

Thinking Empirically about the McDonaldization Thesis in Penang

Ong, B. K.

Department of Anthropology and Sociology, School of Social Sciences, Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 USM, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

The motivation for this article began from personal experiences with Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis. This thesis refers to the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant have gradually dominated most sectors of American society and *the world*. Not only has the restaurant business been affected, but virtually every other aspect of society, such as education, work, health care, travel, leisure, dieting, politics, and the family have been also influenced by the McDonaldization thesis. The success of McDonaldization is in its promise of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, to consumers, workers, and managers. This article examines Ritzer's McDonaldization in Penang.

Keywords: McDonaldization, rationalisation, irrationality of rationality

INTRODUCTION

Fifteen years ago, I wrote an email to George Ritzer after reading his book on the McDonaldization. In the email I shared my personal experiences in Malaysia with regard to his McDonaldization thesis on the labour process in the fast-food restaurants. According to Ritzer, principles of the fast-

food restaurant have gradually dominated most sectors of American society and *the world*. The followings are some parts of the email to him:¹

You have pointed out that the labour process in the fast-food restaurants and other McDonaldized systems have occurred to an extent that customers are now being channelled to do the work (with no pay) which was previously done by paid employees. My personal

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received: 14 March 2016

Accepted: 11 October 2016

E-mail address:

ongbengkok@usm.my (Ong, B. K.)

¹ Personal communication with Dr. George Ritzer.

experience has confirmed this. In McDonaldized society, shopping, for example, which was supposed to be a relaxed and pleasure activity, is now rather stressful. This is because customers have to do the work on their own. In another example, I remember when I went to a gasoline station to fill the tank in my car, it was quite a relaxed activity for paid employees at the station handled this work. Therefore, I could usually do some thinking and planning while sitting in my car. However, this is now not possible with the implementation of self-service at gasoline stations in which the customers have to do all the work.

According to Marxist analysis, individual factory workers, rather than families, are paid wages. This money is not sufficient to support workers' families. Therefore, their wives also have to work. As a consequence, capitalists have indirectly coerced more family members to enter the job market. While it is widely known, according to Marxists, that factory workers are exploited, in the sense that they are paid in wages less than the value of the goods and services which they produce, they are, in this case, super-exploited because of individual wages.

Therefore, it is not only exploitation but super-exploitation that best describes consumers in the McDonaldization society.

The *aim* of this article is to discuss how people in Penang relate to Ritzer's McDonaldization thesis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Weber's theory of rationality

"Weber demonstrated in his research that the modern Western world had produced a distinctive kind of rationality" (Ritzer, 2010, p. 27), he referred to as *formal rationality*. Formal rationality, for Weber, means that "the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures" (Ritzer, 2010, p. 28).

According to Weber, people in the past had been left on their own to discover the best means of attaining a given objective with general help from larger value systems, such as religion. After the development of formal rationality, they could employ institutionalised rules that help them to decide or even to dictate what to do.

Weber argued that *bureaucracy* – his paradigm of formal rationality – helps people discover and perform optimum means to ends. Its main advantages are the four basic dimensions of rationalisation.

First, bureaucracy is the most *efficient* structure for handling large numbers of tasks needing a great deal of paperwork. Weber used the Internal Revenue Service as an example.

Second, bureaucracies place a great emphasis on the *quantification* of as many things as possible. “Reducing performance to a series of quantifiable tasks helps people gauge success”. This enables, for example, IRS to handle more cases in an efficient way. “Handling less than the required number of cases is unsatisfactory performance; handling more is excellence” (Ritzer, 2010, p. 28). However, this quantitative approach poses a difficulty for the actual quality of work.

Third, bureaucracies also operate in a highly *predictable* manner because of their well-established rules and regulations. For example, “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” (Ritzer, 2010, p. 28).

Finally, “bureaucracies emphasize *control* over people through the replacement of human judgment with the dictates of rules, regulations, and structures” (Ritzer, 2010, p. 29). By only making few judgments people start to resemble human robots or computers. As a result, leaders of bureaucracies can think about replacing people with machines. For example, computers have already begun to take over bureaucratic tasks which were once performed by humans. In addition to this, bureaucracy’s clients are also controlled. They may “receive appropriate services in certain ways and not others. For example, people can receive welfare payments by check, not in cash” (Ritzer, 2010, p. 29).

Although bureaucracy offers many advantages, it suffers from the *irrationality of rationality*. A bureaucracy can be a “dehumanizing place in which to work and by which to be serviced” (Ritzer, 2010, p. 29). Takaki described rationalised settings as places in which the “self was placed in confinement, its emotions controlled, and its spirit subdued” (Takaki, 1990, p. ix). People, in these settings, are dehumanised, for they cannot always behave as human beings.

Ritzer has illustrated the following irrationalities of bureaucracies:

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 operation often end up quite irrational.

Although Weber was concerned about the irrationalities of formally rationalised 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 locked into a series of rational structures, who could move only from one rational system to another – from rationalised educational institutions to rationalised workplaces, from rationalised recreational settings to rationalised homes. Society would eventually become nothing more than a seamless web of rationalised structures; there would be no escape.

A good example of what Weber feared is found in the contemporary rationalisation of recreational activities. Recreation can be thought of as way to escape routes have themselves become rationalised, embodying the same principles as bureaucracies. Among the many examples of the rationalisation of recreation are Club Med and package tours. Take, for example, a 30-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 particular interesting or important sights, the bus may slow down or even stop to permit some picture taking. At the most important locales, 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 rationalisation of even their recreational activities, people do live to a large extent in the iron cage of rationality. (Ritzer, 2010, pp. 29–30)

It is now appropriate to review Ritzer’s model of rationalisation (McDonaldization).

Ritzer’s theory of rationality

While Ritzer’s theory of rationality is based on Weber’s ideas about rationalisation (formal rationality), he has argued that today’s rationalisation is best illustrated by the fast-food restaurant – ‘especially the pioneering and still dominant chain of McDonald’s [sic] restaurants’ (1998, p. vii). Ritzer has, therefore, dubbed this process of rationalisation “McDonaldization process”. In short, he has adopted the model of the fast-restaurant (McDonaldization). It is “the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society, as well as the rest of the world” (Ritzer, 2000, p. 1; 2010, p. 4).

The fast-food restaurant is a formally rational system in which people (both workers and customers) are led to seek the most rational means to ends. The drive-through window, for example, is a rational means by which workers can dispense, and customers can obtain, food quickly and efficiently. Speed and efficiency are dictated by the fast-food restaurants and the rules and regulations by which they operate. (Ritzer, 2008, p. 34)

Because McDonaldization/McDonalds offers customers, workers and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability and control, it has affected ‘not only the restaurant business, but also education, work, health care, travel, leisure, dieting, politics, the family, and virtually every other aspect of society’ (Ritzer, 2001a, p. 198).

Therefore, Ritzer’s theory of McDonaldization ‘brings the theory [of Weber’s rationalisation] into the twenty-first century and views rationalization as extending its reach into more sectors of society and into more areas of the world than Weber ever imagined’ (Ritzer, 2008, p. 457).

There are five basic dimensions of the nature of the McDonaldization process:

- Efficiency;
- Calculability;
- Predictability;
- Control by means of technology; and
- Irrationality of Rationality.

Efficiency refers to the effort to find the best possible means to attain whatever end is desired. Fast-food, such as burgers, is assembled and even cooked in an assembly-

line manner. This means that workers are trained to work this way by their managers, who supervise them closely. Hence, workers in fast-food restaurants must work efficiently. Highly efficient work is supported by organisational rules and regulations (Ritzer, 2001a, p. 199).

For consumers, McDonalds offer “the best available way to get from being hungry to being full” (p. 198). “Customers want, and are expected, to acquire and consume their meals efficiently. The drive-through window is a highly efficient means for customers to obtain, and for employees to dole out, meals.” (Ritzer, 2008, p. 458) Therefore, various norms –rules, regulations, procedures – and structures have been implemented in the fast-food restaurant so as to ensure that employees and customers act in an efficient way.

Second, *calculability* refers to an emphasis on quantity. “Quantity has become equivalent to quality; a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good” (Ritzer, 2001a, p. 199). “People can quantify these things and feel that they are getting a lot of food for what appears to be a nominal sum of money” (p. 199). They always conclude that a trip to the fast-food restaurant will take less time than eating at home. “A notable example of time saving in another sort of chain is Lens Crafters, which promises people ‘Glasses fast, glasses in one hour’” (p. 199). However, “the extraordinary profitability of fast-food outlets and other chains, ... indicates that the owners, not the consumers, get the best deal” (p. 199). According to Ritzer,

[C]ustomers are expected to spend as little time as possible in the fast-food restaurant. The drive-through window reduces this time to zero, but if customers desire to eat in the restaurant, the chairs may be designed to impel them to leave after about 20 minutes. This emphasis on speed clearly has a negative effect on the quality of the dining experience at a fast-food restaurant. Furthermore, the emphasis on how fast the work is to be done means that customers cannot be served high-quality food that, almost by definition, would require a good deal of time to prepare. ... Various aspects of the work of employees at fast-food restaurants are timed. (2008, p. 458)

Workers are expected to work hard with low pay (Ritzer, 2001a, p. 199). The emphasis on speed often serves to adversely affect the quality of work. For example, workers have always experienced job dissatisfaction and work alienation, and as a result, the turnover rates are very high in fast-food restaurants (Ritzer, 2001b, p. 36).

Third, “[b]ecause McDonaldization involves an emphasis on *predictability*, things (products, settings, employee and customers behavior, and so on) are pretty much the same from one geographic setting to another and from one time to another” (Ritzer, 2008, p. 458). For example, “the workers in McDonaldized systems ...

behave in predictable ways. They follow corporate rules as well as the dictates of their manager” (Ritzer, 2001a, p. 200). Therefore, what they do and what they say is highly predictable, for McDonaldized organisations often have scripts that employees are supposed to memorise and follow whenever the occasion arises (Ritzer, 2001a, p. 200; Leidner, 1993).

Employees are expected to perform their work in a predictable manner, and customers are expected to respond with similarly predictable behaviour. Thus, when customers enter, employees ask, following scripts, what they wish to order. Customers are expected to know what they want, or where to look to find what they want, and they are expected to order, pay, and leave quickly. Employees (following another script) are expected to thank them when they do leave. A highly predictable ritual is played out in the fast-food restaurant – one that involves highly predictable foods that vary little from one time or place to another. (Ritzer, 2008, p. 458)

As Leidner has argued that:

McDonald’s [sic] pioneered the routinization of interactive service work and remains an exemplar of extreme standardization. Innovation is not discouraged ... at least among managers and franchisees. Ironically, though,

‘the object is to look for new, innovative ways to create an experience that is exactly the same no matter what McDonald’s [sic] you walk into, no matter where it is in the world. (Leidner, 1993, p. 82).

Fourth, “employees and customers find themselves in a variety of McDonaldized structures that demand that they behave in accord with the dictates of those structures” (Ritzer, 1998, p. 62). For example, the drive-through window structures both what customers in their cars and employees in their booths can and cannot do (1998, p. 62). Both employees and customers are also culturally “socialized into, and have internalized, the norms and values of working and living in a McDonaldized society” (p. 62).

In addition, employees are also dominated by technology and, increasingly, this will replace them.

Employees are clearly controlled by such technologies as french-fry machines that ring when the fries are done and even automatically lift the fries out of the hot oil. For their part, customers are controlled by the employees who are constrained by such technologies as well as more directly by the technologies themselves. Thus, the automatic fry machine makes it impossible for a customer to request well-done, well-browned fries. (Ritzer, 2008, p. 458)

Finally, instead of merely producing rationality, the four dimensions of the McDonaldization process have inevitably spawned irrationalities referred to as the *irrationality of rationality*. For example,

the efficiency of the fast-food restaurant is often replaced by the inefficiencies associated with long lines of people at the counters or long lines of cars at the drive-through window. Although there are many other irrationalities, the ultimate irrationality is dehumanization. Employees are forced to work in dehumanizing jobs, and customers are forced to eat in dehumanizing settings and circumstances. The fast-food restaurant is a source of degradation for employees and customers alike. (Ritzer, 2008, p. 459)

With some empirical data collected from Penang, the theory of McDonaldization is now critically discussed.

THE THESIS OF MCDONALDIZATION AND A CASE STUDY

The empirical data employed in this discussion comes from a study of McDonaldization in Penang (Ch’ng, 2007). While McDonaldization affects many aspects of society – such as education, work, health care, travel, leisure, dieting, politics and the family – the study focused only on the restaurant business. Though the study was conducted eight years ago, the findings still provide useful basis for a discussion of McDonaldization thesis.

METHODOLOGY

While deductive research strategy was adopted, the ideas of McDonalddination were tested qualitatively (Blaikie, 2010, p. 227). Therefore, the sample was selected through a combination of purposive and snowball sampling. Data were collected by in-depth interviewing. The interviews and field notes were analysed thematically (Boyatzis, 1998).

In the study, ten respondents were purposively selected and interviewed in-depth. They were customers of fast food restaurants in Penang. It is necessary to note briefly some demographic background of the respondents. While most (90%) of the respondents in the study were Chinese, only one respondent was Indian.² Males and females constituted 30% and 70% respectively. In terms of education background, 90% respondents were degree holders and only one respondent was diploma holder. Seventy percent of the distribution of age among respondents were below the age of thirty and 30% between 45 to 60 years.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

It is possible to identify ten theoretical points of the McDonalddination thesis and to compare them with empirical findings from Penang (Ch'ng, 2007, pp. 88–99).

- Fast-food restaurants streamline the process of eating, and offer finger food to enable efficient consumption.

² Sample for this study is skewed, focusing only of the Chinese and 1 Indian.

- People go to the fast-food restaurant for a quick meal.
- Fast-food customers perform unpaid work in fast-food restaurants.
- Fast-food customers believe that they are getting a lot of food for a small price.
- Fast-food consumers do not expect the food to be of high quality. As a result, the customers end up paying more for their food.
- There is standardisation and consistency in every aspect of fast-food restaurant, including the taste of the food, and the behaviour and speech of both the employees and customers.
- Fast-food restaurants have been structured in such a way that the customers cannot linger over meals.
- Fast-food restaurants place greater emphasis on having an overall atmosphere for they often look for theatre/fun more than the food itself.
- Fast-food restaurants create health problems and poor eating habits, especially among children.
- Fast-food restaurants minimise contact between humans. There is no genuine fraternisation between workers and customers.

Streamlining the process of eating and offer finger foods to enable efficient consumption

While many fast-food customers in Penang have acknowledged and valued the various efficiencies and conveniences created by McDonald's, some have reservation about eating with bare hands.

People go to the fast-food restaurant for a quick meal

Fast-food restaurants are more than a stopover for a quick meal for the fast-food customers in Penang. This is because besides going there for a meal, they also used the fast-food restaurants for socialisation, meetings, functions, doing homework as well as celebrating special occasions.

Putting customers to work

Many fast-food customers in Penang have accepted the self-service system found in McDonalds as something very positive because it makes things easier and faster.

Fast-food customers believe that they are getting a lot of food for a small price

Though most fast-food customers have expressed their satisfaction with the food served by McDonalds, some have complained that the food is too much for them. However, all the respondents regarded the prices charged are relatively expensive when compared with local foods. Nevertheless, they are affordable.

Fast-food consumers do not expect the food to be of high quality. As a result, the customers end up paying more for their food

The local customers have given different responses to food quality in McDonald's. For example, some considered the food at McDonald's to be good; others have

perceived it as mediocre. However, some respondents have commented that fast food at McDonalds is not worth its price.

There are standardization and consistency in every aspect of fast-food restaurant (such as the taste of the food, the behaviour and speech of both the employees and customers)

Fast-food customers in Penang have generally been comfortable with consistency of the taste of the food at McDonalds. For example, they have found that scripted interaction in the fast-food industry as being normal. Some have praised the system for its lots of benefits. Only a small group of respondents viewed this standardisation critically.

Fast-food restaurants have been structured in such a way that the customers could not linger over meals

According to respondents, fast food restaurants are like social centres, in particular, for younger people. They are not in a hurry to finish their meals and are not urged to leave. Hence, in contrast to the West, they regarded lingering over meals as a habit in Malaysia.

Fast-food restaurants have placed greater emphasis on having overall more than the food itself

The quiet, cool and comfortable ambience of the restaurants, as well as other non-food factors, are some of major reasons they (restaurants) are attractive to customers.

Fast-food restaurants create health problems and poor eating habits, especially among children

While people are fully aware of the dangers caused by fast food, they continue to eat fast food.

Fast-food restaurants minimize contact among humans. There is no genuine fraternisation between workers and customers

There is no personal relationship between the fast-food employees and their customers.

CONCLUSIONS

The following conclusions can be drawn. *First*, the force of McDonaldization has been so profound that not many social settings in today's world have been able to escape its domination entirely. However, the discussion in this paper has demonstrated that not all settings are highly McDonaldized. This means that "[w]hile McDonaldized systems seek to mould consumers so that they behave in a uniform manner, they are never totally successful in doing so" (Ritzer, 2001b, p. 58). One of the reasons is that customers do not always simply act in accordance with the demands of McDonaldized systems arising from cultural differences and social backgrounds.

Second, while McDonaldization can be analysed from the aspect of the subjectivity of fast-food customers dealing with this type of rationalization, is more

a structural matter (Ritzer, 1998, 2000, 2010). Therefore, some of the responses to the McDonaldization thesis, such as the respondents' perceptions on the issue of putting customers to work at McDonalds, have to be viewed critically. This is because customers may not be fully aware of their social realities, or they may have false-consciousness about their social realities, and give 'a false expression that the self-service system in the McDonalds as something to be very positive just because it makes things easier and faster'.

However, the fact is that McDonaldized structures:

have discovered that they can even replace paid employees not only with machines, temporary workers and so on, but also with customers who are seemingly glad do the work for nothing! Here, clearly, is a new gift to the capitalist. Surplus value is now not only to be derived from the labour time of the employee, but also from the leisure time of the customers. McDonaldization is helping to open a whole new world of exploitation and growth to the contemporary capitalist. (Ritzer, 1998, p. 70)

Finally, consumers are increasingly being exploited, or super-exploited. The nexus between work and consumption, and its increasing irrelevance should be explored for Malaysia.

REFERENCES

- Blaikie, N. (2010). *Designing social research: The logic of anticipation* (2nd Ed.). Cambridge: Polity.
- Boyatzis, R. E. (1998). *Transforming qualitative information: Thematic analysis and code development*. Thousand Oaks, California: Sage.
- Ch'ng, J. C. (2007). *A study of some of the responses to Ritzer's McDonaldization in Penang*. (Unpublished thesis). Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.
- Leidner, R. (1993). *Fast food, fast talk: service work and the routinization of everyday life*. Berkeley, California: University of California Press.
- Ritzer, G. (1998). *The McDonaldization thesis: exploration and extensions*. London: Sage.
- Ritzer, G. (2000). *The McDonaldization of society*. Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge.
- Ritzer, G. (2001a). *Exploration in social theory: from metatheorizing to rationalization*. London: Sage.
- Ritzer, G. (2001b). *Exploration in the sociology of consumption: Fast food, credit cards and casinos*. London: Sage.
- Ritzer, G. (2008). *Modern sociological theory* (7th Ed.). Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Ritzer, G. (2010). *McDonaldization: a reader*. Los Angeles: Pine Forge.
- Takaki, R. (1990). *Iron cages: race and culture in 19th century America*. New York: Oxford University Press.

