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Dealing With McDonaldization

A Practical Guide

What can people do to deal with an increasingly McDonaldized world? The answer to that question depends, at least in part, on their attitudes toward McDonaldization. Many people view a McDonaldized world as a “velvet cage.” To them, McDonaldization represents not a threat but nirvana. Weber’s metaphor of an iron cage of rationalization communicates a sense of coldness, hardness, and great discomfort. But many people like, even crave, McDonaldization and welcome its proliferation. This is certainly a viable position and one especially likely to be adopted by those who have lived only in McDonaldized societies and who have been reared since the advent of the McDonaldized world. McDonaldized society, the only world they know, represents their standard of good taste and high quality. They can think of nothing better than a world uncluttered with too many choices and options. They like the predictability of many aspects of their lives. They relish an impersonal world in which they interact with human and nonhuman automatons. They seek to avoid, at least in the McDonaldized portions of their world, close human contact. Such people probably represent an increasingly large portion of the population.

For many other people, McDonaldization is a “rubber cage,” the bars of which can be stretched to allow adequate means for escape. Such people dislike many aspects of McDonaldization but find others quite appealing. Like those who see themselves in a velvet cage, these people may like the efficiency, speed, predictability, and impersonality of McDonaldized systems and services. Such people may be busy and therefore will appreciate obtaining a meal (or some other McDonaldized service) efficiently. However, they also recognize the costs

of McDonaldization and therefore seek to escape it when they can. Its efficiencies may even enhance their ability to escape from it. That is, getting a fast meal may allow them the time to luxuriate in other, nonrationalized activities.

These people are the types who, on weekends and vacations, go into the wilderness to camp the old-fashioned way; who go mountain climbing, spelunking, fishing, hunting (without elaborate equipment), antique hunting, and museum browsing; and who search out traditional restaurants, inns, and bed-and-breakfasts. Such people try to humanize their telephone answering machines with creative messages such as, “Sorry, ain’t home, don’t break my heart when you hear the tone.”¹

Although the bars may seem like rubber, they are still there, however. For example, a company that sells prerecorded, humorous messages now rationalizes the escape route for those who prefer creative answering machine messages. Thus, people can buy a machine with an impressionist imitating Humphrey Bogart: “Of all the answering machines in the world, you had to call this one.”² Similarly, for many, home baking now includes the use of bread-baking machines, which do not produce a very good loaf but “do everything but butter the bread.”³

The third type of person believes that the McDonaldized cage is made of iron. If the impregnability of the cage has not led such a person to surrender completely, he or she is likely to be deeply offended by the process but to see few, if any, ways out. Unlike the second type of person, these individuals see escape routes (if they see them at all) that provide only temporary respites, soon to fall under the sway of McDonaldization. They share the dark and pessimistic outlook of Max Weber—and myself—viewing the future as a “polar night of icy darkness and hardness.”⁴ These are the severest critics of McDonaldization and the ones who see less and less place for themselves in modern society.⁵

This chapter suggests actions open to each of these three types of people in a McDonaldized world. Those who think of McDonaldization as a velvet cage will continue to frequent fast-food restaurants and their clones within other sectors of society and will even actively seek to McDonaldize new, as yet unrationalized, venues. At the other extreme, those who think of it as an iron cage may want to work for the radical transformation of McDonaldized society, which might involve efforts to return to a pre-McDonaldized world or to create a new, non-McDonaldized world out of the rubble created by the fall of the golden arches. Primarily, however, this chapter is directed at those who think in terms of a rubber or iron cage and who are interested in ameliorating some of the problems associated with McDonaldization. In the main, the focus here is on more moderate ways of dealing with McDonaldization.

I begin by discussing some attempts at creating non-McDonaldized institutions. Second, I provide an overview of collective efforts to modify McDonaldized systems and limit their negative effects. Finally, I discuss a few examples of other, more individual ways people deal with a McDonaldized society.

Creating "Reasonable" Alternatives: Sometimes You Really Do Have to Break the Rules

The excesses of McDonaldization have led to the development of less rationalized alternatives. These alternatives do not put a premium on the efficient production of goods and services or the efficient processing of customers. They focus on high-quality products instead of large quantities. They revel in the unpredictabilities of their products and services. Instead of nonhuman technologies, they employ skilled human beings who practice their crafts relatively unconstrained by external controls. Hence, these are not McDonaldized settings for workers or customers.

Alternatives to rationalized settings exist in businesses and other social institutions. For example, food co-ops specializing in vegetarian and health foods offer an alternative to the supermarket.⁶ The food is healthier than that in supermarkets (although some supermarket chains—e.g., Whole Foods—have sought to present themselves as alternatives, even though they and the vast majority of their products are highly McDonaldized), the shoppers are often members of the co-op and therefore actively involved in its management, and the employees are frequently more involved in and committed to their work.

In education, alternatives to highly rational state universities include small schools such as Hampshire College⁷ of Amherst, Massachusetts, which at one time had the motto, "Where It's Okay to Go Outside the Lines." (The fast-food restaurants are not above using similar mottoes; for example, Burger King has used "Sometimes You Gotta Break the Rules," even though that's the last thing it wants people to do.) Hampshire College now touts its "personalized" education. According to its website, at Hampshire College, "Students design their own programs of study instead of following predetermined academic pathways (no 'off-the-shelf' majors here)."⁸ There are no traditional academic disciplines at Hampshire, and students receive detailed written evaluations in narrative form rather than letter or numerical grades. Another example of a nonrationalized alternative to the McDonaldized enterprise is the bed-and-breakfast (B&B). In fact, one news report on B&Bs was titled, "B&Bs Offer Travelers Break From McBed, McBreakfast."⁹ B&Bs are private homes that rent out rooms to travelers and offer them home-style hospitality and a homemade breakfast in the morning. Traditionally, the hosts live in the home while they operate it, taking a personal interest in the guests. Although B&Bs have existed for a long time, they began to boom at the beginning of the 1980s.¹⁰ Some travelers had grown weary of the cold impersonality of rationalized motel rooms and instead sought out the types of nonrationalized accommodations offered by B&Bs. Said one visitor to a B&B, "It was marvelous. . . . The innkeepers treated us like family. It was so comfortable and friendly and charming and romantic."¹¹

But success, once again, has brought with it signs of McDonaldization. The range of amenities offered at B&Bs is expanding, and the prices are rising. It is getting harder to distinguish B&Bs from inns or small hotels. Owners increasingly no longer live in the B&Bs but hire managers to run them. Said one observer, "Your best B&Bs are those where the owner is on the premises. . . . When the owner leaves and hires a manager, bad things start happening. Dust balls start accumulating under the beds, the coffee gets stale, and the toast is burnt."¹²

In other words, quality suffers. With the expansion of B&Bs, the American Bed and Breakfast Association came into existence in 1981, and guidebooks about B&Bs proliferated. Now inspections are being undertaken, standards developed, and a rating system implemented. In other words, efforts are under way to rationalize the burgeoning B&B industry.

The pressure to McDonaldize is even greater in England. The British Tourist Authority is pressing B&Bs that want an officially approved crown rating to offer a set of uniform amenities, such as full-length mirrors, ironing boards, telephones, televisions, and trouser presses. Such pressures led to the homogenization of B&Bs and to increasing difficulty in distinguishing them from motel and hotel accommodations. B&Bs are rated by how many amenities they have rather than more esthetic, subjective, and nonquantifiable factors, such as the warmth of the welcome, the friendliness of the atmosphere, the attractiveness of the setting, or the historical or architectural value of the building.¹³

As nonrationalized institutions become successful, pressures mount to McDonaldize them. The issue then becomes how to avoid rationalization. One thing to avoid is too much expansion. At some point, any institution will grow so large that it requires increasingly rational principles to function. With larger size comes another danger—franchising, which almost by definition brings with it rationalization. Because greater size and franchising hold out the almost overpowering lure of greater profits, the entrepreneurs behind a nonrationalized business such as a B&B must always keep the reasons for creating such a business in the forefront of their thinking. They must also keep in mind their obligations to the customers who frequent them because they are not McDonaldized. However, as creatures of a capitalist society, they might well succumb to greater profitability and allow their businesses to expand or be franchised. If they do, I hope they use their profits to begin new nonrationalized enterprises.

Fighting Back Collectively: Saving Hearts, Minds, Taste Buds, and the Piazza di Spagna

The preceding examples represent positive efforts to resist McDonaldization; however, more direct, often more negative, actions are also possible. If a

number of people band together, they can form a movement against a specific component of the process (for example, McDonald's or Wal-Mart) or against the process in general.

One example of the success of collective movements is the elimination of the use of trans fats by most fast-food restaurants. While many of the ingredients in fast food have come under assault over the years, much attention came to be devoted to the fact that fast foods were usually high in trans fats (especially from partially hydrogenated oil). Trans fats are not only bad in themselves but can raise "bad" cholesterol (LDL) and lower "good" cholesterol (HDL), increasing the chances of having a heart attack. Trans fats are widely used in fast-food restaurants because they are cheap and can be stored easily for long periods of time, the oils that include them are very easy to work with, and they extend the shelf life of many products.¹⁴ In other words, such oils are widely used because they are an ideal McDonaldized product. They are inexpensive (calculability), can be stored for long periods of time (calculability), are easy to work with (efficiency), and whatever is produced with them has a long shelf life (calculability).

While some countries (e.g., Denmark) passed laws limiting the amount of trans fat in food, the United States has relied on fast-food restaurants to take action. Local governments, however, have taken action, with New York City being the first to ban the use of trans fats in restaurants.¹⁵ The state of California followed suit in 2010.¹⁶ McDonald's was slower than many of its competitors (e.g., Wendy's) in reducing or eliminating trans fats.¹⁷ However, by early 2007, even McDonald's had settled on a new trans fat-free formula for cooking its French fries,¹⁸ and McDonald's is now 100% trans fat free.

The three most important examples of social movements against McDonaldization are the national and sometimes international campaigns against McDonald's (the McLibel Support Campaign), against fast food (Slow Food), and against Wal-Mart and other chains and superstores (Sprawl-Busters). Let us look briefly at each, as well as at a number of efforts by local communities to combat McDonaldization.

McLibel Support Group: McDonald's Pyrrhic Victory

The origins of the McLibel Support Campaign are traceable to a libel suit brought by McDonald's (United Kingdom) against two unemployed associates of London Greenpeace, Helen Steel and David Morris.¹⁹ These individuals were involved in the distribution of a "fact sheet" that faulted McDonald's for many of the things that it stands accused of in this book (endangering people's health, damaging the environment, and offering poor working conditions and pay). The trial, which ended in January 1997, took more than 30 months to complete and became the longest running libel trial in England's history. The judge found

for McDonald's on most counts but on several matters favored the position taken by the defendants. For example, the judge ruled that McDonald's exploits children, deceptively claims that its food is nutritious, and poses a risk to the health of its long-term customers. This victory was a Pyrrhic one for McDonald's, one widely seen as a public relations disaster. Later legal decisions (1999, 2005) supported the 1997 decision.

McDonald's spent around \$15 million on the trial, hiring the best lawyers, whereas the impecunious Steel and Morris defended themselves. Of further embarrassment to McDonald's was that Steel and Morris continued to appeal the verdict.²⁰

Several million copies of the original leaflet "What's Wrong With McDonald's: Everything They Didn't Want You to Know" have been distributed around the world, and it has been translated into a number of languages. More important, a site created on the World Wide Web (www.mcspotlight.org) reported at its peak an average of 800,000 "hits" a month.²¹ McSpotlight has become the heart of a global movement in opposition to McDonald's as well as other aspects of McDonaldization.²² It acts as the repository for information on actions taken against local McDonald's throughout the world and offers information on conducting such actions.²³ It is also the driving force in the annual Worldwide Anti-McDonald's Day.²⁴ Among "McSpotlight's" other targets is the Body Shop, accused of concealing behind its "green" image the fact that its products are detrimental to the environment, that it pays low wages, and that it encourages consumerism.

McLibel also supports the unionization of McDonald's workers, and there are occasional signs in the United States and elsewhere (e.g., China) of other efforts in this direction.²⁵ Although the initiative flies in the face of the general decline of labor unions, should it become successful, it would offer another base of opposition against McDonaldization. Fast-food restaurants have shown little inclination to deal with dehumanizing working conditions. Burger King, for example, has fought hard against unionization.²⁶ McDonald's is also well known for its hostility toward unions. For example, it destroyed a union in Moscow even after signing a collective agreement with it and shut down a store in Germany to avoid dealing with a workers' council.²⁷ (However, in early 2007, McDonald's agreed to the unionization of at least some of its restaurants in China.²⁸) As long as a steady supply of people is willing to work in such settings for even just a few months, fast-food chains will not do much about their working conditions.

In some locales, McDonald's has faced an inadequate supply of workers from its traditional labor pool—teenagers. Rather than improve the work to attract more workers and keep them on the job longer, McDonald's has responded by broadening its hiring net. It now seeks out teenagers who live in distant communities, hires disabled adults, and brings in older employees, often

retirees.²⁹ KinderCare also hires older people to make up for the shortage in younger workers. In fact, one expert said, "For old people who need to be needed, it [KinderCare] sure beats working in McDonald's."³⁰

Slow Food: Creating a Place for Traditional, Regional, and High-Quality Food

The Slow Food movement had its origins in a mid-1980s grassroots movement organized by an Italian food critic³¹ against the opening of a McDonald's in Rome (further discussed later in this chapter). It is opposed to the homogenization of food styles and states that its mission is "to give voice to local cooking styles and small-time food producers." It has also taken on the task of "fending off the homogenizing effects of European Union regulations on regional culinary treasures."³² More positively, its objectives are "to provide members from all different countries with an identity."³³

Slow Food (www.slowfood.com) has sought, quite successfully, to become a force throughout the world and now has more than 100,000 members in 150 countries.³⁴ It

- supports traditional ways of growing and raising food exceptional in quality and taste;
- favors the eating of such food as opposed to McDonaldized food;
- seeks to continue local traditions in how food is produced, what is eaten, and how it is prepared;
- favors food traditional preparation that is as close to handmade as possible;
- favors raw ingredients that are as specific to the place in which the food is made as possible;
- fights against environmental degradations that threaten local methods of producing food;
- supports the local shopkeeper and restaurateur (it favors "local inns and cafes");³⁵
- creates local "convivia" throughout the world—there are more than 850 of them—that meet and engage in actions to further the above causes;
- has an "Ark of Taste" listing hundreds of foods that are endangered and in need of protection: "Ark foods must withstand the threats posed by bland, synthetic, mass-produced and menacingly cheap food";³⁶
- seeks to involve restaurants, communities, cities, national governments, and inter-governmental agencies in the support of slow food;
- offers annual Slow Food awards, especially to those "who preserve biodiversity as it relates to food—people who may in the process save whole villages and ecosystems";³⁷
- offers special prizes and support to Third World efforts and seeks to help organize local efforts to help conserve "prizewinners' plants, animals, and foods."³⁸

In these and many other ways, Slow Food is fighting to sustain the continued existence of non-McDonaldized alternatives within the realm of food. Such alternatives

in all realms and of all types need organizations like Slow Food and efforts such as these if they, and we, are not to be inundated further by a sea of McDonaldized phenomena. There is no reason why similar global organizations cannot be formed with the objective of sustaining non-McDonaldized alternatives and warding off the onslaught of McDonaldization in various realms.

While the maintenance and defense of non-McDonaldized alternatives are both important, it must be remembered that the Slow Food movement does not want to create a "museum." That is, it is not interested in simply maintaining the past and present but, rather, in creating the future. It is consequently important for it, and all organizations like it, to be actively involved in encouraging the creation of new, non-McDonaldized forms. This may involve making new combinations from what already exists or creating something entirely new. The latter is no easy task, but it must be kept in mind in the effort to maintain extant, non-McDonaldized forms.

This movement is clearly one of a very different order from the McLibel group. The impoverished targets of the McDonald's libel suit are a far cry from the mainly well-heeled gourmets drawn to Slow Food, its convivia around the world, and its regular meetings—Salone del Gusto—oriented to the appreciation of gourmet food. Most of the supporters of McLibel would be shocked by the prices for a meal in and around the Salone del Gusto. Slow Food focuses mainly on the issue of the poor quality of food (and, implicitly, almost all other products) in McDonaldized restaurants and food emporia, while McLibel focuses on threats to health, the environment, and the workers.

However, Slow Food does have a more populist side in which it seeks to support and reward small farmers, beekeepers, and other workers who continue to produce high-quality products in traditional ways. Slow Food is also very concerned about the environment. Whatever the differences in goals, methods, and social class of most of the participants, these groups share a hostility to the McDonaldization of society and are seeking to ameliorate its worst excesses, if not support and create alternatives to it.

In 2004, Slow Food sponsored the first Terra Madre meetings in Turin, Italy (it takes place every 2 years with the most recent in 2010). Nearly 5,000 delegates attended this first meeting (about the same number attended the 2010 meeting), representing 1,200 food communities from 130 countries. The key idea here is that of the "food community," which "consists of all those working in the food sector—from production of ingredients to promotion of end products—whose products are of excellent quality and produced sustainably. A food community is connected to a specific geographical area from a historical, social, economic and cultural point of view."³⁹

There are two types of food communities. The first is *territory based*. In this case, although there may be diverse products, they are all derived from a given geographic area or native ethnic group. The second is *product based* and may

include all farmers, breeders, processors, distributors, and others involved in producing a given product in a defined geographic area. Limited quantities are produced, and what is produced tastes good; does no harm to the environment, animals, or humans; and involves fair compensation and no discrimination or exploitation.⁴⁰ While Slow Food has always been concerned with production, it previously seemed to focus more on consumption than production. With Terra Madre, Slow Food signaled that it was concerned with *both* consumption and production, especially the production and consumption of less- or non-McDonaldized products.

Mention should also be made of the related Slow Cities movement, which seeks to bring many of these principles to bear on cities in Italy and beyond. This organization seeks to go beyond food and to protect art, architecture, a way of life—culture in general—from McDonaldization (and Americanization). The mayor of the Tuscan city of Greve stated, “The American urban model has invaded our cities and risks making Italian towns look the same. We want to stop this kind of globalization.”⁴¹ This mayor links the Slow Cities movement with sustaining alternatives to McDonaldization: “We can’t stop large, fast-food chains [from] coming here if they request it, but we hope that people who come to our towns will not want to eat exactly the same hamburger they can eat in Melbourne, London or Paris, but want something genuine and different.”⁴²

The ideas behind the Slow Food Movement have spread to many other domains such as “slow travel and tourism.”⁴³ Slow travel and tourism includes traveling less, more slowly, staying longer, and enjoying the travel experience itself rather than treating it merely as an efficient means to an end.

Sprawl-Busters: A “Hit List” of McDonaldized Superstores

Sprawl-Busters (www.sprawl-busters.com), founded by Al Norman, grew out of his successful effort to keep Wal-Mart out of his hometown of Greenfield, Massachusetts. The organization offers consulting services to local communities that want to keep out McDonaldized superstores and chains. For his efforts, the TV program *60 Minutes* called Norman “the guru of the anti-Wal-Mart movement.”⁴⁴

Among the services offered by Sprawl-Busters to local communities are help with overseeing media operations, raising money, petitioning for referendums, conducting data searches, and the like. Beyond Wal-Mart, organizations on Sprawl-Buster’s “hit list” include Super Kmart, Home Depot, CVS, and Rite-Aid. The main objective is to keep such superstores and chains out to protect local businesses and the integrity of the local community. As of late 2011, they claim that at least 431 communities had prevented the entry of a big-box

store.⁴⁵ Al Norman published *Slam-Dunking Wal-Mart: How You Can Stop Superstore Sprawl in Your Hometown*.⁴⁶

Local Protests: Not Wanting to Say “Bye-Bye to the Neighborhood”

Some local communities have fought hard on their own, at times successfully, against the invasion of fast-food restaurants⁴⁷—against the garish signs and structures, traffic, noise, and rowdy nature of some of the clientele drawn to fast-food restaurants. They have fought generally against the irrationalities and assaults on tradition that the fast-food restaurant represents. Thus, some of the communities highly attractive to fast-food chains (for example, Sanibel Island in Florida) have few, if any, fast-food restaurants.

The resort village of Saugatuck, Michigan, fought McDonald’s attempt to take over the site of a quaint old café called Ida Red’s. Said one local businessman, “People can see McDonald’s anywhere—they don’t come to Saugatuck for fast food.” The owner of a local inn recognized that the town was really resisting the broader process of rationalization: “It’s the Howard Johnson’s, the McDonald’s, the malls of the world that we’re fighting against. . . . You can go to a mall and not know what state you’re in. We’re a relief from all that.”⁴⁸

Outside the United States, the resistance has often been even greater. The opening of the first McDonald’s in Italy, for example, led to widespread protests involving several thousand people. The Italian McDonald’s opened near the picturesque Piazza di Spagna in Rome adjacent to the headquarters of the famous fashion designer Valentino. One Roman politician claimed that McDonald’s was “the principal cause of degradation of the ancient Roman streets.”⁴⁹ Later, protests against the opening of a McDonald’s in the medieval main market square of Krakow, Poland, led one critic to say, “The activities of this firm are symbolic of mass industrial civilization and a superficial cosmopolitan way of life. . . . Many historic events happened in this place, and McDonald’s would be the beginning of the cultural degradation of this most precious urban area.”⁵⁰

The resort city of Hove is the largest town (91,900 inhabitants) in Great Britain without a McDonald’s (although neighboring Brighton has four of them) or a Burger King.⁵¹ Because of the resistance to the fast-food invasion, Hove has a thriving and diverse restaurant business, including, on its main street, “six Italian, five Indian and two French restaurants.”⁵²

Despite the passionate resistance to McDonaldized businesses in some locales, few communities have successfully kept franchises out completely. Similarly, small communities have usually been unsuccessful⁵³ in keeping out Wal-Mart stores, even though they usually devastate local businesses when they move in⁵⁴ and hurt the communities further on the rare occasions when they depart.⁵⁵

In response to such protests and criticisms, and as an attempt to forestall them in the future, McDonald's is building outlets that fit better into the community in which they are placed. Thus, a McDonald's in Miami's Little Havana has a Spanish-style roof and feels more like a hacienda. Another in Freeport, Maine, looks like a quaint New England inn.⁵⁶ A McDonald's restaurant on Long Island stands in a restored, 1860s, white colonial house. The interior has a 1920s look.⁵⁷ The managing director of Polish operations said of a McDonald's in Poland, "We took a 14th-century building that was devastated and restored it to its natural beauty."⁵⁸ In Vienna, McDonald's opened McCafé, but it has been opposed by the Union of Vienna Coffee Houses, which fears the closing of the famed local coffee houses. The owner of one such café lamented, "You can never bring them back. . . . What we offer is an extension of the Viennese living room—a lifestyle."⁵⁹

McDonald's has also shown signs of responding to environmental groups by creating less harmful packaging to the environment.⁶⁰ In 1990, McDonald's began eliminating its polystyrene "clamshell" hamburger box. The box had been attacked by environmentalists because its production generated pollutants. More important, the boxes lingered for decades in landfills or on the sides of roads. A paper wrapping with a cellophane-like outer layer took their place. In addition, McDonald's has purchased billions of dollars in recycled products and reduced packaging by an enormous amount. Following measures recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency's Green Lights program, they have started designing their buildings to be more energy efficient and have trained managers to reduce energy use in their restaurants. Furthermore, McDonald's corporation has entered into a partnership with Conservation International in an effort to focus on water and energy conservation and the protection and maintenance of animal and plant biodiversity.⁶¹ Said one environmentalist, "I think that the public is pressuring these people into taking positive steps."⁶² Today, McDonald's is pushing a broader environmental program called "Best of Green," which highlights its innovations in energy, packaging, anti-littering, sustainable food, and the like.⁶³

Responses to complaints indicate that the fast-food restaurant is quite an adaptable institution, although all these adaptations remain within the broad confines of rationality. Some people have actually complained about the disappearance of the huge, old-fashioned golden arches, and at least one McDonald's franchise has responded by bringing them back. On the other hand, in response to complaints from upscale clientele about the dehumanizing dining environment, a McDonald's on 160 Broadway in Manhattan's financial district offers Chopin on a grand piano, chandeliers, marble walls, fresh flowers, a doorman, and hosts who show people to their tables. The golden arches at that restaurant are virtually invisible. However, besides a

few classy additions to the menu (espresso, cappuccino, tarts), the fare is largely the same as in all other McDonald's (albeit with slightly higher prices). One visitor, underscoring the continuity between this franchise and all others, commented, "A smashing place, and the best thing is you can still eat with your fingers."⁶⁴

Coping Individually: "Skunk Works," Blindfolded Children, and Fantasy Worlds

Individuals uncomfortable with or opposed to McDonaldization can challenge it in many ways. People who think of the bars of the rationalized cage as made of rubber may choose to extract the best of what the McDonaldized world has to offer without succumbing to its dangers and excesses. This is not easy to do, however, because the lure of McDonaldized institutions is great, and it is easy to become a devotee of, and enmeshed in, rationalized activities. Those who use rationalized systems for what they have to offer need to keep the dangers of McDonaldization always in the forefront of their thinking. But being able to get a bank balance in the middle of the night, avoid hospital emergency rooms by having minor problems cared for at "McDoctors," and lose weight quickly and safely at Jenny Craig, among many other conveniences, are all attractive possibilities for most people.

How can people take advantage of the best that the McDonaldized world has to offer without becoming imprisoned in that world? For one thing, they can use McDonaldized systems only when such use is unavoidable or when what they have to offer cannot be matched by nonrationalized systems. To help limit their use, perhaps we should put warning labels on the front doors of McDonaldized systems, much like those found on cigarette packs: **WARNING! Sociologists have found that habitual use of McDonaldized systems is hazardous to your physical and psychological well-being and to society as a whole.**

Above all, people should avoid the routine and systematic use of McDonaldized systems. To avoid the iron cage, they must seek out nonrationalized alternatives whenever possible. Searching for these niches is admittedly difficult and time-consuming. Using the various aspects of McDonaldized society is far easier than finding and using nonrationalized alternatives. Avoiding McDonaldization requires hard work and vigilance.

The most extreme step would be to pack up and leave the highly McDonaldized society of the United States. Many, if not most, other societies have long since embarked on the rationalization process or are about to, however. A move to another society might buy people some time, but McDonaldization would eventually have to be confronted, this time in a less familiar context.

Games, Knitting, and Nonrationalized Niches

Far less extreme than seeking to exit a McDonaldized society are efforts to cope by playing games, participating in knitting groups, and carving out nonrationalized niches in rationalized systems. One common finding in studies of workers is their use of games as a way of coping with the negative aspects of their jobs.⁶⁵ Workers in fast-food restaurants (and other McDonaldized work settings) are no different and, in fact, may be more prone to such games because they are usually quite young, often teenagers. One example involves fast-food workers throwing things (e.g., pickles) at one another. Another is competing to see who can make a cheeseburger faster. Then there is a version of a "chugging" contest, but instead of beer cans, the shake machine is used: "place your head under the spigot while a coworker pulled back the handle. A steady stream of shake more than a half-inch thick in diameter would then flow into the mouth, and either brain freeze or an overflowing mouth would make short work of even the most determined contestant . . . shake spilled out of the player's mouth and onto his face and clothes."⁶⁶

Such games never deal with the fundamental dissatisfactions associated with work, in this case McJobs, but they do help ease the pain and pass the time at work a bit more joyfully. By the way, customers could emulate such workers and engage in similar games to make their visit to a McDonaldized system a bit more satisfying.

An interesting form of consumer rebellion against McDonaldization is the growing interest in knitting. In the rather widespread "Stitch 'n Bitch" groups throughout the United States, people get together not only to knit but also to interact with one another on a face-to-face basis. Said a leader of this movement, "For a lot of people, it's a way of rebelling against a larger consumer culture. You know where it's made, and you know what goes into making it."⁶⁷ Another commented, "One of the most political things you can do is to make something yourself."⁶⁸ In other words, by knitting something, you know that the end-product is *not* McDonaldized; hence, knitting can involve a political stance and action against that process.

The ability of workers to carve out a non-McDonaldized niche in a McDonaldized system tends to be related to their position in the occupational hierarchy. Those in higher-ranking occupations have a greater ability to create such niches than those in lower-status occupations. Physicians, lawyers, accountants, architects, and the like in private practice have the capacity to create such an environment for themselves. Within large organizations, the general (unwritten) rule for those at the top seems to be to impose rationality on others, especially those with little power, while keeping their own work as nonrational as possible. Rationalization is something to be imposed on others, especially on those with little power.

Some people in lower-ranking occupations are also in a position to be largely free of rationalization. For example, taxi drivers, because they work primarily on their own, are free(r) to construct a nonrationalized work life. They can generally go where they want, choose their passengers, and eat and take breaks when they wish. Similar possibilities exist for night guards and maintenance workers in automated factories. Those who work on their own, or in relative isolation within an organization, are also in a better position to create a nonrationalized work environment.

It is possible to find such nonrationalized work in some high-tech organizations that have created and encourage the use of "skunk works," where people can be insulated from routine organizational demands and do their work as they see fit.⁶⁹ Skunk works emphasize creativity and innovation, not conformity:

They were creating almost radical *decentralization and autonomy*, with its attendant overlap, messiness around the edges, *lack of coordination, internal competition*, and somewhat *chaotic* conditions, in order to breed the entrepreneurial spirit. They had *forsworn* a measure of *tidiness* in order to achieve regular innovation. (italics added)⁷⁰

The italicized terms in the preceding quotation would all be considered nonrational or irrational from the point of view of a McDonaldized society.

Nonrationalized times and places tend to be conducive to creativity. It is difficult to be creative in the face of incessant, externally imposed, and repetitive demands. Working in a nonrationalized setting serves not only the individual but many employers and society as well. All need a steady influx of creative new ideas and products, which are far less likely to emanate from rigidly controlled bureaucratic settings than they are from skunk works.

Even in highly rationalized organizations, people can carve out nonrationalized work spaces and times. For example, by finishing routine tasks quickly, a worker can leave himself or herself time to engage in nonrationalized, albeit work-related, activities. I am not suggesting that finding nonrationalized occupations or carving out nonrationalized spaces within McDonaldized organizations is easy. Nor am I suggesting that everyone can or should operate in a nonrationalized way all the time. But it is possible for some people, some of the time, to carve out nonrationalized niches for themselves.

I would not want to push this idea too far for several reasons:

- Rationalized organizations provide the resources and settings needed to do creative work and the outlets for that work. In other words, nonrationalized niches of creativity need the support of rationalized systems.
- No large-scale organization can exist if it is composed of nothing but such niches. The result would be organizational chaos.
- Not everyone wants to work, or is capable of working, in such nonrationalized niches; indeed, many people prefer their workdays to be highly routinized.

Thus, I am not arguing for a work world composed of nothing but creative occupational spaces. I do assert the need, however, for more nonrationalized niches in an otherwise highly rationalized world.

Another idea is for people to create and operate nonrationalized niche businesses in an otherwise highly McDonaldized environment. B&Bs are examples of such businesses. Local, independent restaurants have been able to find niches for themselves in an industry that is probably more McDonaldized than any other.⁷¹ The owner of a small local chain (but a chain, nonetheless) of restaurants stated, "There are always going to be savvy restaurateurs who can beat the chains. . . . All is not lost."⁷²

Starbucks, which already had 187 stores in New York City in late 2011, will open its 188th coffee shop in early 2012 on the site of a successful local coffee shop, the Bean. However, even though it has been evicted from its site, the Bean is not giving up. It is reopening across the street where it hopes to succeed by offering an alternative to Starbucks and its "hospitable monotony."⁷³

A Range of Individual Actions: If All Else Fails, Save the Children

The following list contains suggestions for individuals who want to combat McDonaldization.⁷⁴ Some of these suggestions are offered "tongue-in-cheek," although the reader should not lose sight of the fact that McDonaldization is an extremely serious problem.

- For those of you who can afford it, avoid living in apartments or tract houses. Try to live in an atypical environment, preferably one you have built yourself or have had built for you. If you must live in an apartment or a tract house, humanize and individualize it.
- Avoid daily routine as much as possible. Try to do as many things as possible in a different way from one day to the next.
- Do as many things as you can for yourself. If you must use services, frequent nonrationalized, nonfranchised establishments. For example, lubricate your own car. If you are unwilling or unable to do so, have it done at your local, independent gasoline station. Do not, at all costs, frequent one of the franchised lube businesses.
- Instead of popping into H&R Block at income tax time, hire a local accountant, preferably one who works out of an office in his or her home.
- Similarly, the next time a minor medical or dental emergency leads you to think of a "McDoctor" or a "McDentist," resist the temptation and go instead to your neighborhood doctor or dentist, preferably one in solo practice.
- The next time you need a pair of glasses, use the local storefront optometrist rather than LensCrafters.
- Avoid Hair Cuttery, Supercuts, and other haircutting chains; go instead to a local barber or hairdresser.

- At least once a week, pass up lunch at McDonald's and frequent a local café or deli. For dinner, again at least once a week, stay at home, unplug the microwave, avoid the freezer, and cook a meal from scratch.
- To really shake up the clerk at the department store, use cash rather than your credit card.
- The next time a computer automatically dials your number, gently place the phone on the floor, thereby allowing the disembodied voice to drone on, occupying the line so that others will not be bothered by such calls for awhile.
- When dialing a business, always choose the option that permits you to speak to a real person.
- Seek out restaurants that use real china and metal utensils; avoid those that use materials such as Styrofoam that adversely affect the environment.
- Organize groups to protest abuses by McDonaldized systems. If you work in such a system, organize your coworkers to create more humanized working conditions.
- If you must frequent a fast-food restaurant, dine at one such as In-N-Out Burger.⁷⁵
- If you are a regular at McDonald's, try to get to know the counter people (although that can be difficult given their high turnover). Also, do whatever else you can to humanize and subvert the system. For example, instead of hastening through their meals, many breakfast customers, especially among the elderly, form informal "breakfast clubs" and "come every day of the week to read their papers, chat, drink coffee, and gobble down an Egg McMuffin."⁷⁶ If breakfasts can be deMcDonaldized, why not other meals? Why not other aspects of the fast-food experience?
- Read the *New York Times* rather than *USA TODAY* once a week. Similarly, watch PBS news once a week, with its three long stories, rather than the network news shows with their numerous snippets or, heaven forbid, *HLN News* (formerly *CNN Headline News*).
- Avoid most finger foods. If you must eat finger foods, make them homemade sandwiches and fresh fruits and vegetables.
- On your next vacation, go to only one locale and get to know it and its inhabitants well.
- Never enter a domed stadium or one with artificial grass; make periodic pilgrimages to Fenway Park in Boston and Wrigley Field in Chicago.
- Avoid classes with short-answer tests graded by computer. If a computer-graded exam is unavoidable, make extraneous marks and curl the edges of the exam so that the computer cannot deal with it.
- Seek out small classes; get to know your professors.
- Don't go to any movies that have roman numerals after their names.

Regina Schrambling has developed a variety of strategies similar to those in the previous list for dealing with the health threats (especially *Salmonella*) posed by the rationalization of food production.⁷⁷ Schrambling recognizes that returning to the pre-rationalized method of raising chickens is not the answer. She argues that the "lifestyles" of such chickens, including "worm-grubbing," led to *Salmonella* problems even in the pre-rationalized days of chicken

production. Nevertheless, she prefers to shop at farmers markets and to buy chickens raised the older way. She buys her eggs "in hand-packed boxes from the same New York State farmer." In her view, such eggs are fresher and cleaner than mass-produced eggs. She also purchases cantaloupes from farmers markets and refuses to buy them in supermarkets because they have been in transit so long that there is an increased risk of spoilage and disease (by late 2011, 18 people had died from *Listeria* linked to cantaloupes; more deaths were expected before the outbreak ran its course). Although rationalization has allowed people to eat fruits and vegetables year-round, it creates costs and dangers. As she puts it, such foods have been raised "in countries where we would never dare drink the water, where pesticides banned here are used freely." She thus buys fruits and vegetables only during their local seasons.

Schrambling argues that people need to understand the limited seasons for fruits and vegetables: "the strawberry crop is really as fleeting as fireflies, that sweet corn waits for no one; it's best when eaten within hours of leaving the stalk. There's nothing like the farmers' market in January, with only potatoes and squash and apples for sale, to give a deep new appreciation of nature's cycles. . . . [W]e can't have all of the food all of the time."⁷⁸

Schrambling's position seems reasonable, even laudable, but the forces of McDonaldization continue to press forward. For example, science has recently discovered that genetically altered tomatoes can be prevented from producing the gas that causes them to ripen.⁷⁹ Thus, these tomatoes, and potentially many other fruits and vegetables, can be left on the vine until maturity instead of being picked early, can be shipped great distances without refrigeration and stored for weeks, and can then be ripened through exposure to ethylene gas when the retailer wishes to put them up for sale. If this technique proves viable commercially, people will, contrary to Schrambling, have many fruits and vegetables and cut flowers "all the time."

Similarly, the strawberry crop may now not be as "fleeting" as Schrambling maintains. The Driscoll strawberry, grown in Watsonville, California ("the strawberry capital of the world"), is big, glossy, and, most important, available year-round because of the favorable climate. Surprisingly, Driscoll strawberries "actually have some flavor, too."⁸⁰

Given the attention that McDonaldized systems devote to marketing to children, it is particularly important that steps be taken to prevent children from becoming mindless supporters. Fast-food restaurants sponsor cartoon programs, have tie-ins with movies aimed at children, and offer numerous promotions involving toys. In fact, McDonald's has become "the world's biggest toymaker on a unit basis," commissioning about 1.5 billion toys per year, more than Hasbro or Mattel.⁸¹ According to the president of a sales promotion agency, "In research, we've seen the kids are clearly motivated by the toy, not the meal."⁸²

To protect children, try the following actions:

- Instead of using a "McChild" care center, leave your child with a responsible neighbor interested in earning some extra money.
- Keep your children away from television as much as possible and encourage them to participate in creative games. It is especially important that they not be exposed to the steady barrage of commercials from rationalized institutions, especially on Saturday morning cartoon shows.
- Lead efforts to keep McDonaldization out of the school system.
- If you can afford it, send your child to a small, non-McDonaldized educational institution.
- Above all, when possible, avoid taking your children to fast-food restaurants or their clones in other domains. If no alternatives are present (for example, you're on a highway and the only options are various fast-food chains), consider blindfolding your child until the ordeal is over. (Remember, some of these suggestions are only half serious.)

Freedom: If You Can't Cope, Can You Escape?

What if, as is likely, all your collective and individual efforts at coping with McDonaldization fail? What else can you do? Suicide is one possibility, but that does seem too extreme, even to me. However, some less radical but still effective ways of escaping rationalized society may exist.

One possibility is to flee to an area that has been designed as an escape area. In his book *Ways of Escape*, Chris Rojek discusses predesigned and prestructured escapes such as theme parks (for example, Disney World) and heritage sites (for example, Gettysburg battlefields), as well as less obvious and organized sites such as "black spots" (such as John F. Kennedy's grave site in Arlington Cemetery or Auschwitz) and "literary landscapes" (like Ernest Hemingway's haunts in Key West, Florida).⁸³ To the degree that such sites are not McDonaldized, they could serve our purposes as escape areas; however, many of them are being pressured to McDonaldize, especially when they are designed for, or attract, hordes of people. Disney World was McDonaldized from the beginning, and the others are growing more McDonaldized over time as they attract more people.

Rojek also analyzes tourist sites such as the beach and the wilderness as places that offer people "loopholes of freedom."⁸⁴ Again, to the degree that such sites remain largely or totally free of McDonaldization, they can serve as regions of escape. However, they, too, come under pressure to McDonaldize as soon as a significant number of people discover them as escape zones.

In *Escape Attempts: The Theory and Practice of Resistance to Everyday Life*, Stanley Cohen and Laurie Taylor outline a number of highly diverse ways to escape the routines of everyday life.⁸⁵ Although not all routines are the result

of McDonaldization (sometimes people develop their own routines), an increasing number are part of this process. Many of the alternatives discussed by Cohen and Taylor are subject to McDonaldization, but two deserve some attention. The first is escaping within oneself, especially through fantasy. No matter how McDonaldized the setting, one can escape into an internal fantasy world of one's own making. Thus, while wandering through the highly McDonaldized fantasies created by Disney World, people can dwell on fantasies of their own creation, perhaps even inspired by the prefabricated fantasies around them. There is a tendency to buy into, and internalize, those prefabricated, McDonaldized fantasies, but they can be evaded within the depths of one's own fantasy world. Escape into one's own imagination does nothing about challenging or changing McDonaldized systems, but it does offer those who want it a viable way out.

Another possibility is what Cohen and Taylor call "trips to the edge" or what Michel Foucault calls "limit experiences."⁸⁶ These experiences are defined by "excess" and "outrage," often involving things like hard drugs. But drugs are not needed to act in an excessive and outrageous manner. One can, for example, "leave everything behind, travel light."⁸⁷ Here are some examples: Walk across the United States (avoiding highways, motel chains, and fast-food restaurants, among many other places), camp (using nothing that has labels like REI, L.L. Bean, Coleman, and Winnebago) on a mountain in Tibet, or take a year off and write that book or song or symphony you've always wanted to write (preferably using pad and pencil). Oh, you can use drugs or sex to excess if you like, but they are not the only ways to go to the limit or the edge not yet reached by McDonaldization. Just remember, although you might fall off (there may be no McDonaldized nets to save you), the journey should be exhilarating. But hurry, McDonaldization is *never* far behind.

Some Concluding Thoughts

A wide range of steps can be taken to cope with, or escape from, McDonaldization. I hold out little hope that such actions will reverse the trend toward McDonaldization, even if most of us were to employ them, but despite this fatalistic view, I think the struggle is worthwhile for several reasons. First, making the effort will mitigate the worst excesses of McDonaldized systems. Second, it will lead to the discovery, creation, and use of more niches where individuals and groups who are so inclined can escape McDonaldization for at least a part of their day or even a larger portion of their lives. Finally, and perhaps most important, the struggle itself is ennobling. In nonrationalized, individual, and collective struggles, people can express genuinely human reason in a world that, in nearly all other ways, has set up rationalized systems to deny people this expression.

Although I have emphasized the irresistibility of McDonaldization throughout this book, my fondest hope is that I am wrong. Indeed, a major motivation behind this book is to alert readers to the dangers of McDonaldization and to motivate them to act to stem its tide. I hope that people can resist McDonaldization and create instead a more reasonable, more human world.

Some years ago, McDonald's was sued by the famous French chef, Paul Bocuse, for using his picture on a poster without his permission. Enraged, Bocuse fumed, "How can I be seen promoting this tasteless, boneless food in which everything is soft." Nevertheless, Bocuse seemed to acknowledge the inevitability of McDonaldization: "There's a need for this kind of thing . . . and trying to get rid of it seems to me to be as futile as trying to get rid of the prostitutes in the Bois de Boulogne."⁸⁸ Lo and behold, 2 weeks later it was announced that the Paris police had cracked down on prostitution in the Bois de Boulogne. A police spokesperson stated, "There are none left." Just as Chef Bocuse was wrong about the prostitutes, perhaps I am wrong about the irresistibility of McDonaldization. Yet before I grow overly optimistic, it should be noted that "everyone knows that the prostitutes will be back as soon as the operation is over. In the spring, police predict, there will be even more than before."⁸⁹ Similarly, it remains likely that, no matter how intense the opposition, the future will bring with it more rather than less McDonaldization.

Even if McDonaldization grows more prevalent, I hope that you will follow some of the advice outlined in this chapter for protesting and mitigating its worst effects. Faced with Max Weber's iron cage and the image of a future dominated by the polar night of icy darkness and hardness, I hope that, if nothing else, you will consider the words of the poet Dylan Thomas: "Do not go gentle into that good night. . . . Rage, rage against the dying of the light."⁹⁰