

# The McDonaldization of Food and Medicine

## Implications for Personal Health: a Multi-Part Series



### Part One: Introduction

[First published on Mar 05, 2019, on Psychology Today.](#)

Fast food is not great food.

It is often not even good food. And by good food, the meaning applies to both flavor and function, both taste and nutrition. This is hardly “stop the presses,” breaking news. In fact, it

is arguable that it is really even news at all.

So given that the average person realizes that the processed and ultra-processed offerings of the standard American diet available at the chains and fast food joints are neither delicious nor nutritious; the question remains.

Why do we keep going back?

Why does McDonald's alone feed approximately 1% of the entire world's population every single day?

What is it that drives our dietary choices so often right up to the drive-thru?

If we are unaware of the influences that shape our decisions we are like a tree without roots. We become tumbleweeds blown about at the direction of forces beyond our ken and control. We believe we make choices based entirely on conscious decisions. But this is an illusion. We are affected by our personal unconscious which is in turn subject to our physical condition, personal experience, and emotional state. We are also prejudiced by our societal norms and cultural bias; which as members of a society we in turn shape as they shape us in an ongoing dynamic exchange.

Our current societal and cultural milieu was born in the Industrial Revolution and has continued to accelerate over the ensuing centuries, and particularly the last several decades. We are the product of industrialization and technology. We are the children of science and logic and rationalization.

Arguably, the Industrial Revolution began with the advancements and mechanization of the British textile industry in the mid-18th century. Its modern face developed with the adoption of *The Principles of Scientific Management*, written by Frederick W. Taylor and published in 1911, in the late 19th and early 20th century. Following its publication, such organizational operation was

embraced by such entrepreneurs as Henry Ford.

Ford did not build the first automobiles. But prior to the Ford Motor Company, cars were more a product of the craftsman than the assemblyman. Neither parts nor people were interchangeable. However utilizing the doctrines as espoused by Taylor, Ford introduced the idea of the assembly line into the mass production of automobiles.

Interestingly, Ford received inspiration from observing the efficiencies of the meatpacking industry. Here he observed laborers at each stop performing a repetitive, single operation at each station. As the animal carcass was moved along its journey it was progressively broken down and processed into selected cuts for sale and distribution. No longer was each butcher processing an entire animal with craftsman-like precision. The process had been reduced into a series of singular steps, each which could be performed by significantly less skilled – and thus less expensive – workers.

As industrialization drove increased production and efficiencies these ideologies became ever more entwined into the fabric of society. Max Weber, one of the founding fathers of sociology, labeled this process rationalization during the late 19th and early 20th century as he observed its impact on the functioning of the German bureaucracy. These philosophies became mainstream within the American food régime with the success of Ray Kroc and McDonald's in the 1950s. This was followed by Sam Walton who established his first Walmart in 1962 and more recently these beliefs were reimagined with Jeff Bezos and the founding of Amazon in 1994.

“McDonaldization” then may be described as the process by which the principles of the fast-food restaurant – efficiency, calculability, predictability, and control – are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world. Thus the term McDonaldization, made

popular by the eminent sociologist Professor George Ritzer, could just as easily be termed "Walmart-ization" or "Amazon.com-ization." For the purposes of discussion, McDonaldization will be the preferred moniker for this practice.

The critical caveat before embarking on further discourse is a reality check. The forthcoming analysis and commentary is by no means a call to abandon or reject our modern civilization. It is not a siren song to return to perceived Halcyon days that were never as keen or tranquil as we may like to remember. It is, however, a critical acknowledgment that as we move forward we must integrate and evolve to control the process; lest the process consume us.