

### **Case Study: The McDonaldization of Society George Ritzer (1993)**

We saw in Chapter 2 that Weber believed modern societies were undergoing a process of *rationalization*, a shift towards instrumentally rational action that involved the calculation of ends and means, formalised efficiency and routine. George Ritzer applied this theory to contemporary society when he developed his thesis of McDonaldization: “*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 of the rest of the world*” (Ritzer 1993: 1). In particular, Ritzer identified four themes of the fast-food business that were shaping our lives: *efficiency* (getting the fastest results with the least amount of effort), *calculability* (valuing quantity rather than quality: we want the biggest and best consumer goods, the most impressive symbols of social status), *predictability* (the standardisation of products and activities which eliminates the need for deep reflective thought) and *control* (through the substitution of non-human technology for human skills). Thus like Weber’s model of bureaucracy, Ritzer argued that the McDonaldization of society exposed the ‘irrationality of rationality’: systems of social organisation that were designed to be liberating and helpful can in fact end up trapping us in certain patterns of behaviour and eroding the traditions and values that give meaning to our lives. Individuals may then lose their sense of autonomy and agency as social actors, becoming simply cogs in the machine of a rationalized culture.

(Source: Robert Keel provides a helpful outline of Ritzer’s ideas at <http://www.umsl.edu/~rkeel/010/mcdonsoc.html>)

#### **Questions:**

- 1) How do you think the principles of *efficiency*, *calculability*, *predictability* and *control* might affect our attitudes to (a) work and study, (b) health and body image, or (c) shopping and consumption?
- 2) Are there any aspects of your everyday life that appear to be unaffected by McDonaldization?
- 3) Consider the link between Ritzer’s ideas and globalisation (see Chapter 16). To what extent can we say that the principles of fast-food restaurants have been extended to non-Western societies?
- 4) What do you think the risks and dangers of McDonaldization might be, for both individuals and societies?
- 5) Can you identify any social groups or movements that provide an alternative ideology to resist the effects of McDonaldization?