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The worldwide fast food culture - chances and risks

Dangers of McDonald's rapid global expansion



Illustration 1: McWorld

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1 Introduction

McDonald's Golden arches – the symbol of globalization. McDonald's is not only a new kind of food. It is a new kind of eating and of culture. Closely linked to the process of globalization, the company is spreading over the world at an incredible pace. Each year, McDonald's expands into new, exotic countries and increases the number of stores by a whole lot in the countries where it had already set foot.

In the past, especially here in Europe, there were many concerns about the company's working conditions, health risks and the taste of its fast food as well as environmental effects through packaging waste. However, the focus of this work will be shifted towards the cultural and economical effects of McDonald's worldwide expansion. Since it is the largest one in the sector, the McDonald's corporation is used in this work to represent the whole fast food business.

Central questions will be how the localization process of this global corporation takes place in the different cultural settings on earth and what the consequences of this development are for them. Does the expansion lead to the ideal of the "Global Village" or will it even increase tensions worldwide? Is it a threat to local cultures and traditions, resulting in one homogenous global culture? What kind of economical dangers arise with franchised chains?

As we can see today, the success of the fast food chains was not limited to the USA. The role that fast food plays in nutrition is increasing on a global scale, but there are regional differences regarding its economical and cultural significance as well as its acceptance in different societies.

2 Origins in the USA

The USA is the birthplace of McDonald's and the fast food industry. More children in the USA can recognize Ronald McDonald than their own president. The only person that is more famous than Ronald McDonald is Santa Claus.¹ In 2000, Americans spent more money on fast food (110 billion \$) than on education, computers and movies altogether.² Impressive 96 percent of all Americans eat at least once a year at a McDonald's restaurant.³ Each day, about one quarter of the US population visits a fast food restaurant.⁴ As these numbers suggest, fast food plays a big role in the American society. The menu of the Americans can reveal more about their culture than art or literature, because it affects a lot more people. Today, fast food is as much an integral part of the American Way of Life as the car or the family home. So how did this whole fast food thing start?

2.1 The beginnings

McDonald's has its name from the two brothers Maurice and Richard McDonald who opened the first "hamburger drive in" with the motto "fast service, low prices, high sales volume"⁵ in 1948 in California. This restaurant sold hamburgers for 15 cents and cheeseburgers for 19 cents⁶, half the price that was usual to this time. The two brothers were able to sell for such low prices because of their new concept, which includes self-service, disposable tableware and a reduction of menu items towards the most successful ones. Those standardized items were already prepared before the customer even ordered them. Because of the limited range of items, it was possible to split up the production process into many small tasks that could be completed by low skilled and low paid workers, just like the assembly-line work in car manufacturing that Henry Ford introduced forty years earlier.⁷ It is remarkable that McDonald's still hangs on to these principles today.

Even though the two brothers established a new kind of restaurant, it was still far from being a restaurant chain. The real founder of today's McDonald's corporation is

¹ Love 1995, p. 2 and Royle 2000, p. 16

² Schlosser 2002, p. 11

³ Love 1995, p. 3

⁴ Schlosser 2002, p. 12

⁵ Schupp 1998, p. 19

⁶ Schmidt 1997, p. 66

⁷ Love 1995, p. 16

Ray Kroc, originally a salesperson for mixers, who bought the restaurant from the two brothers, having been amazed by its efficiency on previous visits. He was able to spread the new restaurant quickly in the whole nation through franchising.⁸ For Kroc, franchising was the ideal means of having control over appearance, the menu and food preparation (he gave out handbooks about the right preparation of the burger), without bearing any financial risks if the restaurant was not profitable enough. Other factors that contributed to the enormous success of McDonald's were its influence as market leader on suppliers, which reduced costs, and of course, the advertising, which was focused around children and the entertaining and recreational character of the restaurant.⁹

2.2 Cultural and economical effects

If you pay a visit to the USA today, you can experience the negative effects that this development has with your own eyes. Driving through a normal American town or suburb on the highway, all you can see are the signs of different fast food chains on each side of the street, repeating in an endless loop. Fast food chains are so dominant that they altered the face of American towns in an impressive way.



Illustration 2: advertising besides the road

⁸ Schupp 1998, p. 20

⁹ Schupp 1998, p. 21

Less visible, but perhaps even more important, are the effects that McDonald's dominant position in the food business has got on its suppliers and the American economy as a whole. Approximately one out of eight persons in the US workforce has eventually worked at a McDonald's.¹⁰ That is the reason why it is appropriate to call the US a "fast food nation," just as the original title of Schlosser's book suggests.¹¹ Schlosser describes the negative effects of this spread:

- The potato industry is split between three huge companies, Simplot, Lamb Weston and McCain who control 80 percent of the American market for deep frozen French fries.¹² Either they bought out their smaller competitors or they ran them out of business by reducing costs using their monopoly. Losers of this price war are the potato farmers, who carry the greatest risk if a crop fails while they only get 1 cent of the price of French fries, which is about 1,5 dollars, in return.
- The same can be said about the meat processing industry in the US. Because of the demands of fast food chains and supermarkets, there was a need for faster production, so huge plants - which merged with each other over time - were created to ensure the supply of hamburger patties. Slaughterer used to be the highest paid job in the production of meat, but with the course of industrializing the meat processing, this job was divided into different tasks on the production line. Very low skilled workers could fulfill those tasks – which is the same that McDonald's did with the work of a cook in the fast food business. However, the work in those "meat processing plants" with its high speed of production lines and sharp knives is even worse. It is so dangerous that mostly only poor illegal immigrants take the job.¹³ The low wages and the numerous injuries without any social security lead to the development of ghettos with social problems such as crime, poverty, drugs and homelessness around those plants, right in the center of the USA.¹⁴

The above factors make it reasonable to say that the spread of McDonald's and fast food in general led to a homogenous culture in the USA. Even though fast food is commonly associated with cheap food inside the States, it is an important part of the American Way of Life. The cultural effects of McDonald's are widely accepted.

However, it is frustrating that the average American consumer rarely thinks of the economical effects for his country when he buys a hamburger.

¹⁰ Schlosser 2002, p. 14

¹¹ Schlosser 2002

¹² Schlosser 2002, p. 167

¹³ Schlosser 2002, p. 239

¹⁴ Schlosser 2002, p. 214

3 McDonald's worldwide expansion

Today, cultural values and production methods of the US fast food society are exported into the whole world. Besides Hollywood, blue jeans and pop music, fast food is the most popular export of American culture.

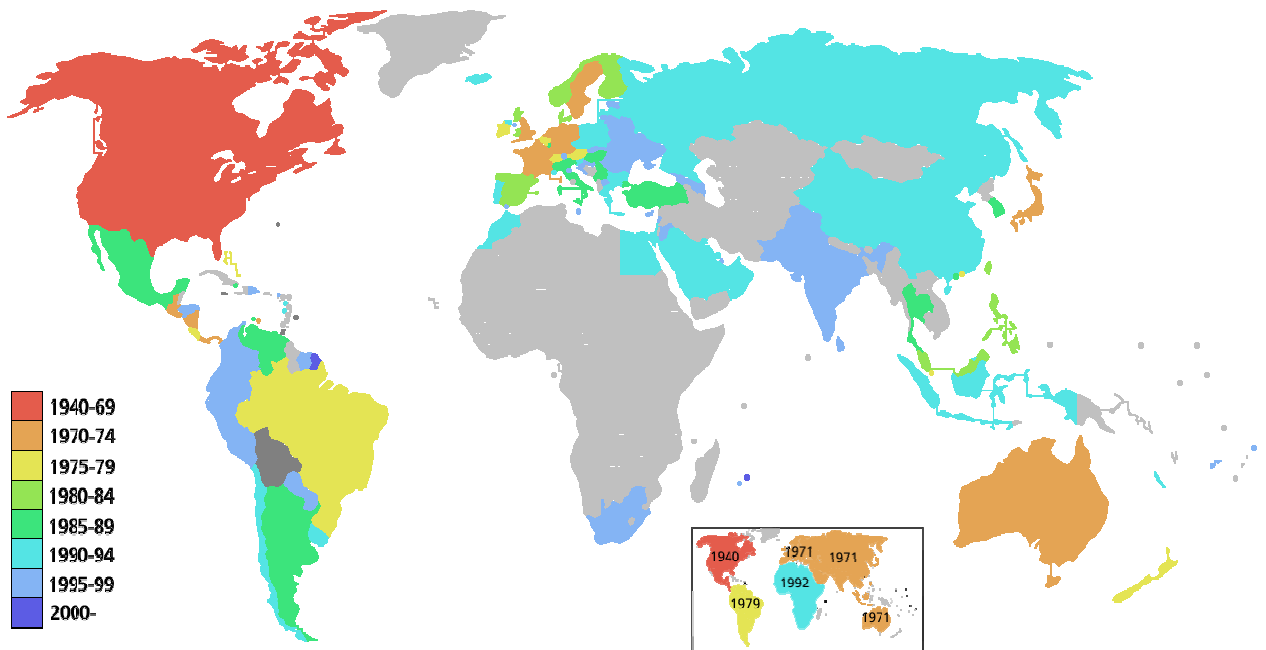


Illustration 3: McDonald's locations and opening dates worldwide

It began in the 1970s when McDonald's first started to go overseas to look for new markets. The first McDonald's in Europe opened in 1971 in the Netherlands and in Germany. Still in the same year that McDonald's was introduced to Europe, it also came to Japan. After the fall of the iron curtain in 1990, it expanded to the emerging markets of Russia and later to China.¹⁵ Today, just as soon as a middle class who can afford the food establishes in a given country, McDonald's will try to expand into it. However, there are only very few McDonald's restaurants in Africa and other third world countries because their underdeveloped economies are not yet interesting for the company. Anyhow, if you can find a McDonald's restaurant in those countries, then only in touristic centers like Kenya.¹⁶ You will not find any McDonald's in the majority of strictly Muslim countries, because there is hatred about anything American.

¹⁵ Schupp 1998, pages 92 and 97

¹⁶ Schupp 1998

How was McDonald's able to spread into foreign markets with globalization? When the expansion began, most countries did not have locally based fast food corporations, so there was no competition. On the other hand, the company had to overcome a number of obstacles, because it attempted to change people's eating habits and to impose the McDonald's system as well as the American culture upon host countries.¹⁷

3.1 Germany

If you ask random people on the street about the origin of the McDonald's restaurant, just as a student from the University of Constance did in 1983¹⁸ in downtown Constance, it is likely that most of them know that McDonald's is not a German invention.

In Europe, restaurants were bounded to traditions such as changing the tablecloth after each guest, waiters in black ties, wine stewards and multicourse meals.¹⁹ Family restaurants did not exist, so eating out was always something special for the middle class. How was McDonald's able to sell hamburgers to Germans who love their beer, but not their kids?²⁰

3.1.1 Initial difficulties

Because of the traditions in the food market, McDonald's first tried to adapt to those cultural differences by modifying its menu and changing the look of the restaurant so that it would appeal to the German consumer.²¹ Up to that time, hamburgers were not known as food but as residents of Hamburg, hard rolls were well known but no one had seen the soft buns around the hamburger before, and there were complaints that the milkshakes were frozen. To minimize the cultural shock, beer was added to the menu and the interior of the restaurant was changed towards an excessive use of dark colored wood and low light, so that one restaurant in Munich even looked like a German beer hall.²² The cozy design did not look inviting to people who passed by and the cheap beer attracted a young hangout crowd rather than families. The first restaurants looked native to the Germans now, but they lost the image of the family-orientated restaurant. "The German public is not a kid-loving public. There are restaurants where a dog is more welcome than a kid"²³, said the first manager of McDonald's Germany, but he

¹⁷ Royle 2000, p. 27

¹⁸ Hofmann 1983, p. 51

¹⁹ Love 1995, p. 414

²⁰ Alfino 1998, p. 48

²¹ Love 1995, p. 433

²² Love 1995, p. 433

²³ Love 1995, p. 434

also states that his first McDonald's restaurants were not child-friendly either. In the first six years of operation, McDonald's Germany did not make any profit. Only after they changed the look and the menu back to the original, the revenues went up.

This indicates that the people in countries where McDonald's expands to accept the new type of restaurant just as it is and do not even want any changes to the standard design. George Ritzer, an American sociologist (whose theories we will discuss in detail later), explains this phenomena. He states that whenever McDonald's is exported into a new country, only very few of its elements have to be removed to ensure an adaption towards the new setting.²⁴ The reason why this cultural transfer is so easy is that the American culture is not the outcome of specific traditions, but a mixed culture, made up from people of different origins.

3.1.2 Recent developments

Nevertheless, in the following years up to today, McDonald's constantly had to invent new mottos and advertising to set itself apart from its competitors and to hold its market leading position. Adaption was also needed to meet the demands of the cautious German customer. During the BSE crisis that started in 2001, the company's profits went down 15 percent.²⁵ The reaction was to offer more chicken, more fish and more vegetables like salad or the vegetable burger. Of course, it was necessary to start a huge advertising campaign proclaiming these products and the company's efforts to increase control of its meat suppliers. Between 2001 and 2004, the company was in a crisis because the sales went down or ascended only very little. The company's image was that of "relentless globalization, worn-out chairs, greasy French fries, food for lower classes, low wages and fat children"²⁶ There were also rumors about foul ingredients and unwashed hands in the kitchens. Something had to be done. In 2005, a new national manager, Bane Knezevic, came into business. He renovated the restaurants and introduced the McCafé – a coffee shop inside the normal McDonald's restaurant, equipped with comfortable armchairs, offering a large variety of coffee and cake. The inspiration came from his colleges in Australia, who stimulated their demand with gourmet coffees. The idea was tried unsuccessfully in Europe before, but the new manager calculated hard and his McCafé became a huge success. At first, it was hard for him to get the permission of his boss in London, but nowadays, in 2009, his concept is even copied throughout Europe and America.²⁷ By the end of 2008, there were 1333 McDonald's in Germa-

²⁴ Ritzer 2005, p. 156

²⁵ Haslauer 2001

²⁶ Werner 2008

²⁷ Werner 2008

ny, out of which 50 percent included a McCafé.²⁸ Profits went up again, because the restaurant was able to attract new groups of costumers, like the elderly, and to extend its busy hours into the afternoon – the time for coffee and cake in Germany.

3.1.3 Conclusion

The new McDonald's in Germany does not have much in common with the old one anymore. Its restaurants look far more elegant than before. It was also the first time that McDonald's made a major change to its standardized design and limited offer, which proved to be successful. Since McCafé filled in an empty corner of the market, it is no threat to local traditions. The only one that could be harmed by McCafé is Starbucks, but since Starbucks is an imported chain just as much as McDonald's, that fact does not have any impact on local cafés or restaurants.

Similarly, the quintessential part of McDonald's business, the fast food, does not replace traditional ways of eating. As the fieldwork of the student that I referred to earlier shows, McDonald's cannot be classified to one of the two categories - restaurant or snack. In fact, it gained the status of a new location category and is accepted as an additional way of eating.²⁹ It did not replace the traditional takeaways for bratwurst et cetera, neither the typical German restaurant with its social atmosphere. Going through a German town, you will find many more individual takeaways like a bratwurst booth or a doner kebab diner than a McDonald's or a Burger King. In the list of favorite fast foods, the hamburger is placed 8 after pizza, sandwich, grilled chicken and bratwurst.³⁰

Thus, it is possible to say that the homogenous effect of fast food onto the German culture is much smaller than it is in the USA. Because the numbers for sales of fast food are lower in Germany compared to the USA and because of more restrictive laws regarding working conditions, immigration, social welfare and economical surveillance, McDonald's introduction into Germany did not lead to such disastrous economical effects as it did in the USA.

3.2 Japan

The first McDonald's in Japan opened in 1971, right in the center of Tokyo. Today it is the largest restaurant chain in the country and one of the most successful localizations of McDonald's, partly because of the Japanese head of the company, Den Fujita.

²⁸ Reuters 2009

²⁹ Hofmann 1983, p. 131

³⁰ Marketing research from 2008: result of a marketing research

3.2.1 Obstacles to overcome

The Japanese people admire everything Western, but on the other hand, they are anti-foreigner, especially against Americans because they lost the war with them.³¹ So Fujita's conclusion was that if he wants to sell American fast food successfully in Japan, the people had to believe that the company that sells it is 100 percent Japanese. Today most of the Japanese people believe that McDonalds is a local chain.³² Fujita tells the story of Japanese Boy Scouts who went on a trip to Chicago and who were pleasantly surprised to find a McDonald's there.³³

Another problem was the kind of the new food. The normal Japanese food was rice and fish, and they even had a traditional fast food, which was a bowl of noodles. Nevertheless, Fujita was confident that he could introduce the hamburger as a revolutionary product, without any need to adjust the menu to the national tastes. (McDonald's had attempted this localization unsuccessfully in Germany before). He got much attention from the media because of his outrageous statements – all part of his plan to make the hamburger known in Japan. “The reason Japanese people are so short and have yellow skins is because they have eaten nothing but fish and rice for two thousand years, if we eat McDonald's hamburgers and potatoes for a thousand years, we will become taller, our skin will become white, and our hair blond.”³⁴

3.2.2 The bilateral effects of the localization process

Especially the young people in Japan think of America as a social paradise – which stands in strong contrast to the uniform local society they live in. For them, the McDonald's restaurant is the door to the West and they use it like a second home - a way to escape the rules of their parents at home. They spend much time there, doing homework and meeting with friends – and eat only a little bit. This is against the principles of fast food – eat quickly and leave the table fast so someone else can use it – but McDonald's Japan had to adapt to it. Now McDonald's even brings out advertise in which they invite the teenagers to come with their Game Boys or PlayStation Portables and play all night with their friends.

The introduction of fast food to Japan also changed etiquettes, manners and lifestyle.³⁵ Before, it was unimaginable to eat while standing – something that only animals did but not humans. The normal way to eat in Japan was to sit on the floor and eat at

³¹ Love 1995, page 423

³² Ritzer 2005, page 157

³³ Watson 1997, page 181

³⁴ Love 1995, page 423

³⁵ Watson 1997, page 161 and 181

low tables – but the tables in the first McDonald’s restaurants were high and there was not much space so you had to stand. It was also unusual to touch the food with your hands. Even today, the Japanese try to touch only the paper but not the hamburger itself.³⁶ They see hamburgers as a “snack” and not as a full meal.³⁷ Any food with bread is not considered filling in Japan – it is more like a light meal for young people than a dinner for adults. So it has not replaced traditional dinners or lunches. Astonishingly, more recently imported foreign food like Kentucky Fried Chicken or Pizza is considered like a meal, maybe because the taste is less strange to the Japanese.

To sum it all up, the influence of McDonald’s food has been minimal, but the company and the values it represents had a profound impact on public manners in Japan.³⁸

3.3 China

In 1991, the first McDonald’s restaurant opened in Beijing, China, just 2 blocks away from the national plaza (Where the demonstrations for Tibet took place during the Olympics). This restaurant was and still is the largest and top-selling restaurant worldwide.³⁹

In 2006, there were 750 McDonald’s in China and the company is planning to open 100 each year, especially drive - throughs.⁴⁰ That is no wonder if you consider the potential for future economic growth in this country with its 1.2 billion people. The reason why this expansion into China did not take place earlier is that the country’s markets were closed until the middle of the 90’s and that there was no affluent middle class. With the opening of its markets to the world of commerce, many companies came into the country, which led to more wealth for more people – money they could now spend at McDonald’s. Currently, more and more people can afford cars; highways are built all over China – the market for drive-throughs is extremely high.

3.3.1 The McDonald’s “experience”

For the Chinese, McDonald’s represents America and the promise of modernization. Chinese society has changed a lot in recent years and McDonald’s has become a syn-

³⁶ Watson 1997, page 179

³⁷ Watson 1997, page 164

³⁸ Watson 1997, page 182

³⁹ Schupp 1998, page 92

⁴⁰ Reuters 2006

onym to progressive changes that make life more enjoyable in contemporary China.⁴¹ In contrast to the USA, where McDonald's stands for cheap and unhealthy food, the fast food restaurant is a status symbol for the Chinese and they admire its special atmosphere of equality and democracy as well as its cleanliness.

Hosting a banquet is highly competitive in China. The hosts of adjacent tables always try to outdo each other by offering more expensive foods and drinks. To avoid losing your face if you want to host a meal, many people who don't have a whole lot of money go to McDonald's, where the menu is limited and even in value.⁴²

To emphasize the cleanliness and modernity of its restaurants, McDonald's offers short tours through the kitchens in its Beijing restaurants. So far, most of the Chinese people and even the media accept the idea that McDonald's provides healthy and nutritional food – which stands in contrast to the public opinion in America, Europe and in recent years Japan that doubts its quality. But in this context you have to understand that fast food is still a young phenomenon in China – maybe the people's attitude towards fast food changes in just some years.

The restaurant benefits a lot from the symbolism it carries. People, except small children, are not drawn to the restaurant because of the food it offers, but because they like the style of eating and the experience.⁴³ Eating at a fast food restaurant is a social event. There is even fast food tourism from rural provinces in China; people come to McDonald's to "taste America" and make this experience a big story back home.

3.3.2 Influencing the localization process

One of the most interesting aspects of this localization process is the way how the local people appropriated the global fast food restaurant to their needs. McDonald's stands for an elegant restaurant in China, people enjoy relaxing there and to be seen. They can gain status just by eating there. This stands in a huge contrast to the image of McDonald's in the USA – the Chinese have transformed this symbol of America into their own Chinese version of America.⁴⁴ Like the Japanese, the Chinese also took out the fast of the fast food – they spend their free time in the restaurant and hold family rituals there (like birthday or farewell parties). But in contrast to the Japanese, they do not have a negative attitude towards America (well obviously they were not in war with them) and so McDonald's didn't need to hide its American roots – they were even useful to attract more people.

⁴¹ Watson 1997, page 41

⁴² Watson 1997, page 44

⁴³ Watson 1997, page 47

⁴⁴ Watson 1997, page 54

To sum it up, the experience of McDonald's in China is much different than it is in the USA. It has undergone a localization process. It is not the "cheap food" and the efficiency that the Chinese are looking for at McDonalds, but the bridge to the American culture.⁴⁵ Nevertheless, it is possible that in 20 years, the fast food restaurant has intermingled so well with the Chinese culture that everybody thinks it is local, just like it is the case in Japan now.

3.4 Interesting adaptations to different local settings

In general, McDonald's tries to offer a standard set of items worldwide - Big Mac, French fries, and soft drinks. Due to national rules or traditions, this was not possible in every country that the company expanded to, so McDonald's had to substitute or extend the standard products with locally accepted ones. Some examples:⁴⁶

- The American "Quarter Pounder" is called "Hamburger Royal" in countries that use the metric system, because a metric quarter pound would be 10 g heavier than an American one and McDonald's did not want to increase the amount of used meat.
- In Muslim countries, McDonald's offers "Halal"-menus that follow the Islamic rules of food preparation. There is also no ham from pigs (e.g. on the burgers and the breakfast items) because the Koran prohibits to eat meat from pigs.
- There are kosher McDonald's in Jerusalem and in Buenos Aires that follow the Jewish rules of food preparation. E.g. they do not offer cheeseburgers because the mix of milk products with meat is prohibited after those rules.
- Hinduism prohibits the consumption of beef. That is why in India, the "Maharaja Mac," a burger out of lamb meat, or the "Chicken Maharaja Mac," which is a chicken burger, replaces the Big Mac.
- In Japan, you can order a rice burger or a burger with soy sauce.

In areas with exotic languages, McDonald's has also changed the spelling and pronunciation of certain elements:

- In Japan, the original name of McDonald's had been changed to "Makudonarudo" because that sounds nicer in Japanese ears.
- In China, McDonald's is called "Maidanglao" and the Big Mac is a "Juwuba"⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Watson 1997, page 76

⁴⁶ Schneider 2007, p. 65

⁴⁷ Schmidt 1997, p. 71

4 Theoretical approaches

McDonald's rapid global expansion is not only due to the process of globalization, but also due to the linked processes of Americanization and McDonaldization.

	<i>Globalization</i>	<i>Americanization</i>	<i>McDonaldization</i>
Definition	'[T]he compression of the world and the intensification of consciousness of the world as a whole' (Robertson 1992: 8).	The propagation of American ideas, customs, social patterns, industry and capital around the world (Williams 1962).	'[T]he process by which the principles of the fast food restaurant are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world' (Ritzer 2000a: 1).
Culture	Increasing opportunities for self-transformation and bricolage.	Dominance of American consumer and media culture on the world scene.	Consumer culture, especially, but also religion, education, justice and health care, become subject to standardization.

Illustration 4: comparison between attributes of trends that come along with globalization

4.1 McDonaldization

In his book "The McDonaldization of Society,"⁴⁸ the American sociologist George Ritzer introduces a new term, called McDonaldization (defined above). He refers to the classical German sociologist Max Weber. One of the main questions for Weber was to find reasons for the development of capitalism in the Western world during his time (he lived from 1864 until 1920). Key element for this development was the rationalization of economy and society in different areas like administration – leading to the rational bureaucracy,⁴⁹ or changes in lifestyle. Ritzer's term McDonaldization is the modern version of Weber's rationalization concept. Rationalization means to break down a complicated task, e.g to manufacture a car, into many small tasks like tightening a specific screw. Very low skilled workers can do this work on the assembly line, because each worker gets a specific and small task that he can accomplish.

⁴⁸ Ritzer 2008, p. 125

⁴⁹ Bayer 2008, p. 16

The division of labor – the idea that any task can be rationalized – is a central aspect of the McDonaldization theory and the key element of success for the fast food restaurant, as I showed in chapter two. There is no need for a highly skilled cook in a McDonald's restaurant, because the task of food preparation can be divided into many small parts that even students can fulfill. Workers at McDonald's just have to read the manuals of the machines they use to make the food the way it is supposed to be.

4.1.1 Dimensions of McDonaldization

Ritzer's theory consists of four dimensions that are typical for fast food restaurants:⁵⁰

1. **Efficiency:** Always choosing the optimal and fastest way to accomplish something, e.g. to make a burger. It is an advantage for the consumers who can get what they need quickly and without effort.
2. **Calculability:** The idea that quantity is more important than quality. McDonald's equals quantity with quality and wants to make the impression that a large amount of food, prepared in a short amount of time, is the same as a high quality product. The customer gets more food, but its quality and uniqueness are low.
3. **Predictability:** The consumer always knows what kind of service and product he will get, because taste of the burger and behavior of the workers towards customers are standardized worldwide.
4. **Control:** Employees of a McDonald's restaurant have to follow strict rules for food preparation, they have to dress uniformly and they need to smile when receiving orders from customers. A lot of their work is replaced by machines that they can operate in only one way. The McDonald's corporation controls the franchisee of the restaurant. He has to follow the corporation's rules, like getting the materials only from specific suppliers. This includes bread and meat, but also cleaning agent and toilet paper.

Ritzer states that these techniques, which originated from the fast food restaurants, were applied to many other areas in society. He has a very critical attitude towards the increasing domination of these principles in American society and in the rest of the world.

4.1.2 Negative effects of McDonaldization: the "Irrationality of Rationality"

Although the above principles seem to be good for the customer, they are primarily advantageous for the corporation.⁵¹ When a customer thinks that he makes a good deal

⁵⁰ Ritzer 1995, p. 27ff explains those dimensions more detailed

⁵¹ Schmidt 1997, p. 109

by buying fast food, he falls for the illusion of “cheap food, fast service: a win-win situation for the customer” that McDonald’s created in our minds. That is what Ritzer calls the “Irrationality of Rationality.”⁵²

So why should it be efficient for the customer to wait a long time in line and clean up his own mess? Why should he be satisfied with the standardized menu items? (Did you ever try to order a soft drink without ice in a McDonald’s or a medium fried hamburger? – One thing is sure: you will irritate the employee behind the counter and he will try to persuade you to get a standard item.) The reason why the system is efficient for the restaurant is that it shifts its inefficient tasks on to the customers. When you go to a McDonald’s, you spend at least some seconds working for them by seating yourself and cleaning up your own mess. McDonald’s does not only control its employees, but also its customers in a way that you might not yet have noticed: you follow the rules of the restaurant like waiting in line, carrying your own meal and cleaning up after yourself.

McDonald’s is also dehumanizing, towards both, employee and customer. Work in a McDonald’s does not demand a lot of skill, “Any trained monkey could do this job.”⁵³ Employees are not allowed to be creative and to use all their skills, so they are very unlikely to be satisfied by their work. That is why the fast food industry has the highest turnover rate in the US, which is about 300 percent per year,⁵⁴ meaning that an average employee does not stay longer than 4 months. The contact between customer and employee is very impersonal, too. Employees are trained to communicate with customers only in a certain way. Sometimes that gives the impression of speaking to machines rather than to humans:⁵⁵ (“Welcome to McDonald’s ... your order please ... large or small menu? ... do you want any ketchup with it? ... Thank you for coming to McDonald’s and have a nice day”)

Following Ritzer, McDonald’s leads to homogenization because its taste and values are reduced to core elements that the average customer accepts, thus leading to a leveling of cultural values.⁵⁶ The effects of franchising in the USA were already shown in chapter two: there is little difference between regions and between cities. On a global scale, travelers are finding more familiarity and less diversity.⁵⁷

⁵² Ritzer 2008, p. 142

⁵³ Ritzer 2008, p. 153

⁵⁴ Ritzer 2008, p. 153

⁵⁵ Ritzer 1995, p. 224

⁵⁶ Schmidt 1997, p. 111 and Ritzer 1995, p. 212

⁵⁷ Ritzer 2008, p. 152

4.2 Americanization

Weber also introduced the term “Protestant work ethic,”⁵⁸ which describes the spirit of modern capitalism that has its roots in the USA. Americans, regarding their Puritan heritage, were supposed to work hard in order to achieve salvation. The idea of individualism plays a big role in that context, too. Exporting American values - based around the ones I just stated - into other cultures is called Americanization of the world. This term also has a negative connotation, which is “cultural imperialism.”⁵⁹ Cultural imperialism focuses on the influences through another culture that destroy or overlap the original culture in the “invaded” country.

Even though there are many differences between the processes of McDonaldization and Americanization, McDonald’s remains an American symbol. Hence, it is a popular target for demonstrators worldwide who want to protest against American cultural imperialism. In 1999, the French farmer and anti-globalization activist José Bové devastated a McDonald’s restaurant during its construction process to protest against American protective tariffs on the traditional French cheese delicacy “Roquefort.”⁶⁰

In spite of some anti-American feelings, McDonald’s profits largely from the symbolism it carries. Fast food restaurants are a fundamental element of the American Way of Life. In countries that never saw democracy before, they are a way to experience that all-American myth of equality. Whenever McDonald’s starts in a new country, it is perceived as an exotic import. Normally, only very few people can afford to eat there in the beginning. It is a place for the newly rich and young people who value its novelty.⁶¹ The new restaurant gives them the opportunity to prove their identity as true cosmopolitans with global perspectives. In China, where McDonald’s is still a novelty, it provides the opportunity for the people to prove their high status in society.

Nevertheless, over the years, when the novelty fades, the association of McDonald’s with American values loses its mythical character and its beneficial potential to attract customers.

4.3 Contradicting the McDonaldization theory

John Caputo, a Californian who grew up very close to the first McDonald’s and who visited its restaurants worldwide, following its expansion due to globalization, contra-

⁵⁸ Bayer 2008, p. 125

⁵⁹ Beck 2003, p. 56: cultural imperialism is the practice of promoting one’s culture into another, usually from a large and powerful nation into a less important one.

⁶⁰ Ponlevoy 2002

⁶¹ Beck 2003, p. 57

dicts Ritzer's theory. He states that it is not the rational system with the four components of efficiency, calculability, predictability and control that made McDonald's successful on a global scale, but the story of culture, economics, equality and family that the company tells through its advertising, which promotes products of "food, folks and fun."⁶² The American myth encapsulates the symbolism McDonald's carries and from which it benefits on a large. So in his opinion, it was primarily the process of Americanization and not of McDonaldization that led to the company's global success.

The McDonaldization thesis suggests that the consumer has no power over the system by which it is controlled. Nevertheless, this system of control has its limits. The consumer has some power over the system because:

- McDonald's has to adapt to a certain degree to local conditions like tastes, traditions or even the language, as shown in chapter 3.3.
- McDonald's has very different meanings and functions in different parts of the world.⁶³ The process of McDonaldization is not a one-way street; it is influenced by local conditions. E.g. the image of McDonalds in the USA (cheap food) stands in a strong contrast to the one in China (eating at McDonald's is a special event, a taste of the American dream)
- The McDonald's restaurant can serve a diversity of purposes. Individuals can give the "rational" restaurant a meaning by appropriating it to their own need⁶⁴. They can also develop their own identity by taking elements of the restaurant apart and making them part of their own. This is especially true in China and Japan where the "fast" was taken out of the fast food restaurant, converting it into a leisure center for young people.

As indicated above, it can be said that the force of the McDonaldization process towards a homogenous culture is limited. Consumer reactions on McDonaldization processes as well as its unintended consequences lead to different, unpredictable outcomes in each location.⁶⁵ Thus, they force the system – in this case McDonald's by itself – to adapt continuously. The principles of McDonaldization remain valid, but applying these principles to the customer, McDonald's is in a constant process of adjustment and evolution.

⁶² Alfino 1998, p. 50

⁶³ Smart 1999, p. 193

⁶⁴ Beck 2003, p. 56

⁶⁵ Beck 2003, p. 56

5 Conclusion

With evidence from the preceding chapters, what can be said about chances and risks of the worldwide fast food culture and the dangers of McDonald's global expansion?

While McDonald's had a strong homogenous effect on the culture in its home country, the same cannot be said about the countries it expanded to. There, its localization process was rather about assimilating into the local culture than to suppress it.

On the one side, McDonald's leads to a standardized and homogenous global consumer culture, but on the other side, it brings variety, diversity and innovation to many parts of the world. It contributes to the creation of a hybrid global culture,⁶⁶ especially as we saw in Asia. When the localization process of McDonald's is viewed out of the perspective of the customer, the risk of leading towards a homogenous culture is smaller than the theory of McDonaldization suggests.

The exportation of McDonald's into Germany did not erase local traditions, because it was something completely new and thus needed its own category. Anyway, it changed public eating habits in Japan and replaced the traditional parks and teahouses as places for old people to meet.

McDonald's helps to achieve the ideal of the Global village because it creates a global consciousness. It also leads to more equality as it offers free access to foreign foods in about every corner of the world. Sitting in a McDonald's restaurant can be seen as a cosmopolitan act, since its values link people of different cultures. This is a chance for the world in the 21st century; mutual understanding between different races on earth is a key for peace, economic stability and collective solutions for environmental problems.

The spread of the fast food culture also bears some risks. Even though it did not lead to a homogenous global culture yet, it could lead towards what is the case in the USA now in just some decades. I think this is possible because the whole world is becoming more hectic and because the values of family and having a home-cooked meal together are declining.

Other than cultural, the spread of fast food corporations can lead to many economical risks when they become a dominant factor in the local economy. As usual when it comes to globalization, the average person will be the loser of such monopolies.

⁶⁶ Smart 1999, page 193

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6.3 Illustrations

- Illustration 1: Watson 2000, p. 130
- Illustration 2: own picture that I took in my hometown Pleasanton during my stay in Texas from 2007-2008
- Illustration 3: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Mcdonalds_World_locations_map.PNG accessed: 25.03.09, accuracy checked with http://www.bpb.de/wissen-/VYGS5X,0,0,Fast_Food.html (German version from reliable source)
- Illustration 4: Beck 2003, p. 52, translated into English