BOOK REVIEW SECTION


George Ritzer’s widely used social theory book and The McDonaldization of Society are a testimony to his ability to produce readable, interesting, useful and informative textbooks. With the arrival of Expressing America and quick revision of The McDonaldization of Society, Ritzer has successfully shown his creativity in applying sociological concepts and theories to everyday life and continues to present sociological ideas to students in a relevant and easily understandable fashion. He has truly mastered what C. Wright Mills called “sociological imagination.”

Following Simmel’s view that any cultural item serves as a window to sociological understanding of the nature of a social totality, in Expressing America Ritzer uses the credit card as a key symbol of rationalization of American culture and society. In many ways, the credit card has become the premier symbol of the American lifestyle representing affluence, mobility and the capability to buy even when one does not have any money. As an American icon, American Express is spreading the American life-style throughout the world. As its use spreads around the globe, it erodes other cultures and replaces them with American culture.

Although the main focus of the book is the sociological effects of the credit card on society, Ritzer explains the advantages and disadvantages of credit cards for individuals, businesses and the economy as a whole. As this instrument became more popular following its introduction after the second world war, so did the idea of spending intangible money. A society that once prided itself on saving for the future is now floundering in debt caused by overspending.

The fact that America is an indebted society, from the federal to the individual level, is not accidental; it is due to the capitalist tendencies of this society and its various cultural components. This culture emphasizes individualism and materialism, inclines us to psychologize and medicalize problems like indebtedness, and discourages us from saving. Though individuals are the real users of these cards, the credit card industry is the main culprit. The industry uses numerous tactics to get the public to apply for its cards and is notorious for hooking Americans, especially the youth, onto these plastics. The government is also one of the culprits in this affair by overspending and living beyond its own means. Individuals are victims of a social and financial system that discourages saving and encourages indebtedness.

Ritzer views the creditization process as a means of rationalization in the modern world. Despite its positive effects, these cards create numerous social problems for
individuals and society: rampant consumerism, escalating indebtedness, pervasive fraud and crime, invasion of privacy, dehumanization of our daily lives and increasing homogenization of the world's cultures.

In *The McDonaldization of Society*, Ritzer examines the growth and impact of McDonald's as one of the most successful fast-food franchises in the 20th century. McDonald's was invented on the principle of scientific management and application of rational production and marketing strategies. Using Weber's concept of rationalization, Ritzer traces the history of McDonald's and how it has successfully incorporated the principles of efficiency, predictability, standardization, control and dehumanization of production. The process of scientification of labor and workplace through Taylorism, which had been critically studied by Braverman and other political economists in the 1960-70s, is called "McDonaldization" by Ritzer. For him, it was McDonald's success that caused the widespread application of scientific management. All sectors of society, from the medical profession to the diet industry, are imitating the McDonald's format. After demonstrating the application of elements of McDonaldization in various industries and professions, Ritzer discusses the irrationality and the devastating effects of this process on the individual and society. He examines the driving forces behind the spread of McDonaldization and argues that such a development will inevitably turn our society into what Weber called an "iron cage." In reality, McDonaldization leads to more inefficiency, unpredictability and loss of control in our life. The McDonaldized products and relationships are often empty of meaning and substance. They may fit well into a bureaucratized world of consumerism, profitability and greed, but they make us into robots with very little sense of individuality, creativity, spontaneity and meaningful interaction.

Finally, Ritzer discusses reactions to the McDonaldization. Describing the McDonaldized society as a cage, he argues that for those comfortable with this process, it is a velvet cage, for those accepting its inevitability but resisting its negative effects the cage is made of rubber bars and for those who see very little positive in this process, this is an iron cage.

Both these books present strong arguments against the rationalization of modern society. Ritzer writes convincingly about the increasingly important role of the credit card in modern society, the negative impacts of its use, the increasing standardization of our tastes and eating habits, the superficialization of social relationships, and the danger of commercialization of various aspects of our society. He skillfully demonstrates how slowly and quietly, but widely and completely, McDonaldization has crept into all aspects of our lives. Credit cards and fast-food restaurants continue the dehumanization of the society by mechanizing eating behavior and economic transactions.

Both books are well written and easy to read. They are excellent supplemental reading for introductory and topical classes in sociology. They provide ample opportunities for students to see the functional effects of systematization of social relationships, the standardization of goods and products, the symbolic implications of using a credit card in a consumption-oriented society, and global interconnection through financial exchange. By applying the perspectives of various classical sociologists, such as Simmel, Weber, Marx and C. Wright Mills, Ritzer offers an exposure to their theories and a sense of their relevance to the conditions of the contemporary society. Both books have a great deal of practical use for students by making them aware of
their rights vis-a-vis credit industry chicanery, of the manipulations involved in the sale of products in various industries, and of the slow loss of control over numerous aspects of our lives.

While the revision of The McDonaldization of Society for the second edition has eliminated many of the problems present in the first edition, both books still have their distractions. First, despite its wide use, the term "McDonaldization" is not really a good sociological substitute for Weber's rationalization. While it helps students to see the impact of rationalization, it reduces the process to an example and might distract them from understanding the different aspects of this process in other arenas of social life. What Ritzer is referring to is "rationalization" and not "McDonaldization." The latter is merely an instance of the former. Ritzer's creativity in generating catchy phrases and luring terms (e.g., McDoctor, News McNuggets, Drive-In Churches, CREDEBELS, sneakerization) throughout these books seems a replication of the same tactics used by the very industries he criticizes.

Second, to make his points Ritzer unnecessarily repeats himself, oversimplifies issues, overargues his major points and offers far-fetched but sometimes entertaining suggestions such as a sin-tax for using credit cards. His view of the global use of credit cards as a sign of Americanization is problematic and parochial. The use of credit cards may facilitate the globalization of various national economies, but it is not by itself a measure of Americanization. Many European and Asian countries have offered credit cards of their own. This might be indicative of rationalization of those economies and dehumanization of these societies but hardly Americanization.

Third, both books contain materials that Ritzer could have done without. Expressing America at times reads like a handbook on credit cards. For instance, he lists ways of preventing debt by publishing the guidelines of Overspenders Anonymous. These materials may be related but are unnecessary in an analytical book about the impact of credit cards on society. Furthermore, they make it more difficult for students to focus on the major ideas of the book.

Overall, however, the publication of these books has come as a breath of fresh air in the overstuffed field of undergraduate sociological textbooks.

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