

Irony (n.) – the irrationality of rationality

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“The hottest places in Hell are reserved for those who remain neutral in time of great moral crisis.”

- Dante Alighieri, 13th Century Italian Poet

“*God is dead*” exclaims the ecstatic madman, while on-lookers in this imaginary market-place stare in amusement at him, whispering to each other, snickering. “*God remains dead! And we have killed him!*” These very words are what Nietzsche is best known for. But what does he mean by this? The answer is in simplicity itself. The answer creeps on our heels slowly but surely keeping its pace with humanity. The answer is *reason*. Reason itself, more appropriately the misuse (or overuse of reason in our lives.) Never before have the words of an individual rung with such *ganz umgebend* truth than in the world of today. In the world controlled by logic (technology) and multinational corporations – which is *merely* a monstrous human construct – continually attempting to make their practices more rational (increase profit) at whatever the ecological, social, political, and ethical cost. This force to be reckoned with (misuse of reason) is known as *the McDonaldization of Society*.

George Ritzer first gave us this term in 1983 with his essay on the subject. It was a modern day interpretation of the main elements in the works of Max Weber, a social theorist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The McDonaldization of society is visible in all aspects of the modern world and is characterized mainly by four facets: Efficiency, Calculability, Predictability, and Control. We no longer have to go to the chains of stores, they come to us. They are everywhere, from Barnes and Nobles school bookstores, to Auntie Annie's Pretzel shops at railway stations. These

ubiquitous giants are becoming a pandemic force dulling the world we live in. Changing this world in such a manner that every city – no town, save the skyline (if even that is sacred) will seem the same. Should the trend continue, however, there will be no stores at all; All we shall have is the Internet, with its *speed* and *efficiency* who can deny that the Internet allows for true 24 hour 365 days per year shopping. Botched up deliveries then will be a part of this *efficiency* that one will have to cope with.

Delving Under

In order to understand this machination of mankind (after all, according to Aristotle, rationality is our defining quality as humans) we must first attempt to isolate its properties. Then we must delve beneath the layers, pull the skin back, as if peeling an onion, to release its full odor. We shall see what stench of irony lies underneath all of these promised facades.

The inefficiency of Efficiency

Let us begin with Efficiency¹. First we shall define the term as stated by common English parlance. Efficiency is effective operation as measured by a

¹To make the distinction between normal use of the words 'efficiency', 'Calculability', 'Predictability', and 'Control' they will be capitalised when used in the context of McDonaldization.

comparison of production with cost (as in energy, time, and money.)² This term is continuously seen disgorged about by corporations in their advertisements to the consumer for many products. However, the idea of Efficiency is specific only to the self interests of the company despite their advertisements.

Consider the Automated Teller Machine. Banks and institutions portray this as anything but the penultimate form of modern day banking. They encourage it, and oft times use it in advertising campaigns as a reason to switch to their bank. Touting that they have the most available ATM's of any other competitor in the area. Some banks strongly suggest that you use ATM's by going so far as to even charge you for the use of the *real* teller over the ATM. How complex can it be? Instant access to your cash at all hours of the day and night; never having to have to wade about the maze of cordoned off sectors of the inside of the bank, waiting in a seemly endless line. It's perfection at its best. But what occurs at most ATM's during the busy hours of the morning or lunch time? There's a queue several people deep waiting . . . alas if they were waiting for an ATM to free up.

This technology which is supposed to make lives easier is, in reality, making it more difficult. In fact during an ATM transaction, be it withdrawal or the depositing of money, the customer is doing what the teller used to do. Not only is the consumer to do more work, he is still forced to stand in line.

Consider the *supermarkets* that find it efficient to stock up on foods of all sorts. Or the Wal-Marts that find it efficient to have everything imaginable from guns to the kitchen sink! Alas if one should go into this *supermarket* in search for a carton of milk

²Merriam-Webster WWW Dictionary "Efficiency" < <http://www.m-w.com> >

and some bread. One would have to wade through the mini-departments in these monstrosities, passing the jewelry counters, delis, café's, photo-mats, and conspicuously placed displays at the head and foot of each aisle – usually displaying items that are not necessarily on sale, but are going out of stock because they do not sell. Not very efficient for the consumer, is it? In fact, most surprising would it be if the consumer would not leave the store with something that he very well did not intend to buy. And of course, the longer you stay in these stores the more tempting it becomes. Hence the air conditioned environment, and pleasant *muzak* version of the consumer's favorite song filling the air.

Consider a college student attending a modern McDonaldized institution. The highest form of a rational *entity* – the compute – in place allows the student to access his grades over the Internet. If he needs to change his home address, no longer does he need to speak to a *real* human. A click here and a click there on his computer mouse he commits the transactions necessary for a change in address. Several more clicks in one direction he can sign up for classes, find out when his final exams are being issued, and what his GPA is. Woe if he should happen to need assistance in determining what courses to take next, or even how to navigate the system.

Let us continue with this hypothetical situation. Assuming that the student would *need* to speak to a human. He would dial up the institution's telephone number and immediately be directed to a telephone menu system. He will continue to wade through the menu until he reached his destination. When he *has* reached his destination, a lucky one he would be should he not be entrapped by a voice mail system. He leaves a message for the individual requesting whatever information that was needed and hangs up. He would then wait until he received a reciprocating

telephone call. How Efficient is the system now? How *personal* is the system now?

We must ask ourselves all of this Efficiency is efficient for whom? These systems are all Efficient only for those who distribute the goods and services for which the consumer is being 'provided.' The consumer oft times ends up doing more work (and work that would previously be done *for* them.) Yet, the consumer (vis a vis the ATM example) ends up *paying for the 'service.'* The customer ends up "spending more time, being forced to learn new technologies, remember more numbers, and often pay higher prices in order for the business to operate more efficiently (maintaining a higher *profit margin.*)"³ [Italics Added.]

Bigger is better

Calculability is the second most significant aspect of the process of McDonaldization. It is closely intertwined with the various other properties of McDonaldization. For example, determining the time for a process may help in its Predictability. This is evident across all of American culture; the idea of quantity versus quality. Large conspicuous signs elaborate the scene of shopping malls and large department stores. "We have everything...", "wide selections of ...", "aisles to choose from...", "2 for 1 special", "with over 300 locations in the greater metropolitan area..." are all phrases that we have seen or heard in advertisements in the media.

Consider the *Big Mac*. Even the name in and of itself embodies the aspect of

³Keel, Robert. "The McDonaldization of Society: Introduction to Sociology" <<http://www.umsl.edu/~rkeel/010/mcdonsoc.html> >

quantity. Yet, lest it not be forgotten that the average meal at McDonald's (Big Mac, fries, and a shake) contain over 1,000 calories. How rational is it to live unhealthy? The same may be said of the Whopper, or Biggie Fries, and the *Extra Value Meal*. Microwave dinners that take very little time to cook is another face to this propensity of *size*.

In all of this talk about quantity, there is no mention about quality. In fact many consumers expect mediocre food from these fast food places. Customers do not eat at McDonald's because they want a nice meal, they eat there because they want a quick fix. They want to fill their stomachs up with the most food for the least money. Many do not think twice what goes into a "Chicken McNugget" Warned be he who should delve into such deep secrets, for he would never eat again at McDonald's.

Ritzer also implies that all of this quantity that we may be getting is but an illusion.⁴ Packaging and containers are designed in such a way that the consumer *feels* as if he is getting the biggest bang for his buck. The buns allow the burger to stick out of the sandwiches to make it seem as if the meat cannot be contained. The fries are allowed to stick out of their containers for the same purpose. But Ritzer yields that, in fact, you *are* getting more food for your money than traditional restaurants, but once again the issue of quality comes into question.

One may ask for the problem in size. "Bigger *is* Better... is it not?" may be on the minds of many of today's consumers. But let us consider a mall in Syracuse called the Carousel Center. It has seven floors, 170 stores, 17 various dining establishments,

⁴Ritzer, George. "The McDonaldization of Society." P. 62.

19 movie theaters and nine other larger department stores⁵. Its size implies that whatever the consumer may want is located within this large establishment somewhere. A mall like this is the epitome of calculability- its emphasis: lots of stuff.

“Go there to buy a mixing bowl, and it may take you 45 minutes to find the right store. Then spend another 20 minutes attempting to relocate your car. And driving around the lots can be confusing; the arrows on the ground indicating the direction of traffic flow between each row of cars can be easy to miss.”⁶

Hence, with the incalculability of calculability, who is to gain? Surely not the consumer is to gain from such a product, but the pushers of these goods and services: Corporate America.

Deja-vous

With calculability comes predictability. Americans warm to the idea that regardless of what town they are in, they know a McDonald's burger, the Colonel's chicken, Starbucks's coffee will be exactly the same as what they ordered back home. American society as *rational* people need to know what exactly to expect. They do not want surprises and oddities to play havoc on their sensible sides. They want to be sure that the fun they had last night in New York City is the same *fun* they are going to have in Philadelphia.

Malls are all the same: shopping in them is always predictable. Many of them

⁵Wright, Chris. “The McDonaldization of Syracuse: Why life looks a lot like a fast food restaurant.” < <http://newtimes.rway.com/1997/100897/cover.htm> >

⁶Ibid.

have the same stores, usually the same layout, the same shop 'till you drop attitude. Starbucks always looks like Starbucks, a *Gigante* coffee at Xando is the same, be it in Philadelphia, or California. These franchises are nothing more than cookie cutter images of themselves spotted all throughout the American landscape. Movie theaters with their spout of predictability are at the center of most malls. "Shop 'till you drop" then get herded through more levels of commercialism into the theaters (which usually spew forth the number of screens that they have Cineplex, Multiplex, Sony *Imax*, Hoyts 19, Ritz 5.)

American cinema, and television has shown this to be very blatant. How oft are the times when one sees a favorite movie murdered by a sequel or similar film – take for example the recent (1998) outbreaks of teenage 'slasher' movies. Or how about a television show with a spin off series. Some of the more salient examples are epitomized by "Beverly Hills, 90210" which gave way to "Melrose Place" or "Cheers" which gave way to "Frasier" and even the "Star Trek" films and TV shows.

What is this really doing to society? As these multinationals stretch beyond the borders of America, what is being left is a rubber stamp imprint on the rest of the world. With each new chain that becomes popular, the consumer is losing more and more of their individuality. Not only is this *homogenization* occurring with the big fast food chains, but it is also spreading to other types of ethnic foods. Yet, the even the ethnically oriented food has been altered from its original form to fit the tastes of the multitude of people eating these foods.

We are sacrificing individuality for comfort. Should the current trends continue, one town will look no different from the other. American lives are being structured in

such a way that all one would have to do is set himself on procedural memory recall, moving down the line like automatons. Ritzer calls this process a dehumanizing factor of McDonaldization.

Automatons

The aspect of Control seems to be a double edged sword. It works both against the consumer and the employee at a McDonaldized establishment. The main way in that McDonaldized institutions exert their control is by the use of technology, which ultimately leads to *dehumanization*. Organizations "...gain control over people gradually and progressively through the development and deployment of increasingly effective technologies."⁷ At the first step is the control over the various aspects of the system which purvey the most uncertainty. In fast food chains the two salient members of uncertainty are the cooks, and the customers.

The first step in controlling the cook's uncertainty is by removing him from the loop. For example, if meat that can be pre-sliced, pre-manufactured, "pre-pared" (usually by automated technology) before entering the store, leaves very little options for the employee to mis-cook the meat patty. In fact, the simplification of the process makes it such that any "well trained monkey" can do the task at hand. This simplicity leads to predictability across the various stores. But the less that the worker needs to think, stifles creativity, and removes the necessity for the worker to exercise his judgement and/or any particular skill that they might have. How very *dehumanizing!*

⁷Ritzer, 1996 P.101.

Use of technology in the 'front lines' is also quite evident in the cash register. No longer does the individual need to do any math to calculate the change needed after a transaction. The computer tells the worker exactly how much change is necessary to return to the customer. It is certain that one would be hard pressed to find very many people, working in this industry, who are able to determine, in a timely manner, the amount of change necessary for a particular transaction. This looking up the price of an item on a menu may lead to mistakes, so all that this worker (who is, at this point, a human robot, automaton) has to do is press the picture associated with the item that the customer wants to buy.

Alas if it did stop there; however management also are not immune from this issue of control. Computer software programs (such as those in place at Radio Shack) tell the individual exactly how much of what ought to be ordered. The order is usually placed automatically into the central office.

Control manifests itself against the consumer in such simple aspects as the wait in line. There are usually cordoned aisles, and mazes directing the consumer to the registers. A strong suggestion by the institution to eat quickly and leave: many times by such blatant practices as uncomfortable seating, large conspicuous signs denoting '20 minute time limit'. Large colours like the use of reds and oranges are psychologically displeasing to the eye, which leads to a tendency of 'strongly suggesting' for the customer to leave.

Other methods of control in place (which rings the bell of dehumanization) is scripted conversation. When a customer at Blockbuster video is told "have a good day, jane", she is being lead into a false sense of friendliness. The employee at

Blockbuster is mandated to greet everyone as they come in.⁸ For the most part, these greetings are embellished with resentment. This forced greeting is obviously not sincere in the McDonaldized society.

“God remains dead! And we have killed him!”

Many aspects of this paper denote the things that we have to lose by the McDonaldization of society. Despite all of the good things that rationality ought bring us, we see that irony surrounds it all. We see that over rationalization (of the sort warned by Nietzsche or Weber) leads to *dehumanization*. Despite all of the promises of speed, and Efficiency, over rationalization leads to inefficiency. We must be continuously asking ourselves, efficiency for *whom*? The Irony in all of this seems to be that despite the companies' insistence that more Calculability, Predictability, Control will yield greater efficiency this is not the case. Here is where the irrationality of rationality comes forth and its stench reigns.

Over rationalization works only to dehumanize society, for personal profit of the corporate class (the Capitalists.) It is intended to keep the humans around long enough only to strip them of the ability to create, to practice skills and offer judgement. Ultimately, it replaces humans with technology. This essay is not intended to be a luddite's manifesto. It is intended as a forward look into the future. It is intended as a warning sign to all those out there whom seem to take advantage of this

⁸This is as described by the policies of Blockbuster Entertainment to its employees as of August 1996.

McDonaldized society. One must, at every point of the way, question the methodology of the McDonaldized society; one mustn't let this system get out of hand – although some would argue that we are, indeed, too late.

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