making "high-level business decisions" en route. Every so often they come up for air and lap some beer from the communal "brew basin." After they have finished their "meal," they pay their bills "by the head." Since their faces are smeared with chili, they are literally "hosed off" before they leave the restaurant. The young executives are last seen being herded out of the restaurant, which is closing for a half hour so that it can be "hosed down." *Saturday Night Live* was clearly ridiculing the fact that fast-food restaurants tend to treat their customers like lower animals.

Customers are also dehumanized by scripts and other efforts to make interactions uniform. "Uniformity is incompatible when human interactions are involved. Human interactions that are mass-produced may strike consumers as dehumanizing if the routinization is obvious or manipulative if it is not."⁶⁶ In other words, dehumanization occurs when prefabricated interactions take the place of authentic human relationships. Bob Garfield's critique of Walt Disney World provides another example of dehumanized customers: "I actually believed there was real fun and real imagination in store only to be confronted with an extruded, injection-molded, civil-engineered brand of fantasy, which is to say: no fantasy at all. . . . From the network of chutes and corrals channeling people into attractions, to the chillingly programmed *Stepford Wives* demeanor of the employees, to the compulsively litter-free grounds, to the generalized North Korean model Socialist Society sense of totalitarian order, to the utterly passive nature of the entertainment itself, Disney turns out to be the very antithesis of fantasy" (italics added).⁶⁷ Thus, instead of being creative and imaginative, Disney World turns out to be an uncreative, unimaginative, and ultimately inhuman experience.

Fast-food restaurants and other McDonalidized settings also minimize contact among human beings. The relationships between employees and customers are fleeting at best. Because employees typically work part-time and stay only a few months, even regular customers rarely develop personal relationships with them. All but gone are the days when one got to know well a waitress at a diner or the short-order cook at a local "greasy spoon." There are fewer and fewer places where an employee knows who you are and knows what you are likely to order. Fast being overwhelmed are what Ray Oldenburg calls "great good places," such as local cafés and taverns.⁶⁸

Contact time between workers and customers at the fast-food restaurant is also very short. It takes little time at the counter to order, receive the food, and pay for it. Both employees and customers are likely to feel rushed and to want to move customers on to their meal and employees to the next order.⁶⁹ There is

virtually no time for customer and counter person to interact. This is even truer of the drive-through window where, thanks to the speedy service and the physical barriers, the server is even more distant.

Other potential relationships in fast-food restaurants are also limited greatly. Because employees remain on the job for only a few months, satisfying personal relationships among employees are unlikely to develop. More permanent employment helps foster long-term relationships on the job, and workers with more job stability are likely to get together after work hours and on weekends. The temporary and part-time character of jobs in fast-food restaurants, and other McDonalidized settings, largely eliminates the possibility of such personal relationships among employees.

Relationships among fast-food customers are largely curtailed as well. Although some McDonald's ads would have people believe otherwise, gone for the most part are the days when people met in the diner or cafeteria for coffee or a meal and lingered to socialize. Fast-food restaurants clearly do not encourage such socializing. The exception seems to be Starbucks, but as we will see in Chapter 7, this is more myth than reality.

Family: The Kitchen as Filling Station

Fast-food restaurants also negatively affect the family, especially the so-called family meal.⁷⁰ The fast-food restaurant is not conducive to a long, leisurely, conversation-filled dinnertime. Furthermore, because of the fast-food restaurant, teens are better able to go out and eat with their friends, leaving the rest of the family to eat somewhere else or at another time. Of course, the drive-through window only serves to reduce further the possibility of a family meal. The family that gobbles its food while driving on to its next stop can hardly enjoy "quality time."

Here is the way one journalist describes what is happening to the family meal:

Do families who eat their suppers at the Colonel's, swinging on plastic seats, or however the restaurant is arranged, say grace before picking up a crispy brown chicken leg? Does dad ask junior what he did today as he remembers he forgot the piccalilli and trots through the crowds over to the counter to get some? Does mom find the atmosphere conducive to asking little Mildred about the problems she was having with third conjugation French verbs, or would it matter since otherwise the family might have been at home chomping down precooked frozen food, warmed in the microwave oven and watching [television]?⁷¹

There is much talk these days about the disintegration of the family, and the fast-food restaurant may well be a crucial contributor to that disintegration. Conversely, the decline of the family creates ready-made customers for fast-food restaurants.

In fact, dinners at home may now be not much different from meals at the fast-food restaurant. Families long ago tended to stop having lunch and breakfast together. Today, the family dinner is following the same route. Even at home, the meal is probably not what it once was. Following the fast-food model, people have ever more options to “graze,” “refuel,” nibble on this, or snack on that rather than sit down at a formal meal. Also, because it may seem inefficient to do nothing but just eat, families are likely to watch television, play computer games, or text or tweet while they are eating; they might even split up and, plate in hand, head for their own computers.⁷² The din, to say nothing of the lure, of dinnertime TV programs such as *Wheel of Fortune*, the “buzzes” and “beeps” associated with smartphones, and the distraction associated with sending and receiving text messages are likely to make it difficult for family members to interact with one another. We need to decide whether we can afford to lose the primary ritual of the communal meal: “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.”⁷³

Beyond the computer and the smartphone, a key technology in the destruction of the family meal has been the microwave oven and the vast array of microwavable foods it helped generate.⁷⁴ Some time ago, a *Wall Street Journal* poll indicated that Americans consider the microwave their favorite household product (that would undoubtedly be replaced by the smartphone and the laptop computer today). Said one consumer researcher, “It has made even fast-food restaurants not seem fast because at home you don’t have to wait in line.” As a general rule, consumers demand meals that take no more than 10 minutes to microwave, whereas in the past, people were more often willing to spend a half hour or even an hour cooking dinner. This emphasis on speed has, of course, brought with it lower quality, but people do not seem to mind this loss: “We’re just not as critical of food as we used to be.”⁷⁵

The speed of microwave cooking and the wide variety of microwavable foods make it possible for family members to eat at different times and places. With microwavable products such as Hormel “Completes” Kids Microwave Meals and “Kid Cuisine” (the latter has similar products in frozen food), even children can “zap” their 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 when food is ‘zapped’ or ‘nuked’ instead of cooked.”⁷⁶

The advances in microwave cooking continue. On some foods, plastic strips turn blue when the food is done. The industry has even promised 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.”⁷⁷

The family meal is not the only aspect of family life threatened by McDonaldization. For example, busy and exhausted parents are being advised

that, instead of reading to their children at night, they should have them listen to audiotapes.⁷⁸

Higher Education: McLectures and McColleges

The modern university has, in various ways, become a highly irrational place. The impact of McDonaldization is clear, for example, in the way that students increasingly relate to professors as if they were workers in the fast-food industry. If the “service” in class is not up to their standards, students feel free to complain and even behave abusively toward their professors. Both students and faculty members are put off by schools’ factory-like atmosphere. They may feel like automatons processed by the bureaucracy and computers, or feel like cattle run through a meat-processing plant. In other words, education in such settings can be a dehumanizing experience.

The masses of students, large and impersonal dorms, and huge lecture classes make getting to know other students difficult. The large lecture classes, constrained tightly by the clock, also make it virtually impossible to know professors personally; at best, students might get to know a graduate assistant teaching a discussion section. Grades (and students are obsessed by this quantifiable measure of education) might be derived from a series of machine-graded, multiple-choice exams and posted on Blackboard. In sum, students may feel like little more than objects into which knowledge is poured as they move along an information-providing and degree-granting educational assembly line.

Of course, technological advances are leading to even greater irrationalities in education. The minimal contact between teacher and student is being limited further by advances such as Internet education and online instruction,⁷⁹ educational television, closed-circuit television,⁸⁰ distance learning, computerized instruction, and teaching machines. With Internet education, we have seen the ultimate step in the dehumanization of education: the elimination of a human teacher and of human interaction between teacher and student. Said one historian, “Taking a course online, by yourself, is not the same as being in a classroom with a professor who can respond to you, present different viewpoints and push you to work a problem.”⁸¹ Where human teachers do remain, they are less likely to be tenured professors and more likely to be part-time employees (“McLecturers” at “McColleges”),⁸² who are apt to be treated as disposable service workers by both the university and students.

Health Care: You’re Just a Number

For the physician, the process of rationalization carries with it a series of dehumanizing consequences. At or near the top of the list is the shift in control away from the physician and toward rationalized structures and institutions. In

the past, private practitioners had a large degree of control over their work, with the major constraints being peer control as well as the needs and demands of patients. In rationalized medicine, external control increases and shifts to social structures and institutions. Not only is the physician more likely to be controlled by these structures and institutions, but he or she is also constrained by managers and bureaucrats who are not themselves physicians. The ability of physicians to control their own work lives is declining. As a result, many physicians are experiencing increased job dissatisfaction and alienation. Some are even turning toward unionization such as the Union of American Physicians and Dentists.⁸³

From the patients' viewpoint, the rationalization of medicine causes a number of irrationalities. The drive for efficiency can make them feel like products on a medical assembly line. The effort to increase predictability will likely lead patients to lose personal relationships with physicians and other health professionals, because rules and regulations lead physicians to treat all patients in essentially the same way. This is also true in hospitals, where instead of seeing the same nurse regularly, a patient may see many different nurses. The result, of course, is that nurses never come to know their patients as individuals. Another dehumanizing development is the advent (at least in the United States) of "hospitalists," doctors who practice exclusively in hospitals. Now instead of seeing their personal physician (if they still have such a doctor), hospitalized patients are more likely to be seen by physicians whom they probably have never seen and with whom they have no personal relationship.⁸⁴

As a result of the emphasis on calculability, the patient is more likely to feel like a number in the system rather than a person. Minimizing time and maximizing profits may lead to a decline in the quality of health care provided to patients. Like physicians, patients are apt to be controlled increasingly by large-scale structures and institutions, which will probably appear to them as distant, uncaring, and impenetrable. Finally, patients are increasingly likely to interact with technicians and impersonal technologies. In fact, because more and more technologies may be purchased at the drug store, patients can test themselves and thereby cut out human contact with both physicians and technicians.

The ultimate irrationality of this rationalization would be the unanticipated consequences of a decline in the quality of medical practice and a deterioration in the health of patients. Increasingly rational medical systems, with their focus on lowering costs and increasing profits, may reduce the quality of health care, especially for the poorest members of society. At least some people may become sicker, and perhaps even die, because of the rationalization of medicine. Health in general may even decline. These possibilities can be assessed only in the future as the health care system continues to rationalize. Since the health care system will continue to rationalize, health professionals and their patients may need to learn how to control rational structures and institutions to ameliorate their irrational consequences.

Dehumanized Death

Then there is the dehumanization of the very human process of death. People are increasingly likely to die (as they are likely to be born) impersonally, in the presence of total strangers: "A patient is every day less a human being and more a complicated challenge in intensive care to the consulting superspecialists . . . he is a case. . . . Doctors thirty years his junior call him by his first name. Better that, than to be called by the name of the disease or the number of the bed."⁸⁵

This dehumanization is part of the process, according to Philippe Aries, by which the modern world has "banished death."⁸⁶ Here is the way Sherwin Nuland describes our need to rationalize death: "In recent generations, we have . . . created the *method of modern dying* . . . in modern hospitals, where it can be hidden, cleansed of its organic blight, and finally packaged for modern burial. We can now deny the power not only of death but of nature itself" (italics added).⁸⁷

Similarly, Jean Baudrillard has written of "designer deaths," paralleling "designer births": "To streamline death at all costs, to varnish it, cryogenically freeze it, or condition it, put make-up on it, 'design' it, to pursue it with the same relentlessness as grime, sex, bacteriological or radioactive waste. The makeup of death . . . 'designed' according to the purest laws of . . . international marketing."⁸⁸

Closely related to the growing power of physicians and hospitals over death, nonhuman technologies play an increasing role in the dying process. Technology has blurred the line between life and death by, for example, keeping people's hearts going even though their brains are dead. Medical personnel have also come to rely on technology to help them decide when it is acceptable to declare death. What could be more dehumanizing than dying alone amid machines rather than with loved ones?

When people are asked how they wish to die, most respond with something like this: quickly, painlessly, at home, surrounded by family and friends. Ask them how they expect to die, and the fear emerges: in the hospital, all alone, on a machine, in pain.⁸⁹

Here is the way Nuland describes dehumanized death amid a sea of nonhuman technologies:

The beeping and squealing monitors, the hissings of respirators and pistoned mattresses, the flashing multicolored electronic signals—the whole technological panoply is background for the tactics by which we are deprived of the tranquility we have every right to hope for, and separated from those few who would not let us die alone. By such means, biotechnology created to provide hope serves actually to take it away, and to leave our survivors bereft of the unshattered final memories that rightly belong to those who sit nearby as our days draw to a close.⁹⁰