

## ***The McDonaldization of Higher Education***

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2017 saw the publication of *Beyond McDonaldization: Visions of Higher Education* (Routledge), the first chapter of which, 'Beyond the McDonaldization of Higher Education', develops and updates the ideas in this paper, which is an edited and revised version of the 'Introduction' to Dennis Hayes and Robin Wynyard's book *The McDonaldization of Higher Education* (Bergin and Garvey 2002). This well-received book introduced, and presented some criticisms of, the concept of 'McDonaldization' and examined the consequences of the process of McDonaldization to the university. A notable idea in the 2002 book was the concept of the 'therapeutic university' that, in part, explained the acquiescence of academics and students to the bureaucratising aspects of McDonaldization. The term is now widely used to describe a cultural climate in universities that sees today's students as emotionally vulnerable and incapable of coping with challenging ideas.

### **References**

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**Citation for this paper:** Hayes, D., Wynyard, R., and Mandal, L. ([2002] 2017) *The McDonaldization of Higher Education*, Derby: UDORA.

## THE McDONALDIZATION OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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Talking about the university, Ritzer says, “I...expect the university to borrow liberally from many other sectors of society as well as to retain many of its traditional components” (Ritzer 1998: 161). He goes on to state that he does not want it to look like a “shopping mall” or “fast-food restaurant.” But, all the same, he implies that it is inevitable that the university in the twenty-first century will borrow aspects of the process and the presentation of consumption from many sectors of society including the shopping mall and the fast-food restaurant.

Although the university is not excluded generally from his arguments concerning the globalizing features of McDonaldization (Ritzer 1998; 2000), our concern in *The McDonaldization of Higher Education* is to disentangle the university from Ritzer’s overview.

“McDonaldization” as outlined by Ritzer is a valuable tool for providing a theoretical and practical debate concerning novel and defining features of our contemporary world. Of this contemporary world, the contributors to the 2002 book argue that, for good or ill, the university is a component of it.

### WEBER: RITZER’S SOLE THEORIST?

The sole theorist used by Ritzer in expounding the theory of McDonaldization is the German sociologist Max Weber who died in 1920. “McDonaldization is an amplification and extension of Weber’s theory of rationalization” (Ritzer 2000: 23). For Ritzer, McDonaldization as an almost inexorable process, permeates most of the modern world in varying degrees – including higher education. Such permeation into higher education concerns all contributors to *The McDonaldization of Higher Education*. As Ritzer says, “There are degrees of McDonaldization. Fast-food restaurants, for example, have been heavily McDonaldized, universities moderately McDonaldized” (Ritzer 2000: 19). The purpose of this part of this essay is to examine how valid the work of Max Weber is in examining issues of modernity and postmodernity, of which the nascent or full-blown McUniversity is a part.

Without doubt, Weber's thought is difficult and often not easy to follow. He might be providing a theoretical framework for Ritzer in *The McDonaldization of Society*. This, however, is something needing further work by the reader. A brief introduction to a few facets of his thought can only suffice to whet the reader's appetite for further study. Had Weber been alive today, what would he have thought of the concept of McDonaldization? With what parts of Ritzer's argument would he have agreed or disagreed? Would Weber have given a subtler consideration of workers' and customers' perceptions of the meaning of their McDonald's experience when analysing McDonaldization?

It is possible that Weber would not disagree entirely with the "McDonaldization thesis" as a possible tool for further analysis and explanation. Any book with concepts such as this must be judged on its merits. Weber, being totally unaware of brand name burgers, could not, of course, comment. We suspect that he would be annoyed at the rather simple transposition of his thought by Ritzer. Weber was, if nothing, meticulous in his work but one of his major faults was that he overreached himself in terms of empirical observation, setting himself such observable goals that could not be concluded due to his untimely death. Thus, the somewhat cavalier way important explanatory concepts are transposed in Ritzer's book would have grated with him. One of Weber's key concepts, *rationalization*, gets very short shrift. It is this that Ritzer turns into *McDonaldization*, simply explaining the transformation from *rationalization* into the "...more timely labelled McDonaldization" (Ritzer 1993: xiii).

Likewise, Weber would have been very interested in those pages where his name is used in conjunction with the McDonaldization thesis: "*iron cage of rationality*" (Ritzer 1993: xi, 18, 24, 147, 160, 162, 188); *rationalization* (Ritzer 1993: xi, xiii, 18, 20, 23, 147); *rationality* (Ritzer 1993: xi, 19, 22, 23, 121); and *bureaucracy* (Ritzer 1993: 20, 21, 22, 24).

He would have been in broad agreement with the way Ritzer attempts to link concepts into some explanatory format: e.g. rationality  $\Rightarrow$  bureaucracy  $\Rightarrow$  irrationality  $\Rightarrow$  iron cage. On the other hand, he would have disagreed with how his thought gets cannibalised to make a rather simplistic point about bureaucracy in general, and how this comes to vindicate the McDonaldization thesis.

There would seem to be little disagreement between Weber and Ritzer concerning the salient points of bureaucracy as an ideal typical form of organization. In this case the use of *efficiency*, *calculability*, *predictability* and *control* (Ritzer 2000: Chs 3-6). Perhaps his strongest disagreement

would be reserved for the mechanical way Ritzer attributes rationalization (as a formal process) the cause of his own “iron cage of rationality.” Weber would cite partiality in terms of the attempted explanation, for Ritzer’s use of McDonaldization totally ignores Weber’s substantive as opposed to formal sociology: i.e. the meanings that individuals give to their actions. These would have to be checked with objective facts at every opportunity. This acknowledges that individuals utilise what passes for accepted societal concepts and how broadly they agree with accepted definitions of such concepts. It is perhaps easier to agree *rationalization* as part of an abstract bureaucratic process than to agree McDonaldization as a worldwide material practice.

Just taking one of Ritzer’s basic dimensions of McDonaldization, the one of *control* (Ritzer 2000: Ch. 6), common sense says that control is not all bad, certainly not in the sense implied in this chapter. A concept is neither good nor bad. It can be either, or even both at the same time. For example, at school, “pupils,” accept the fact that teachers have control over them in the interests of learning. Weber could see that what appeared as irrational behaviour could indeed be highly rational. This exercise of control on the part of the pupil extends to teachers, significant others, schools as organizations, and increased use of technology on their part. Control can, of course, also be “bad”: Ritzer uses this in the sense of the McDonaldization thesis, where individuals get turned into “zombies” by nonhuman technology (Ritzer 1993: 120). People often do become zombies when dealing with highly routinized processes, but how and why they do is open to much debate and scrutiny and is often far from obvious to the observer. Although this is hinted at (Ritzer 2000: 122-145), Weber would want a lot more in terms of empirical observation to substantiate each individual example.

MacRae catches well this point behind Weber’s substantive sociology, when he says:

society is problematic because we cannot foreknow all the consequences – nor for that matter all the determinants of our acts... No one intends to establish a market economy: such a state of affairs comes into being through the individual bargaining arrangements of people exchanging goods and services to maximise their advantages or minimise their deprivations. [MacRae 1974: 73]

McDonaldization depends entirely on the theory of Max Weber for academic respectability. Ritzer tells us that Weber “fretted” (Ritzer 1993: 19) and “animated” (Ritzer 1993: 22) by what Weber called the “iron cage of rationality.” We are also told that Weber was “particularly upset” by the irrationality of rationality (Ritzer 1993: 19). Such concepts as these are used by Ritzer in vindication of

the McDonaldization thesis and are readily applied to fast-food restaurants. It might be helpful here to briefly deal with those ideas of Weber particularly pertinent to the understanding of Ritzer's arguments.

Weber saw *rationalization* as a process, as a continuation of the secularization and disenchantment of the Western world. When the inevitable "benefits" of capitalism caught up, religious practices and other non-materialist ideologies in parts of the world like India and China would also, in time, succumb to the rationalization process. For Weber, the process was inevitable and did not depend on an ideology, so though socialism might succeed capitalism and the market mechanism in the allocation of goods and services, rationalization would still occur (Weber 1968).

Above all, Weber saw the rationalization process as economic. In the West, it was helped by the "push" of technology and the "pull" of a developed monetary system. The kind of consumer goods produced by new technologies, e.g. motor cars; could not help but engender a new rationalized and "modern" way of life. For Weber, rationalization was a process by which magic and religion gave way to knowledge based not on superstition and tradition, but on empirically sound and scientific knowledge. The components comprising this process were a new kind of rational individual. These individuals were engaged in the matching of means via logical reasoning to ends, which, because they were calculable, were also achievable. This is methodological individualism, but one also constrained by the structure inherent in the rationalization process. Everyone could work hard to gain the money to purchase the goods they needed, but the understanding was that because as individuals they were not equally endowed with skills, they would all earn different amounts.

The reward and payment of individuals in the West was also facilitated by the development of coined money. With such an invention, economic rationality could instantly be based on a common calculability. If we know the cost of something and know the means at our disposal, both can be reconciled in our paying or not paying the going price. Nation states were not slow to grasp the importance of money in the system of things. They made sure that they exercised control over the expansion and contraction of money supply (Weber 1968: 167, 168).

Once money was established as the medium of exchange, there could be no going back to other imprecise systems of exchange, like barter. The new system founded on money quickly became professionally and scientifically organized.

More specifically, a rational capitalistic establishment is one with capital accounting – that is, an establishment that determines its income-yielding power by calculation in accordance with the methods of modern book keeping and the striking of a balance. Via accountants and bankers, individuality becomes enmeshed in “rational commerce,” which is “the field in which quantitative reckoning first appeared, to become dominant finally over the whole extent of economic life” (Weber [1927] 1981: 223). Once this becomes established as regular practice, it is a short step to legitimation of inventor and process – for example, the “first rational patent law of 1623” (Weber [1927] 1981: 312). Formulation of the rationalization process helped, not hindered the individual, as the process was both predictable and calculable, making it much easier to understand. It also moved action away from the random movements of individuals to action by individuals on the grand scale: “But if a person acts subjectively rational, his expectations in relation to the behaviour of others may also assume that he can expect a subjectively meaningful behaviour on their part” (Weber 1968: 1376). The development of Western science not only put new knowledge in the hands of people, it also removed partiality. Fever was no longer managed and controlled by an all-powerful magician, as now qualified medical practitioners can agree on which drugs are the most effective. In this case, techniques in the development and application of pharmacy joined hands with the economic organization of doctors. Included in this system was the training, professional organization, and payment of the doctors: “Now this process of rationalization in the field of technique and economic organization undoubtedly determines an important part of the ideals of life of modern bourgeois society” (Weber 1930: 75).

This was the basis of Weber’s “formal sociology,” on which Ritzer relies. But, this was not the end of the story as far as Weber was concerned. He wanted to draw a distinction between formal elements of rationality and substantive elements. Modern organization, technology, and cost accountancy may indeed produce a cheap-to-buy, cost-effective burger, but the elements as to who eats McDonald’s burgers and why they eat them does not get explained. Often the formal and the substantive do coincide, for example, the production of tobacco and its purchase by the poor as a cheap narcotic. This is, however, not true for McDonald’s, whose burgers get eaten by all social groups worldwide.

Weber further developed his ideas of rationalization into his concept of *bureaucracy*. This he saw as the inevitable consequence of Western capitalistic and technological development.

Bureaucracy was impersonal, guided by written rules and regulations, resting on state-of-the-art knowledge of the production process. For Weber, bureaucracy was the pinnacle of efficiency:

According to Weber, such an organization is technically superior to all other forms of administration, much as machine production is superior to nonmechanical methods. In precision, speed, lack of equivocation, knowledge of the documentary record, continuity, sense of direction, uniformity of operation, system of subordination, and reduction of frictions, bureaucracy surpasses honorific and avocational forms of administration. This is a long list of advantages, but they are relative. [Bendix 1966: 426]

Individuality poses a problem for the smooth running of bureaucracy. Commands and the authority connected to these must be depersonalised. If rules and the consequences of rule breaking are knowable in advance, at the end of the day, the individual cannot shout “foul” if he or she is dismissed for an infringement of the rules.

Weber equated discipline with rationalization and bureaucracy. If someone willingly joins the army, that person would expect to be turned into an efficient fighting machine and, with identically trained others, be part of an irresistible force. In this sense, the individual is part of what are termed the “armed forces.” As Weber said: “What is decisive for discipline is that the obedience of a plurality of men is rationally uniform” (Weber 1968: 1149). It might not square with Ritzer’s view of the rationalization of the McDonaldization process, but who would want the armed forces too different? Contained within this, though, are seeds of irrationality: i.e. to join the army - some of a person’s individuality is willingly given up in terms of dress, appearance, speech etc. Without submission to this, the goal of joining the army cannot be achieved.

Although with Western rationalization, bureaucracy was an inevitability and Weber certainly felt gloomy over this prospect, but he acknowledged that it could still be an improvement over the tradition and mindless behaviour of old: “Discipline puts drill for the sake of habitual routinized skill in place of heroic ecstasy, loyalty, spirited enthusiasm for a leader and personal devotion to him” (Weber 1968: 1149).

## THE IRON CAGE

Sharing what he sees to be Weber’s pessimism, Ritzer takes great interest in what Weber says about the “iron cage of rationality.” Weber refers to it in his book *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*. The book contains the nub of his rationality argument. Here, Weber is clearly

aware of changes in the world around him. Material changes advancing rapidly in countries like the United States, Germany, and Great Britain had to be explained, as they were not happening in the rest of the world.

Weber generally argued that technology, like everything else in culture, would be subsumed under a growing “cloak” of rationality. Following his rationality argument through, the public were becoming more and more dependent on the products of advanced economies (see wa Mwachofi Ch. 14, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002). In suggesting that technologically induced economies were becoming supply-side-led, Weber at the end of his book introduces the “iron cage of rationality.” In doing so he dismisses the idea that we are purveyors of our own free will, as the demand for external possessions cannot be cast off like a “light cloak” where “fate decreed that the cloak should become an iron cage” (Weber 1930: 181).

With some justification, Weber asserts that material goods had gained such a hold over men and women as has never been known before. In this context, not unreasonably, Weber saw this grip-like march of material possessions and the hold these had over people, as an “inexorable power” (Weber 1930: 181). Older historical aestheticism “has escaped from the cage” as “wealth stripped of its religious and ethical meaning, tends to become associated with purely mundane passion.” Weber finally concludes: “No one knows who will live in this cage in the future, or whether at the end of this tremendous development entirely new prophets will arise” (Weber 1930: 182). So, really, it all depends where you stand, as the “iron cage” can be seen from different points of view; rationality can be a double-edged weapon, and as such neither good nor bad. As Zygmunt Bauman puts it: “To the strong, bold and determined, the patronage state feels like a most sinister rendition of the Weberian ‘iron cage;’ yet to many weak, shy and lacking in will it may also feel like a shelter” (Bauman 1992: 163).

Ritzer and Weber share a similar pessimistic platform. For Weber, the cage door is at least slightly ajar, for Ritzer, it is firmly shut.

## FATALISM

What Bauman does not consider here, is the likelihood of a destructive contemporary state wishing to render its citizens weak, shy and lacking in will and thus encouraging a dependent



personality. This might be an explanation of why the new ideologues of the British government have given pre-eminence to the concept of lifelong learning. Thinking of ourselves as lifelong learners places us in the psychological condition of the dependent learner. The view that we are all learners assigns an essentially dependent role to the university lecturer as well as the student.

Weber's concept of rationality, as adapted initially by Ritzer, is of an impersonal mechanistic force that is just taken as a given feature of contemporary capitalist society. From this objectivist position, McDonaldization is just happening. Rationalization leads to bureaucracy that in turn leads to dehumanisation. This comes out clearly in Ritzer's references to the consequences of rationality, which he derives from Bauman. This is the view that "rationality" leads to the gas chamber and the systematic factory-like genocide of a people. The existence of McDonaldization should alert us to the fact that "something like the Holocaust could happen again" (Ritzer 2000: 28). The leading British writer on the contemporary state of higher education, Ronald Barnett, argues in exactly this way about the search for knowledge: "Knowledge and control are not, thankfully, available. (That belief partly led to Auschwitz). What is both necessary and possible – just – is an enlightened societal self-monitoring" (Barnett 2000: 68). "Self-monitoring" to ensure that we make no more attempts at gaining knowledge and hence control of nature and our human lives is a depressing and negative view of the potential of human beings to bring about progress. Behind Ritzer's initial analysis of McDonaldization, therefore, lies a fatalism that assumes that the process cannot be challenged, that rationalization as a feature of contemporary capitalism was inevitable and we can do no more than condemn it morally or throw a spanner or two in the works (Ritzer 1998: 182-188). There is a purely individualized conception of resistance here that Ritzer took from Weber. Many critics pointed out the fatalism in Ritzer's thinking (Parker 1998: 14; Rinehart 1998: 24; Wood 1998: 95; Wynyard 1998: 172) and Ritzer himself contributed to a collection of essays on *Resisting McDonaldization* (Smart 1999).

#### RESISTANCE: MANURING MCDONALD'S

Resistance can be individual or collective. Jane A. Rinehart, in her critique of Ritzer's fatalism, went beyond an individualistic approach and took heart from the possibility of a broader movement against rationalization. Although she had "not heard of any collective resistance to McDonaldization *per se*," she thought it was "already occurring in many group efforts to resist efficiency, predictability,

calculability and control” (1998: 35). The forms of “resistance” with which we are familiar are symbolic actions to ensure media coverage of a motley assortment of young people breaking McDonald’s windows from Seattle to Genoa. These remain isolated gestures of dislike that have no long-term importance. In a general climate that is anti-collectivist and when unions are in decline, only individual action of this sort that attempts to make consumers suspicious about certain companies might be all that seems possible. The recent furore in Britain about McDonald’s sponsorship of a dinner at the Labour Party conference reveals just how strong the suspicion and dislike is among some social groups. This public relations disaster has led to the party being nick-named “McLabour.” Journalist Polly Toynbee, commenting on the sponsorship deal, calls McDonald’s “the hate-brand of all time” (2001), but she recognises that there are worse places to eat. Despite this hatred and the predictable consequences on the streets of Britain, this will be nothing but an exercise in anger release. The only practical result will be that middle-class people, who never ate in McDonald’s, will continue not to do so.<sup>1</sup>

Equally dramatic media portrayals of French farmers dumping tons of manure at a McDonald’s near them are nothing more than examples of local protectionism. Resistance of a more substantial nature might come from trade unions, but there is little to take heart from. Even spontaneous attempts to establish “McUnions” are fiercely resisted, apparently to the point of withdrawing franchises and closing restaurants (Klein 2000: 240-245). General, or popular, resistance to McDonaldization does not seem likely – so are we committed to some form of fatalism?

#### IMPERIAL OVERSTRETCH OR THE IMPLOSION OF McDONALDIZATION

Ritzer, in all his works, says very little about people and less about notions such as class. His fatalism about humanity seems to be deep rooted. But he has moved, in his more recent writing to a postmodern position consistent with but providing what seems an alternative to his neglect or is it his despair people themselves opposing rationalization? He still holds to an inevitability thesis because: “It is difficult to anticipate anything other than the continued growth of consumption” (Ritzer 1999: 215). This is clearly a Western, post-1945, perspective that he shares with a range of writers from

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<sup>1</sup> See the discussion which began in the British newspaper *The Guardian* in August 2001: K. Maguire, “New Labour: Out with the red rose and in with the Big Mac” (30 August 2001); P. Toynbee, “McLabour is so naff” (31 August 2001); G. Monbiot, “Sleeping with the enemy” (4 September 2001); and C. Hitchens, “The sour taste of McLabour” (5 September 2001).

Galbraith and Marcuse to Beck and Giddens. But from his new perspective, this very expansion may result in what he calls "implosion," an idea he takes from Baudrillard (Ritzer 1999: 112-4). "Implosion" is not something that is the result of any conscious critique or attack on rationalization, it just happens. As consumption moves from the mall to the home, this over-stretch may bring about the collapse of the latter. "Cathedrals of consumption" or consumer demand could in some unspecified way bring about "unsupportable expansion or a level of indebtedness that could bring the economy down" (Ritzer 1999: 217). What Ritzer labels "implosion" is a form of imperial over-stretch by McDonaldized and McDonaldizing monopolies.

Although he now declares himself: "wary of grand narratives," it is hard not to draw the conclusion that Ritzer does not believe in the possibility of "implosion." At one point, he considers and rejects escape into the family and a private world uncontaminated as far as possible with consumerism. But his fatalism outs at the end. His conclusion is that we must learn to live with McDonaldization: "the most immediate issue is how to live a more meaningful life within a society increasingly defined by consumption" (Ritzer 1999: 217).

## PRODUCTION AND CONSUMPTION

Ritzer's analysis is restricted to the sphere of consumption. This is a natural way of looking at the world as we meet in the realm of exchange, in shops, and pubs. The grubby world of production is hidden and Ritzer's turn towards Baudrillard can only make his analysis more restricted as Baudrillard was sceptical of the very existence of the production process (Heartfield 1998: 38). The notion that we live in a world made up entirely of consumers, isolated from the increasingly unimportant sphere of production, is a result of a long retreat of the left from involvement in what they increasingly saw as conservative industrial struggles. But it also has a partial and seemingly paradoxical explanation in economic downturn. Capitalists are increasingly timid about putting their surplus back into investment in production and are turning to consumption in the cultural realm where profits, for example, on the sale of paintings, are more immediate (Heartfield 1998: 44-49). There is, therefore, a real basis for the current obsession with the realm of consumption, but it is one based ultimately on the demise of production. This focus on consumption is mirrored throughout society and reflected by sociologists

such as Ritzer. Even from a capitalist point of view such a position must be short-term. Capitalists cannot cease acting as capitalists for long, or they will cease to be.

Ritzer approaches his few comments on production through Braverman, whom he connects closely with Marx. But Braverman, had a distorted understanding of Marx, concentrating on how capitalists control their workers (Ritzer 1998: 63-65). But it is the concept of exploitation – getting more surplus value out of the labour power purchased by capitalists – value produced free over and above wages and other costs of production - that is central to capitalism -- rather than the issue of control. Ritzer just sees the wage labour relationship as a swindle. The employer just cheats the employee out of money, paying him “less than the value they produce” (Ritzer 1998: 65). Even a superficial reading of Marx would show that the commodity labour power exchanges at its value, the socially relative labour time necessary to reproduce the labourer. Ritzer’s complete misunderstanding of surplus value production is shown by the fact that he considers customers at McDonald’s create value by putting litter in bins, etc. He considers customers to be more exploited than workers because they get paid nothing at all. But there is no exploitation here. Such work is done for free and is “valuable” to the restaurant because this helps to cut costs and realise profits, but do not produce any surplus value in the Marxist sense as we are already in the realm of consumption.

Ritzer’s fatalism about human activity stems from this focus on consumption. This is understandable because of two factors. The first is the constant increase in, and hence wider availability of, cheaper commodities resulting from the attempts by companies to overcome problems of profitability by increasing production. The cheapness and wide availability of the mobile phone is the best contemporary example of this phenomenon. The second and most important factor behind this general focus on consumer activity is that we are living in a period in which capitalists lack confidence in the risky and long-term process of investment in production and are going instead for the quick buck. Ritzer’s discussion of *The McDonaldization of Higher Education* conceals rather than reveals how a lack of confidence in another long-term investment has a base in production (see Poynter Ch. 4 and Hudson Ch. 7, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002). Fatalism is not the consequence, however, as the seeming inevitability of the McUniversity is due to political rather than economic reasons.

## WHIMPERING INTO THE GOOD NIGHT: RESISTING McUNIVERSITY

Ritzer, in 1993, saw McDonaldization as an exemplar of *modernism* and not just a modern phenomenon. It is worth comparing the 1993 and Millennium editions of his seminal book and his later works to track the changes in his approach as they imply different futures for the university.

In *The McDonaldization of Society*, Ritzer says very little about the university. It is seen straightforwardly as another rationalized institution. The analysis here is a simple Weberian one. Ritzer's description of the university could come out of F. W. Taylor's work or any manual for the application of techniques offered by followers of Ford. The university is the worst sort of factory. He depicts it as a savage place where staff and students are not just dehumanised but butchered:

The modern university has, in various ways, become a highly irrational place. Many students and faculty members are put off by its factory-like atmosphere. They may feel like automatons processed by the bureaucracy and computers or feel like cattle run through a meat processing plant. In other words, education in such settings can be a dehumanising experience. [Ritzer 1993: 143]

There is no recognition here of notions of students as consumers. They are simply there to be "burgered." This is the back door to McDonald's. There were no golden arches for students in 1993. The university is in the hands of Moloch, and staff and students are subject to control by non-human technologies. Why would you go? Would tenure – a job for life – keep you there? What future generations of middle-class employees would such a factory produce?

The techniques for avoiding the dehumanising consequences of the university are of the sort known to any subversive (or is it successful?) consumer: Shop elsewhere; choose small classes; get to know the assistants (professors); if you are sent unsolicited goods or marketing questionnaires, send them back (without a stamp!) – damage the exam papers (so they can't be marked by computer!). In the early analysis, there is little said about challenging McDonaldization.

The growing literature on McDonaldization shows the power of the term to describe the extension of industrial rationalization (commodification) to wider society. It "nicely points to the exemplary role of one of the most successful contemporary practitioners of Weberian rationalization" (Kumar 1995: 189). It is often used by educationalists in this descriptive way (see Smart Ch. 3, Poynter Ch. 4, and Persell Ch. 5, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002; Lomas 2001).

This descriptive analysis usually consists of a simple application of Ritzer's four features of McDonaldization: *efficiency*, *calculability*, *predictability* and *control* of the higher education sector. We

can summarise the basic idea here, and readers can add examples from their own experience. It may seem obvious that higher education is becoming more *efficient* because it is processing more students by introducing multiple-choice examinations (USA) or by removing examinations altogether (UK) and replacing them by forms of continuous assessment. This leads to grade inflation, and more students pass. It is just easier to get something called a degree – and a “good” degree at that. University league tables that reflect this make the system subject to quantitative, rather than the previous qualitative evaluations and therefore clearly *calculable* (see Parker Ch. 8, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002).<sup>2</sup> Higher education is also becoming *predictable* as content is standardized in terms of uniform units of delivery (modularization) with agreed learning outcomes. *Control* over what happens in the universities is established at first through the introduction of appraisal systems for academics, and then through the introduction of initial teacher training qualifications and systems of controlling continuing professional development. The sort of control that is implied here is, of course, based on self-regulation. All these systems have been introduced in the interest of maintaining standards and supporting students. This leads many lay people to ask: “Is McDonaldization a good thing or a bad thing?” The failure to answer this question, or even discuss it, is a major reason for addressing the issues in *The McDonaldization of Higher Education*. Up till now, the striking response to all these initiatives by academics has been “passivity” (Smith and Webster 1997: 4)

Several early commentators (Hartley 1995; Parker and Jary 1995) noted that Ritzer was writing within a modernist perspective and suggested that postmodernism offered a better way of approaching McDonaldization, one that allowed much more scope for contesting the bureaucratic rationality that was afflicting universities:

the culture of postmodernism is said to be dismantling the very disciplinary structures of the age of modernity. Systems thinking and grand over-arching structures cannot easily cope with a world that is in flux, a world where moral codes and scientific canons no longer command compliance, a world where relativism rears its head. Given all this, a number of questions suggest themselves. Is the systematisation of education a doomed endeavour, one bound to disintegrate in the centrifugal forces of post-modern culture? Are we witnessing the last stand of the grand, bureaucratic system – the “structure,” as it is called? [Hartley 1995: 419]

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<sup>2</sup> Martin Parker’s critique in this book was timely. The chief executive of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) resigned in August 2001 initiating a national debate about the future of that organization. See Baty, P. “Randall’s exit imperils light touch regime” *Times Higher Educational Supplement (THES)* (24 August 2001), and other articles in that journal. Another contributor to this book also engaged in a debate with the former chief executive, see Furedi, F. “Why the QAA should RIP” and Randall, J. “A Question of Quality” *Guardian Education* (30 August 2001).

Hartley believes that “increasing bureaucratization does have an egalitarian effect, for it increases (though does not necessarily widen) access to higher education” (Hartley 1995: 420; compare Fox: Ch. 9, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002). He sees two forces at work: “a centrifugal force allowing choice, flexibility and diversity; and a centripetal force towards central control” (Hartley 1995: 421). Tensions will be created because of the “emerging disorder of post-modern culture” (1995: 410); staff and students come to see the “falsity of fraternisation” involved, and the government will be forced to “resort to strong bureaucratic control over the dissenting academics” (Hartley 1995: 421).

What Hartley never considers is that there need be no tension here and that what appear to be forces in contraposition are in fact complementary. It takes only a little reflection to see how notions like “empowerment” and, in Britain, “inclusion” have been appropriated by policymakers.

Ritzer simply changed his mind after reviewing the comments of his postmodern critics. In a footnote in *The McDonaldization Thesis* he claims that borrowing liberally from consumer society: “will make the university of the near future even more postmodern than it is today” (Ritzer 1998: 151). In a footnote, he adds: “Thus, I disagree with Boland’s contention that the university is necessarily the quintessential modern institution” (Ritzer 1998: 161). But he is still ambiguous in his attitude to the McUniversity:

I should make it clear that I do *not* expect tomorrow’s university to look exactly like a shopping mall or a chain of fast-food restaurants. However, I do expect it to integrate applicable elements of these and other new means of consumption (and tourism) into the existing structure of the university. I also expect the university to borrow liberally from many other sectors of society as well as to retain many of its traditional components. I emphasize the new means of consumption... in part because, counterintuitively, I think they will be an important model for future universities. [Ritzer 1998: 161]

Yet within a few pages, he is envisioning the end of the McDonaldized university. Citing Baudrillard, and echoing T. S. Eliot’s *The Hollow Men*, he declares:

“we are no longer in the age of grandiose collapses and resurrections, of games of death and eternity, but of little factual events, smooth annihilations and gradual slides.” Thus, for example, McUniversity will not be destroyed with a bang, but in a series of whimpers [Ritzer 1998: 171].

Ritzer, at the end of the 1990s, was ambiguous in his attitude to the McUniversity.

But now, Ritzer makes clear his values as he writes his theory of implosion in *The McDonaldization of Higher Education* and that he does not believe in the possibility of a world without the McUniversity:

everyday educational activity is one of those areas (another is the doctor-patient relationship) that has been overly and inappropriately McDonaldized. What a spectacle it would be if the quotidian activities of

the university were truly deMcDonaldized! And just imagine how much better the educational process itself would function! [Ritzer: Ch. 1, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002].

He concludes that the university cannot compete with Las Vegas; instead, the university must:

focus on making more spectacular the quotidian activities that go to the heart of its educational functioning. While everything around it is growing increasingly McDonaldized, the route open to the university is to create spectacle by deMcDonaldizing its quotidian activities. Inefficient, unpredictable, incalculable education employing human technologies will seem quite spectacular to students, especially in contrast to the numbing McDonaldization that is increasingly found almost everywhere else. The spectacle of the deMcDonaldization of the university's everyday activities will not only be spectacular and attract students, but it will also serve to enhance dramatically the quality of the educational process [Ritzer: Ch. 1, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002].

One element of the traditional university that is clearly close to Ritzer's heart is the academic tutorial (see Ritzer Ch. 1, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002). One way of making this quotidian activity spectacular would be to offer it to all students on a massive scale. But this would be impossibly expensive. We would need thousands of new academic staff. But it would be an example of (de)McDonaldization par excellence! Instead, he envisages a digital alternative, where new technology creates this relationship within a lecture theatre. He sees technology as possibly liberating rather than dehumanising. (This is a question discussed at length by Persell Ch. 5, and Woudhuysen Ch. 6, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002). Ritzer does not seem to recognise that this would be nothing more than a complex form of scripted communication, familiar to us all from McDonald's training manuals and exemplified in the modern call centre. What Ritzer's emphasis on the tutorial shows is that ultimately he believes in the traditional liberal university. This university cannot be McDonaldized. The university in this society is the place that pursues knowledge – a creative activity that is uncertain in its outcomes. So why is the McUniversity inevitable?

#### McJOBS AND THE McUNIVERSITY

If we look at the expansion of student numbers in the 1960s and 1990s, there is a clear difference. In the 1960s (see Hudson Ch. 7, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002) young people were being trained for work. The difference now is that the huge expansion of student numbers in Britain and the USA (see Hayes Ch. 10, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002; Ryan 1999) has one consequence that is of enormous benefit to capitalism: it delays entry to the labour market for up to five years – two years doing preparatory study (A Levels or Vocational Qualifications in Britain) and three at university. A 17-



year-old can, on average, expect to receive 2 to 3 years of full-time tertiary education, with more than 1 year of full-time equivalent education between the ages of 25 and 64. The transition to work now occurs later in life. Between the ages 15 and 29, young people spend 6.5 years in a job, a year of unemployment, and 1.5 years neither studying nor seeking work. The other 5 years are spent in education (source: OECD 2000). The youth labour market as we knew it has disappeared, and young people now seek full-time employment in their early twenties rather than at 16 as in the 1960s. This is of great benefit for an economy as it does away with a potentially volatile group of unemployed or underemployed. While “consuming” education, this group also comes to accept the usual ascetic and impoverished experience of student life and the need to do McWork. It is also worth remembering that, in Britain, this new student group leave with £12,000 (\$18,000) of debt after paying for their consumption. The earlier generation of students had state funding that covered everything including books, and there was even some money left over to buy albums!

This expansion of educational consumption is held to be something of value. The British target is for 50% of all young people to attend university. But it is far from obvious that 50% of any generation would want a liberal education. And, even if they do, we shall see in the next section that this is not what is intended (see Furedi Ch. 2, Fox Ch. 9 and Evans Ch. 11 in Hayes and Wynyard 2002).

#### SOME RELISH WITH THAT DEGREE?

Claire Fox (see Fox Ch. 9, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002) reminds us of a distinction made between two sorts of knowledge – knowledges 1 and 2 – and argues that the sort of knowing peddled in the contemporary university is no longer “knowledge 1” or academic, subject-based knowledge. Rather, it is “knowledge 2” or everyday knowledge – an idea that flatters students when they discover how much they already know! It would be tempting to make a distinction between university 1 and university 2, where “university 2” is the McUniversity, with its “commodified” knowledge and modularised courses, delivered by teachers who do no research and are in no sense scholars. This would comfort the supporters of the Ivy League or Russell groups of universities and destroy morale elsewhere. To make this distinction would be wrong – because all universities are subject to McDonaldizing tendencies and this way of processing huge numbers is not the only way.

To explore this, let us return to the idea that McDonaldization exists in a situation of tension or opposition between ideas which are modern and postmodern (Hartley 1995; Wynyard: Ch. 15, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002). It is more profitable to see these elements as complementary. As Kumar puts it: "To eat at McDonald's is not necessarily to be McDonalized" (Kumar 1995: 194). This simple phrase helps pose what Kumar calls a central, if not *the* central, question of contemporary social theory, the relationship of capitalism to postmodernism. One example, a discussion of competence will show that such an opposition is an illusion. Statements of competence are the form in which training schemes at all levels are expressed. The notion of "competence" is what Fox refers to as "everyday knowledge," Hudson as "cultural capital," and others call "learning objectives." It is the general form of the new higher education, first supplementing then replacing subject knowledge. Usher and Edwards point out that the notion of competence is: "cast in behavioural terms but the discourse is itself not behaviourist. It is precise because it is not, but rather interwoven with liberal humanist discourse that it is powerful" (Usher and Edwards 1994: 110). They add that, "In its liberal humanist form, competence is more a form of "seduction" than oppression" (1994: 111).

What this indicates is that what is said to be "oppositional" can be used to support rather than oppose McDonaldizing tendencies. The idea of oppositional postmodernism neglects the way in which the state appropriates cultural concepts such as those associated with postmodernism and uses them as a means of legitimisation (this might also be true of feminist ideas) (see Rinehart: Ch. 12, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002). This is because postmodern discourse largely ignores the state. But the idea that the state has become postmodern is clearly unsustainable. A more convincing argument is that the state takes elements of what appear to be unorthodox or oppositional cultural ideas to replace older modes of justification in relation to traditional moral codes.

James L. Nolan has argued that the central cultural trend influencing the state is the therapeutic ethos. This ethos centres on building up individual self-esteem. In the face of rationalization, it helps people cope with the effects on their private lives. It helps every person subject to racial, sexual and other forms of discrimination come to cope with their "victimhood." Moreover, it accommodates religious or cultural pluralism by offering "a religion-like system of collective meaning" devoid of divisive sectarianism (Nolan 1998: 19). Like postmodernism, the therapeutic ethos is viewed as oppositional:

Though sometimes portrayed as a reaction against utilitarian capitalism, the therapeutic cultural impulse does not directly challenge or threaten the utilitarian orientation of the capitalistic order. To the contrary, the therapeutic ethic appears to complement the utilitarian ethic. It offers to soften the harshness of life in the machine without removing the machine. In fact, it is often defended as a viable source of action because of its purported efficacy. Though these two dispositions seem intuitively disparate, they may actually be complementary." [Nolan 1998: 20]

More succinctly, he argues: "The therapeutic orientation provides a personalised remedy to a highly impersonal, rationalized, bureaucratic system, but without fundamentally altering the system" (Nolan 1998: 20). Nolan seems to weaken his analysis when he reverses what has just been argued here and suggests that the "therapeutic ethos" at heart, rejects the orthodox concepts of reason and revelation in favour of subjective meanings, which: "may well signify a shift towards a distinctly postmodern cultural system" (Nolan 1998: 289).

But we do not have to go with him down a line of argument already rejected. There are consequences for the McUniversity. Students will be given courses not in how to pursue knowledge for its own sake (see Finkelstein: Ch. 13, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002). Such knowledge is demanding and its related activities are self-denying. Instead, courses which are effectively exercises in building self-esteem are more likely. As graduates from what Dennis Hayes (see Hayes: Ch. 10, in Hayes and Wynyard 2002) has called the *therapeutic university*, they will be impoverished human beings taught not to seek things like knowledge and truth which pose no danger but more experiences that build up their self-esteem and that of others. This has already impacted on many training and business conferences and everyday meetings where being "positive" is the cardinal value and criticism is viewed as negative and confrontational.

The therapeutic university is the McUniversity of the near future. Aspects of the therapeutic ethos of the university are discussed in several of the contributions to *The McDonaldization of Higher Education*. In his closing chapter, Robin Wynyard points out that, whether academics bemoan the coming of the McUniversity, students will still value the experience. If that is so, it will be a triumph for the therapeutic approach in building their self-esteem. They will feel positive about what they have achieved. They will lack self-doubt. But their confidence will be fragile and constantly require more therapeutic attention and a therapeutic focus will come to be an essential element in a university education.

The discussions in *The McDonaldization of Higher Education* are about the future of higher education – if, indeed, it has a future! The theme of many of the contributions in this book is an ancient one: to argue that the unexamined life, the life built around improving people's self-esteem, is not worth living.

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