An Introduction to McDonaldization

Ray Kroc (1902–1984), the genius behind the franchising of McDonald’s restaurants, was a man with big ideas and grand ambitions. But even Kroc could not have anticipated the astounding impact of his creation. McDonald’s is the basis of one of the most influential developments in contemporary society. Its reverberations extend far beyond its point of origin in the United States and in the fast-food business. It has influenced a wide range of undertakings, indeed the way of life, of a significant portion of the world. That impact is likely to continue to expand throughout the 21st century.¹

However, this is not a book about McDonald’s, or even about the fast-food business,² although both will be discussed frequently throughout these pages. I devote all this attention to McDonald’s (as well as to the industry of which it is a part and that it played such a key role in spawning) because it serves here as the major example of, and the paradigm for, a wide-ranging process I call McDonaldization.³ This book is about that process, as well as the many phenomena affected by it. McDonaldization 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 of the rest of the world.⁴

McDonaldization has shown every sign of being an inexorable process, sweeping through seemingly impervious institutions (e.g., religion) and regions (e.g., European nations such as France) of the world.⁵

¹Notes may be found at the back of the book, beginning on page 211.
The success of McDonald’s itself is apparent: Having begun operations in 1955, it had sold 99 billion burgers by 1994; it surpassed 300 billion burgers sold in 2013. In that year, its revenues were $28.1 billion (greater than the gross domestic product [GDP] of Equador), with net income of $5.6 billion. McDonald’s has well over 35,000 restaurants in 128 countries throughout the world, serving an average of nearly 70 million customers a day. A computer programmer compiled a visualization of all the McDonald’s locations in the United States (just over 14,000 in 2013) and reported that it is impossible to get farther than 115 miles from a McDonald’s. The “McFarthest Spot,” as the programmer labeled it, lies in Nevada. A British commentator archly notes, “There are McDonald’s everywhere. There’s one near you, and there’s one being built right now even nearer to you. Soon, if McDonald’s goes on expanding at its present rate, there might even be one in your house. You could find Ronald McDonald’s boots under your bed. And maybe his red wig, too.”

McDonald’s has also been expanding its offerings with increased emphasis on its McCafé coffees, as well as with more than 4,500 McCafé locations in Europe by late 2014. McDonald’s began to compete with Starbucks (discussed in some detail in Chapter 9) in 2007 by offering its own line of specialty coffees and, before long, was engaged in a “coffee war.”

McDonald’s is also employing 21st-century technologies to retain its pre-eminent position. More than 11,000 U.S. locations now have Wi-Fi access. In Japan, millions of customers receive promotional e-mails, which are “more efficient than traditional coupons.” McDonald’s established an online community for its crew members, called StationM, with blogs and other communication tools for workers to “share experiences.” Restaurants are being extensively remodeled and adding high-tech drive-through lanes, big-screen televisions, video games, and even exercise bikes.

McDonald’s and McDonaldization have had their most obvious influence on the restaurant industry and, more generally, on franchises of all types:

1. In 2014, small franchises generated about $2.1 trillion in business in the United States. They employed over 8.5 million people. Franchises are growing rapidly; more than 80% of McDonald’s restaurants are franchises (up from 57% in 2006). (Interestingly, Starbucks refuses to franchise its operations, but it does license them to independent owners.) In the words of the McDonald’s 2008 report, “We believe locally-owned and operated restaurants are at the core of our competitive advantage, making us not just a global brand but also a locally relevant one.”

2. The McDonald’s model has been adopted not only by other budget-minded hamburger franchises, such as Burger King and Wendy’s, but also by a wide array of other low-priced fast-food businesses. In 2013, Yum! Brands, Inc., operated more than 40,000 restaurants in 128 countries and territories.
best-known of its restaurants are Pizza Hut, KFC, and Taco Bell. Yum! Brands has more outlets than McDonald’s, although its total sales ($11.1 billion in 2013) and net income ($1.1 billion) are not nearly as high. Subway (with almost 42,000 outlets in 106 countries; 26,628 of them are in the United States) is one of the fastest-growing fast-food businesses. It claims to be—and may actually be—the largest restaurant chain in the world. The Cleveland, Ohio, market, to take one example, is so saturated with Subway restaurants that one opened inside the Jewish Community Center. Among the innumerable other successful budget-oriented fast-food chains are Chipotle, Chick-fil-A, Dunkin’ Donuts, Firehouse Subs, Five Guys, and Jimmy John’s. Even Halal Guys, the highly successful New York City purveyor of Middle Eastern street food, has a five-year plan to have 100 storefronts in the United States, Canada, and the Middle East. The consultant hired by Halal Guys (his firm was behind the massive expansion of Five Guys from four outlets to over 1,200 in 2013), says, “It’s going to be the Chipotle of Middle Eastern food.”

3. The McDonald’s model has been extended to more upscale, higher-priced chain restaurants. One that is currently very hot is Shake Shack and its high-quality “ShackBurger.” The company started as a kiosk in 2004, and by 2014 it had 46 locations, with more to come. On its 10th anniversary, it created a limited-edition burger, and 1,500 people waited in line in New York City for up to seven hours to be able to eat one. However, the dominant higher-priced restaurant chains offer fuller menus (for example, Outback Steakhouse, Chili’s, Olive Garden, Cheesecake Factory, and Red Lobster). Morton’s is an even more upscale, high-priced chain of steakhouses that has overtly modeled itself after McDonald’s: “Despite the fawning service and the huge wine list, a meal at Morton’s conforms to the same dictates of uniformity, cost control and portion regulation that have enabled American fast-food chains to rule the world.” In fact, the chief executive of Morton’s was an owner of a number of Wendy’s outlets and admits, “My experience with Wendy’s has helped in Morton’s venues.” To achieve uniformity, employees go “by the book”: “an ingredient-by-ingredient illustrated binder describing the exact specifications of . . . Morton’s kitchen items, sauces and garnishes. A row of color pictures in every Morton’s kitchen displays the presentation for each dish.” Each Morton’s also offers private boardrooms with standardized features, including “state-of-the-art, high-definition satellite television broadcast reception, large drop-down screens and theater-quality surround sound, Wi-Fi technology and Velocity broadcasting capabilities.”

4. Other types of business are increasingly adapting the principles of the fast-food industry to their needs. Said the vice chairman of Toys “R” Us, “We want to be thought of as a sort of McDonald’s of toys.” (Interestingly, Toys “R” Us is now in decline because of its inability to compete with the even more McDonaldized Walmart and its toy business.) The founder of Kidsports Fun and Fitness Club echoed this desire: “I want to be the McDonald’s of the kids’ fun and fitness business.” Other chains with similar ambitions include Gap, Jiffy Lube,
AAMCO Transmissions, Midas Muffler & Brake Shops, Great Clips, H&R Block, Pearle Vision, Bally’s, Kampgrounds of America (KOA) (called the “McDonald’s of camping”), KinderCare (dubbed “Kentucky Fried Children”), Home Depot, PetSmart, Jenny Craig, and Curves (which claims to be the world’s largest chain of women’s fitness centers). The European budget airline Ryanair has copied the McDonald’s model in a process that has been called “Ryanization.”

McDonald’s has been a resounding success in the international arena. About 60% of McDonald’s restaurants are outside the United States (in the mid-1980s, that number was only 25%). The majority of the new restaurants being opened are overseas. McDonald’s will open its first restaurant in Vietnam in Ho Chi Minh City in 2014. Well over half of McDonald’s revenue comes from its overseas operations. As of 2014, the leader, by far, is Japan with 3,096 restaurants. There are currently 1,800 McDonald’s restaurants in China, and a major expansion is likely to occur there. (However, Yum! Brands operates more than 4,600 KFCs in China—the Chinese greatly prefer chicken to beef.) More generally, Yum! Brands is expanding faster in China than McDonald’s. France, the bastion of fine food, has become the second most profitable market in the world (the United States is first) for McDonald’s. As of 2013, there were 414 McDonald’s in Russia: It is the company’s fastest-growing market. McDonald’s plans to open many more restaurants in the former Soviet Union and in the vast new territory in Eastern Europe that has been laid bare to the invasion of fast-food restaurants. In fact, many other fast-food restaurants are succeeding in Russia; Russians seem to love American fast food. Although there have been recent setbacks for McDonald’s in Great Britain, that nation remains the “fast-food capital of Europe,” and Israel is described as “McDonaldized,” with its shopping malls populated by “Ace Hardware, Toys’R’Us, Office Depot, and TCBY.”

Many highly McDonaldized firms outside the fast-food industry have also had success globally. Walmart is the world’s largest retailer with 2.2 million employees (1.4 million in the United States) and over $419 billion in sales in 2013. Almost 3,000 of its stores are in the United States (as of 2014). It opened its first international store (in Mexico) in 1991; it now has more than 6,000 stores in 27 countries, including Argentina, Brazil, Canada, Chile, China, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, India, Japan, Mexico, Nicaragua, Puerto Rico, and the United Kingdom. In any given week, 245 million customers visit Walmart stores worldwide.

Other nations have developed their own variants on the McDonald’s chain. Canada has a chain of coffee shops called Tim Hortons (merged with Wendy’s in 1995 and purchased by Burger King in 2014), with more than 3,500 outlets (600 in the United States) in 2014. It is Canada’s largest food service provider with 42% of the fast-food market there and about twice as many outlets as McDonald’s in that country. The chain dominates Canada’s coffee business;
Starbucks is a distant second. Paris, a city whose love for fine cuisine might lead you to think it would prove immune to fast food, has a large number of fast-food croissanteries. The revered French bread has also been McDonaldized. An increasing number of French restaurants serve industrially produced food rather than food produced in their own kitchens. Overall, for the first time, in 2013 the French spent more money in fast-food restaurants than in traditional restaurants. India has a chain of fast-food restaurants, Nirula’s, that sells mutton burgers (about 80% of Indians are Hindus, who eat no beef) as well as local Indian cuisine. Mos Burger is a Japanese chain with more than 1,700 restaurants in eight countries that, in addition to the usual fare, sells Teriyaki chicken burgers, rice burgers, and “Oshiruko with brown rice cake.” Perhaps the most unlikely spot for an indigenous fast-food restaurant, war-ravaged Beirut of 1984, witnessed the opening of Juicy Burger, with a rainbow instead of golden arches and J. B. the Clown standing in for Ronald McDonald. Its owners hoped it would become the “McDonald’s of the Arab world.” In the immediate wake of the 2003 invasion of Iraq, clones of McDonald’s (sporting names like “MaDonal” and “Matbax”) opened in that country complete with hamburgers, French fries, and even golden arches.

8. And now McDonaldization is coming full circle. Other countries with their own McDonaldized institutions have begun to export them to the United States. As of 2012, the Body Shop, an ecologically sensitive British cosmetics chain, had more than 2,500 shops in 60 nations, 300 of them in the United States. American firms, such as Bath & Body Works, have followed the lead and opened copies of this British chain. Pret A Manger (see below), a chain of sandwich shops that also originated in Great Britain (interestingly, McDonald’s purchased a 33% minority share of the company in 2001 but divested itself in 2008), has more than 300 company-owned-and-run restaurants, mostly in the United Kingdom but now also in the United States (38 restaurants) and France. Pollo Campero was founded in Guatemala in 1971 and by 2011 had over 300 restaurants in Latin America and seven other countries. More than 50 Pollo Campero restaurants are operating in the United States. Jollibee, a Philippine chain, has over 800 stores, with 29 U.S. outlets. Although Pollo Campero is a smaller presence in the United States than the American-owned Pollo Tropical chain (which has over 125 outlets, almost all in the United States, including Puerto Rico, as well as a smattering in Latin America), Pollo Campero is more significant because it involves the invasion of the United States, the home of fast food, by a foreign chain. Even the hamburger business in the United States is not immune to an influx of foreign competition. A recent example is BurgerFuel, a small, high-end, New Zealand burger chain with 57 outlets in 2014. It has ambitious plans for expansion in the United States (it is already in the Middle East) based on a newly formed partnership with Subway.

9. IKEA (more on this important chain later), a Swedish-based (but Dutch-owned) home furnishings company, did about 28.5 billion euros of business in 2013,
derived from the more than 684 million people visiting its 303 stores in 26
countries. Purchases were also made from the 212 million copies of its catalog
printed in 62 editions and 29 languages. In fact, that catalog is reputed to
print annually the second largest number of copies in the world, just after the
Bible. IKEA's website reported 1.2 billion visitors in 2013. IKEA is so popu-
lar in Europe that "it is said that one in ten Europeans is conceived on an IKEA
bed." Another international chain to watch in the coming years is H&M
clothing, which was founded in 1947 and now has 3,200 shops in 54 coun-
tries. It currently employs more than 116,000 people and had about 32,143
million krona in sales in the first quarter of 2014. Zara opened its first shop
in 1975 and now has more than 1,800 shops in 90 countries. Zara is part of
a large group of fashion retailers that make up the Spanish firm Inditex. Taken
together, there are more than 6,300 Inditex shops in 87 countries operating
under nine different brand names. Inditex had total revenue of almost 176
billion euros in 2013.

10. Much of the above emphasizes the spatial expansion of McDonald's and
other McDonaldized businesses, but in addition they have all expanded tem-
porally. McDonald's has shifted some of its attention from adding locations
to adding hours to existing locales, thereby squeezing greater profits from
each of them. For example, McDonald's did not at first offer breakfast, but
now that meal has become the most important part of the day, and
McDonald's dominates the fast-food breakfast market (although Starbucks
sought, highly unsuccessfully, to challenge its preeminence). There is also a
trend toward remaining open on a 24/7 basis. While fewer than 1% of
McDonald's restaurants in the United States operated nonstop in 2002,
almost 40% were operating that way by 2009. Moreover, the vast majority of
U.S. locations now open by 5 a.m. Time, like space, is no barrier to the
spread of McDonald's and McDonaldization.

11. As we will see throughout this book, it is possible to view a wide range of
the most contemporary phenomena as being affected directly or indirectly by
the McDonald's model (and McDonaldization). Among them are text mes-
saging, multitasking, iPhones, iPods, Facebook, YouTube, eBay, Craigslist,
Second Life, online dating (e.g., Match.com), Viagra, virtual vacations, and
extreme sports.

McDonald's as an American and a Global Icon

McDonald's has come to occupy a central place not just in the business world
but also in American and global popular culture. The opening of a new
McDonald's in a small town can be an important social event. Said one
Maryland high school student at such an opening, "Nothing this exciting ever
happens in Dale City." Even big-city and national newspapers avidly cover
developments in the fast-food business.
Fast-food restaurants also play symbolic roles on television programs and in the movies. A skit on the legendary television show *Saturday Night Live* satirized specialty chains by detailing the hardships of a franchise that sold nothing but Scotch tape. In the movie *Coming to America* (1988), Eddie Murphy plays an African prince whose introduction to America includes a job at “McDowell’s,” a thinly disguised McDonald’s. In *Falling Down* (1993), Michael Douglas vents his rage against the modern world in a fast-food restaurant dominated by mindless rules designed to frustrate customers. In *Sleeper* (1973), Woody Allen awakens in the future only to encounter a McDonald’s. *Tin Men* (1987) ends with the early 1960s heroes driving off into a future represented by a huge golden arch looming in the distance. *Scotland, PA* (2001) brings Shakespeare’s *Macbeth* to the Pennsylvania of the 1970s. The famous murder scene involves, in this case, plunging a doughnut king’s head into the boiling oil of a deep fat fryer. The “McBeths” then use their ill-gotten gains to transform the king’s greasy spoon café into a fast-food restaurant featuring “McBeth” burgers. The focus of the movie *Fast Food Nation* (2006) is a fictional fast-food chain (“Mickey’s”) and its hit hamburger (“The Big One”), the beef processor that supplies the meat, and the plight of the illegal Mexican immigrants who work there. In the 2008 remake of the sci-fi classic *The Day the Earth Stood Still*, an important meeting, and perhaps the pivotal scene in the movie, takes place in McDonald’s. There, a newly arrived alien meets another who has been on Earth for decades and is dissuaded from destroying humanity by the fact that the latter has learned to love humans.

When plans were made to raze Ray Kroc’s first McDonald’s restaurant, hundreds of letters poured into company headquarters, including the following: “Please don’t tear it down! . . . To destroy this major artifact of contemporary culture would, indeed, destroy part of the faith the people of the world have in your company.” In the end, the restaurant was rebuilt according to the original blueprints and turned into a museum. A McDonald’s executive explained the move: “McDonald’s . . . is really a part of Americana.”

Americans aren’t the only ones who feel this way. At the opening of the McDonald’s in Moscow, one journalist described the franchise as the “ultimate icon of Americana.” When Pizza Hut opened in Moscow, a Russian student said, “It’s a piece of America.” Reflecting on the growth of fast-food restaurants in Brazil, an executive associated with Pizza Hut of Brazil said that his nation “is experiencing a passion for things American.” On the popularity of KFC in Malaysia, the local owner said, “Anything Western, especially American, people here love. . . . They want to be associated with America.”

One could go further and argue that in at least some ways, McDonald’s has become more important than the United States itself. Take the following story about a former U.S. ambassador to Israel officiating at the opening of the first
McDonald’s in Jerusalem wearing a baseball cap with the McDonald’s golden arches logo:

An Israeli teen-ager walked up to him, carrying his own McDonald’s hat, which he handed to Ambassador Indyk with a pen and asked: “Are you the Ambassador? Can I have your autograph?” Somewhat sheepishly, Ambassador Indyk replied: “Sure. I’ve never been asked for my autograph before.”

As the Ambassador prepared to sign his name, the Israeli teen-ager said to him, “Wow, what’s it like to be the ambassador from McDonald’s, going around the world opening McDonald’s restaurants everywhere?”

Ambassador Indyk looked at the Israeli youth and said, “No, no. I’m the American ambassador—not the ambassador from McDonald’s!” Ambassador Indyk described what happened next: “I said to him, ‘Does this mean you don’t want my autograph?’ And the kid said, ‘No, I don’t want your autograph,’ and he took his hat back and walked away.”

Two other indices of the significance of McDonald’s (and, implicitly, McDonaldization) are worth mentioning. The first is the annual “Big Mac index” (part of “burgernomics”), published, tongue-in-cheek, by a prestigious magazine, The Economist. It indicates the purchasing power of various currencies around the world based on the local price (in dollars) of the Big Mac. The Big Mac is used because it is a uniform commodity sold in many different nations. In the 2013 survey, a Big Mac in the United States cost an average of $4.20; in China, it was $2.44; and in Switzerland, it cost $6.81. This measure indicates, at least roughly, where the cost of living is high or low, as well as which currencies are undervalued (China) and overvalued (Switzerland). Although The Economist is calculating the Big Mac index only half-seriously, the index represents the ubiquity and importance of McDonald’s around the world. Alternatively, The Economist measured economic disparity by comparing the labor time required for the average workers in various cities to earn enough to purchase a Big Mac. The least amount of labor time—12 minutes—was required in Chicago, while workers in Nairobi had to work for nearly 160 minutes to be able to buy a Big Mac.

The second indicator of the global significance of McDonald’s is the idea developed by Thomas Friedman that “no two countries that both have a McDonald’s have ever fought a war since they each got McDonald’s.” Friedman calls this the “Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention.” Another tongue-in-cheek idea, it implies that the path to world peace lies through the continued international expansion of McDonald’s. Unfortunately, it was proved wrong by the NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999, which had McDonald’s at the time.

To many people throughout the world, McDonald’s has become a sacred institution. At that opening of the McDonald’s in Moscow, a worker spoke
of it “as if it were the Cathedral in Chartres, . . . a place to experience ‘celes-
tial joy.’” Kowinski argues that indoor shopping malls, which almost always encompass fast-food restaurants and other franchises and chains, are the modern “cathedrals of consumption” to which people go to practice their “consumer religion.” Similarly, a visit to another central element of McDonaldized society, Walt Disney World, has been described as “the middle-class hajj, the compulsory visit to the sunbaked holy city.”

McDonald’s has achieved its exalted position because virtually all Americans, and many others, have passed through its golden arches (or by its drive-through windows) on innumerable occasions. Furthermore, most of us have been bombarded by commercials extolling the virtues of McDonald’s, commercials tailored to a variety of audiences and that change as the chain introduces new foods, new contests, and new product tie-ins. These ever-present commercials, combined with the fact that people cannot drive or walk very far without having a McDonald’s pop into view, have embedded McDonald’s deep in popular consciousness. A poll of school-age children showed that 96% of them could identify Ronald McDonald, second only to Santa Claus in name recognition.

Over the years, McDonald’s has appealed to people in many ways. The restaurants themselves are depicted as spick-and-span, the food is said to be fresh and nutritious, the employees are shown to be young and eager, the managers appear gentle and caring, and the dining experience itself seems fun-filled. Through their purchases, people contribute, at least indirectly, to charities such as the Ronald McDonald Houses for sick children.

The Long Arm of McDonaldization

McDonald’s strives continually to extend its reach within American society and beyond. As the company’s chairman said, “Our goal: to totally dominate the quick service restaurant industry worldwide. . . . I want McDonald’s to dominate.”

McDonald’s began as a phenomenon of suburbs and medium-sized towns, but later it moved into smaller towns that supposedly could not support such a restaurant and into many big cities that were supposedly too sophisticated. Today, you can find fast-food outlets in New York’s Times Square. McDonald’s can even be found on the Guantanamo Bay U.S. Naval Base in Cuba and in the Pentagon. Small, satellite, express, or remote outlets, opened in areas that could not support full-scale fast-food restaurants, are also expanding rapidly. They are found in small storefronts in large cities and in nontraditional settings such as museums, department stores, service stations, and even schools. These satellites typically offer only limited menus and may rely on larger outlets for food storage and preparation. A flap arose over the placement of a McDonald’s in the new federal courthouse in Boston.
In Paris, McDonald’s is not only on the Champs-Élysées, but there is even a branch in the Louvre. Soon after it opened in 1992, the McDonald’s in Moscow’s Pushkin Square sold almost 30,000 hamburgers a day and employed a staff of 1,200 young people working two to a cash register. In early 1992, Beijing witnessed the opening of what still may be the world’s largest McDonald’s, with 700 seats, 29 cash registers, and nearly 1,000 employees. On its first day of business, it set a new one-day record for McDonald’s by serving about 40,000 customers. Among the more striking sites for a McDonald’s restaurant are at the Grand Canyon; in what was once the world’s tallest building, the Petronas Towers in Malaysia; as a ski-through on a slope in Sweden; and in a structure in Shrewsbury, England, that dates back to the 13th century.

No longer content to dominate the strips that surround many college campuses, fast-food restaurants have moved right onto many of those campuses. The first campus fast-food restaurant opened at the University of Cincinnati in 1973. Today, college cafeterias often look like shopping mall food courts (and it’s no wonder, given that campus food service is a multibillion-dollar-a-year business). In conjunction with a variety of “branded partners” (for example, Pizza Hut and Subway), Marriott now supplies food to many colleges and universities. The apparent approval of college administrations puts fast-food restaurants in a position to further influence the younger generation.

We no longer need to leave many highways to obtain fast food quickly and easily. Fast food is now available at many convenient rest stops along the road. After “refueling,” we can proceed with our trip, which is likely to end in another community with about the same density and mix of fast-food restaurants as the locale we left behind. Fast food is also increasingly available in hotels, railway stations, and airports.

In other sectors of society, the influence of fast-food restaurants has been subtler but no less profound. Food produced by McDonald’s and other fast-food restaurants is now found in high schools and trade schools; more than 50% of school cafeterias offer popular brand-name fast foods such as McDonald’s, Pizza Hut, or Taco Bell at least once a week. Said the director of nutrition for the American School Food Service Association, “Kids today live in a world where fast food has become a way of life. For us to get kids to eat, period, we have to provide some familiar items.” Few lower-grade schools as yet have in-house fast-food restaurants; however, many have had to alter school cafeteria menus and procedures to make fast food readily available. Apples, yogurt, and milk may go straight into the trash can, but hamburgers, fries, and shakes are devoured. Fast-food restaurants also tend to cluster within walking distances of schools. The attempt to hook school-age children on fast food reached something of a peak in Illinois, where McDonald’s operated a program called “A for Cheeseburger.” Students who received As on their report cards
received a free cheeseburger, thereby linking success in school with McDonald’s. In Australia, toy versions of food featured by McDonald’s have been marketed to children as young as 3. The toys include “fake McDonald’s fries, a self-assembling Big Mac, milkshake, Chicken McNuggets, baked apple pie and mini cookies.” Many fear that playing with such toy food will increase children’s interest in eating the real thing.

The military has also been pressed to offer fast food on both bases and ships. Despite criticisms by physicians and nutritionists, fast-food outlets have turned up inside U.S. general hospitals and in children’s hospitals. While no private homes yet have a McDonald’s of their own, meals at home often resemble those available in fast-food restaurants. Frozen, microwavable, and prepared foods, which bear a striking resemblance to meals available at fast-food restaurants, often find their way to the dinner table. There are even cookbooks—for example, Secret Fast Food Recipes: The Fast Food Cookbook—that allow one to prepare “genuine” fast food at home. Then there is also home delivery of fast foods, especially pizza, as revolutionized by Domino’s.

Another type of expansion involves what could be termed “vertical McDonaldization”; that is, the demands of the fast-food industry, as is well documented in Eric Schlosser’s Fast Food Nation, have forced industries that service it to McDonaldize in order to satisfy its insatiable demands. Potato growing and processing, cattle ranching, chicken raising, and meat slaughtering and processing have all had to McDonaldize their operations, leading to dramatic increases in production. That growth has not come without costs, however.

As demonstrated in the movie Food, Inc. (2008), meat and poultry are more likely to be disease ridden, small (often non-McDonaldized) producers and ranchers have been driven out of business, and millions of people have been forced to work in low-paying, demeaning, demanding, and sometimes outright dangerous jobs. For example, in the meatpacking industry, relatively safe, unionized, secure, manageable, and relatively high-paying jobs in firms with once-household names such as Swift and Armour have been replaced with unsafe, nonunionized, insecure, unmanageable, and relatively low-paying positions with largely anonymous corporations. While some (largely owners, managers, and stockholders) have profited enormously from vertical McDonaldization, far more have been forced into a marginal economic existence.

McDonald’s is such a powerful model that many businesses, as well as entities in many other domains, have acquired nicknames beginning with “Mc.” Examples include “McDentists” and “McDoctors,” meaning drive-in clinics designed to deal quickly and efficiently with minor dental and medical problems; “McChild” care centers, meaning child care centers such as KinderCare; “McStables,” designating the nationwide racehorse-training operation of D. Wayne Lukas; and “McPaper,” describing the newspaper USA TODAY.
Recently, scholars have used the term “McSexy” to describe the McDonaldization of exotic dancing.\textsuperscript{116} McDonald’s is not enamored, to put it mildly, of the proliferation of businesses using “Mc” as a prefix. Take the case of We Be Sushi, a San Francisco chain with a half-dozen outlets. A note appears on the back of the menu explaining why the chain was not named “McSushi”:

The original name was McSushi. Our sign was up and we were ready to go. But before we could open our doors we received a very formal letter from the lawyers of, you guessed it, McDonald’s. It seems that McDonald’s has cornered the market on every McFood name possible from McBagle \textsuperscript{sic} to McTaco. They explained that the use of the name McSushi would dilute the image of McDonald’s.

So strong is McDonaldization that the derivatives of McDonald’s, in turn, exert their own powerful influence. For example, the success of \textit{USA TODAY} led many newspapers across the nation, as well as many other parts of the world, to adopt shorter stories and colorful weather maps. As one \textit{USA TODAY} editor said, “The same newspaper editors who call us McPaper have been stealing our McNuggets.”\textsuperscript{118} Even serious journalistic enterprises such as the \textit{New York Times} and \textit{Washington Post} have undergone changes (for example, the use of color) as a result of the success of \textit{USA TODAY}. The influence of \textit{USA TODAY} is blatantly manifested in many local newspapers throughout the United States.\textsuperscript{119} As in \textit{USA TODAY}, stories usually start and finish on the same page. Many important details, much of a story’s context, and much of what the principals have to say are cut back severely or omitted entirely. With its emphasis on light news and color graphics, the main function of such a newspaper seems to be entertainment.

Like virtually every other sector of society, sex has been McDonaldized.\textsuperscript{120} In New York City, an official called a three-story pornographic center “the McDonald’s of sex” because of its “cookie-cutter cleanliness and compliance with the law.”\textsuperscript{121} In the movie \textit{Sleeper}, Woody Allen not only created a futuristic world in which McDonald’s was an important and highly visible element, but he also envisioned a society in which people could enter a machine called an “orgasmatron” to experience an orgasm without going through the muss and fuss of sexual intercourse.

The porn site RedTube mimics the standardized interface of YouTube to provide various categories of adult content that users can view on the site or embed in their own web pages. The Web is filled with video chat sites where users can request the performance of various sex acts. The casual encounters section on Craigslist.org provides people from every city in the world with a centralized interface to find sexual partners. A variety of devices, termed
“teledildonics” by the adult entertainment industry, enable users to stimulate one another through computer networks. 3Feel is a virtual 3-D environment where users can interact in real time and engage in sexual activity (with or without teledildonics). As Woody Allen anticipated with his orgasmatron, “Participants can experience an orgasm without ever meeting or touching one another.”

In a world where convenience is king, disembodied sex has its allure. You don’t have to stir from your comfortable home. You pick up the phone, or log onto the computer and, if you’re plugged in, a world of unheard of sexual splendor rolls out before your eyes.

These examples suggest that no aspect of people’s lives is immune to McDonaldization.

Various pharmaceuticals can be seen as McDonaldizing sex. Viagra (and similar drugs such as Cialis) do this by, for example, making the ability of males to have sex more predictable. Such drugs also claim to work fast and to last for a long time. MDMA (ecstasy) lasts for as much as eight hours and tends to increase the intensity of sensory information and feelings of social (including sexual) connectedness.

The preceding merely represents the tip of the iceberg as far as the long arm of McDonaldization is concerned. Other areas affected by McDonaldization (many of which will be discussed throughout this book) include the following:

- Outdoor recreation, especially mountain climbing (e.g., reliance on guidebooks to climbing routes), and professional sports
- The police and the criminal justice system (profiling, “three strikes and you’re out”)
- Family (books, TV shows devoted to quick fixes to family problems)
- McSchools and the policies that serve to McDonaldize them
- Universities, e-learning, especially Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs; see Chapter 7), as well as entire academic fields such as kinesiology (“McKinesiology”)
- The practice of medicine
- Death and dying, including funeral practices in Islamic societies
- Losing weight and the McDonaldization of the body
- Internet as a site of McDonaldization (and deMcDonaldization—see Chapter 9)
- Farms and their supersizing
- Religion and the McDonaldization of religious creeds
- Banking
- McJobs (see Chapters 5 and 6)
- Politics (“cool” vs. “hot” politics; “drive-through democracy”) 
- Scientific research
The Dimensions of McDonaldization

Why has the McDonald’s model proven so irresistible? Eating fast food at McDonald’s has certainly become a “sign” that, among other things, one is in tune with the contemporary lifestyle. There is also a kind of magic or enchantment associated with such food and its settings. The focus here, however, is on the four dimensions that lie at the heart of the success of this model and, more generally, of McDonaldization. In short, McDonald’s has succeeded because it offers consumers, workers, and managers efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control. Chapters 3–6 will be devoted to these dimensions of McDonaldization, but it is important to at least mention them at this point.

Efficiency

One important element of the success of McDonald’s is efficiency, or the optimum method for getting from one point to another. For consumers, McDonald’s (its drive-through is a good example) offers the best available way to get from being hungry to being full. The fast-food model offers, or at least appears to offer, an efficient method for satisfying many other needs as well. Woody Allen’s orgasmatron offered an efficient method for getting from quiescence to sexual gratification. Other institutions fashioned on the McDonald’s model offer similar efficiency in exercising, losing weight, lubricating cars, getting new glasses or contacts, or completing income tax forms. Like their customers, workers in McDonaldized systems function efficiently by following the steps in a predesigned process.

Calculability

Calculability emphasizes the quantitative aspects of products sold (portion size, cost) and services offered (the time it takes to get the product). In McDonaldized systems, quantity has become equivalent to quality; a lot of something, or the quick delivery of it, means it must be good. “As a culture, we tend to believe deeply that in general ‘bigger is better.’” People can quantify things and feel that they are getting a lot of food for what appears to be a nominal sum of money (best exemplified by the McDonald’s “Dollar Menu”). In a Denny’s ad, a man says, “I’m going to eat too much, but I’m never going to pay too much.” This calculation does not take into account an important point, however: The high profit margin of fast-food chains indicates that the owners, not the consumers, get the best deal.

People also calculate how much time it will take to drive to McDonald’s, be served the food, eat it, and return home; they then compare that interval to the
time required to prepare food at home. They often conclude, rightly or wrongly, that a trip to the fast-food restaurant will take less time than eating at home. This sort of calculation particularly supports home delivery franchises such as Domino’s and Papa John’s, as well as other chains that emphasize saving time. A notable example of time savings in another sort of chain is LensCrafters, which promises people “Glasses fast, glasses in one hour.” H&M is known for its “fast fashion.”

Some McDonaldized institutions combine the emphases on time and money. Domino’s has promised pizza delivery in half an hour, or the pizza is free. Pizza Hut claims it will serve a personal pan pizza in five minutes, or it, too, will be free.

Workers in McDonaldized systems also emphasize the quantitative rather than the qualitative aspects of their work. Since the quality of the work is allowed to vary little, workers focus on how quickly tasks can be accomplished. In a situation analogous to that of the customer, workers are expected to do a lot of work, very quickly, for low pay.

Predictability

McDonald’s also offers predictability, the assurance that products and services will be the same over time and in all locales. Egg McMuffins in New York will be virtually identical to those in Chicago and Los Angeles. Also, those eaten next week or next year will be about the same as those eaten today. Customers take great comfort in knowing that McDonald’s offers no surprises. They know that the next Egg McMuffin they eat will not be awful, but it will not be exceptionally delicious, either. The success of the McDonald’s model suggests that many people have come to prefer a world in which there are few surprises. “This is strange,” notes a British observer, “considering [McDonald’s is] the product of a culture which honours individualism above all.”

The workers in McDonaldized systems also behave in predictable ways. They follow corporate rules as well as the dictates of their managers. In many cases, what they do, and even what they say, is highly predictable.

Control

The fourth element in the success of McDonald’s, control, is exerted over the people who enter McDonald’s. Lines, limited menus, few options, and uncomfortable seats all lead diners to do what management wishes them to do—eat quickly and leave. Furthermore, the drive-through window invites diners to leave before they eat. In the Domino’s model, customers never enter in the first place.
The people who work in McDonaldized organizations are also controlled to a high degree, usually more blatantly and directly than customers. They are trained to do a limited number of tasks in precisely the way they are told to do them. This control is reinforced by the technologies used and the way the organization is set up to bolster this control. Managers and inspectors make sure that workers toe the line.

A Critique of McDonaldization: The Irrationality of Rationality

McDonaldization offers powerful advantages. In fact, efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control through nonhuman technology (that is, technology that controls people rather than being controlled by them) can be thought of not only as the basic components of a rational system but also as the powerful advantages of such a system. However, rational systems inevitably spawn irrationalities. The downside of McDonaldization will be dealt with most systematically under the heading of the irrationality of rationality; in fact, paradoxically, the irrationality of rationality can be thought of as the fifth dimension of McDonaldization (see Chapter 7).

Criticism, in fact, can be applied to all facets of the McDonaldizing world. As just one example, at the opening of Euro Disney, a French politician said that it will “bombard France with uprooted creations that are to culture what fast food is to gastronomy.” McDonald’s and other purveyors of the fast-food model spend billions of dollars each year detailing the benefits of their system. Critics of the system, however, have few outlets for their ideas. For example, no one sponsors commercials between Saturday morning cartoons warning children of the dangers associated with fast-food restaurants.

Nonetheless, a legitimate question may be raised about this critique of McDonaldization: Is it animated by a romanticization of the past, an impossible desire to return to a world that no longer exists? Some critics do base their critiques on nostalgia for a time when life was slower and offered more surprises, when at least some people (those who were better off economically) were freer, and when one was more likely to deal with a human being than a robot or a computer. Although they have a point, these critics have undoubtedly exaggerated the positive aspects of a world without McDonald’s, and they have certainly tended to forget the liabilities associated with earlier eras. As an example of the latter, take the following anecdote about a visit to a pizzeria in Havana, Cuba, which in some respects is decades behind the United States:

The pizza’s not much to rave about—they scrimp on tomato sauce, and the dough is mushy.
It was about 7:30 P.M., and as usual the place was standing-room-only, with people two deep jostling for a stool to come open and a waiting line spilling out onto the sidewalk.

The menu is similarly Spartan. . . . To drink, there is tap water. That’s it—no toppings, no soda, no beer, no coffee, no salt, no pepper. And no special orders.

A very few people are eating. Most are waiting. . . . Fingers are drumming, flies are buzzing, the clock is ticking. The waiter wears a watch around his belt loop, but he hardly needs it; time is evidently not his chief concern. After a while, tempers begin to fray.

But right now, it’s 8:45 P.M. at the pizzeria, I’ve been waiting an hour and a quarter for two small pies. 

Few would prefer such a restaurant to the fast, friendly, diverse offerings of, say, Pizza Hut. More important, however, critics who revere the past do not seem to realize that we are not returning to such a world. In fact, fast-food restaurants have begun to appear even in Havana (and many more are likely after the death of Fidel Castro). 

The increase in the number of people crowding the planet, the acceleration of technological change, the increasing pace of life—all this and more make it impossible to go back to the world, if it ever existed, of home-cooked meals, traditional restaurant dinners, high-quality foods, meals loaded with surprises, and restaurants run by chefs free to express their creativity.

It is more valid to critique McDonaldization from the perspective of a conceivable future. Unfettered by the constraints of McDonaldized systems, but using the technological advances made possible by them, people could have the potential to be far more thoughtful, skillful, creative, and well rounded than they are now. In short, if the world were less McDonaldized, people would be better able to live up to their human potential.

We must look at McDonaldization as both “enabling” and “constraining.” McDonaldized systems enable us to do many things we were not able to do in the past; however, these systems also keep us from doing things we otherwise would do. McDonaldization is a “double-edged” phenomenon.

Illustrating the Dimensions of McDonaldization: The Case of IKEA

An interesting example of McDonaldization, especially since it has its roots in Sweden rather than the United States, is IKEA. In fact, IKEA is so important there is work on the “IKEAization of France,” although it could be that it is more the IKEAization of society as a whole that is being discussed. IKEA's
popularity stems from the fact that it offers, at very low prices, trendy furniture based on well-known Swedish designs. It has a large and devoted clientele throughout the world. What is interesting about IKEA from the point of view of this book is how well it fits the dimensions of McDonaldization. The similarities go beyond that, however. For example, just as with the opening of a new McDonald’s, there is great anticipation over the opening of the first IKEA in a particular location. Just the rumor that one was to open in Dayton, Ohio, led to the following statement: “We here in Dayton are peeing our collective pants waiting for the IKEA announcement.”

IKEA is also a global phenomenon that sells in many countries both its signature products and a few (e.g., chopsticks in China) more adapted to local tastes and interests.

In terms of efficiency, IKEA offers one-stop shopping for an extraordinary range of furniture. In general, there is no waiting for one’s purchases since a huge warehouse is attached to each store (one often enters through the warehouse), with large numbers of virtually everything in stock. Much of the efficiency at IKEA stems from the fact that customers are expected to do a lot of the work:

- Unlike McDonald’s, there are relatively few IKEAs in any given area; thus, customers most often spend many hours driving great distances to get to a store. This is known as the “IKEA road trip.”
- On entry, customers are expected to take a map to guide themselves through the huge and purposely maze-like store (IKEA hopes, like Las Vegas casinos, that customers will get “lost” in the maze and wander for hours, spending money as they go). There are few employees to guide anyone, but there are paths painted on the floor that customers can follow on their own.
- Also upon entry, customers are expected to grab a pencil and an order form and to write down the shelf and bin numbers for the larger items they wish to purchase; a yellow shopping bag is to be picked up on entry for smaller items. There is little in the way of help available as customers wander through the stores. Customers can switch from a shopping bag to a shopping cart after leaving the showroom and entering the marketplace, where they can pick up other smaller items.
- If customers eat in the cafeteria, they are expected to clean their tables after eating. There is even this helpful sign: “Why should I clean my own table? At IKEA, cleaning your own table at the end of your meal is one of the reasons you paid less at the start.”
- Most of the furniture sold is unassembled in flat packages, and customers are expected to load most of the items (except the largest) into their cars themselves. After they get home, they must break down (and dispose of) the packaging and then put their furniture together. If the furniture does not fit into their cars, they can rent a truck on site to transport it home or have it delivered, although the cost tends to be high, especially relative to the price paid for the furniture.
- To get a catalog, customers often sign up online.

In these ways, and others, IKEA has its customers do unpaid work.
Calculability is at the heart of IKEA, especially the idea that what is offered is at a very low price: “IKEA uses a technique called ‘bulla bulla,’ in which a bunch of items are purposely jumbled in bins, to create the impression of volume and, therefore, inexpensiveness.” Like a McDonald’s “Dollar Menu,” one can get a lot of furniture—a roomful, even a houseful—at bargain prices. As with value meals, IKEA customers feel they are getting value for their money. (The large cafeteria offers low-priced food, including the chain’s signature Swedish meatballs—15 of them with mashed potatoes for $4.99—and its 99-cent breakfasts.) However, as is always the case in McDonaldized settings, low price generally means that the quality is inferior, and it is often the case that IKEA products fall apart in relatively short order. IKEA also emphasizes the huge size of its stores, which often approach 300,000 square feet or about four to five football fields. This mammoth size leads the consumer to believe that there will be a lot of furniture offered (and there is) and that, given the store’s reputation, most of it will be highly affordable.

Of course, there is great predictability about any given IKEA—large parking lots; a supervised children’s play area (where IKEA provides personnel, because of liability issues as well as the fact that supervised children give parents more time and peace of mind to shop and spend); the masses of inexpensive, Swedish-designed furniture; exit through the warehouse and the checkout counters; boxes to take home with furniture requiring assembly; and so on. An IKEA is a highly controlled environment, mainly in the sense that the maze-like structure of the store virtually forces the consumer to traverse the entire place and to see virtually everything it has to offer. If one tries to take a path other than that set by IKEA, one is likely to become lost and disoriented. There seems to be no way out that does not lead to the checkout counter, where you pay for your purchases.

There are a variety of irrationalities associated with the rationality of IKEA, most notably the poor quality of most of its products. Although the furniture is purportedly easy to assemble, many are more likely to think of it as “impossible-to-assemble.” Then there are the often long hours required to get to an IKEA, to wander through it, to drive back home, and then to assemble the purchases.

The Advantages of McDonaldization

This discussion of the fundamental characteristics of McDonaldization makes it clear that, despite irrationalities, McDonald’s (and other McDonaldized systems such as IKEA) has succeeded so phenomenally for good, solid reasons. Many knowledgeable people, such as the economic columnist Robert Samuelson, strongly support the McDonald’s business model. Samuelson confesses to “openly worship[ing] McDonald’s,” and he thinks of it as “the greatest restaurant chain in
history.” In addition, McDonald’s offers many praiseworthy programs that benefit society, such as its Ronald McDonald Houses, which permit parents to stay with children undergoing treatment for serious medical problems; job-training programs for teenagers; programs to help keep its employees in school; efforts to hire and train the disabled; the McMasters program, aimed at hiring senior citizens; an enviable record of hiring and promoting minorities; and a social responsibility program with goals of improving the environment and animal welfare.

The process of McDonaldization also moved ahead dramatically undoubtedly because it has led to positive changes. Here are a few specific examples of such changes:

- A wider range of goods and services is available to a much larger portion of the population than ever before.
- Availability of goods and services depends far less than before on time or geographic location; people can now do things that were impossible previously, such as text message, e-mail, arrange dates online, make online purchases, and participate in online social networks, in the middle of the night.
- People are able to acquire what they want or need almost instantaneously and get it far more conveniently.
- Goods and services are of far more uniform quality; at least some people even get better-quality goods and services than before McDonaldization.
- Far more economical alternatives to high-priced, customized goods and services are widely available; therefore, people can afford things (e.g., IKEA furniture rather than handmade furniture) they could not previously afford.
- Fast, efficient goods and services are available to a population that is working longer hours and has fewer hours to spare.
- In a rapidly changing, unfamiliar, and seemingly hostile world, the comparatively stable, familiar, and safe environment of a McDonaldized system offers comfort.
- Because of quantification, consumers can more easily compare competing products.
- Certain products (for example, exercise and diet programs) are safer in a carefully regulated and controlled system.
- People are more likely to be treated similarly, no matter their race, sex, sexual orientation, or social class.
- Organizational and technological innovations are more quickly and easily diffused through networks of identical operators.
- The most popular products of one society are more easily disseminated to others.

What Isn’t McDonaldized?

This chapter should give you a sense of McDonaldization and of the range of phenomena to be discussed throughout this book. In fact, such a wide range of phenomena can be linked to McDonaldization that you may begin to wonder what isn’t McDonaldized. Is McDonaldization the equivalent of modernity? Is everything contemporary McDonaldized?
Although much of the world has been McDonaldized, at least three aspects of contemporary society have largely escaped the process:

- Those aspects traceable to an earlier, “premodern” age. A good example is the mom-and-pop grocery store.
- New businesses that have sprung up or expanded, at least in part, as a reaction against McDonaldization. For instance, people fed up with McDonaldized motel rooms in Holiday Inns or Motel 6s can stay instead in a bed-and-breakfast (see Chapter 8), which offers a room in a private home with personalized attention and a homemade breakfast from the proprietor. Or they can go online and use Airbnb to rent private apartments virtually anywhere in the world.
- Those aspects suggesting a move toward a new, “postmodern” age. For example, in a postmodern society, “modern” high-rise housing projects make way for smaller, more livable communities.

Thus, although McDonaldization is ubiquitous, there is more to the contemporary world than McDonaldization. It is a very important social process, but it is far from the only process transforming contemporary society.

Are In-N-Out Burger and Pret A Manger Antitheses of McDonaldization?

There are degrees of McDonaldization. *McDonaldization is not an all-or-nothing process.* Not all fast-food restaurants are as McDonaldized as McDonald’s. In fact, fast food is not the problem. Most societies throughout history have had fast foods of all types, and they have not been problematic. There are many fine fast-food restaurants in the United States and the world (although few are part of large chains). Then there are the best of the street vendors in large cities such as New York who attract long lines of customers because of their fine and fast food and low prices. In fact, there is now an award in New York City, called the “Vendy,” that goes to the best purveyors of the city’s street food.

In this section, however, we focus on two relatively small fast-food chains—In-N-Out Burger and Pret A Manger—that are far less McDonaldized than the highly McDonaldized chains dealt with thus far in this book. They have many devotees who love them, often for their non-McDonaldized qualities. Does this mean that these fast-food chains are the antitheses of McDonaldized systems?

_In-N-Out Burger_

In-N-Out Burger is a relatively small West Coast chain with almost 300 restaurants. Like McDonald’s and other fast-food chains, it has its roots in Southern California in the first half of the 20th century. (In-N-Out Burger began operations in 1948.) Unlike McDonald’s, as well as the other major chains of
fast-food restaurants, In-N-Out has not gone public; it remains under private ownership and has resisted many efforts to buy it and transform it into a public corporation. While it has expanded gradually over the years, it has, at least thus far, resisted the pressures and temptations to expand throughout the United States and to become a global operation. For this reason and many others, Stacy Perman argues that In-N-Out Burger is “the antithesis of McDonald’s.”

Similarly, the subtitle of Perman’s book contends that In-N-Out is “the fast-food chain that breaks all the rules.” It could be argued that those rules are the principles of McDonaldization outlined in this book and because In-N-Out Burger, at least in Perman’s view, does not adhere to them, it is the antithesis of McDonald’s. The objective in this section is to seek to determine whether or not this is the case.

Like all McDonaldized systems, In-N-Out Burger has certainly emphasized efficiency in various ways. Most notably, it was originally only a drive-through restaurant that focused on allowing customers to get their food as quickly as possible without ever leaving their cars. In fact, Perman points out that In-N-Out Burger billed itself as “California’s first drive-through,” but she goes further to contend that “in all probability it was the country’s first as well.” The name itself—In-N-Out—implied efficiency (and speed) for the customers; they could get their food and leave without the inefficiency and inconvenience of leaving their cars. Furthermore, In-N-Out Burger’s early motto was “NO DELAY.”

In-N-Out Burger also maximized efficiency by offering a highly limited menu—“three burger items, french fries, soft drinks, lemonade and milkshakes”—an even more limited menu than McDonald’s. The “public” In-N-Out Burger menu has changed little over the years, although a variety of soft drinks are now available. This highly limited menu makes In-N-Out Burger more efficient for both customers (less to choose from) and employees (fewer menu items to prepare) than McDonald’s and its other major competitors. In fact, one of the company slogans is “Ordering as easy as 1, 2, 3.” Interestingly, as we will see below, that efficiency is limited by the existence of a so-called secret menu that greatly expands menu options and therefore reduces efficiency. In fact, In-N-Out Burger now calls it its “not-so-secret menu” and lists the alternatives publicly, including on its website. This serves to reduce efficiency at In-N-Out Burger, but as we will discuss below, it has served other functions that have greatly advantaged this burger chain.

In-N-Out Burger is also highly predictable in various ways. For example, one customer said, “In-N-Out always tastes the same.” Although the more recent restaurants offer indoor seating, the drive-throughs serve to make customer behavior highly predictable because patrons are unable to enter the restaurant and thereby unable to do any number of unanticipated things. The drive-through window also limited what employees could say and do, at least relative
to customers. However, the no-longer-so-secret secret menu has served to increase unpredictability. In its early years, these additional menu items were known only to regular customers, and the secret was shared among them by word of mouth. Because its secret menu is now public and the various items included in it are visible to all, In-N-Out Burger has turned its secret menu into something that is highly predictable.

In terms of calculability, the limited menu (even with the addition of the secret menu) makes it relatively easy for customers to estimate the cost of a meal. In addition, as is true of all fast-food chains, the prices are low, and customers know (or at least believe) that they are going to get a lot of food for little money. The preparation and serving of food is fast, but not nearly as fast as at McDonald’s since food is not prepared until it is ordered. For example, custom cooking of a burger with fresh ingredients can take as much as 12 minutes. Overall, there is less emphasis on quantitative factors at In-N-Out Burger and more on quality. This is reflected in the beef that was used in the company’s early years:

All hamburgers were made from fresh, 100 percent additive-, filler-, and preservative-free beef. . . . In-N-Out’s butcher boned, hand-cut the chuck’s front ribs and shoulder . . . no other part of the steer was ever used . . . , ground it up into beef, and molded it into hamburger patties before delivering them fresh to each store.179

Later, when the company and its facilities were much larger,

specially selected cow and steer chucks arrived at the antiseptically clean commissary. The chain proudly proclaimed that it paid “a premium to purchase fresh, high-quality beef chucks” . . . To better enforce In-N-Out’s quality standards, each chuck was inspected before being accepted. After In-N-Out’s inspection, a team of skilled butchers boned and removed the meat.180

The careful way in which this is worded is interesting and revealing; we will return to it below.

There is control at In-N-Out, but it is not nearly as great as that at McDonald’s. The drive-through gave, and continues to give, In-N-Out great control over customers as well as over workers because of their limited contact with customers. In at least one way, In-N-Out Burger has even more control than McDonald’s. McDonald’s has many franchises, and while systems are in place to exert control over them, franchisees do have a measure of autonomy and can act in ways that the corporation does not sanction. In contrast, In-N-Out Burger has refused to franchise its operations because it saw franchising “as a surefire path to losing quality control.”181 Since it owns all of its restaurants, In-N-Out has great control over them.
Thus, in various ways, In-N-Out Burger *is* McDonaldized, and because of that, as well as for other reasons, it has a number of irrationalities. For example, its great popularity and the enormous devotion of many of its customers have led to at least some inefficiencies such as long lines at the drive-through and in the restaurants. The use of fresh beef and raw potatoes can lead to more unpredictable results than the use of frozen beef and potatoes. It is far more difficult to control raw beef and fresh potatoes than frozen beef and potatoes. McDonald’s gave up on fresh potatoes decades ago because of the mess and smell of rotting potato peels.

While In-N-Out Burger touts its quality, it is not clear that what it offers is truly high-quality products. Take, for example, the beef discussed above. We are told that the company pays a premium for the beef, and it is “high quality,” “specially selected,” inspected, and processed in antiseptically clean commissaries; it is hand cut; no additives, preservatives, or fillers are added to the hamburger; and the preformed hamburgers are delivered fresh to the restaurants. However, we are not told the key fact about the beef, that is, its USDA grade. Top-grade beef is prime or choice, but since the company does not use those terms to describe its beef, we can assume that it uses lower-grade beef. Furthermore, it admits to using beef from “cows” (females); the best beef comes from steers (young males), and no self-respecting steakhouse would ever sell cow meat.

While In-N-Out Burger is McDonaldized in various ways, what is most interesting about it is the degree to which it is not McDonaldized, or at least less McDonaldized than, say, McDonald’s itself. Some of this is implied above. For example, the use of fresh beef and potatoes means that it must operate in a less rationalized manner than its competitors that use frozen beef and potatoes. For example, it is less efficient to ship and store fresh potatoes than those that are frozen. Hand-peeled and hand-cut potatoes that are fried raw will be less uniform than those cut by machine. Lettuce that is leafed by hand will not be as uniform as that which is handled industrially. In-N-Out Burger has relied more on humans and less on nonhuman technologies than most other chains.

In-N-Out Burger has worked hard to limit the McDonaldization of the work in its restaurants—to reduce the creation of “McJobs” (see Chapters 5 and 6). This is clear in the area of employee pay and benefits: “From the start, In-N-Out paid its employees more than the going rate (associates always made at least two to three dollars above minimum wage) and was an early practitioner of profit sharing . . . an expansive set of benefits under which part-time workers received free meals, paid vacations, 401(k) plans, and flexible schedules. Full-time associates also received medical, dental, vision, life and travel insurance.”

As a result of such policies, In-N-Out Burger had the lowest turnover rate in the fast-food industry. It is likely a bit of hyperbole, but Perman claims that In-N-Out Burger “was a place where people genuinely enjoyed getting up in the
morning and going to work.” No data are presented to support this view, and it is certainly the case that at least some employees didn’t like going to work, didn’t like the job, and quit because of that. Furthermore, it is not clear that the work itself is any more challenging or demanding than the work at McDonald’s.

In-N-Out Burger’s customers seem to like eating there more than those who eat at the other major chains. In fact, many customers seem quite devoted to it. Perman has a lot to say about this, but again she has no hard data; all she has is anecdotal evidence. Nonetheless, it does seem that In-N-Out Burger has more devoted customers than does McDonald’s. Rather than simply having millions of customers, In-N-Out Burger has devoted fans, and it has arguably “been elevated to cult status.”

The reason for the loyalty and devotion of In-N-Out Burger’s customers is traceable to a large extent to its ability to be, or at least appear to be, enchanted. There is a magic, a mystery, a “mystique” about In-N-Out Burger that is not rivaled anywhere else in the fast-food industry. The best example of this is the chain’s “secret menu,” which, at first, was known only to “those in the know.” Now, however, as was pointed out above, the secret has been made public (hence it is no longer a secret, if it ever really was). Nonetheless, the existence of this secret menu helped to enchant the chain, at least in its early years. By the way, the no-longer-secret menu is the following:

- Double Meat
- Grilled Cheese
- 3 x 3 (3 beef patties and 3 slices of cheese)
- 4 x 4 (same as 3 x 3, plus one more patty and cheese slice)
- Protein Style (burger wrapped in lettuce rather than a bun)
- Animal Style (a mustard-cooked beef patty)

While there is some originality here (especially the last two menu items), half of the secret menu simply involves the supersizing found in many other fast-food chains.

Pret A Manger

Pret A Manger is a British company, although the name is French, meaning “ready to eat.” It was founded in London in 1968 and remains based primarily in Great Britain, although about 70 have opened in the United States (New York, Washington, D.C., Chicago, and Boston), and more are promised. As of this writing, there are about 335 Pret A Manger restaurants in the world. Unlike In-N-Out and McDonald’s, Pret A Manger does not sell hamburgers. While it sells a variety of foods (salads, soups, wraps, desserts, etc.), Pret is best known for its high-quality sandwiches such as...
Balsamic Chicken & Avocado and Egg Salad & Arugula. Like In-N-Out, Pret avoids the use of preservatives and chemicals. Pret does not make its sandwiches to order, but it does have them made in the shops several times a day. Those sandwiches and other products that have not sold at the end of the day are given away to charities.

While Pret strives in many ways to be the antithesis of McDonald’s, a third of the company was sold to McDonald’s about a decade ago. Following that sale, the company was pushed in the direction of the McDonald’s model of great, perhaps over-, expansion, resulting in declining sales and closed restaurants. McDonald’s sold its share in 2008, and the majority of the company is now owned by a private equity firm. Since then, Pret seems to have found its footing and niche once again and is expanding without losing the quality that makes it distinctive.

Nevertheless, Pret, like In-N-Out, has the basic characteristics of McDonaldization:

- There is an emphasis on efficiency and speed. The objective is to serve a customer within 60 seconds. While sandwiches are made fresh several times a day, they are wrapped and stored in cases where they can be grabbed by customers and eaten in the shop but more likely on the go. On the issue of speed, the company’s chief executive said, “Pret a Manger does mean ready to eat—kapow!—not ready to wait.”

- Control is exercised over the employees by mystery shoppers who visit the shops and evaluate the workers. In addition, a thick manual dictates what employees are supposed to do: “It states, for example, that employees should be ‘bustling around and being active’ on the floor, not ‘standing around looking bored.’ It encourages them to occasionally hand out free coffee or cakes to regulars, and not ‘hide your true character’ with customers.” Further control is exercised by the fact that after they have been working there for three months, employees must pass a quiz on basic Pret procedures. On the job, Hot Chefs do not set oven temperature controls by themselves, but rather the “ovens are preprogrammed for each baked item.”

- Predictability is ensured by giving employees recipe cards detailing what should go into, and how to prepare, various foods. They also have access to pictures of how, for example, sandwiches should look when they are finished. Copying the picture leads to highly predictable sandwiches.

- Many aspects of Pret’s operations are highly quantified. For example, in one case, a kitchen-supervisor-in-training had goals that included “six bowls of granola within 1 minute and 17 seconds; 24 edamame packs within 6 minutes and 2 seconds; 20 containers of honey-granola within 6 minutes and 17 seconds. Berry
bowls, muesli bowls, porridge toppings—the list goes on. The food is taken to the shop floor as soon as it is finished.\(^{193}\)

- Pret A Manger has its irrationalities, including the fact that much of its food is high in calories, salt, and sugar. While the emphasis on fresh and natural ingredients seems to imply that the food is also healthy, the fact is that many of the items sold at Pret are quite unhealthy. For example, a British newspaper revealed that the Posh Cheddar & Pickle Baguette “contains almost 800 calories and 15.6g of saturated fat . . . not dissimilar to a Big Mac and medium fries.”\(^{194}\)

While it is McDonaldized in various ways and to at least some degree, Pret, like In-N-Out, has various characteristics that seem to be at variance with the McDonald’s model. Among other things, there is the high quality of much of its food, the high level of satisfaction among its employees and their comparatively low turnover rate, and the fact that Pret, like In-N-Out, has its devoted fans and has become something of a cult.

Overall, we are led to conclude that while there are important differences between In-N-Out and Pret and the highly McDonaldized chains like McDonald’s, there are far more similarities than differences; they do adhere to the basic principles of McDonaldization. Thus, while In-N-Out and Pret are different in many ways, they are certainly not the antitheses of McDonald’s and other highly McDonaldized systems.

A Look Ahead

Because this book is a work in the social sciences, it cannot merely assert that McDonaldization is spreading throughout society; it must present evidence for that assertion. Numerous and diverse examples in each chapter demonstrate the degree to which McDonaldization has penetrated society and the accelerating rate of that penetration.

The focus throughout is on the impact of McDonaldized systems (e.g., fast-food restaurants, universities) on people, especially the people—consumers and workers—who are found in them. Thus, after a discussion of the past, present, and future of McDonaldization in Chapter 2, Chapters 3 and 4 concentrate on the consumers in McDonaldized settings. The focus is on the four basic dimensions of McDonaldization outlined in this chapter: efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control—and the ways in which they affect consumers. Chapters 5 and 6 shift the focus to the workers, the producers, in those settings and their McDonaldized occupations, especially their McJobs. As was the case with consumers, workers are discussed from the perspective of the four dimensions of McDonaldization.

The remainder of the book is more analytical. In Chapter 7, the fifth and paradoxical element of McDonaldization—the irrationality of rationality—is
explored. Although much of the book criticizes McDonaldization, this chapter presents the critique most clearly and directly, discussing a variety of irrationalities, the most important of which is dehumanization. Chapter 8 offers ways of dealing with an increasingly McDonaldized world for individual consumers and workers, as well as groups and organizations, bothered, if not enraged, by McDonaldization. Finally, Chapter 9 discusses the continued expansion of McDonaldization primarily under the heading of globalization. We will also discuss the possibility that a process of deMcDonaldization is under way in the form of seemingly contradictory processes of Starbucksization, eBayization, and the expansion of Web 2.0 (e.g., social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter). We conclude that, while there is some evidence of deMcDonaldization, it is far from enough to allow us to conclude that McDonaldization is anywhere near its end. Rather, it leads us to a more nuanced sense of the McDonaldization process.