



GLOBALIZATION AS McWORLD

Who invented globalization? The way you answer this question depends on how you think about globalization. If you think of globalization literally you might answer “Christopher Columbus” or someone else from the great era of (European) discovery. If you want to know who “invented” the world as a single geographic unit, all connected to the European center, there are several names you might give, but Columbus is as good as any of them.

If you think of globalization as the *idea* of an economic process that unites and transforms the world, creating a single global system, the inventors’ names are Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. They said it all in *The Communist Manifesto*, first published in that great year of revolutions, 1848. The bourgeoisie, Marx and Engels wrote,

has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. . . . In place of the old wants, satisfied by the productions of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interde-

pendence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature.¹

Marx and Engels were writing about capitalism, of course, but they were really describing globalization in this passage. Like many visions of globalization, theirs was rooted in technology. The bourgeoisie, which we may think of as the masters of globalization, “by the rapid improvement of all instruments of production, by the immensely facilitated means of communication, draws all nations, even the most barbarian, into civilization.”² Resistance is futile; globalization “compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In a word, it creates a world after its own image.”³

Marx and Engels provide us with an analysis of the process of economic globalization that might have been written yesterday. Indeed, someone somewhere probably did write it yesterday, or something much like it, totally unaware of Marx’s prior claim to the idea.

Marx wrote about globalization, but he didn’t call it that. The term *globalization* (or *globalisation* if you are British) seems to have come into use in the 1960s, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Many people credit the Harvard political economist Raymond Vernon for inventing the concept, even if he did not actually coin the term. Vernon was famous for two things. The first was his path-breaking research on multinational corporations from the 1970s to the 1990s, which made him the “father of globalization,” according to Daniel Yergin.⁴ His second great achievement? The Peanut M&M, which he brought to market in the 1950s while working for the Mars candy company.

There is one product that is so closely associated with globalization that it has become a symbol for the process that Columbus got started, Marx and Engels described, and Raymond Vernon studied. According to popular accounts, globalization was invented, more or less, by two brothers named Richard and Maurice when they opened a tiny drive-through restaurant in Pasadena, California, in 1937 and named it after themselves. Surely you have heard of “Richard and Maurice’s”? No? Of course not; why choose an awkward name like that when your last name is McDonald. Perhaps you’ve heard of that? In 1940 they opened a larger operation—600 square feet!—in San Bernadino.⁵

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The McDonald brothers did not invent hamburgers. In fact, their first store didn't even sell hamburgers—hot dogs and milkshakes were its specialties. Burgers were introduced in San Bernadino, but the McDonald's innovation wasn't putting meat on a bun, it was turning bread and meat into dough—profits, that is. Drive-in restaurants like McDonald's were caught in a profit pinch, selling low-priced food using traditional methods, which were labor-intensive and expensive. The brothers' contribution to globalization was their decision to rationalize the food production process. They stripped down their twenty-five-item menu to its core—hamburgers accounted for 80 percent of their sales—even though this meant dismantling their authentic hickory-fired pit barbeque. They closed shop for three months in 1948 and remodeled the whole operation to be fast and efficient. Eventually the McDonalds designed new types of kitchen equipment for their maximum-efficiency operations.

McDonald's reopened with a product that was cheap but standardized. The old 30-cent burger now sold for half that amount, but it came just one way. "If we gave people a choice there would be chaos," Richard McDonald said.⁶ They were not an immediate hit, but eventually speed, consistency, and low price found a market.

The secret to the McDonalds' success was their mastery of Adam Smith's famous division of labor. In a traditional drive-in restaurant, one or two chefs might make the food from start to finish and sometimes they would serve customers, too. The McDonald's system applied the division of labor: three counter men took orders at two windows and issued orders to the production crew: three grill men, two shake men, two fry men, and "dressers" who assembled and added condiments to the hamburgers. They could take and fill and order in 30 seconds—or less.⁷

Today McDonald's is a multinational corporation that operates 30,000 restaurants in 119 countries that serve 47 million customers each day. Its flagship product, the Big Mac, is so nearly universal that the *Economist* magazine uses it to calculate the relative purchasing power of foreign currencies.⁸ Some people love McDonald's, and others hate it. In the 1990s McDonald's became the defining symbol of globalization—the Golden Arches that "provoked" José Bové to violence. No McDonald's store is a safe harbor during an antiglobalization protest.

McDonald's place in the center of the globalization debate is due mainly to the work of three men: Thomas Friedman, Benjamin Barber, and George Ritzer. All three use McDonald's and its ubiquitous Golden

Arches as an icon or metaphor for the transformative force of contemporary globalization. Two of their versions of globalization-McDonaldisation are globaloney pure and simple. One offers real insight into what globalization is today and where it may be headed. None of the three tells the whole story.

Golden Arches: The Good Globalization

New York Times columnist Thomas L. Friedman is a globalization optimist who uses McDonald's to motivate a hopeful American vision of globalization past, present, and future. Friedman's idea of McDonald's and globalization is a distinctly American view, one that only an American who constantly travels abroad might naturally develop. McDonald's appears with nearly numbing regularity in Friedman's book *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (as it does in many books on globalization). The entry for McDonald's in the index looks like this:

McDonald's, ix, 9, 169, 248–254, 258, 263, 268, 271, 274, 292, 294, 296, 301, 303, 305, 311–13, 344, 358, 374, 379, 382–84, 464⁹

Why so much McDonald's? Probably because it is such a useful rhetorical device—McDonald's is an instantly recognizable symbol of America to Friedman's readers, who are mainly Americans living in America. Frame a foreign problem in terms of McDonald's and your audience connects the dots immediately. But it is probably also true that Friedman, like many Americans who spend months and months abroad, is always looking for reminders of home. And since his home is the United States, his eyes search from branded goods, which are the way Americans think of things: not hamburgers, Big Macs. Not beer, Budweiser. Not soft drinks, Coca Cola. And McDonald's has more than thirty thousand locations that display their trademark logos and designs, of which more than seventeen thousand are located outside the United States.

McDonald's is easy to spot—the company goes out its way to be visible. And it is almost everywhere. McDonald's says that in 2002 its global restaurant system was arrayed across the world map as follows: United States, 13,491; Europe, 6,070; APMEA (Asia-Pacific, Middle East, and Africa), 7,555; Latin America 1,605; and Canada 1,304. The top five countries, ranked by numbers of stores, were the United States, Japan, Canada, the United Kingdom, and Germany.¹⁰ So it is easy to

understand why Thomas Friedman so often sees the Golden Arches in his travels and has a quiet little “globalization moment.”

Looking at the world and seeing Golden Arches is a distinctly American kind of vision. It’s not obvious that other people see globalization the same way. Imagine for a moment an Italian version of Thomas Friedman—call him Tomaso. For Tomaso, McDonald’s restaurants are all but invisible. They are everywhere, you run into them all the time on the way to the airport, but they disappear into the visual noise of the background. They are unimportant because they are not what Tomaso is looking for, which is decent Italian food. Tomaso is looking for signs of home—good Italian restaurants—and he sees them everywhere. They are even more ubiquitous, if that’s grammatically possible, than McDonald’s. According to the Italian culinary magazine *Gambero Rosso*, there are about twice as many reasonably authentic Italian restaurants *outside of Italy* as there are McDonald’s restaurants *in all the world*, including the United States.¹¹ So it’s not hard to see them if that’s what you are looking for.

Gambero Rosso estimates that there are about 15,000 decent Italian restaurants in the United States and Canada, which is about the number of McDonald’s you will find there. Japan has more than 3,500 McDonald’s and only about 2,000 Italian restaurants (both numbers insignificant, of course, compared to the number of Japanese food shops there). *Gambero Rosso* puts the number of Italian restaurants in Latin America at 7,000, in Africa at 1,000, 300 in the Middle East, and more than 28,000 in the European Union and Eastern Europe. McDonald’s numbers are much less in each of these regions and especially in Africa, where McDonald’s is all but unknown (except via satellite television commercials).

Except in Japan, Italian restaurants seem to be far more common than McDonald’s stores. Surely you have seen Italian restaurants wherever you have traveled in the world? Yes, but you have not taken account of them the way that Tomaso Friedman would. Why is that? Branding is part of the story. McDonald’s stores all have the same name, use versions of the same trademarked logo, and serve somewhat similar food items, so it is easy to use them to connect the dots that form a global pattern. McDonald’s franchises are everywhere—must be globalization. But Italian restaurants have a stronger claim to globalization, even though their visual variety makes them blend into the background to American eyes. If Tomaso Friedman was writing a book about globalization, he would be having tagliatelle al ragù moments (not Big Mac

attacks) and seeing Italian influences everywhere. It would be a different book, but it would be just as valid as Thomas Friedman's.¹²

Tommy Friedman's book (Tommy is British) would be filled with examples of British influence abroad, and he would have no trouble finding it, let me tell you. The legacy of Britain's global empire guarantees that Tommy would constantly encounter familiar people, places, and things, including the food. He'd run into Britain's signature fast food everywhere he went and build clever global metaphors from the experience. Do you doubt it? No, I am not thinking of fish and chips or bangers and mash or bubble and squeak, as you might assume. Britain's fast food of choice is "curry"—Indian food. Curry is the most popular food in Britain. Britain has taken Indian curry to its heart much as Americans have adopted hamburgers and hotdogs (frankfurters)—food with Germanic origins that are obvious to anyone who thinks even for a moment about their names (Hamburg, Frankfurt). The global Indian diaspora practically guarantees that Tommy Friedman would be able to find a familiar plate of chicken tikka masala nearly everywhere he goes.

For my money, Tao Friedman would write the most interesting book. Tao is Chinese, and I probably do not have to persuade you that she would be able to find familiar home-style dishes wherever she goes and the experience would raise important questions for Tao about Chinese influence abroad and about globalization's effect on China. Are traditional recipes and preparations preserved in foreign Chinese restaurants, or are they adapted to local tastes and ingredients? Is "authenticity" preserved? Are culinary norms maintained—or are they lost forever as regional Chinese cuisine is melded into international "fusion" foods? Tao Friedman is a fictional invention, but there are real scholars who study these questions and publish volumes with titles like *The Globalization of Chinese Food*.¹³

Thomas, Tomaso, Tommy, and Tao constantly encounter images of home as they travel the world, and they associate them with their particular visions of globalization. Their reactions to what they find are likely to differ, however, because, although they see the same world, they process the images through different cultural filters, which yield predictably different conclusions. Thomas assumes that the fast food he finds abroad is the same as at home and takes comfort from that.¹⁴ But he's wrong. In fact, McDonald's menus are not all the same, although they tend to be as similar as local markets will allow. McDonald's tries to have each location carry some of the "classic" American items, but please remember that McDonald's really isn't about particular foods, al-

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though that's what the branding process leads you to believe. What made the original McDonald's distinctive was price and efficiency, and this is still true today.

McDonald's must compete with local retailers wherever it operates (and with local Italian, Indian, and Chinese restaurants), so its restaurants necessarily adapt to local tastes in terms of food recipes and preparations—only the efficiency remains the same. After trying and failing to sell all-beef burgers in India, a country where the majority of the population considers cows sacred, McDonald's now has a 100-percent vegetarian menu in Hindu regions, featuring items such as Pizza Mc-Puff, the McAloo Tikki spiced potato sandwich, Paneer (spiced spinach) Salsa McWrap, and McCurry.¹⁵ Because Chinese food is popular in India, there is even a vegetarian Crispy Chinese burger. McDonald's menus in most other countries have not adapted to local taste to quite this degree, but all show the combined influence of local preferences and competition from local restaurants that know those preferences well. Interestingly, some Indian items have been earmarked for introduction in China, Hong Kong, Great Britain, and the United States.¹⁶ That's globalization, I guess.

The world has become a culturally complex space, both in terms of food and more generally. As Tyler Cowen has noted, as local areas become more diverse (with more kinds of ethnic foods, for example), the discontinuities between places fade and the world as a whole feels less diverse.¹⁷ What each of us makes of this depends on how we approach it. People who love America will see it and smile. People who hate America will see it and scowl. People who look for Italy or India or China will find them, too. Thomas Friedman's perspective, with McDonald's everywhere, is that of an American looking for America and finding it.

This is what makes Thomas Friedman's version of McWorld a globaloney theory. It presents as universal a view of the world that is strictly American, using American symbols to tell an American story. I call it *The Good Globalization* because it is an optimistic viewpoint. Friedman can at least appreciate why people would be happy to embrace the image of McDonald's and globalization that he creates.

McWorld: Globalization Gone Bad

McWorld is perhaps the most powerful image of globalization yet conceived. Significantly, it is a very negative image. Thomas Friedman's op-

timism aside, McDonald's has an image problem. If you want to express your informed disrespect for anything that the masses seem to enjoy, the best way is to make it a Mc, as in McMansions (suburban housing), McDoctors (HMO health-care providers), McWine (wine that lacks distinctive character), and volumes like this one (McBooks). Mass-produced, interchangeable, undistinguished—crap—that's what a Mc-prefix says.

So you don't need much imagination to guess that McWorld is a description of globalization gone bad. Benjamin R. Barber invented McWorld in a 1992 *Atlantic Monthly* article titled "Jihad vs. McWorld."¹⁸ The article inspired a 1995 book, also called *Jihad vs. McWorld*, with the subtitle, "How the World Is Both Falling Apart and Coming Together—And What This Means for Democracy." A paperback edition appeared in 1996 with a different subtitle, "How Globalism and Tribalism are Re-shaping the World," and a revised volume was released in 2002, subtitled "Terrorism's Challenge to Democracy."¹⁹ McWorld is a flexible concept, apparently, equally relevant to the collapse of communism in 1995, the rise of ethnic violence in 1996, and terrorism after September 11, 2001.

I fear that Barber's McWorld has become a McIdea—an undistinguished product cynically crafted to appeal to an indiscriminating mass-market audience, which is a shame. The migration of titles gives it away: Barber's publisher seems to be trying to sell the book by appealing to the market's "fear du jour"—tribalism, terrorism, whatever. Barber's core *argument* is not crap, however, and it is worthwhile to separate the two and appreciate their differences.

Barber believes that globalization is a threat to democracy, which is a legitimate concern (the book's title should be *Globalization versus Democracy*, not *Jihad vs. McWorld*). The argument is that globalization twists the world in two ways at once. On one side it bends the world toward markets and business, which tend to organize along certain lines, guided by the ideology of globalism. This is McWorld, an America-centered, media-driven version of global capitalism. I don't even have to tell you what McWorld looks like—it is McDonald's and the culture, media, technology, and values that critics associate with it.

At the same time the world is twisting toward McWorld, however, it is also turning toward Jihad. Globalization magnifies ethnic, religious, and racial divisions, producing Jihad. Jihad is not literally an Islamic holy war in Barber's lexicon anymore than McWorld is literally the global McDonald's empire. Barber doesn't intend to pick on Muslims

when talking about “Jihad,” and he is very careful in this regard in the book’s text. Unfortunately the regrettable image of an apparently Muslim woman in full head-scarf holding a Pepsi can on the cover strongly reinforces at every glance the very Islamic Jihad connection that Barber says he wants to avoid.²⁰ Jihad, properly understood in Barber’s argument, is the reaction to or retreat from globalization and back toward the security of tradition, religion, and tribe or nation.

Now the problem, Barber says, is that both Jihad and McWorld are essentially undemocratic and perhaps even antidemocratic. Therefore this global torsion is a threat to democracy. Jihad places tradition or religious teachings ahead of popular opinion and legitimizes autocratic rule. Hard to grow democracy on that rocky field. McWorld privileges money over people, replacing one-person, one-vote with one-dollar, one-vote. As neoliberal policies shrink the state and market forces expand, democracy becomes at best a meaningless ritual and potentially a threat to global competition. If the world disintegrates into Jihad and McWorld, Barber asks, what chance is there for democracy?

The future of democracy in a globalized world is a very important question, although I must point out that is a distinctly American question. Worship of democracy is America’s civil religion—we are raised from the ground up to view the United States as a nation built upon democratic principles and to honor the Founding Fathers who symbolize a commitment to democratic ideals. A European might ask a different question, such as whether Jihad and McWorld are consistent with peace, not democracy. Americans, I believe, simply assume that democracy produces peace. Europeans worry that it might not. Others might be concerned with inequality, economic development, or environmental sustainability—there are many critical values potentially threatened by globalization. To privilege democracy in the pantheon of principles is not unreasonable, and I would probably do it myself, but we must recognize that it is a distinctly American thing to do.

Benjamin Barber is someone who takes democracy seriously. No wonder he is worried about it. Jihad and McWorld are not the only threats to democracy, however, nor perhaps even the most important threats. Jihad and McWorld are sexy concepts that quickly focus our attention on democracy and its discontents, and I think that’s why Barber wrote the original *Atlantic Monthly* article. In a world where people don’t worry very much about democracy, Jihad and McWorld made a lot of people think about it more seriously, which is a good thing. The book that packages the argument is another matter. In order to gather

sympathy and support for democracy, Barber seems to try to make McWorld and globalization as evil as possible—a force that doesn't just destroy democracy, but everything else of value in modern and traditional societies, too. This is where the globaloney comes in.

If you read it uncritically, *Jihad vs. McWorld* is very persuasive—nearly as persuasive as Adam Smith's argument in the first chapter of *The Wealth of Nations*. Like Smith, Barber uses the “Newtonian” principle of the New Rhetoric—he states a grand principle, provides a few memorable and well-chosen examples, then leaps to a universal conclusion. The readers, you and me, are pleased to connect the dots. Soon we see examples of the argument all around us and we notice that they fit the rule even as we ignore everything that breaks it. Thus does unscientific observation make believers of us all.

Democracy has lots of problems, as I have said, and the globalization of the infotainment telesector is probably one of them, but not the only one or perhaps even the most important one. And many people (ask Thomas Friedman) think that markets might even promote democracy by undermining undemocratic authority. So I am suspicious that the threat to democracy is as simple as this or that saving it is just a matter of stopping globalization.

One of the best ways to understand why McWorld is more about globaloney than globalization to look at what it has to say about its most representative component: McDonald's. McWorld is named for McDonald's, of course, and the Golden Arches show up almost as regularly in *Jihad vs. McWorld* as in *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*.²¹ Here's the story, pieced together from Barber's book.

- McDonald's (and McWorld) stands astride the globe like a Colossus, more powerful than modern nation-states. “McDonald's serves 20 million customers around the world every day,” Barber tells us, “drawing more customers daily than there are people in Greece, Ireland and Switzerland together.”²²
- McDonald's ideology is more powerful than even the great revolutionary thinkers. “The McDonald's way of eating is a way of life: an ideology as theme park more intrusive (if much more subtle) than any Marx or Mao ever contrived.”²³
- McDonald's is the vanguard of global capitalism. “Following McDonald's golden arch from country to country, the market traces a trajectory of dollars and bonds and ads and yen and stocks and currency transactions that reaches right around the globe.”²⁴

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- Resistance is futile. “We have seen . . . how McDonald’s ‘adapts’ to foreign climes with wine in France and local beef in Russia even as it imposes a way of life that makes domestic wines and local beef irrelevant.”²⁵
- We have sold our souls to McWorld . . . “When McDonald’s sells *Dances with Wolves* and *Jurassic Park* videos with sundry movie tie-ins in a vague celebration of multiculturalism or environmentalism or extinct reptile preservation, or hires Michael Jordan to link its products to celebrity sport, simple service to the body . . . is displaced by complex service to the soul.”²⁶
- . . . and destroyed democracy in the process. “If the traditional conservators of freedom were democratic constitutions and Bills of Rights, ‘the new temples of liberty . . . will be McDonald’s and Kentucky Fried Chicken.’”²⁷
- And if you think otherwise, you are just wrong. “There are stylistic differences between McDonald’s in Moscow, in Budapest, in Paris and in London by which they all can be distinguished from the first McDonald’s,” Barber says. “But squint a little and all the small differences vanish and the Golden Arch is all that remains, a virtual ghost haunting our retinas even on Champs Élysées in Paris, where the actual display is no longer permitted. . . . [The] ‘world where there is only one image’ has already come to pass.”²⁸

What is wrong with this argument? Well, you already know. Almost everything.

McDonald’s has more customers than whole nations have citizens? That’s comparing apples and oranges. It is wrong to compare lunch counters with nation-states—unless you think that national citizenship is the patriotic equivalent of pulling into a restaurant’s drive-through line.²⁹

McDonald’s has a more subtle and intrusive ideology than Marx or Mao? Doubtful, although I see Barber’s point and expand upon it in the next section. This seems overblown, however. I wonder how many people have gone to their deaths with the words “Big Mac” on their lips? Some, probably, but nothing compared with the effect of Marx and Mao.

McDonald’s is the Trojan horse for global capitalism, clearing the way for bond markets and advertising agencies? Sorry, but McDonald’s is a business, not an economic evangelical organization. McDonald’s comes in *after* the property rights, markets, ads, and money, not before. McDonald’s needs those things to survive.³⁰

McDonald's *imposes* a way of life that makes local products irrelevant? That's strong language, and strong language invites abuse. To impose a way of life is to take away choice, but it seems to me that McDonald's actually does the opposite. I don't see how McDonald's *imposes* anything. I suppose there is one case: if you believe that people should have no options and make no choices, then adding McDonald's *does* change everything—it *imposes* the necessity to choose. It seems to me that an argument that is rooted in a concern about democracy ought to lean on the side of the right to choose, the McDonald's side, not against it, even if the choices made are sometimes poor ones.

McDonald's customers are seeking a soulful experience, not just a quick meal? Yes, I agree, but so what? We shouldn't be surprised that the people who eat at McDonald's think about their meals as more than just food. "Unlike other species," anthropologist Sidney W. Mintz notes, "human beings invest their food with secondary meanings that transcend nourishment. We eat to live, yes, but hardly ever *only* to live."³¹

"Temples of Liberty?" Is it even possible to compare McDonald's to the Bill of Rights? And the final straw—if you see anything that seems to contradict this argument, just squint and it will go away. This lacks the elegance of Adam Smith's solution to the problem of inconvenient counterexamples. Smith would have covered his tracks like this: "What is true of a single McDonald's cannot be false about the entire system, so tightly 'twined are branch and root, and what is true about McDonald's cannot be false about McWorld, its logical extension."

Benjamin Barber's argument about democracy deserves better than this. You don't need to use globaloney to argue his point about democracy and the forces that threaten it. That globaloney is useful, however, is clear because it covers over the fundamental flaw in *Jihad vs. McWorld*: that it is, like Friedman's argument, an argument about America, not the world. It is based upon American values and concerned, ultimately, that America is not true to its uniquely American principles.

One particular problem with the McWorld scenario is its reliance on the power of the media—the "infotainment telesector." The working assumption seems to be that this sector has such power over people that it is virtually irresistible. Once the infotainment telesector has local consumers in its crosshairs, indigenous culture is dead meat. And, of course, it is under the command of American multinationals like McDonald's.

There are several reasons to doubt that the world really works this

way and that the infotainment telesector is globaloney. The first is that many multinational firms fail to penetrate foreign markets even with the help of their evil media persuaders. Even the McDonald's record is blemished.³² These failures are invisible of course, because they have failed and so disappeared. You only see the success stories, so that's what is reinforced. The failures can be found, however, in MBA case-study books.³³

McWorld believes that foreign consumers cannot resist these forces—it denies them agency and assumes that, absent media coercion, their own cultures would remain permanently fixed. They indiscriminately absorb the products and values that are pushed in their direction. This is a sad view of humanity, which is sadder still because it may be based on the belief that this is true about American consumers, too. If people are really such hollow vessels as this, then it is unclear why we should care about them. The world would be better off without them. We should fill them with large orders of fries until they explode!

But when you look closely at these people, they are not at all like their globaloney image. A group of anthropologists took a careful look at McDonald's customers in Asia, for example, and what they discovered didn't look anything like McWorld. The results were published in a fascinating 1997 book called *Golden Arches East: McDonald's in East Asia*.³⁴ The authors looked carefully at how McDonald's customers related to the products and brands and to each other over time and compared results across countries. Here is a small smattering of their findings.

McDonald's has induced (*imposed* is too strong a term) small changes in foreign cultures. In Japan, for example, few people ate food with their hands before McDonald's came along.³⁵ McDonald's and other fast-food stores are displacing local "street foods" to a certain extent, but research indicates that this is due in part to greater concern, especially by parents, over sanitation and food safety. As incomes rise, these factors become more important and restaurants with better sanitation gain market share.

On the other hand, there are many examples of how local consumers have transformed McDonald's, shaping it to play particular roles in their societies. In Beijing, Seoul, and Taipei, for example, many people use McDonald's as a refuge from urban chaos. Middle school students in Hong Kong hang out at McDonald's for hours, talking and doing homework. Both of these uses are diametrically opposite to the McDon-

ald's system, which stresses efficient production and consumption of food, "turning" tables over to new customers every few minutes.³⁶ "Suffice it to note here," James L. Watson says, "that McDonald's does not always call the shots."³⁷

McDonald's is given many meanings by its patrons, who seem to have the ability to do this (they are not *all* empty vessels, it seems). Some women in East Asia, for example, seem to use McDonald's stores as a "sanctuary" from male domination. As the multigeneration nuclear family has disintegrated into separate households, McDonald's has become a gathering place where children and grandchildren are especially celebrated. (McDonald's plays this role in the United States, too.)³⁸ McDonald's is the home of "conspicuous consumption" for some, who flaunt their wealth and foreign tastes, but it is also a great leveler. Low prices and restricted menu choice mean that everyone eats about the same food and pays about the same amounts, so no one is likely to "lose face" in McDonald's. Eating a Big Mac can even be a political statement. In Taiwan, for example, the choice of McDonald's (versus a restaurant owned by a mainland Chinese family) makes a statement about independence from mainland influence.

McDonald's in East Asia doesn't seem to be very much like McWorld. But maybe it was a bad idea to use McDonald's as a model for McWorld. McDonald's may be much more local than most multinational firms. McDonald's in East Asia are at least partly owned by local firms and families; they are run by local managers and staffed by local people. They mainly buy their supplies from local businesses. A good deal of their profits stay at home, too, and are reinvested. As already noted, local food tastes and dining habits are accommodated, at least in part, within the overall burger and fries framework. It's ironic, but McDonald's might be one of the worst examples of the McWorld model—if McWorld were really about the world and not, at its core, a commentary on the United States.

But is McWorld even a true representation of America? If we use McDonald's as our analytical guide, I believe the answer is probably no. I really don't believe that a big media push—the dreaded infotainment telesector—accounts for McDonald's success even in the United States. In support of my position I cite recent evidence on obesity in the United States. The fact that Americans are gaining weight quite rapidly is well known and often associated with fast-food consumption. McWorld is McFat. The same infotainment telesector forces that push McWorld

down our throats are to be blamed, it is said, for our McFat. It's not just the same principle, it is literally the same thing.

Recently, however, Harvard economists David M. Cuttler, Edward L. Glaeser, and Jesse M. Shapiro have asked the question, "Why Have Americans Become More Obese," and their findings are indeed revealing.³⁹ They test a number of hypotheses using data for the United States and other countries. They conclude that the best single explanation of rising obesity is that technological change—increased efficiency—has reduced the cost of food in terms of both the money it takes to buy it and the time it takes to prepare and consume it. Time and money are the two main constraints upon economic behavior. Fast food is both fast (time) and cheap (money)—and has only become faster and cheaper over the years. No wonder there has been a shift in favor of such products as their relative prices have fallen.⁴⁰

Now what is most interesting to me about these findings is that they point *away* from clever marketing and media power as the driving forces behind McFat, McDonald's and, by extension, McWorld and instead highlight the principle that the McDonald brothers recognized in their little San Bernadino store: efficiency, technology, and the division of labor. Cheaper. Faster. More. To understand the implications of this fact, we need to leave McWorld behind and move on to a simpler, but far scarier vision of globalization.

Rationalization: The Ugly Globalization

Capitalism's tendency to reward and therefore promote efficiency is well known. It is the secret behind Adam Smith's pin factory and invisible hand. For Marx and Engels, it is the force that enables global capitalism to transform foreign countries, not simply penetrate them. Capitalism's drive for greater and greater efficiency causes it to do for society in general what it did for Adam Smith's pin factory in particular: break it down into basic components and reassemble it in the most starkly efficient fashion. There is not much harm done (and much benefit produced) when the division of labor is applied to the manufacture of pins. The stakes are higher when whole societies are involved, as some have suggested. *This*, not the superficial influence of advertising and electronic media, is the truly ugly side of globalization.

Efficiency, and the process of rational calculation that is necessary to achieve it, reaches its zenith inside a McDonald's restaurant. The American sociologist George Ritzer observed this fact in his 1993 book,

*The McDonaldization of Society: An Investigation into the Changing Character of Social Life.*⁴¹ If you make even a casual study of a McDonald's restaurant you will see Ritzer's point. McDonald's makes efficiency the top-most goal and consciously organizes its assembly line accordingly. This is not news, of course, since the McDonald brothers began doing this way back in the 1950s, even before they sold their name and business to Ray Kroc. What is interesting, however, is how McDonald's has managed to rationalize both sides of the counter. This is where Ritzer comes in.

It is easy to see the production side of McDonald's efficiency. Specialized technology and a highly organized division of labor produce standardized menu items quickly and efficiently. Service may not be quite as fast as in the San Bernadino store, where orders were filled in 30 seconds, but the menu is much larger and competitive factors have forced McDonald's to permit customers to make some special orders. All in all, it is a highly structured, very efficient production line for food of reliably consistent quality and relatively low price.

What may be more significant, however, is how McDonald's has transformed the way that its customers behave. In traditional restaurants, customers are relatively passive participants in the food service operation. They arrive, are seated, and given menus. Wait staff deliver water and other beverages, take the order and deliver it, assuring that everything is exactly as requested. Staff typically check on the customers at several points during the meal, which may be multicourse and require changes in cutlery, glassware, and so forth. Finally, the bill is delivered and paid, change given, and table cleared and reset before it can be turned over to the next group of customers.

Compare this to a typical fast-food experience. Customers arrive and queue to give their orders at the counter, choosing from the standard items listed on the backlit overhead display. The order is given, payment made, and the customer waits for the food to arrive at the counter. (In fast food, customers, not staff, do the waiting.) The customer gets her own condiments and eating utensils, fills her own cup, finds her own table, and then clears it when finished. Customers do much of the work of running the restaurant, work that would otherwise be performed by paid staff. (Over at the drive-through window, customers are actually making their own home and office deliveries!) And they do this work rapidly, efficiently, and without apparent displeasure. Actually, customers don't seem to be aware that they are doing McDonald's work; they just go through the paces automatically. The miracle

of the modern McDonald's is that its customers work for the firm but draw no wages. The experience of cooking a meal and eating it is thus transformed from an art to a highly engineered, precisely coordinated production process.

McDonald's is an excellent example of the process that the great German sociologist Max Weber (1864–1920) called “formal rationalization.” According to Weber, Ritzer explains, “*formal rationality* means that the search by people for the optimum means to a given end is shaped by rules, regulations, and larger social structures. Individuals are not left to their own devices in searching for the best possible means of attaining a given objective. Weber identified this type of rationality as a major development in the history of the world.”⁴² Weber's analysis of formal rationalization focused on bureaucracy as an institution that organized a certain segment of society to achieve certain goals quickly and efficiently. A successful bureaucracy is able to process large numbers of people relatively quickly and in a highly predictable manner. Individual variations are tightly controlled, with rules and regulations generally relied upon rather than variable (and therefore unreliable) human judgment within a tightly defined division of labor. There are few “surprises,” especially unpleasant ones.

A successful visit to a modern health maintenance organization clinic illustrates a bureaucracy at work. The division of labor, both within offices and among specialties, is obvious. The steps of making appointments, gathering information, making diagnosis, planning treatment, performing tests, filling prescriptions, etc. are all discrete and handled by specialists. Information technology is used to share information and coordinate the stages. The patient (you) moves efficiently through the production line, through various locations, until you are discharged, instructions in hand, into the parking garage. The term *patient* is well chosen because, as in the fast-food restaurant, the customer does all of the waiting, while the assembly-line workers are kept in constant, efficient motion. Other public and private bureaucracies, including income taxation and pension and insurance systems, work much the same way.

George Ritzer gave the name “*McDonaldization*” to the way that formal rationalization organizes contemporary society, especially in the United States, I think. McDonaldization is characterized by efficiency, calculability, predictability, and the use of technology to control human behavior. McDonaldization is not about McDonald's, Ritzer says, it is about the transforming force of rationalization.⁴³ Rationalization has

many advantages, Ritzer notes.⁴⁴ More goods and services can be made available to a larger segment of the population with greater convenience with respect to time and place. Lower cost increases affordability. Workers and customers alike confront a standardized process that is therefore stable and familiar. Uniform treatment means that discrimination due to gender, race, age, or ethnicity is reduced.⁴⁵ Standardization means that many products are safer. A high degree of coordination means that technology is rapidly diffused.

McDonald's is a good example of each of these characteristics. When you go to McDonald's you know that there is little chance that you will have an unexpectedly good meal. The sandwiches, fries, and drinks will be just what you expect and no better. But no worse, either. The flip side of standardization is that bad surprises are systematically reduced (although the certainty of occasional human and equipment failures mean they can never fully be eliminated). If you've ever had an expensive meal with poorly prepared or unsafe food served (slowly) by a surly waiter, you know what I am talking about. There are few high points in a Big Mac value meal, but few lows, either.

I think this is why McDonald's is so popular in formerly Communist countries, despite prices that are high relative to weekly income. Under communism, they could be pretty sure of poor food and worse service in most cases, but sometimes they were pleasantly surprised. McDonald's is the other way around. The food is consistently decent. You provide most of the service yourself, so you are not dependent on the whims of a surly waiter. Not a bad deal, compared to the alternative.

If formal rationalization and McDonaldization were limited to McDonald's I don't think we would have very much to complain about. Ritzer's concern, which is shared by many others, however, is that what is true about McDonald's may also be true more generally. It's not about the burgers. It's about the lives behind the burgers and the limited and automatic roles we play as efficient producing and consuming agents. What is the final consequence as formal rationalism spreads from McRestaurant to McMall to McCinema to McHospital to McUniversity to . . . to what? To McChurch?

This is what seems to worry Benjamin Barber. Barber sees the rationalization process (and writes about it in *Jihad vs. McWorld*), but he is apparently more concerned with who has the power in the system (hence his misplaced concern with the infotainment telesector), not realizing that the power is the system. The power lies in the rationaliza-

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tion process itself. This is true even in the most unlikely places, such as the infotainment telesector.

Many people see increasing concentration in the print and electronic media and worry about the potential for abuse of influence. This is a legitimate concern, but it assumes that these firms want power, that they want to control what we believe, whereas I think they really want our money. What I see is increasingly fierce competition among the media giants, which drives them to ever bolder acts of rationalization. On television, for example, the reality show essentially get audiences to produce their own shows just as McDonald's gets customers to fill their own drink cups. A true monopolist could become lazy and just show reruns or cheap game shows. It is competition and the quest for efficiency that drives them to extremes. It's not the manipulative power of the media giants that I fear, it is the possible effects of their drive to rationalize.

Thomas Friedman both recognizes the rationalization process inherent in globalization and, I think, embraces it. This accounts for Friedman's sunny but realistic attitude toward globalization. As a political reporter covering the Middle East and other troubled regions, Friedman has seen more than his share of irrational acts. I think he'd take economic rationalism over political or social irrationalism any day. He is hopeful that global capitalism will help people learn how to coordinate their actions and behave rationally—which means that they would try not to go to war, for example—even when they are not in a McDonald's. I sure hope he right, but it is a long shot. Many people have argued that war is irrational because it is too expensive, but this doesn't seem to have stopped war. Perhaps McDonaldization—a deeper cultural process that starts with production and consumption and then eventually is absorbed by into a society's DNA—will work where mere hunger for money has failed.

The Threat of McNothing

If globalization is McDonaldization, where does that leave us? As you might expect, opinions differ. George Ritzer used to hold out hope for McDonaldization, not Thomas Friedman's hope that a rationalized world will be a rational one, but hope that standardization and rationalization could produce some good things along with mountains of mediocre mass-market stuff. He seemed to be taken with his experiences at Starbucks, for example.⁴⁶

At Starbucks, Ritzer noted in 1998, standardization and technology do more than just reduce cost and control human behavior, they also produce consistently high quality products for which customers were willing to pay a premium. “Thus, Starbucks indicates that it is possible to McDonaldize quality . . . when there are technologies that ensure high and consistent quality, and when enough patrons are willing to pay large amounts of money for the product.”⁴⁷ Ritzer seemed to think that Starbucks and Ruth’s Chris Steak House and a few other high-quality chains were the start of something important.

But now he’s changed his mind. Ritzer’s 2004 book *The Globalization of Nothing* looks at the proliferation of Starbucks in London and sees nothing to love.⁴⁸ “Such a uniform chain is one of the prime examples of nothing and its proliferation in the most visited areas of the city tend to give it the feeling of nothingness.”⁴⁹ Ritzer has decided that meaningful content is difficult to globalize because it is too tied to time and place, too human, too special. To be successful, globalization has to bleach the authentic content out of products and services, make them standard, uniform, and meaningless. This, presumably, is what Nike’s swoosh logo is so successful—it doesn’t mean a thing.

What makes *something* different from *nothing*? You might think it is just a matter of taste—or lack of it—and I think there is something to this, but Ritzer proposes a sort of matrix of meaning to help separate content from void. Somethingness and nothingness form a continuum. Products or experiences closer to the something end of the spectrum are associated with these characteristics: unique, specific to time and place, humanized, and enchanted (capable of surprise). Nothingness, on the other hand, is characterized by its generic, timeless, placeless qualities and the tendency to be impersonal and disenchanting (rationally predictably).⁵⁰ Dinner at a friend’s apartment lies toward the something end of the continuum, even if you just order in Chinese food. Dinner at the local Ruth’s Chris Steak House, on the other hand, is sort of nothing, even it is delicious. Going trout fishing is something; going shopping at the mall is nothing.

This taxonomy helps us understand how Ritzer’s reaction to Starbucks might have changed, although this is only speculation. Perhaps Ritzer was taken when the first Starbucks opened in his neighborhood, and he learned to order his special type of coffee drink (“I’ll have a tall skinny vanilla latte, extra foam”) and became a “regular,” known by the staff and recognized by other customers. Perhaps this enchantment faded away as he saw his own special experience replicated almost end-

lessly by other “regulars” wherever he went. Or maybe it was that seeing Starbucks in London made him associate it with Americanization, and this offended him. Or maybe he just got tired of standing in line and switched to Diet Coke; I don’t really know. In any case, the coffee drinks that were so “something” in 1998 have become “nothing” today.

The Globalization of Nothing is a very interesting book because, like the best globalization stories and metaphors, it appears at a time of social upheaval and uncertainty and tells us why we are so anxious and what will come to pass in the future. We are anxious, clearly, because globalization is stripping our lives of meaning as products and relationships are rationalized down to nothing. The more globalization proceeds, the more we have and the less it means to us. Existential questions inevitably arise.

But, while I share his anxiety, I am not convinced Ritzer is right. His Starbucks turnaround bothers me a bit as does the fact that he seems to find a lot of meaning in motion pictures, which seem to me to be the ultimate embodiment of nothingness, for the most part: mass-produced, centrally controlled, identical entertainment experiences supplied indiscriminately to millions at low cost in highly controlled artificial environments by cynical media oligopolists. It’s just everything that Ritzer finds empty in other circumstances. But then I’m also a bit suspicious of Ritzer’s tendency to find “something” in things that he personally likes (such as chrome and glass roadside diners) while he sees only “nothing” in things that he doesn’t like, such as McDonald’s. I worry that Ritzer is has fallen into a sort of cultural elitism, which is hard to avoid when you are evaluating the content of culture.⁵¹

A more serious criticism is that Ritzer distinguishes between something and nothing based upon the conditions of production. A McDonald’s meal is nothing, for example, in part because it is standardized—they are all the same. But he thinks that a fine gourmet meal is something (and would be impossible to globalize) in part because of its variability—it is different each time the skilled chef makes it. But I find both sides of this division problematic.

I suspect that the customers at McDonald’s are at least sometimes able to manufacture their own meaning, regardless of the rationalized environment. Standard-issue French fries can take on a life of their own when shared with grandchildren at Sunday lunch. If consumers are to be classified as part of the rationalized production process, then we must consider that they are full participants in the meaning creation business, too, and can sometimes make something out of nothing.

As for gourmet meals, I have eaten my share of them at wonderful restaurants. These meals were far from mass produced, but it would be a mistake to think that their pleasure comes from daily variation and inspiration.⁵² In my experience, great chefs work hard to find just the right recipe and then work even harder to see that it is prepared *exactly* the same each time.

I am suspicious of the idea that globalization is the end of culture and meaning and hopeful, even confident, that authentic content can be preserved. To his credit, George Ritzer is hopeful, too. He ends *The Globalization of Nothing* with a brief discussion of a movement that tries to use globalization against itself, to preserve the local and the authentic. This is the Slow Food movement, which is the subject of chapter 7 of this book.

But I do take seriously the rationalizing force of capitalism and globalization that is driven by capitalism, so there are limits to my optimism. I am especially mindful of the argument made many years ago by the Austrian American economist Joseph Schumpeter in his book *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*.⁵³ Like Benjamin Barber, Schumpeter feared that capitalism would destroy democracy, but he was not worried about Jihad, McWorld, or the infotainment telesector. Rather Schumpeter was worried about the effect of rationalization on society.

Schumpeter, you see, believed that society advanced due to the efforts of bold, heroic figures. This was especially true in business, where the figures are called entrepreneurs, but the idea also holds in politics, science, and the arts. Most of us take small risks with life and mainly play it safe. But a few people take bigger risks, and some of them achieve breakthroughs that really make a difference. These risk takers, even when they fail, are the real sources of social drive and change—he called it “creative destruction”—in Schumpeter’s view. Without them, the world is a pretty stagnant, uninteresting place.

The problem, Schumpeter believed, is that capitalism’s drive to rationalize is really quite intense, and he thought it would eventually destroy the culture that produces entrepreneurs. Capitalism, as a dynamic force, will slowly fade into stagnant socialism, Schumpeter thought, as rational calculation replaced entrepreneurial risk taking. Thus, he said, socialism will overcome capitalism, just as Karl Marx predicted, but not through a worker revolt. Nope, the culture of calculation will swallow up capitalism from the inside out.

Schumpeter’s view of politics is less well known, but he tended to see it in the same way he viewed the economy. He saw democracy as

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a competitive political marketplace. Like the economy, progress came through the actions of bold political entrepreneurs who took the risk of providing real leadership. And he thought that democracy, like capitalism, would be destroyed as a dynamic social force as bold political entrepreneurs were replaced by vote-calculating political managers, content to follow voters rather than leading them. Thus does democracy die, in Schumpeter's world, the victim of rationalism, not Jihad or McWorld.

* * *

Where does our study of globalization and McDonald's leave us? I don't know about you, but I feel like I have learned a great deal about McDonald's but not very much about globalization. This is the problem with using McDonald's or any single product or industry as a metaphor or image for something as complex as globalization. We quickly become caught up in the particular case and risk making false generalizations. Meanwhile, the true general globalization case, if it exists, remains unstudied for the most part.

McDonald's may in fact be an especially poor example to use in studying globalization. McDonald's seems to have a special meaning to Americans that it may or may not have to others. You can almost tell how an American feels about her country by what she has to say about McDonald's. We end up, as I have argued here, with an American view of America, not an objective analysis of globalization.

That said, studying McWorld is not entirely a waste of time. Ritzer's analysis of McDonaldization usefully highlights the rationalizing force of markets and makes us aware of the potential of cold calculation to benefit and to harm. What we need to do is to find a way to think about this process that isn't bound up in a particularly American set of values. That's what I try to do in the next chapter by looking at globalization from a different angle—through the bottom of a glass of wine.

