
The McDonaldization of Society

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According to George Ritzer, our society has become increasingly McDonaldized. That is, we constantly search for ways to maximize efficiency in diverse social settings. In this article, Ritzer explains how organizations like McDonald's have influenced other aspects of our social structure through their emphasis on rationality, efficiency, control, and predictability. As you read this article, think about the ways in which your own life has become McDonaldized.

*M*cDonaldization implies a search for maximum efficiency in increasingly numerous and diverse social settings. *Efficiency* means choosing the optimum means to a given end. Let me clarify this definition. First, the truly optimum means to an end is rarely found. Rather, optimum in this definition implies the attempt to find and use the *best possible* means. . . .

In a McDonaldized society, people rarely search for the best means to an end on their own. Rather, they rely on the optimum means that have been previously discovered and institutionalized in a variety of social settings. Thus, the best means may be part of a technology, written into an organization's rules and regulations, or taught to employees during the process of occupational socialization. It would be inefficient if people always had to discover for themselves the optimum means to ends. . . .

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☉ *The Fast-Food Industry: We Do It All for Them*

Although the fast-food restaurant did not create the yearning for efficiency, it has helped turn it into a nearly universal desire. Many sectors of society have had to change in order to operate in the efficient manner demanded by those accustomed to life in the fast lane of the fast-food restaurant. . . .

In the early 1950s, the dawn of the era of the fast-food restaurant, the major alternative to fast food was the home-cooked meal made mostly from ingredients previously purchased at various markets. . . .

But the home-cooked meal was, and still is, a relatively inefficient way to eat. It requires going to the market, preparing the ingredients, cooking the food, eating it, and cleaning up afterward. The restaurant has long been a more efficient alternative in terms of effort.

But restaurants can also be inefficient—it may take several hours to go to a restaurant, consume a meal, and then return home. The desire for more efficient restaurants led to the rise of some of the ancestors of the fast-food restaurants—diners, cafeterias, and early drive-through or drive-in restaurants. . . .

Above all else, Ray Kroc was impressed by the efficiency of the McDonald brothers' operation, as well as the enormous profit potential of such a system applied at a large number of sites. Here is how Kroc described his initial reactions to the McDonald's system:

I was fascinated by the simplicity and effectiveness of the system.

. . . each step in producing the limited menu was stripped down to its essence and accomplished with a minimum of effort. They sold hamburgers and cheeseburgers only. The burgers were . . . all fried the same way.¹

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Kroc and his associates experimented with each component of the hamburger to increase the efficiency of producing and serving it.

For example, they started with only partially sliced buns that arrived in cardboard boxes. The griddle workers had to spend time opening the boxes, separating the buns, slicing them in half, and discarding the leftover paper and cardboard. Eventually, they found that buns sliced completely in half could be used more efficiently. In addition, buns were made efficient by having them separated and shipped in reusable boxes. The meat patty received similar attention. For example, the paper between the patties had to have just the right amount of wax so that the patties would readily slide off the paper and onto the grill. Kroc made it clear that he aimed at greater efficiency:

The purpose of all these refinements, and we never lost sight of it, was to make our griddle man's job easier to do quickly and well. And the other considerations of cost cutting, inventory control, and so forth were important to be sure, but they were secondary to the critical detail of what happened there at the smoking griddle. This was the vital passage of our *assembly-line*, and the product had to flow through it smoothly or the whole plant would falter.² (Italics added.)

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Getting diners into and out of the fast-food restaurant has also been streamlined. As three observers put it, McDonald's has done "everything to speed the way from secretion to excretion."³ Parking lots adjacent to the restaurant offer readily available parking spots. It's a short walk to the counter, and although there is sometimes a line, food is usually quickly ordered, obtained, and paid for. The highly limited menu makes the diner's choice easy in contrast to the many choices available in other restaurants. With the food obtained, it is but a few steps to a table and the beginning of the "dining experience." Because there is little inducement to linger, the diners generally gather the leftover paper, styrofoam, and plastic, discard them in a nearby trash receptacle, and get back in their cars to drive to the next (often McDonaldized) activity.

Not too many years ago, those in charge of fast-food restaurants discovered that the drive-through window made this whole process far more efficient. McDonald's opened its first drive-through in 1975

in Oklahoma City; within four years, almost half its restaurants had one. Instead of the “laborious” and “inefficient” process of parking the car, walking to the counter, waiting in line, ordering, paying, carrying the food to the table, eating, and disposing of the remnants, the drive-through window offered diners the option of driving to the window (perhaps waiting in a line of cars), ordering, paying, and driving off with the meal. You could eat while driving if you wanted to be even more efficient. The drive-through window is also efficient for the fast-food restaurant. As more and more people use the drive-through window, fewer parking spaces, tables, and employees are needed. Further, consumers take their debris with them as they drive away, thereby eliminating the need for additional trash receptacles and employees to empty those receptacles periodically.

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☺ Higher Education: *Just Fill in the Box*

In the educational system, specifically the university (now being dubbed “McUniversity”⁴), you can find many examples of the pressure for greater efficiency. One is the machine-graded, multiple-choice examination. In a much earlier era, students were examined individually by their professors. This may have been a good way to find out what students knew, but it was highly labor-intensive and inefficient. Later, the essay examination became very popular. While grading a set of essays was more efficient than giving individual oral examinations, it was still relatively inefficient and time-consuming. Enter the multiple-choice examination, the grading of which was a snap. In fact, graduate assistants could grade it, making it even more efficient for the professor. Now there are computer-graded examinations that maximize efficiency for both professors and graduate assistants. They even offer advantages to students, such as making it easier to study and limiting the effect of the subjective views of the grader on the grading process.

The multiple-choice examination still left the professor saddled with the inefficient task of composing the necessary sets of questions.

Furthermore, at least some of the questions had to be changed each semester because new students were likely to gain possession of old exams. The solution: Textbook companies provided professors with books (free of charge) full of multiple-choice questions to accompany textbooks required for use in large classes. However, the professor still had to retype the questions or have them retyped. Recently, publishers have begun to provide these sets of questions on computer disks. Now all the professor needs to do is select the desired questions and let the printer do the rest. With these great advances in efficiency, professors now can choose to have very little to do with the entire examination process, from question composition to grading.

Publishers have provided other services to make teaching more efficient for those professors who adopt their textbooks. With the adoption of a textbook, a professor may receive many materials with which to fill class hours—lecture outlines, computer simulations, discussion questions, videotapes, movies, even ideas for guest lecturers and student projects. Professors who choose to use all these devices need do little or nothing on their own for their classes. A highly efficient means of teaching, this approach frees up time for other much more valued activities (by professors, but not students) such as writing and research.

Finally, worth noting is the development of a relatively new type of “service” on college campuses. For a nominal fee, students are provided with lecture notes, from instructors, teaching assistants, and top-notch students, for their courses. No more inefficient note-taking, in fact, no more inefficient class attendance. Students are free to pursue more valuable activities such as poring over arcane journals in the graduate library or watching the “soaps.”

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Home Cooking (and Related Phenomena)

Given the efficiency of the fast-food restaurant, the home kitchen has had to grow more efficient or face total extinction. Had the kitchen

not grown more efficient, a comedian could have envisioned a time when the kitchen would have been replaced by a large, comfortable telephone lounge used for calling Domino's for pizza delivery.

One key to the salvation of the kitchen is the microwave oven.⁵ Far more efficient than conventional ovens for preparing a meal, the microwave has streamlined the process of cooking. Microwaves are usually faster than other ovens, and people can also prepare a wider array of foods in them. Perhaps most important, they spawned a number of microwavable foods (including soup, pizza, hamburgers, fried chicken, french fries, and popcorn) that permit the efficient preparation of the fare people usually find in fast-food restaurants. For example, one of the first microwavable foods produced by Hormel was an array of biscuit-based breakfast sandwiches "popularized in recent years by many of the fast-food chains," most notably McDonald's and its Egg McMuffin.⁶ . . . In fact, many food companies now employ people who continually scout fast-food restaurants for new ideas. As one executive put it, "Instead of having a breakfast sandwich at McDonald's, you can pick one up from the freezer of your grocery store."⁷ . . . Instead of getting into the car, driving to the restaurant, and returning home, people need only pop the desired foods in the microwave. . . .

Another reason efficiency in the kitchen has not damaged the fast-food business is that fast food offers many advantages over the "home-cooked" microwaved dinner. For one, people can have dinner out rather than just another meal at home. For another, as Stan Luxenberg has pointed out in *Roadside Empires*, McDonald's offers more than an efficient meal; it offers fun—brightly lit, colorful, and attractive settings, garish packaging, special inducements to children, giveaways, contests—in short, it offers a carnival-like atmosphere in which to buy and consume fast food.⁸ Thus, faced with the choice of an efficient meal at home or one in a fast-food restaurant, many people will choose the latter.

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The McDonaldization of food preparation and consumption has also reached the booming diet industry. Diet books promising all sorts of shortcuts to weight loss are often at the top of the best-seller

lists. Losing weight is normally difficult and time-consuming, hence the lure of diet books that promise to make weight loss easier and quicker, that is, more efficient.

For those on a diet, and many people are on more or less perpetual diets, the preparation of low-calorie food has been streamlined. Instead of cooking diet foods from scratch, they may now purchase an array of prepared diet foods in frozen and/or microwavable form. For those who do not wish to go through the inefficient process of eating these diet meals, there are products even more streamlined such as diet shakes (Slim-Fast, for example) that can be “prepared” and consumed in a matter of seconds.

The issue of dieting points outside the home to the growth of diet centers such as Jenny Craig and Nutri/System. Nutri/System sells dieters, at substantial cost, prepackaged freeze-dried food. In what is close to the ultimate in streamlined cooking, all the dieter need do is add water. Freeze-dried foods are also efficient for Nutri/System, because they can be efficiently packaged, transported, and stored. Furthermore, the dieter’s periodic visits to a Nutri/System center are efficiently organized. A counselor is allotted ten minutes with each client. During that brief time, the counselor takes the client’s weight, blood pressure, and measurements, asks routine questions, fills out a chart, and devotes whatever time is left to “problem solving.” If the session extends beyond the allotted ten minutes and other clients are waiting, the receptionist will buzz the counselor’s room. Counselors learn their techniques at Nutri/System University where, after a week of training (no inefficient years of matriculation here), they earn certification and an NSU diploma.

Shopping

Shopping has also grown more efficient. The department store obviously is a more efficient place in which to shop than a series of specialty shops dispersed throughout the city or suburbs. The shopping mall increases efficiency by bringing a wide range of department stores and specialty shops under one roof. Kowinski describes the

mall as “an extremely efficient and effective selling machine.”⁹ It is cost-efficient for retailers because it is the collection of shops and department stores (“mail synergy”) that brings in throngs of people. And it is efficient for consumers because in one stop they can visit numerous shops, have lunch at a “food court” (likely populated by many fast-food chains), see a movie, have a drink, and go to an exercise or diet center.

The drive for shopping efficiency did not end with the malls. Seven-Eleven and its clones have become drive-up, if not drive-through, minimarkets. For those who need only a few items, it is far more efficient (albeit more costly) to pull up to a highly streamlined Seven-Eleven than to run to a supermarket. . . .

In recent years, catalogues (e.g., L.L. Bean, Lands’ End) have become more popular. They enable people to shop from the comfort of their homes. Still more efficient, though it may lead to many hours in front of the TV, is home-television shopping. A range of products are paraded before viewers, who can purchase them simply by phoning in and conveniently charging their purchases. The latest advance in home shopping is the “scanfone,” an at-home phone machine that includes “a pen-sized bar-code scanner, a credit card magnetic-strip reader, and a key pad.” The customer merely “scans items from a bar-coded catalogue and also scans delivery dates and payment methods. The orders are then electronically relayed to the various stores, businesses, and banks involved.”¹⁰ Some mall operators fear that they will ultimately be put out of business because of the greater efficiency of shopping at home.

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Entertainment

With the advent of videotapes and video-rental stores, many people no longer deem it efficient to drive to their local theater to see a movie. Movies can now be viewed, often more than one at a sitting, in people’s own dens. Those who wish even greater efficiency can buy one of the new television sets that enables viewers to see a movie while also watching a favorite TV show on an inset on the screen.

The largest video rental franchise in the United States, Blockbuster, predictably “considers itself the McDonald’s of the video business.”¹¹ . . . However, Blockbuster may already be in danger of replacement by even more efficient alternatives such as the pay-per-view movies offered by many cable companies. Instead of trekking to the video store, people just turn to the proper channel and phone the cable company. New small dishes allow people access to a wider range of video offerings. Now in the experimental stage, video-on-demand systems may some day allow people to order the movies available in video stores from the comfort of their homes. . . . Just as the video store replaced many movie theaters, video stores themselves may soon make way for even more efficient alternatives.

. . . Travel to exotic foreign locales has also grown more streamlined. The best example of this is the package tour. Take, for example, a thirty-day tour of Europe. To make it efficient, tourists visit only the major locales in Europe. Buses hurtle through cities, allowing tourists to glimpse the maximum number of sites in the time allowed. At particularly interesting or important sights, the bus may slow down or even stop to permit some picture taking. At the most important locales, a brief stopover is planned; there, a visitor can hurry through the site, take a few pictures, buy a souvenir, then hop back on the bus to head to the next attraction. The package tour can be seen as a mechanism that permits the efficient transport of people from one locale to another.

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Dehumanization of Customers and Employees

. . . The fast-food restaurant offers its employees a dehumanizing work setting. Said Burger King workers, “A moron could learn this job, it’s so easy” and “Any trained monkey could do this job.”¹² Workers can use only a small portion of their skills and abilities. This is irrational from the organization’s viewpoint, because it could obtain much more from its employees for the money (however negligible) it pays them. . . .

The minimal skill demands of the fast-food restaurant are also irrational from the employee's perspective. Besides not using all their skills, employees are not allowed to think and be creative on the job. This leads to a high level of resentment, job dissatisfaction, alienation, absenteeism, and turnover among those who work in fast-food restaurants.¹³ In fact, the fast-food industry has the highest turnover rate—approximately 300% a year—of any industry in the United States. That means that the average fast-food worker lasts only about four months; the entire work force of the fast-food industry turns over approximately three times a year. . . .

The fast-food restaurant also dehumanizes the customer. By eating on a sort of assembly line, the diner is reduced to an automaton made to rush through a meal with little gratification derived from the dining experience or from the food itself. The best that can usually be said is that it is efficient and it is over quickly.

Some customers might even feel as if they are being fed like livestock in a highly rationalized manner. This point was made on TV a number of years ago in a *Saturday Night Live* skit, "Trough and Brew," a parody of a small fast-food chain called "Burger and Brew." In the skit, some young executives learn that a new fast-food restaurant called Trough and Brew has opened, and they decide to try it for lunch. When they enter the restaurant, bibs are tied around their necks. Then, they discover what resembles a pig trough filled with chili and periodically refilled by a waitress scooping new supplies from a bucket. The customers bend over, stick their heads into the trough, and lap up the chili as they move along the trough making high-level business decisions. Every so often they come up for air and lap some beer from the communal "brew basin." After they have finished their "meal," they pay their bills "by the head." Since their faces are smeared with chili, they are literally "hosed off" before they leave the restaurant. The young executives are last seen being herded out of the restaurant, which is being closed for a half-hour so that it can be "hosed down." *Saturday Night Live* was clearly ridiculing the fact that fast-food restaurants tend to treat their customers like lower animals.

Customers are also dehumanized by scripted interactions, and other efforts to make interactions uniform. “Uniformity is incompatible when human interactions are involved. Human interactions that are mass-produced may strike consumers as dehumanizing if the routinization is obvious or manipulative if it is not.”¹⁴ Dehumanization occurs when prefabricated interactions take the place of authentic human relationships.

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Another dehumanizing aspect of fast-food restaurants is that they minimize contact among human beings. For example, the nature of the fast-food restaurant makes the relationships between employees and customers fleeting at best. Because the average employee works part-time and stays only a few months, even the regular customer can rarely develop a personal relationship with him or her. All but gone are the days when one got to know well a waitress at a diner or the short order cook at a local greasy spoon. Few are the places where an employee knows who you are and knows what you are likely to order.

Contact between workers and customers is very short. It takes little time at the counter to order, receive the food, and pay for it. Both employees and customers are likely to feel rushed and to want to move on, customers to their dinner and employees to the next order. There is virtually no time for customer and counterperson to interact in such a context. This is even truer of the drive-through window, where thanks to the speedy service and the physical barriers, the server is even more distant.

These highly impersonal and anonymous relationships are heightened by the training of employees to interact in a staged, scripted, and limited manner with customers. Thus, the customers may feel that they are dealing with automatons rather than with fellow human beings. For their part, the customers are supposed to be, and often are, in a hurry, so they also have little to say to the McDonald’s employee. Indeed, it could be argued that one of the reasons the fast-food restaurants succeed is that they are in time with our fast-paced and impersonal society. . . . People in the modern world

want to get on with their business without unnecessary personal relationships. The fast-food restaurant gives them precisely what they want.

Not only the relationships between employee and customer, but other potential relationships are limited greatly. Because employees remain on the job for only a few months, satisfying personal relationships among employees are unlikely to develop. . . .

Relationships among customers are largely curtailed as well. Although some McDonald's ads would have people believe otherwise, gone for the most part are the days when people met in the diner or cafeteria for coffee or a meal and lingered to socialize. Fast-food restaurants clearly do not encourage such socializing. If nothing else, the chairs by design make people uncomfortable, so that they move on quickly. The drive-through windows completely eliminate the possibility of interaction with other customers.

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Fast-food restaurants also tend to have negative effects on other human relationships. There is, for example, the effect on the family, especially the so-called "family meal." The fast-food restaurant is not conducive to a long, leisurely, conversation-filled dinnertime. Furthermore, as the children grow into their teens, the fast-food restaurant can lead to separate meals as the teens go at one time with their friends, and the parents go at another time. Of course, the drive-through window only serves to reduce further the possibility of a family meal. The family that gobbles its food while driving on to its next stop can hardly enjoy "quality time." Here is the way one journalist describes what is happening to the family meal:

Do families who eat their suppers at the Colonel's, swinging on plastic seats, or however the restaurant is arranged, say grace before picking up a crispy brown chicken leg? Does dad ask junior what he did today as he remembers he forgot the piccalilli and trots through the crowds over to the counter to get some? Does mom find the atmosphere conducive to asking little Mildred about the problems she was having with

third conjugation French verbs, or would it matter since otherwise the family might have been at home chomping down precooked frozen food, warmed in the microwave oven and watching “Hollywood Squares”?¹⁵

There is much talk these days about the disintegration of the family, and the fast-food restaurant may well be a crucial contributor to that disintegration. In fact, as implied above, dinners at home may now not be much different from meals at the fast-food restaurant. Families tended to stop having lunch together by the 1940s and breakfast together by the 1950s. Today, the family dinner is following the same route. Even at home, the meal will probably not be what it once was. Following the fast-food model, people have ever more options to “graze,” “refuel” nibble on this, or snack on that, rather than sit down at a formal meal. Also, because it may seem inefficient to do nothing but just eat, families are likely to watch television while they are eating. Furthermore, the din, to say nothing of the lure, of dinnertime TV programs such as *Wheel of Fortune* is likely to make it difficult for family members to interact with one another.

A key technology in the destruction of the family meal is the microwave oven and the vast array of microwavable foods it helped generate.¹⁶ More than 70% of American households have a microwave oven. A *Wall Street Journal* poll indicated that Americans consider the microwave their favorite household product. In fact, the microwave in a McDonaldizing society is seen as an advance over the fast-food restaurant. Said one consumer researcher, “It has made even fast-food restaurants not seem fast because at home you don’t have to wait in line.” As a general rule, consumers demand meals that take no more than ten minutes to microwave, whereas in the past people were more often willing to spend a half hour or even an hour cooking dinner. This emphasis on speed has, of course, brought with it lower quality, but people do not seem to mind this loss: “We’re just not as critical of food as we used to be.”¹⁷

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*H*omogenization

Another dehumanizing effect of the fast-food restaurant is that it has increased homogenization in the United States and, increasingly, throughout the world. This decline in diversity is manifest in the extension of the fast-food model to all sorts of ethnic foods. People are hard-pressed to find an authentically different meal in an ethnic fast-food chain. The food has been rationalized and compromised so that it is acceptable to the tastes of virtually all diners. Paradoxically, while fast-food restaurants have permitted far more people to experience ethnic food, the food that they eat has lost many of its distinguishing characteristics. The settings are also all modeled after McDonald's in one way or another.

The expansion of these franchises across the United States means that people find little difference between regions and between cities. Tourists find more familiarity and less diversity as they travel around the nation, and this is increasingly true on a global scale. Exotic settings are increasingly likely sites for American fast-food chains. The McDonald's and Kentucky Fried Chicken in Beijing are but two examples of this. . . . The spread of American and indigenous fast food throughout much of the world causes less and less diversity from one setting to another. The human craving for new and diverse experiences is being limited, if not progressively destroyed, by the spread of fast-food restaurants. The craving for diversity is being supplanted by the desire for uniformity and predictability.

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☺ *C*onclusion

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Although I have emphasized the irresistibility of McDonaldization, . . . my fondest hope is that I am wrong. . . . I hope that people can resist McDonaldization and create instead a more reasonable, more human world.

A few 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 said, "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 Bologne."¹⁸ Lo and behold, two weeks later, it was announced that the Paris police had cracked down on prostitution in the Bois de Bologne. Said a police spokesperson, "There are none left." Thus, 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."¹⁹ Similarly, it remains likely that no matter how intense the opposition, the future will bring with it more rather than less McDonaldization. Even if this proves to be the case, it is my hope that you will follow some of the advice outlined in this chapter for protesting and mitigating the worst effects of McDonaldization. Faced with Max Weber's iron cage and 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."²⁰

Endnotes

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- ⁵“The microwave cooks up a new way of life. (1989, September 19). *Wall Street Journal*, p. B1; Microwavable foods—Industry’s response to consumer demands for convenience. (1987). *Food Technology*, 41, 52–63.
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- ¹¹Potts, M. (1991, December 9). Blockbuster struggle with merger script. *Washington Post/Washington Business*, p. 24; Shapiro, E. (1992, February 21). Market place: A mixed outlook for Blockbuster. *New York Times*, p. D6.
- ¹²Reiter, E. (1991). *Making fast food*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, pp. 150, 167.
- ¹³Leidner disagrees with this, arguing that McDonald’s “workers expressed relatively little dissatisfaction with the extreme routinization.” See Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast food, fast talk: Service work and the routinization of everyday life*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 134. One could ask, however, whether this indicates a McDonaldizing society in which people, accustomed to the process, simply accept it as an inevitable part of their work.
- ¹⁴Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast food, fast talk: Service work and the routinization of everyday life*. Berkeley-University of California Press, p. 30.
- ¹⁵von Hoffman, N. (1978, November 23). The fast-disappearing family meal. *Washington Post*, p. C4.
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- ¹⁷“The microwave cooks up a new way of life. (1989, September 19). *Wall Street Journal*, p. B1.

¹⁸Cohen, R. (1992, February 18). Faux pas by McDonald's in Europe. *New York Times*, p. D1.

¹⁹Two quotes from Waxman, S. (1992, March 2). Paris's sex change operation. *Washington Post*, p. B1.

²⁰Thomas, D. (1952). *The collected poems of Dylan Thomas*. "Do Not Go Gentle into That Good Night." New York: New Directions, p. 128.



Questions

1. What is McDonaldization?
2. What are some negative outcomes of McDonaldization? What are some of the positive outcomes?
3. How has McDonaldization resulted in social change? What effect has this change had on our culture? On the world?
4. Describe some ways in which your life has become McDonaldized. What can you do to fight McDonaldization in your life?
5. Have you ever worked for McDonald's or another McDonaldized business? If so, does the behind-the-scenes reality compare with what the customer sees? How do your experiences compare with those described in the article?