

McDonaldization of the World

McDonaldization Definition - The process by which 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. Principles of McDonaldization include Standardization, Efficiency, Calculability, and Predictability

Directions – Read and answer questions following the article

McDonald's as an Agent of Cultural Imperialism

To some extent, at least, McDonaldized systems must be standardized. Thus, they cannot help but impose themselves to some degree on local markets in other societies. Although McDonald's may adapt to local realities in various ways, its basic menu and the fundamental operating procedures remain essentially the same everywhere in the world.

The enormous expansion of such standardized systems in the international arena is one indication of cultural imperialism. In many ways, however, the mere existence of standard American chains in other countries is not the most important indicator of the spread of McDonaldization; rather, it is the existence of indigenous clones of those McDonaldized enterprises. After all, the presence of American imports could simply be a manifestation of an invasion of isolated and superficial elements that represent no fundamental change in a culture. But the emergence of native versions does reflect an underlying change in those societies, a genuine McDonaldization.

The following examples reflect the power of McDonald's to transform local restaurants:

- The success of the many McDonald's in Russia led to the development of indigenous enterprises such as Russkoye Bistro, which now has over hundred outlets and serves 35,000 to 40,000 customers per day. Said Russkoye Bistro's deputy director, " 'If McDonald's had not come to our country, then we probably wouldn't be here.' "21 Furthermore, "We need to create fast food here that fits our lifestyle and traditions.... We see McDonald's aid's like an older brother. ... We have a lot to learn from them."
- In China, Ronghua Chicken and Xiangfei Roast Chicken emulate Kentucky Fried Chicken. The Beijing Fast Food Company has almost a thousand local restaurants and street stalls that sell local fare. Several of the company's executives are former employees of KFC or McDonald's, where they learned basic management techniques. Even "the most famous restaurant in Beijing — Qianjude Roast Duck Restaurant — sent its management staff to McDonald's in 1993 and then introduced its own 'roast duck fast food' in early 1994."23
- In Japan, the strongest competitor to McDonald's is Mos Burger (with 1,500 outlets), which serves "a sloppy-joe-style concoction of meat and chile sauce on a bun."24 The corporate parent also operates chains under other names such as Chirimentei, a chain of 161 Chinese noodle shops in Japan (and 2 more in the People's Republic of China), Nakau (rice and Japanese noodles) with 82 outlets, and Mikoshi, 4 Japanese noodle houses in California.25
- In Seoul, competitors to McDonald's include Uncle Joe's Hamburger (the inventor of the kimchi burger, featuring an important local condiment made from spicy pickled cabbage26) and Americana.27

Beyond sparking changes in local restaurants, McDonaldization poses a threat to the customs of society as a whole:

- While their parents still call them "chips," British children now routinely ask for "french fries."
- In Korea (and Japan) the individualism of eating a meal at McDonald's threatens the commensality of eating rice, which is cooked in a common pot, and of sharing side dishes.
- As in the United States, McDonald's has helped to transform children into customers in Hong Kong. Immigrants to the city are given a tour that ends at McDonald's.. The clear implication is that this is the very best Hong Kong has to offer.
- In Japan, McDonald's is described as a new "local" phenomenon. A Japanese Boy Scout was surprised to find a McDonald's in Chicago; he thought it was a Japanese firm.

As local residents come to see McDonald's and McDonaldized systems as their own, the process of McDonaldization will surely embed itself ever more deeply into the realities of cultures throughout the world.¹ For example, the traditional Japanese taboo against eating while standing has been undermined by the fast-food restaurant. Also subverted to some degree is the cultural sanction against drinking directly from a can or bottle. The norm against eating with one's hands is holding up better (the Japanese typically eat their burgers in the wrappers so that their hands do not touch the food directly). Nevertheless the fact that deeply held norms are being transformed by McDonald's is evidence of the profound impact of McDonaldization.

Cultural imperialism is a reality, but it is not likely to affect all nations and to the same degree. For example, Korea, unlike other East Asian locales, has a long history of anti-Americanism (coexisting with pro-American feelings) and of fearing that Americanism will destroy Korean self-identity. Thus, one would anticipate more opposition there to McDonaldization than in most other nations.

Despite the negative effects of McDonaldization on local customs, we must not forget that McDonaldized systems bring with them many advances. For example, in Hong Kong (and in Taipei) McDonald's served as a catalyst for improving sanitary conditions at many other restaurants in the city.

In addition, McDonaldization has at times helped resuscitate local traditions. For example, although fast-food restaurants have boomed in Taipei, they have encouraged a revival of indigenous food traditions, such as the eating of betel nuts. More generally, in his book, *Jihad vs. McWorld*, Benjamin Barber argues that the spread of "McWorld" brings with it the development of local fundamentalist movements ("Jihads") deeply opposed to McDonaldization. However, in the end, Barber concludes that McWorld will win out over Jihad. To succeed on a large scale, he says, fundamentalist movements must begin to use McDonaldized systems (such as e-mail, the Internet, television).

Globalization versus Americanization

In discussing the issues of cultural imperialism and local adaptation, we are touching on a theoretical debate raging in the social sciences these days OVER the issue of globalization. Globalization theorists argue that the focus should be on global processes and not on those arising in any specific nation." In the past, the West in general, and the United States in particular, has often been seen as the model for the rest of the world. Previous theorizing has also tended to emphasize the impact of Western processes on the rest of the world, especially the homogenization of those cultures.

Globalization theorists argue that the nation-state in general, and the United States in particular, is not as important as it used to be. Of far greater importance are global processes that are independent of any specific nation. For example, there is a global financial world, "finanscape," that involves the "movement of megamonies through national turnstiles at blinding speed." Another example is "ethnoscape," or the movement of large numbers of people throughout the world through tourism. In addition to such independent processes, globalization theorists also argue that exports of all sorts are moving in many different directions. Thus, they would emphasize the fact that it is not just the United States that is exporting McDonaldized businesses; other nations are exporting them to the United States.

McDonaldization in a Changing World

But the fact remains that most McDonaldized systems have been American creations exported to the rest of the world. As Friedman puts it, "Globalization has a distinctly American face: It wears Mickey Mouse ears, it eats Big Macs, it rinks Coke or Pepsi and it does its computing on an IBM or Apple laptop, us-g Windows 98, with an Intel Pentium II processor and a network link from Cisco systems."³⁵ Thus, McDonald's impact on Japan is infinitely greater than that of Mos Burger on the United States. In fact, with the death of communism and any other large-scale alternative to American-style capitalism, the world is far more open to these processes than ever before. The main opposition will come from the local level, and it remains to be seen just how successful such efforts will be.

One globalization theorist argues that the "central problem of today's global interactions is the tension between cultural homogenization and cultural heterogenization." Most globalization theorists contend that we are witnessing greater heterogenization (while the spread of McDonaldized systems around the world points toward homogenization).

Globalization theorists point to what they call hybridization at the local level as an indication of the limits of cultural imperialism. Examples include "Thai boxing by Moroccan girls in Amsterdam, Asian rap in London, Irish bagels, Chinese tacos and Mardi Gras Indians in the United States."³⁷ In fact, of course, it is possible for both things to be true. We can have the greater homogenization of some aspects of our lives (through, for example, McDonaldization) along with the greater heterogenization of other aspects. The coexistence of homogenization and heterogenization is manifest in the idea of "glocalization" which reflects a complex interplay between the global and the local. Perhaps James Watson is right in his analysis of McDonald's in Hong Kong, arguing that it "is no longer possible to distinguish what is local and what is not. In Hong Kong the transnational is the local." But if he is, it is because McDonaldized systems have penetrated deeply into local life. The many local adaptations do not mean that homogenization is not taking place as well.

The McDonaldization thesis tends to be more supportive of theories of Americanization than of globalization theory. After all, the United States is the home of not only McDonald's but also of so many of the other key forces of McDonaldization, and that process is being actively exported to the rest of the world. Almost forty years ago, Francis Williams wrote, "The American invasion is going on all over the world: American ideas, American methods, American customs, American habits of eating, drinking and dressing, American amusements, American social patterns, American capital."⁴⁰ From this perspective, McDonald's (and McDonaldization) is just one of a long line of American exports—Coca Cola, MTV, Disney, Harvard Business School techniques—that have been considered threats in other cultures. Indeed, a furor occurred in France in the 1940s over the importation of Coca Cola: the French feared "coca-colonization."

However, today, McDonald's and McDonaldization represent a unique threat to other cultures. First, unlike previous American exports they have an impact on both the way business is organized and on the way people live on a day-to-day basis. Second, they represent a set of principles that can be completely disengaged from their original source (McDonald's and, more broadly, American society). Once these principles have been dis-embedded from their original source and then re-embedded in indigenous structures, identifying them as originating in McDonald's or in the United States will eventually become difficult or impossible. As a result, opposing McDonaldization as some foreign import will become more difficult, as will mounting anti-American sentiment against its various manifestations. Coca-Cola—like an actual McDonald's restaurant, the Big Mac, and so on—is simply a product that retains its American identity even when it is sold and consumed in other cultures. In contrast, McDonaldization as a process is able to escape its specific material manifestations and invade any indigenous institution. Of course, it does not do this on its own. Entrepreneurs who see profits to be gained from McDonaldization are eager to apply the principles to more settings in various nations.

This brings us back to Watson's argument that it is growing impossible to distinguish the global from the local. That may be so, but it is, at least in part because the principles of McDonaldization have become detached from their roots and become so integral a part of local institutions and local life.

Questions to Answer

1. Assess the impact of the diffusion of Western ideas of efficiency & standardization (McDonaldization) is having and may have in the future on the rest of the Non-Western World
2. What does Benjamin Barber argue that McDonaldization is doing in specific regions like the Islamic World?
3. Why is it becoming difficult to distinguish between the global & the local?