

The remainder of the book is more analytical. In Chapter 7, the fifth and paradoxical element of McDonaldization—the irrationality of rationality—is explored. Though much of the book criticizes McDonaldization, this chapter presents the critique most clearly and directly, discussing a variety of irrationalities, the most important of which is dehumanization. Chapter 8 discusses the way McDonaldization has pushed its frontiers to encompass not just life but birth (and before), death (and beyond), and death-defying activities, such as the climbing of Mt. Everest. This is followed by a discussion, in Chapter 9, of the place of McDonaldization in a changing world, its global presence, its future prospects, and even the possibility of de-McDonaldization. In the concluding chapter (10), individuals and groups bothered, if not enraged, by the process are offered ways of dealing with an increasingly McDonaldized world.

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McDonaldization and Its Precursors

From the Iron Cage to the Fast-Food Factory

McDonaldization did not emerge in a vacuum; it was preceded by a series of social and economic developments that not only anticipated it but also gave it many of the basic characteristics touched on in Chapter 1.¹ In this chapter, I will look briefly at a few of these developments. First, I will examine the notion of bureaucracy and Max Weber's theories about it and the larger process of rationalization. Next, I will offer a discussion of the Nazi Holocaust, a method of mass killing that can be viewed as the logical extreme of Weber's fears about rationalization and bureaucratization. Then, I will look at several intertwined socioeconomic developments that were precursors of McDonaldization: scientific management as it was invented at the turn of the century by F. W. Taylor, Henry Ford's assembly line, the mass-produced suburban houses of Levittown, the shopping mall, and Ray

Kroc's creation of the McDonald's chain. These are not only of historical interest; most continue to be important to this day.

BUREAUCRATIZATION: MAKING LIFE MORE RATIONAL

A *bureaucracy* is a large-scale organization composed of a hierarchy of offices. In these offices, people have certain responsibilities and must act in accord with rules, written regulations, and means of compulsion exercised by those who occupy higher-level positions.

The bureaucracy is largely a creation of the modern Western world. Though earlier societies had organizational structures, they were not nearly as effective as the bureaucracy. For example, in traditional societies, officials performed their tasks because of a personal loyalty to their leader. These officials were subject to personal whim rather than impersonal rules. Their offices lacked clearly defined spheres of competence, there was no clear hierarchy of positions, and officials did not have to obtain technical training to gain a position.

Ultimately, the bureaucracy differs from earlier methods of organizing work because of its formal structure, which, among other things, allows for greater efficiency. Institutionalized rules and regulations lead, even force, those employed in the bureaucracy to choose the best means to arrive at their ends. A given task is broken down into components, with each office responsible for a distinct portion of the larger task. Incumbents of each office handle their part of the task, usually following preset rules and regulations, and often in a predetermined sequence. When each of the incumbents has, in order, handled the required part, the task is completed. In handling the task in this way, the bureaucracy has used what its past history has shown to be the optimum means to the desired end.

Weber's Theory of Rationality

The roots of modern thinking on bureaucracy lie in the work of the turn-of-the-century German sociologist Max Weber.² His ideas on bureaucracy are embedded in his broader theory of the *rationalization* process. In the latter, Weber described how the modern Western world managed to become increas-

ingly rational—that is, dominated by efficiency, predictability, calculability, and nonhuman technologies that control people. He also examined why the rest of the world largely failed to rationalize.

As you can see, McDonaldization is an amplification and an extension of Weber's theory of rationalization. For Weber, the model of rationalization was the bureaucracy; for me, the fast-food restaurant is the paradigm of McDonaldization.³

Weber demonstrated in his research that the modern Western world had produced a distinctive kind of rationality. Various types of rationality had existed in all societies at one time or another, but none had produced the type that Weber called formal rationality. This is the sort of rationality I refer to when I discuss McDonaldization or the rationalization process in general.

What is formal rationality? According to Weber, *formal rationality* means that the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures. Individuals are not left to their own devices in searching for the best means of attaining a given objective. Weber identified this type of rationality as a major development in the history of the world: Previously, people had been left to discover such mechanisms on their own or with vague and general guidance from larger value systems (religion, for example).⁴ After the development of formal rationality, they could use institutionalized rules that help them decide—or even dictate to them—what to do. An important aspect of formal rationality, then, is that it allows individuals little choice of means to ends. In a formally rational system, virtually everyone can (or must) make the same, optimal choice.

Weber praised the bureaucracy, his paradigm of formal rationality, for its many advantages over other mechanisms that help people discover and implement optimum means to ends. The most important advantages are the four basic dimensions of rationalization (and of McDonaldization).

First, Weber viewed the bureaucracy as the most efficient structure for handling large numbers of tasks requiring a great deal of paperwork. As an example, Weber might have used the Internal Revenue Service, for no other structure could handle millions of tax returns so well.

Second, bureaucracies emphasize the quantification of as many things as possible. Reducing performance to a series of quantifiable tasks helps people gauge success. For example, an IRS agent is expected to process a certain number of tax returns each day. Handling less than the required number of cases is unsatisfactory performance; handling more is excellence.

The quantitative approach presents a problem, however: little or no concern for the actual quality of work. Employees are expected to finish a task with little attention paid to how well it is handled. For instance, IRS agents who receive positive evaluations from their superiors for managing large numbers of cases may actually handle the cases poorly, costing the government thousands or even millions of dollars in uncollected revenue. Or the agents may handle cases so aggressively that taxpayers become angered.

Third, because of their well-entrenched rules and regulations, bureaucracies also operate in a highly predictable manner. Incumbents of a given office know with great assurance how the incumbents of other offices will behave. They know what they will be provided with and when they will receive it. Outsiders who receive the services that bureaucracies dispense know with a high degree of confidence what they will receive and when they will receive it. Again, to use an example Weber might have used, the millions of recipients of checks from the Social Security Administration know precisely when they will receive their checks and exactly how much money they will receive.

Finally, bureaucracies emphasize control over people through the replacement of human judgment with the dictates of rules, regulations, and structures. Employees are controlled by the division of labor, which allocates to each office a limited number of well-defined tasks. Incumbents must do those tasks, and no others, in the manner prescribed by the organization. They may not, in most cases, devise idiosyncratic ways of doing those tasks. Furthermore, by making few, if any, judgments, people begin to resemble human robots or computers. Having reduced people to this status, leaders of bureaucracies can think about actually replacing human beings with machines. This replacement has already occurred to some extent: In many settings, computers have taken over bureaucratic tasks once performed by humans. Similarly, the bureaucracy's clients are also controlled. They may receive only certain services and not others from the organization. For example, the Internal Revenue Service can offer people advice on their tax returns but not on their marriages. People may also receive appropriate services in certain ways and not others. For example, people can receive welfare payments by check, not in cash.

Irrationality and the "Iron Cage"

Despite the advantages it offers, bureaucracy suffers from the *irrationality of rationality*. Like a fast-food restaurant, a bureaucracy can be a dehumaniz-

ing place in which to work and by which to be serviced. Ronald Takaki characterizes rationalized settings as places in which the "self was placed in confinement, its emotions controlled, and its spirit subdued."⁵ In other words, they are settings in which people cannot always behave as human beings—where people are dehumanized.

In addition to dehumanization, bureaucracies have other irrationalities. Instead of remaining efficient, bureaucracies can become increasingly inefficient because of tangles of red tape and other pathologies. The emphasis on quantification often leads to large amounts of poor-quality work. Bureaucracies often become unpredictable as employees grow unclear about what they are supposed to do and clients do not get the services they expect. Because of these and other inadequacies, bureaucracies begin to lose control over those who work within and are served by them. Anger at the nonhuman technologies that replace them often leads employees to undercut or sabotage the operation of these technologies. All in all, what were designed as highly rational operations often end up quite irrational.

Although Weber was concerned about the irrationalities of formally rationalized systems, he was even more animated by what he called the "iron cage" of rationality. In Weber's view, bureaucracies are cages in the sense that people are trapped in them, their basic humanity denied. Weber feared most that bureaucracies would grow more and more rational and that rational principles would come to dominate an accelerating number of sectors of society. He anticipated a society of people locked into a series of rational structures, who could move only from one rational system to another—from rationalized educational institutions to rationalized workplaces, from rationalized recreational settings to rationalized homes. Society would eventually become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalized structures; there would be no escape.

A good example of what Weber feared is found in the contemporary rationalization of recreational activities. Recreation can be thought of as a way to escape the rationalization of daily routines. However, over the years, these escape routes have themselves become rationalized, embodying the same principles as bureaucracies and fast-food restaurants. Among the many examples of the rationalization of recreation⁶ are Club Med,⁷ chains of campgrounds, and package tours. Take, for example, a thirty-day tour of Europe. Buses hurtle through only the major cities in Europe, allowing tourists to glimpse the maximum number of sites in the time allowed. At particularly interesting or impor-

tant sights, the bus may slow down or even stop to permit some picture taking. At the most important locales, a brief stopover is planned so visitors can hurry through the site, take a few pictures, buy a souvenir, then hop back on the bus to head to the next attraction. With the rationalization of even their recreational activities, people do live to a large extent in the iron cage of rationality.

THE HOLOCAUST: MASS PRODUCING DEATH

Weber wrote about the iron cage of rationalization and bureaucratization in the early 1900s. Zygmunt Bauman argues that Weber's worst fears about these processes were realized in the Nazi Holocaust, which began within a few decades of his death in 1920.

Bauman contends that "the Holocaust may serve as a paradigm of modern bureaucratic rationality."⁸ Like the bureaucracy, the Holocaust was a distinctive product of Western civilization. In fact, Bauman argues that the Holocaust was not an aberration but "in keeping with everything we know about our civilization, its guiding spirit, its priorities, its immanent vision of the world."⁹ That is, the Holocaust required the rationality of the modern world. It could not have occurred in premodern, less rationalized societies.¹⁰ In fact, the pogroms that had occurred in premodern societies were too inefficient to allow the systematic murder of the millions of people killed in the Holocaust.

The Holocaust can also be seen as an example of modern social engineering in which the goal was a perfectly rational society. To the Nazis, a perfect society was one free of Jews, as well as gypsies, gays, lesbians, and the disabled. Hitler himself defined the Jews as a "virus," a disease that had to be eliminated from Nazi society.

The Holocaust had all of the basic characteristics of rationalization (and McDonaldization). It was an effective mechanism for the destruction of massive numbers of human beings. For example, early experiments showed that bullets were inefficient; the Nazis eventually settled on gas as the most efficient means of destroying people. The Nazis also found it efficient to use members of the Jewish community to perform a variety of tasks (for example, choosing the next group of victims) that the Nazis otherwise would have had to perform themselves.¹¹ Many Jews cooperated because it seemed like the "rational" thing to do (they might be able to save others, or themselves) in such a rationalized system.

The Holocaust emphasized things such as how many people could be killed in the shortest time. Bauman offers additional examples:

For railway managers, the only meaningful articulation of their object is in terms of tonnes per kilometre. They do not deal with humans, sheep, or barbed wire; they only deal with cargo, and this means an entity consisting entirely of measurements and devoid of quality. For most bureaucrats, even such a category as cargo would mean too strict a quality-bound restriction. They deal only with the financial effects of their actions. Their object is money.¹²

There was certainly little attention paid to the quality of the life, or even of the death, of the Jews as they marched inexorably to the gas chambers.

In another quantitative sense, the Holocaust has the dubious distinction of being seen as the most extreme of mass exterminations:

Like everything else done in the modern—rational, planned, scientifically informed, expert, efficiently managed, coordinated—way, the Holocaust left behind and put to shame all its alleged pre-modern equivalents, exposing them as primitive, wasteful and ineffective by comparison. Like everything else in our modern society, the Holocaust was an accomplishment in every respect superior. . . . It towers high above the past genocidal episodes.¹³

The Holocaust involved an effort to make mass murder routine. The whole process had an assembly line quality about it. Trains snaked their way toward the concentration camps, victims lined up and followed a set series of steps. Once the process was complete, camp workers produced stacks of dead bodies for systematic disposal.

Finally, the victims of the Holocaust were managed by a huge nonhuman technology. Some of the components of this technological system are described below:

[Auschwitz] was also a mundane extension of the modern factory system. Rather than producing goods, the raw material was human beings and the end-product was death, so many units per day marked carefully on the manager's production charts. The chimneys, the very symbol of the modern factory system, poured forth acrid smoke produced by burning human flesh. The brilliantly organized railroad grid of modern Europe carried a new kind of raw material to the factories. It did so in the same manner as with other cargo. . . . Engineers designed the crematoria;

managers designed the system of bureaucracy that worked with a zest and efficiency.¹⁴

Needless to say, the Holocaust represented the ultimate in the irrationality of rationality. After all, what could be more dehumanizing than murdering millions of people in such a mechanical way? Furthermore, for the murders to have occurred in the first place, the victims had to be dehumanized—that is, “reduced to a set of quantitative measures.”¹⁵ Bauman concludes, “German bureaucratic machinery was put in the service of a goal incomprehensible in its irrationality.”¹⁶

Discussing the Holocaust in the context of McDonaldization may seem extreme to some readers. Clearly, the fast-food restaurant cannot be discussed in the same breath as the Holocaust. There has been no more heinous crime in the history of humankind. Yet I have strong reasons for presenting the Holocaust as a precursor of McDonaldization. First, the Holocaust was organized around the principles of formal rationality, relying extensively on the paradigm of that type of rationality—the bureaucracy. Second, the Holocaust was also linked to the factory system, which you will soon discover was related to other precursors of McDonaldization. Finally, the spread of formal rationality today, through the process of McDonaldization, supports Bauman’s view that something like the Holocaust could happen again.

SCIENTIFIC MANAGEMENT: FINDING THE ONE BEST WAY

A less dramatic but no less important precursor to McDonaldization was the development of scientific management. In fact, Weber at times mentioned scientific management in his discussion of the rationalization process.

Scientific management was created by Frederick W. Taylor, whose ideas played a key role in shaping the work world throughout the twentieth century.¹⁷ Taylor developed a series of principles designed to rationalize work and was hired by a number of large organizations (for example, Bethlehem Steel) to implement those ideas, mostly in their factories.

Taylor was animated by the belief that the United States suffered from “inefficiency in almost all our daily acts” and that there was a need for “greater national efficiency”; his followers came to be known as “efficiency experts.” His

“time-and-motion” studies were designed to replace what Taylor called the inefficient “rule-of-thumb” methods that dominated work in his day with what he thought of as the “one best way”—that is, the optimum means to the end of doing a job.¹⁸ Taylor outlined a series of steps to be followed in time and motion studies:

1. Find a number of workers, preferably in diverse work settings, who are particularly skillful at the work in question.
2. Make a careful study of the elementary movements (as well as the tools and implements) employed by these people in their work.
3. Time each of these elementary steps carefully (here was one of the ways in which Taylor emphasized calculability) with the aim of discovering the most efficient way of accomplishing each step.
4. Make the work efficient by eliminating inefficient steps, such as “all false movements, slow movements, and useless movements.”
5. Finally, after all unnecessary movements have been eliminated, combine the most efficient movements (and tools) to create the “one best way” of doing a job.¹⁹

Scientific management also placed great emphasis on predictability. Clearly, in delineating the one best way to do a job, Taylor sought an approach that each and every worker could use. Taylor also believed that allowing workers to choose their own tools and methods of doing a job led to low productivity and poor quality. Instead, he sought the complete standardization of tools and work processes. In fact, he felt that poor standards were better than no standards at all because they caused at least some improvement in productivity and quality. Of course, Taylor favored the clear and detailed standards that made sure all workers did a given type of job in exactly the same way and would therefore consistently produce high-quality work.

Overall, scientific management produced a nonhuman technology that exerted great control over workers. When workers followed Taylor’s methods, employers found that they worked much more efficiently, that everyone performed the same steps (that is, their work exhibited predictability), and that they produced a great deal more while their pay had to be increased only slightly (another instance of emphasizing calculability). Thus, Taylor’s methods meant increased profits to those enterprises that adopted them.

Like all rational systems, scientific management had its irrationalities. Above all, it was a dehumanizing system in which people were considered expendable and treated as such. Furthermore, because workers did only one or a few tasks, most of their skills and abilities remained unused. This had disastrous consequences, and by the 1980s, American industry found itself outstripped by Japanese industry, which had found a way not only to be formally rational but also to use the abilities of its workers more fully.²⁰ In the 1990s, Japanese industry, and the Japanese economy as a whole, went into a tailspin, but the lessons that American industry had learned from Japan during the 1980s helped lead to the robust economy of the late 1990s.

Although one hears little these days of Taylor, efficiency experts, and time-and-motion studies, their impact is strongly felt in a McDonaldized society. For instance, hamburger chains strive to discover and implement the "one best way" to grill hamburgers, cook french fries, prepare shakes, process customers, and the rest. The most efficient ways of handling a variety of tasks have been codified in training manuals and taught to managers who, in turn, teach them to new employees. The design of the fast-food restaurant and its various technologies have been put in place to aid in the attainment of the most efficient means to the end of feeding large numbers of people.²¹ Here, again, McDonald's did not invent these ideas but, rather, brought them together with the principles of the bureaucracy and of the assembly line, thus contributing to the creation of McDonaldization.

THE ASSEMBLY LINE: TURNING WORKERS INTO ROBOTS

Like modern bureaucracy and scientific management, the assembly line came into existence at the dawn of the twentieth century. Pioneered in the bureaucratized automobile industry, the ideas of scientific management helped shape it. Henry Ford generally receives credit for the invention of the assembly line, although it was mainly a product of Ford engineers.²²

The automobile assembly line was invented mainly because Ford wanted to save time, energy, and money (that is, to be more efficient). Greater efficiency would lead to lower prices, increased sales, and greater profitability for the Ford Motor Company.

Ford got the idea for the automobile assembly line from the overhead trolley system used at the time by Chicago meat packers to butcher cattle. As the

steer was propelled along on the trolley system, a line of highly specialized butchers performed specific tasks, so that by the end of the line, the steer had been completely butchered. This system was clearly more efficient than having a single meat cutter handle all these tasks.

On the basis of this experience and his knowledge of the automobile business, Ford developed a set of principles for the construction of an automobile assembly line, principles that to this day stand as models of efficiency:

- ◆ Workers are not to take any unnecessary steps; work-related movements are reduced to an absolute minimum.
- ◆ Parts needed in the assembly process are to travel the least possible distance.
- ◆ Mechanical (rather than human) means are to be used to move the car (and parts) from one step in the assembly process to the next. (At first, gravity was used, but later, electrical conveyor belts were employed.)
- ◆ Complex sets of movements are eliminated, and the worker does "as nearly as possible only one thing with one movement."²³

The Japanese adopted American assembly line technology after World War II and then made their own distinctive contributions to heightened efficiency. For example, the Japanese "just-in-time" system replaced the American "just-in-case" system. Both systems refer to the supply of needed parts to a manufacturing operation. In the American system, parts are stored in the plant until, or in case, they are needed. This system leads to inefficiencies such as the purchase and storage (at great cost) of parts that will not be needed for quite some time. To counter these inefficiencies, the Japanese developed the just-in-time system: Needed parts arrive at the assembly line just as they are to be placed in the car or whatever object is being manufactured. In effect, all the Japanese company's suppliers become part of the assembly line process.

In either system, the assembly line permits the quantification of many elements of the production process and maximizes the number of cars or other goods produced. What each worker on the line does, such as putting a hubcap on each passing car, is highly predictable and leads to identical end products.

The assembly line is also a nonhuman technology that permits maximum control over workers. It is immediately obvious when a worker fails to perform the required tasks. There would, for example, be a missing hubcap as the car moves down the line. The limited time allotted for each job allows little or no room for innovative ways of doing a specific task. Thus, fewer, less-skilled peo-

ple are able to produce cars. Furthermore, the specialization of each task permits the replacement of human workers with robots. Today, mechanical robots handle more and more assembly line tasks.

As has been well detailed by many observers, the assembly line carries with it much irrationality. For example, it can be a dehumanizing setting in which to work. Human beings, equipped with a wide array of skills and abilities, are asked to perform a limited number of highly simplified tasks over and over. Instead of expressing their human abilities on the job, people are forced to deny their humanity and to act like robots.

Despite its flaws, the assembly line represented a remarkable step forward in the rationalization of production and became widely used throughout manufacturing. Like bureaucracy and even the Holocaust, the automobile assembly line beautifully illustrates the basic elements of formal rationality.

The assembly line also has had a profound influence on the development of the fast-food restaurant. The most obvious example of this is the conveyor belt used by Burger King to cook its hamburgers. Less obvious is the fact that much of the work in a fast-food restaurant is performed in assembly line fashion, with tasks broken down into their simplest components. For example, "making a hamburger" means grilling the burgers, putting them on the rolls, smearing on the "special sauce," laying on the lettuce and tomato, and wrapping the fully dressed burgers. Even customers face a kind of assembly line, the drive-through window being the most obvious example. As one observer notes, "The basic elements of the factory have obviously been introduced to the fast-food phenomenon . . . [with] the advent of the feeding machine."²⁴

In addition to being a precursor, the automobile assembly line laid the groundwork for McDonaldization in another way. Mass production gave many people ready access to affordable automobiles, which in turn led to the immense expansion of the highway system and the tourist industry that grew up alongside it.²⁵ Restaurants, hotels, campgrounds, gas stations, and the like arose and served as the precursors to many of the franchises that lie at the base of the McDonaldized society.²⁶

LEVITTOWN: PUTTING UP HOUSES— "BOOM, BOOM, BOOM"

The availability of the automobile helped make possible not only the fast-food restaurant but also suburbia, especially the mass-produced suburban houses

pioneered by Levitt & Sons, founded by Abraham Levitt. Between 1947 and 1951, this company built 17,447 homes on former New York potato fields, thereby creating Levittown, Long Island, and an instant community of 75,000 people.²⁷ The first houses in the planned community of Levittown, Pennsylvania, went on sale in 1958. The Levittowns provided the model for innumerable contemporary suburban developments. With their need for and access to automobiles, suburban dwellers were, and are, a natural constituency for the fast-food restaurant.

Levitt & Sons thought of their building sites as large factories using assembly line technology. William Levitt, one of the sons, explained the system this way:

What it amounted to was a reversal of the Detroit assembly line. . . . There, the car moved while the workers stayed at their stations. In the case of our houses, it was the workers who moved, doing the same jobs at different locations. To the best of my knowledge, no one had ever done that before.²⁸

The workers performed specialized tasks, much like their compatriots on the automobile assembly line. Said Alfred Levitt, another one of the sons, "The same man does the same thing every day, despite the psychologists. It is boring; it is bad; but the reward of the green stuff seems to alleviate the boredom of the work."²⁹ Thus, the Levitts rationalized the work of the construction laborer much as Ford had done with the automobile worker, with much the same attitude toward the worker.

The housing site as well as the work was rationalized. In and around the building locale, the Levitts constructed warehouses, woodworking shops, plumbing shops, and a sand, gravel, and cement plant. Thus, instead of buying these services and their resulting products from others and then shipping them to the construction site, the products and services were onsite and controlled by the Levitts. Where possible, the Levitts also used prefabricated products. However, they deemed manufacturing an entirely prefabricated house less efficient than making a partially prefabricated one.

The actual construction of each house followed a series of rigidly defined and rationalized steps. For example, in constructing the wall framework, the workers did no measuring or cutting; each piece had been cut to fit. The siding for a wall consisted of 73½ large sheets of Colorbestos, replacing the former requirement of 570 small shingles. All houses were painted under high pres-

sure, using the same two-tone scheme—green on ivory. As a result, “Once the groundwork is down, houses go up boom, boom, boom.”³⁰ The result, of course, was a large number of nearly identical houses produced quickly at low cost.

The emphasis on quantitative factors went beyond the physical construction of the house. For example, to sell the houses, instead of emphasizing the total cost of the house, real estate agents focused their pitches on the size of the down payment and monthly payments. The agents believed that the kinds of buyers attracted to Levittown were far more interested in such immediate numbers than the apparently more remote issue of the asking price of a house. Advertisements for Levittown houses stressed “the size and value of the house.”³¹ In other words, Levittown, like its many successors in the march toward increased rationalization, tried to convince consumers that they were getting the most for the least money.

These principles, once used exclusively in low-priced homes, have now been applied to high-priced homes, as well. “McMansions” are increasingly often little more than huge and luxuriously appointed factory-made, modular homes.³²

Many have criticized life in identical houses in highly rationalized communities. One early critique renamed suburbia “Disturbia,” describing the suburban home as a “split level trap.”³³ However, you can also look positively at suburban rationalization. For example, many residents of Levittown have customized their homes so that they no longer look as homogeneous as before. People now see “the Levitt box disguised as a Tudor Manor, a Swiss chalet, a Pennsylvania Dutch barn.”³⁴ Other observers have found much of merit in Levittown and suburbia. Herbert Gans, for example, concluded his study of a third Levittown built in New Jersey by arguing that “whatever its imperfections, Levittown is a good place to live.”³⁵ Whether or not it is a “good” place to live, Levittown is certainly a rationalized place.

SHOPPING CENTERS: MALLING AMERICA

Another component of rationalized society whose development was fueled by the rise of automobiles, and of suburban housing, was the fully enclosed shopping mall.³⁶ The modern mall had precursors in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan, Italy (completed in 1877), and the first planned outdoor shopping

center in the United States (built in 1916). The original fully enclosed shopping mall, however, was Southdale Center in Edina, Minnesota, which opened in 1956, not long after the opening of Ray Kroc’s first McDonald’s. Today, tens of thousands of malls in the United States are visited by hundreds of millions of shoppers each month. The United States’s largest shopping mall to date, The Mall of America, opened in 1992 down the road from Edina, in Bloomington, Minnesota. It included four department stores, four hundred specialty shops (many of them parts of chains), and an amusement park.³⁷

Shopping malls and McDonaldized chains complement each other beautifully. The malls provide a predictable, uniform, and profitable venue for such chains. When a new mall is built, the chains line up to gain entry. For their part, most malls would have much unrented space and not be able to exist were it not for the chains. Simultaneous products of the fast-moving automobile age, malls and chains feed off each other, furthering McDonaldization.

Ironically, malls today have become a kind of community center for both young and old. Many elderly people now use malls as places to both exercise and socialize. Teens prowl the malls after school and on weekends, seeking social contact and checking out the latest in fashions and mass entertainment. Because some parents also take their children to malls to “play,” malls are offering play rooms (free ones as well as outlets of chains such as Discovery Zone that charge an entry fee), free video games, and free movies.³⁸ Like many other contributors to the McDonaldization of society, malls strive to engage customers from cradle to grave.

William Kowinski argues that the mall “was the culmination of all the American dreams, both decent and demented; the fulfillment, the model of the postwar paradise.”³⁹ One could give priority to the mall, as Kowinski does, and discuss the “mall of America.” However, in my view, the fast-food restaurant is a far more powerful and influential force. Like the mall, however, McDonaldization can be seen as both “decent and demented.”

McDONALD’S: CREATING THE “FAST-FOOD FACTORY”

Ray Kroc, the creator of the McDonald’s empire, is usually credited with developing its rational principles. However, the basic McDonald’s approach was created by two brothers, Mac and Dick McDonald.⁴⁰ The McDonald brothers

opened their first restaurant in Pasadena, California, in 1937. They based the restaurant on the principles of high speed, large volume, and low price. To avoid chaos, they offered customers a highly circumscribed menu. Instead of personalized service and traditional cooking techniques, the McDonald brothers used assembly line procedures for cooking and serving food. In place of trained cooks, the brothers' "limited menu allowed them to break down food preparation into simple, repetitive tasks that could be learned quickly even by those stepping into a commercial kitchen for the first time."⁴¹ They pioneered the use of specialized restaurant workers such as "grill men," "shake men," "fry men," and "dressers" (those who put the "extras" on burgers and who wrapped them). They developed regulations dictating what workers should do and even what they should say. In these and other ways, the McDonald brothers took the lead in the development of the rationalized "fast-food factory."⁴²

Kroc invented neither the McDonald's principles nor the idea of a franchise. Franchising is a system in which "one large firm . . . grants or sells the right to distribute its products or use its trade name and processes to a number of smaller firms. . . . franchise holders, although legally independent, must conform to detailed standards of operation designed and enforced by the parent company."⁴³ The Singer Sewing Machine company pioneered franchising after the Civil War, and automobile manufacturers and soft drink companies were using it by the turn of the twentieth century. By the 1930s, it had found its way into retail businesses such as Western Auto, Rexall Pharmacy, and the IGA food markets.

Furthermore, there had been many efforts to franchise food service before Kroc arrived on the scene in the early 1950s. The first food service franchises, the A&W Root Beer stands, made their debut in 1924. Howard Johnson began franchising ice cream and other food in 1935. The first Dairy Queen opened in 1944; efforts to franchise it nationally led to a chain of about 2,500 outlets by 1948. Other well-known food franchises predated McDonald's. Big Boy started in the late 1930s, and Burger King (then InstaBurger) and Kentucky Fried Chicken began in 1954. Thus, Kroc's first McDonald's, which opened on April 15, 1955, was a relative latecomer to the franchising business in general and the food franchise business in particular. But I am getting a bit ahead of the story.

In 1954, when Ray Kroc first visited it, McDonald's was but a single drive-in hamburger stand in San Bernardino, California. The basic menu, the approach, and even some of the techniques that McDonald's is famous for to-

day had already been created by the McDonald brothers. Though it was a local sensation, the McDonald brothers were content to keep it that way; they were doing very well and had few grand ambitions in spite of a few tentative steps toward franchising. With plenty of ambition for all of them, Kroc became their franchising agent and went on to build the McDonald's empire of franchises, thereby giving impetus to McDonaldization. At first, Kroc worked in partnership with the McDonald brothers, but after he bought them out in 1961 for \$2.7 million, he was free to build the business as he wished.

Kroc took the specific products and techniques of the McDonald brothers and combined them with the principles of other franchises (food service and others), bureaucracies, scientific management, and the assembly line. Kroc's genius was in bringing all these well-known ideas and techniques to bear on the fast-food business and adding his ambition to turn it, through franchising, into a national, then international, business. *McDonald's and McDonaldization, then, do not represent something new but, rather, the culmination of a series of rationalization processes that had been occurring throughout the twentieth century.*

Kroc's major innovation lay in the way he franchised McDonald's. For one thing, he did not permit regional franchises in which a single franchisee received control over all the outlets to be opened in a given area. Other franchisers had foundered because regional franchisees had grown too powerful and subverted the basic principles of the company. Kroc maximized central control, and thereby uniformity throughout the system, by granting franchises one at a time and rarely granting more than one franchise to a specific individual. Kroc also gained control over, and profited from, franchisee's property.⁴⁴ Another of Kroc's innovations was to set the fee for a franchise at a rock-bottom \$950. Other franchisers had set very high initial fees and made most of their money from them. As a result, they tended to lose interest in the continued viability of the franchisees. At McDonald's, profits did not come from high initial fees but from the 1.9% of store sales that headquarters demanded of its franchisees. Thus, the success of Kroc and his organization depended on the prosperity of the franchisees. This mutual interest was Kroc's greatest contribution to the franchise business and a key factor in the success of McDonald's and its franchisees, many of whom became millionaires in their own right.

Though Kroc imposed and enforced a uniform system, he encouraged the franchisees to come up with innovations that could enhance not only their operations but also those of the system as a whole. Take the case of product inno-

vations. Kroc himself was not a great product innovator. One of his most notorious flops was the Hulaburger, a slice of grilled pineapple between two pieces of cheese wrapped in a toasted bun. Successful creations, such as the fish sandwich, the Egg McMuffin, and, more generally, McDonald's breakfast meals, came from franchisees. Thus, McDonald's achieved a balance between centralized control and the independence of franchisees.

Kroc spearheaded a series of developments that further rationalized the fast-food business.⁴⁵ For one thing, he (unwittingly) served as preacher and cheerleader for the principles of rationalization as he lectured "about uniformity, about a standardized menu, one size portions, same prices, same quality in every store."⁴⁶ This uniformity allowed McDonald's to differentiate itself from its competitors, whose food was typically inconsistent. McDonald's also led the field by imposing a limited menu (at first, ten items), creating tough standards for the fat content of hamburgers, converting to frozen hamburgers and french fries, using inspectors to check on uniformity and conformity, forming in 1961 the first full-time training center in the business (called Hamburger University and offering a "degree" in "Hamburgerology"), and publishing in 1958 an operations manual that detailed how to run a franchise.⁴⁷ This manual laid down many of the principles for operating a fast-food restaurant:

It told operators *exactly* how to draw milk shakes, grill hamburgers, and fry potatoes. It specified *precise* cooking times for all products and temperature settings for all equipment. It fixed *standard* portions on every food item, down to the *quarter ounce* of onions placed on each hamburger patty and the *thirty-two slices per pound* of cheese. It specified that french fries be cut at *nine thirty-seconds of an inch* thick. And it defined quality *controls* that were unique to food service, including the disposal of meat and potato products that were held more than *ten minutes* in a serving bin.

... Grill men ... *were instructed* to put hamburgers down on the grill moving from left to right, creating *six rows of six* patties each. And because the first two rows were farthest from the heating element, they were instructed (and still are) to flip the third row first, then the fourth, fifth, and sixth before flipping the first two [*italics added*].⁴⁸

It is hard to imagine a more rational system.

CONCLUSION

McDonald's and McDonaldization did not occur in a historical vacuum; they had important precursors that remain important to this day. The assembly line, scientific management, and bureaucracy provided many of the basic principles on which fast-food restaurant chains were built. Furthermore, these precursors provided the environment the fast-food chains needed to thrive: large numbers of factory workers and bureaucrats driving great distances between work and their suburban dwellings in automobiles that also allowed them to visit shopping malls in their spare time.

The fast-food restaurant has become the model of rationality. Although it has adopted elements of rationality pioneered by its predecessors, it also represents a quantum leap in the process of rationalization. What we have today is sufficiently more extreme than previous forms of rationalization to legitimize the use of a distinct label—McDonaldization—to describe the most contemporary aspects of the rationalization process.

Just as Weber fretted over the emerging iron cage of rationality, I foresee a similar iron cage being created by the increasing ubiquity of the fast-food model. Weber was particularly upset by the irrationality of rationality, a concern that also lies at the heart of this book. As you will see in the following chapters, Weber's theory, adapted to fit the new realities of a McDonaldized world, has great relevance at the dawn of the twenty-first century.