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Fordism, McDonaldization and the virtues of Ritzer's disciplined eclecticism

Thesis Eleven

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journals.sagepub.com/home/the**Chris Rojek**¹ 

Abstract

This paper explores Ritzer's analytical innovation in offering McDonaldization as a concept that avoids the macro–micro divide. This dichotomy was ascendant for much of the post-war period. Ritzer's pioneering work on meta-theory did much to loosen its grip on sociological work. Meta-theory is the handmaiden of McDonaldization. The paper seeks to draw out some links because they have not generally been explored in the secondary literature. McDonaldization is conceived as a process in which local and global alternate and intersect. Ritzer's concept of grobalization is used to demonstrate the gains in analysis compared with 'Fordism' which tended to reproduce the macro/micro distinction in an uncritical manner. Ritzer might be said to be a far more critical theorist in holding that evidentiary analysis should leave no doors closed and presuppose no permanent theoretical advantage in the 'global' over the 'local'.

Keywords

Fordism, McDonaldization, grobalization

For much of its history, a commonplace conceptual distinction in sociology was the so-called macro/micro divide. On reflection, this advanced a rather simplistic argument. It held that the study of social life can be classified as either the investigation of small-scale local *micro* relations, or the investigation of large-scale *macro* relations that demand a perspective of the *longue durée* to competently address. By and large the division is now held with disapproval. Nowadays, practically speaking, the methodological custom is to regard the micro and the macro as interdependent. This does not stop

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many sociologists from harbouring a ghost memory under which, as a first step, it is perfectly all right to approach the academic study of life with others at either the micro or the macro level of analysis. Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis has been entangled in this ghost memory. The result is methodological confusion about how the process is thought to proceed and what constitutes its contribution for the elucidation of contemporary social life. McDonaldization is not really a thesis of globalization. Something different, something that treats micro and macro relations and processes as always and already interrelated, is propounded. As we shall see, this is explicitly formulated in Ritzer's writings on meta-theory (Ritzer, 2001). Generally speaking, the secondary literature on Ritzer and McDonaldization has not granted the courtesy of recognizing the ground-clearing work done by him on meta-theory. Scarcely any of the secondary literature on McDonaldization engages with his publications on meta-theory. This results in a misunderstanding of the methodology involved in framing McDonaldization and, more locally, a distortion of the sociological significance of Ritzer's sociological contribution.

As a first step to seek clarification, we might begin by briefly considering one of the signature post-war macro theories of social order and development: Fordism. This may be defined as a theory of a market system of mass production/mass consumption that is based in the combination of automated technology and centralized management to elicit an integrated cycle of resource allocation and control (Watson, 2019). The model is a grand expression of the plant organization and consumer retail strategies devised and deployed by the industrialist Henry T Ford in his pioneering Highland Park factory (Hounshell, 1984; Nye, 2015). The four technical components of Fordism may be subdivided into two production and consumption sets. On the production side, the manufacturing process is subject to the thorough-going *deskilling* and the *regimentation* of the labour process (via the reduction of the division of labour into low-skill/unskilled tasks). With regard to consumption, Fordism champions the *standardization* of experience (Ford motor cars will be the same throughout the global market); *separation* from the mechanics of production (the commodity appears as if delivered by a stork to the market without any obvious traces of the labour process that called it into being); *high-trust* service (the Ford T delivers on consumer expectations of reliability and value for money); and *disposability* (buying the product is understood to enter a projected purchase line wherein upgrading/product replacement is baked into the queue).

Prima facie, there are clear and undeniable points of comparison with Ritzer's thesis of McDonaldization (Ritzer, 2021). As is well known, McDonaldization is also an all-encompassing process. It applies principles of predictability, calculability, standardization and efficiency to relations of production and consumption. With regard to production, the McDonaldization process exploits and develops calculable, standardized and efficient systems of resourcing, commodity design, commodity preparation and seamless retail distribution. On the consumption side, standardization and high-trust service are also paramount. Thus, to be specific, in all retail locations, McDonald's offers the same basic food and drink menu. It situates low-cost commodification and 'value for money' at the spine of the marketing-retail playbook.

A few more overlaps between Fordism and McDonaldization are worthy of note. Both are theories of scale. They refer to American business initiatives that colonize

business practice globally over time. Both submit that, all other things being equal, automated production and standardized commodity form expand margins. Fordism and McDonaldization are as one in being subordinate to the goal of maximizing accumulation. Nowhere is the overlap more striking than on the question of cultural effects. In the secondary literature, Fordism and McDonaldization are ordinarily understood to propose the homogenization of culture. The creation of Fordist and McDonaldized consumers extends much further than brand loyalty. Rather, the forms of association, identity and practice attached to the brand spill over and conquer conceptually distinct and organizationally separate sectors of the economy, society and culture. Thus, for example, commentators speak of the Fordist provision of low-cost urban housing (Gartman, 2009: 257, 261). Fordist logic is further invoked in the management of learning, governance, the environment and even the arts (Belina et al., 2013; Halkos and Aslandis, 2024; Hounshell, 1984; Jessop, 1995; Nye, 2015). For its part, the secondary literature on McDonaldization identifies the proliferation of the process in a variety of fields; for example, the ‘McDonaldized University’, ‘McDonaldized Health Care’, the ‘McDonaldization of Social Work’, ‘McJobs’ and ‘McJustice’ (Bohm, 2006; Carroll, 2013; Gamble, 2011; Gray and Gunderman, 2013; Johnstone et al., 2022).

It need hardly be laboured here that neither Fordism nor McDonaldization are Marxist projects. Both are inflexibly joined to market form and liberty of choice. Nonetheless, the macro consequences that the secondary literature claims for both processes were indisputably anticipated in the Marxist standpoint on the logistics of capitalist domination. Nowhere has this been better expressed than in the words of Marx himself. ‘The country that is more developed industrially’, he declares, ‘only shows to the less developed, the image of its own future’ (Marx, 1977: 19). A big part of the appeal of Fordism back in the day, and McDonaldization now, is that they are both comprehended to be business programmes that reduce labour costs and promote the homogenization of consumer choice and practice. Compared with political command systems, Fordism and McDonaldization are means of what might be called *soft regulation*. That is, they defend notions of agency and free choice while operating remorselessly to produce and reproduce common transnational, patterned responses.

Differences between Fordism and McDonaldization

Having commented on some of the significant parallels between Fordism and McDonaldization it is now appropriate to consider some of the key differences. To begin with, it is necessary first to comment upon contrasting positions on homogenization. However, this is a prelude to the more decisive question of the distinctive methodological premise of McDonaldization (which is also a hallmark of Ritzer’s approach to sociology). Coming first to the question of homogenization, Fordism is a straightforward model of globalization. It portrays industrial and social development as linear and irreversible. That is, the destiny of the world is to follow the tenets of market organization, the technical division of labour, the rule of law, political pluralism, consumer choice and possessive individualism, polished to the highest levels in the West. Within the academic fields of global business practice and international relations, this way of thinking was already

under attack by the time of the first world oil crisis (1973–1974). Looking back, it is easy to forget the widespread shock and outrage in the West that oil suppliers in ‘developing countries’ should take it upon themselves to expose the dependence of Fordism by unilaterally raising the price of oil. The zero-sum perspective on power that always lurked in the shadows of Fordism had to be slowly exposed and discarded. Gradually, a post-Fordist standpoint came to the fore. Drawing on ideas from post-structuralism and postmodernism, it highlighted the importance of flexible specialization, balance of power relationships, regional economies and flexible accumulation in the world economy (Ash, 1994).

It might be thought that the McDonaldization thesis is in step with the basic assumptions of the early Fordist model of globalization. After all, the process is generally regarded as belonging to the ‘macro’ camp of social theory. As such, it is widely thought to deal with unilinear, all-encompassing, irreversible tendencies in global development. In fact, Ritzer’s thesis never portrayed McDonaldization as equivalent to social and economic determinism. He was immediately receptive to the proposition that *glocalization* is a more accurate way to capture transnational development than globalization (Ritzer, 2003). Negotiation, exchange, hybridity, creolization and multi-culturalism between global agents is essential in the global theatre of exchange. To this end, he coined the term ‘globalization’ to refer to the diversity in corporate global growth strategies resulting in varied territorial and sectoral outcomes (Ritzer, 2007). As he puts it,

the interaction of the grobal and the local, produces unique phenomena that are not reducible to either the grobal or the local. If the local is no longer the source that it once was of uniqueness, at least some of the slack has been picked up by the glocal. (Ritzer, 2003: 208)

This points to a methodological trait that in thinking about McDonaldization, and Ritzer’s sociology as a whole, has been somewhat neglected. The McDonaldization thesis is often categorized as an iteration of Weber’s rationalization thesis in modern dress. Ritzer himself makes no bones about crediting Weber’s thesis as a major influence. However, there are no ‘iron laws’ in the McDonaldization thesis. Rather the thesis describes *contexts*, *balances* and *tendencies* of conduct in which it is assumed that a degree of elasticity (‘slack’) and response variation are present. To refer concretely to the McDonald’s retail chain itself for a moment, just like any other market business, McDonaldization both creates wants and listens to market demand. Hence, the inclusion of McPlant, vegetarian and vegan meals, on the current McDonald’s menu. This provides a volte face to the proposition that ‘the country that is more industrially developed’, shows to ‘the less developed’ the ‘image of their own future’. McDonald’s has reacted to global criticism of resourcing and consumer worries of health risks associated with the high calory content, saturated fat, trans fat, sodium and added sugars in the basic Mac menu. McDonald’s now claims to ‘do the right thing and always put people first’ (corporate.mcdonalds.com). Critics may cavil that health and environment are still not high enough on the McDonald’s business agenda. Be that as it may, the changes in the basic menu support the relevance of glocalization and globalization to describe the McDonald’s business model.

The virtue of eclecticism

One reason why it has proved to be so difficult to classify where Ritzer fits as a social theorist is that he is always been uncomfortable with 'steamroller models' of social development that neglect variation, balance and diversity. The concept of 'grobalization' directly challenges unidimensional theories of globalization. Similarly, the notion of 'prosumption' is partly designed to expose the exaggeration involved in theories of industrial and consumer homogenization. These concepts are not accidental, epiphenomena. In contrast, they provide an entry point to the specifics of Ritzer's sociological practice and his ambition for what the discipline might achieve. Procedurally, I think that it is correct to regard him as a theorist who has always been methodologically inclined to treat *eclecticism* as a virtue. Of course, it is not, and never has been, an undisciplined type of eclecticism. Ritzer's sociology has never been shy of using a big tool bag to accurately elucidate a social topic. But he has always used it as a strategy of accurate problem solving rather than a mark of academic performativity. After reading the first edition of the McDonalization thesis, some readers may have automatically classified him as a Weberian. But his subsequent work on McDonaldization not only developed challenges to globalization theory in the form of grobalization and presumption. It also ventured into such issues as the dematerialization of exchange via the credit card economy, the digitalization of consumption and the transition to consumption as spectacle (Ritzer, 1995, 2005; Ritzer and Jurgenson, 2010). In the course of these explorations the Weberian heritage is supplemented with arguments and ideas from Walter Benjamin, Thorstein Veblen, Georg Simmel, Anthony Giddens, Roland Robertson, Jan Pieterse, Guy Debord and Jean Baudrillard.

Compared with Fordism, Ritzer has shown a more intense interest in the question of *modalities* in the experience of consumption. Fordism defends and replicates the principle of boundaries between production and consumption. Consumer reaction is marketed as centred on the commodity, not the labour process. Never the twain shall meet. This translates into overwhelming marketing emphasis upon the various lifestyle benefits that derive from owning reliable, low-cost, motorized vehicles. It is as if the automobile is delivered to the market by a stork. No trace of the production regime is included in the marketing propaganda. Instead, the focus is upon the colourful steps forward in lifestyle choice that owning an automobile portends: speed of movement, enhancement of territorial access, independence from public types of transport, status, etc. In David Gartman's (1994) evocative term, Ford delivers 'auto utopia'.

In contrast to Fordism, Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis does not propose fixed boundaries between consumption and production. Rather, the concept of prosumption explicitly directs attention to the collusion between production and consumption in the retail setting (Ritzer, 2014). Part of this is the little-noticed theoretical option for consumer resistance built into the retail encounter. Consumers may not choose to clear away tray waste as a protest against bare-bones retail service. This militates against the commonplace view of the homogenization of consumer experience in the McDonaldization process. Beyond this, Ritzer demonstrates that the architecture and service attributes of the McDonald's retail setting encourage a purely *transactional* orientation to consumption. Part of this

involves making the process of producing drink and foodstuffs visible to consumers. Mac kitchens are open-plan, allowing consumers to clearly see Mac burners, drink dispensers and packaging in operation. Unlike Fordism, McDonald's makes no claim to seek to elicit a more consummate, balanced view of life via the consumption experience. There is no 'Mac Utopia' on the table. The meals are not meant to be memorable. There is no sense of distinction, *savoir faire* or a gourmet event in the McDonald's dining experience. Fordism celebrated the Ford automobile as a mark of upward mobility and an accessory for 'the good life'. In contrast, McDonaldization dining is strictly transitional and instrumental. There are three interconnected stages to the argument that are worth drawing out in a little more detail. To begin with, McDonald's places emphasis not only upon 'good' food but *fast* food. Eat/Drink/Enjoy/Move On are the four pillars of the text-book McDonald's retail experience. Velocity, the sense of value for money and the certainty of repeat consumer satisfaction are all.

The next stage addresses the spatial setting. The sensory experience of stimuli in the retail spatial setting is not meant to be savoured. Ritzer is quite forthright in maintaining that no one would wish to chill in a McDonald's retail outlet (Ritzer, 2021). Contemplation and companionship are hardly encouraged by the seating arrangements and the lighting. The retail exchange process is constructed around velocity, transitional experience and smooth exchange. This is exacerbated by digital screen ordering. Digital menu display and ordering and credit/debit purchase options are designed both to reduce physical labour costs and to accelerate transactions. The consumption of food and drink is presented as a transition interlude between the last external event in the world outside, and the next external event. McDonaldization emerged in post-war 'affluent society' in which perpetual progress is taken as given. Not to move fast is a declaration of self-imposed obsolescence. In a world of ceaseless flux, repetition compulsion is the name of the McDonald's game. Menu upgrades are peripheral. The core of the business model is consumption of the same basic products ('Big Mac', 'Quarter Pounder', 'Fries', Soft Drinks) ad infinitum. McDonald's drive-in retailing is even more naked in prioritizing consumption as part of 'on the move' lifestyles. Yet it should also be recognized that the retail setting and the menu also explicitly appeal to the comfort of familiarity. McDonald's might be said to offer not only fast food, but something akin to the eternal meal. For the same food can be consumed at all stages of the life cycle. As with monarchy considered as a system of government, there is even a hereditary principle at work; that is, the appetite for the basic Mac menu is inherited by children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren etc.

The third stage of the argument is that, visually and organically, the velocity of consumption is theorized as conveying the paramountcy of mobility in the rest of life. The food production and service functions are an integral *part* of the consumer experience. As already noted, there is a *candour* about the production process that is absent in Fordism. This translates into the presentation of consumer experience as reflecting wider technical and instrumental objectives in the rest of life. Nowhere is it proposed or implied that this experience is *the same*. Ritzer has read and understood his Simmel and Veblen, just as he has accurately observed the retail McDonald's transition interlude and its connections with the rest of life.

Meta-theory and the rejection of formulaic sociology

The pitfalls of the macro/micro divide in sociology can be readily seen if one briefly counterposes the work of, say, Seymour Martin Lipset with Harold Garfinkel. Lipset (1960) was a grand macro theorist. He provides a picture of pluralism, industrialization and modernization as all-conquering and enduring. To adapt Mills' (1959) phrase, this results in a sort of abstracted idealism in which lofty concepts and regal propositions dissolve everyday empirical feelings and experience. Garfinkel's ethnomethodology developed in reaction to this. Garfinkel is a micro theorist. His famous 'breaching experiments' and his analysis of the social presentation and reactions of others to Agnes, a transgender woman, seek to elucidate the unwritten rules and granular inputs of orderly social interaction (Garfinkel, 1967). This was, and still is, illuminating. Giddens (1976) celebrated it as an essential component of his *New Rules of Sociological Method*. However, the enthusiasm drowned out the indifference to large-scale relations and processes in Garfinkel's practice of ethnomethodology. Lipset's sociology treats the micro as an apostrophized form. It is acknowledged but it is not investigated because larger tectonic forces are judged to put the decisive stamp on social life. Garfinkel reverses the manoeuvre. In his sociology the Macro is apostrophized. All of the action is in the close analysis of small-group relations.

Lipset and Garfinkel offer the world very different, ultimately incompatible perspectives upon what sociology should be. Yet ironically their work canonizes a formulaic cook-book of doing sociology. Both the macro and the micro options are impasses. Whatever insights they deliver, they end in perversions of the analysis of social life, for each leaves out half the picture. Ritzer's meta-theory politely renounces the division of sociology into two hemispheres that acknowledge little interest or correspondence with one another (Ritzer, 2001). His McDonaldization thesis can be usefully read as a pioneering recantation of globalization in favour of a theory of development that allows for balance, dynamism and hybridity. It is a rejection of formulaic sociology in favour of a more open, inquisitive, dynamic approach to studying one's sense of self and life with others.

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