

George Ritzer's

**THE RATIONALIZATION
OF CONSUMPTION**

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George Ritzer



Note:

This presentation is based on the theories of George Ritzer as presented in his *books* listed in the bibliography. A more complete summary of Ritzer's theories (as well as the theories of other macro-social theorists) can be found in [*Macrosociology: The Study of Sociocultural Systems*](#) by Frank W. Elwell. If you would like to receive a .pdf file of the chapter on Ritzer, please write me at felwell@rsu.edu and put Ritzer.pdf in the subject line.

Rationalization

The concept of rationalization was developed by Max Weber. It is the application of logic, observation, and science to achieve desired ends. The major characteristics of the process are efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control.

Rationalization

Weber saw bureaucracy as the prime example of the rationalization process applied to human organizations. These organizations are hierarchical in nature, and controlled through directives from the top offices. Written rules define the responsibilities and authorities of office; there is a detailed division of labor; and staffing and promotion are done through achievement.

Rationalization

While Ritzer sees bureaucracy as continuing in the world today, he believes that McDonalds is a more effective model of the rationalization process applied to human organization. Ritzer did not coin the term “McDonalization” to describe a new process, only to reach a broader audience and to more effectively illustrate the rationalization process.

Rationalization

What are the bureaucratic characteristics of the fast food restaurant? There are many. They have a very detailed division of labor. Unlike traditional restaurants that rely on chefs or cooks, the fast food restaurant relies on unskilled laborers who are assigned a simple task that is endlessly repeated. They are able to do this because these restaurants have a very restricted menu.

Rationalization

Much of the food preparation is done in factories away from the restaurant. The hamburger patties and chicken nuggets are formed off-site, the fries are pre-cut, and the buns are baked and shipped out to the restaurants for final cooking and assembly.

Rationalization

The preparation of food on site is broken down into simple steps, the restaurant employs technologies to take the variability and guesswork out of preparation. Rather than waitresses, the restaurant employs counter people and uses cash registers with pictures instead of prices.

Rationalization

Rather than busboys, the restaurant encourages customers to clear their own tables. To move customers quickly through the dining experience, restaurants provide finger foods that can be rapidly eaten and uncomfortable seating that discourages lingering over the meal.

Rationalization

To make it even more efficient, a recent innovation has been the drive-through where the customer is not even given a table is required to remove the waste from the premises as well.

Rationalization

The attractions of fast food restaurants to consumers, Ritzer points out, are many. Their efficiency combined with the volume of their business allows them to give more food for the money. They serve very predictable fare. The food has been designed to appeal to a broad audience.

Rationalization

While no one will anticipate a gourmet feast, you need not fear spoiled or bad-tasting food, or outrageous prices, either. By design, the Big Mac you buy in San Francisco is likely to be virtually identical to the one purchased in Tulsa or New York City.

Rationalization

This predictability is ensured through centralized control, exercised through written rules, regulations, and procedures as well as through the use of technology.

Rationalization

Another attraction of fast food is that the innovation fits in with modern lifestyles.

The growth of fast food coincides with

1. The rise of the automobile culture.
2. The increase in women working outside the home.
3. The increased pace of modern life, and
4. The decline of the family meal (of which fast food is both a cause and effect).

Rationalization

Ritzer is also in agreement with Weber in seeing Capitalism as providing much of the driving force promoting the rationalization process. In its drive for profit—which is its reason for being—capitalism pushes the individual to acquire marketable skills, work at inhumane jobs for wages, and above all consume.

Rationalization

Although the forces of rationalization and capitalism are separate, Ritzer writes, they are also very much intertwined. Profit provides a motive for millions of entrepreneurs (and wannabes) to adopt technologies and techniques that can lower the costs of producing, delivering, or selling products or service to consumers.

Rationalization

Chief among these techniques are the detailed division of labor thus breaking jobs up into simple steps, the replacement of labor with technology, setting the pace of work, and close monitoring of employee performance—all of which are part of the rationalization process.

Rationalization

The rationalization of the economy to maximize profit is in the interests of capitalists, and it is capitalism that provides much of the drive (though not all) behind the rationalization process.

Rationalization

Ritzer also points out that rationalization is driven by our cultural value system, that is, rationalization and its drive for efficiency has come to be seen as a value in-and-of-itself.

Rationalization

It is the continuing development of rationalization and capitalism that has led to the creation of culture of hyper-consumption in America. So important has consumption become, Ritzer argues, that America is now “better characterized by consumption than production.”

Rationalization

With the expansion of rationalization, the spread of consumer society is threatening to overwhelm indigenous cultures around the world.

George Ritzer

For a more extensive discussion of the theories of George Ritzer refer to *Macrosociology: the Study of Sociocultural Systems*. For an even deeper understanding, read from the bibliography that follows.

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