

McDonald's Democracy---A Cultural Perspective

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Introduction

McDonald's founders' (Dick and Mac McDonald) first venture into the food business was in 1937, when they opened a hot dog stand in Arcadia, California. They opened the first McDonald's restaurant on May 15, 1940, in San Bernardino, California. Now there are more than 30,000 McDonald's restaurants all over the world in 119 countries and territories around the world. They serve nearly 50 million customers each day. But what is more significant is they have become a symbol of American culture, as some say that "McDonald's has become one of many new and powerful elements of American culture that provides common expectations, experience, and behavior".¹ While many students are attracted by the so-called "McDonald's phenomenon", it also incurs much criticism, or even lawsuit (like the well-known "McLibel Case")². And the worst is it also became a target of attack from other nations when the US government, for example, was believed to have interfered with the internal affair of other lands³, and McDonald's appears to have been attacked because it is seen as a symbol of American imperialism.⁴ Nevertheless, McDonald's remains popular the world over.

While there are many books or essays having already made discussion over McDonald's cultural and economic significance, this essay intends to focus, through the "McDonald's phenomenon", more on how democracy is related to McDonald's and helps make it big; what cause McDonald's to become so popular; how American culture are understood and indeed, what the concept of democracy should be. Or, as Kottak questions: Why has McDonald's been so much more successful than other businesses, than the United States Army, and even than many religious institutions in producing behavioral invariance⁵, and in pushing the American values to the world outside the United States?

¹ Conrad P. Kottak, *Rituals at McDonald's in Ronald revisited*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983, p.58.

² More of such criticism may also be found in *Fast Food Nation* by [Eric Schlosser](#). See the reference.

³ China experienced this in 1999 when Chinese embassy was bombed by the US led-NATO, and another time in 2001 when one of Chinese military aircrafts was crashed by the US air force in South China sea.

⁴ Tony Royle, *Working for McDonald's in Europe---the Unequal Struggle*, Routledge Press, NY, 2000, p.19.

⁵ Conrad P. Kottak, p.53.

Before we go further, it is also necessary to give a brief mention about democracy. There are dozen of ideas about what a democracy means and what the essence of democracy is, although people literally know that the English word democracy is derived from the classical Greek word *demokratia*, which means “people” (*demos*)+ “ruling” (*kratos*). Democracy for many is associated so much with politics that it is usually discussed and understood in politic rather than cultural sense, and that its cultural sense is consequently overlooked. In this essay democracy is seen not as a political concept, nor is it to be categorized into politics where some politicians and scholars of politic science hold that democracy is looked either as a value, or as a way to govern, but should be viewed instead as a way of life, somewhat as what author Margeta Gutmane puts it, “Democracy... as a way of life, is a deliberate orientation towards western democratic traditions.”⁶ My understanding of democracy in this essay is that democracy is at first not a politic concept, or, to be more exact, it is a concept more than politics. We would rather call it a cultural concept and view it as a way of life as Gutmane and John Dowey do. To understand the essence of democracy is a much better way to understand its concept. When it comes to the essence of democracy, equality, some scholars argue, is what the essence is because without equality, there could hardly be anything concerned with democracy. For the others, freedom is believed to be the core which the idea of democracy centers around, and its absence might render democracy meaningless and insignificant. While all these views are reasonable in one way or the other, the elements they are referring to are actually not the essence of democracy (and one should not forget the literal meaning of democracy aforesaid). By essence, we mean the very fundamental element which establishes the idea, and determines the basic meaning which all its other meanings depend on. For democracy, therefore, we would rather look de-centralization, or, politically, the devolution, as its essence. Let me justify this in three ways. First, the process of decentralization is one that power is distributed among people; secondly, equality and freedom may be realized only after the power has been properly distributed. Without decentralization, or the proper distribution of power, equality and freedom would become nothing but a beautiful slogan; thirdly, because decentralization comes first, and freedom and equality later, decentralization becomes, therefore, the very basic cornerstone that holds all other compositions

⁶ MARGITA GUTMANE, Democracy as a way of life, Bulletin “Tagad” nr.4, 1999 http://www.lvavp.lv/pages/pr/article.php?PHPSESSID=6ece91f1b199bf43b2b6ab1aaa1229ee&lang_code=_eng&art_id=60&cur_page=TNN

within this concept, and the interpretation of democracy would have to employ decentralization both as a reference and as a basis.

Since McDonald's is taken as a cultural symbol, or as one of the ethnic rituals that may "translate enduring messages, values and sentiments into observable action"⁷, McDonald's, with its own performance, conveys the American cultural information to the world. "Although some participants may be more strongly committed than others to the beliefs on which rituals are based, all people who take part in joint public acts signal their acceptance of an order that transcends their status as individuals."⁸ Thus, McDonald's, since its introduction in the 1940s, has been practiced for more than 60 years, and the message, sentiments and values within the restaurants have been conveyed to, recognized and accepted by all its participants, its customers, workers, suppliers etc. When it goes abroad, such values, sentiments and messages from American culture are recognized and accepted by customers and the like worldwide. In discussing the fast food restaurant White Castle, Hogan said that the White Castle advanced food production and distribution to the volume demanded by the expanding population, and it gave American democracy an accessible, egalitarian, and standardized style of eating. McDonald's, too, supplied America with distinctive ethnic symbol: people the world over now readily identify fast food hamburgers as the food of Americans.⁹ It is, therefore, safe enough to say that McDonald's as a fast food selling practice encompasses the elements of democracy that one is ready to find in the American way of life, and more, in the American culture.

1. Decentralization (devolution), the Essence of Democracy

Decentralization is one of the keys to organizational structure for McDonald's,¹⁰ says one essay. Unlike the ethnocentrism that attempts to centralize, McDonald's believe in such motto, "out of one comes many"¹¹, which is meant to decentralize. McDonald's is featured with decentralization in several aspects. One is that the top management in Oak Brook,

⁷ Conrad P. Kottak, p.53.

⁸ Ditto., p.53.

⁹ David Gerard Hogan, *Selling' em by the Sack---White Castle and the Creation of American Food*, New York University Press, NY, 1997, p. 6.

¹⁰ Sarah Sanderson King & Richard A. Sanderson, *MAO AND MAC: A Cultural Perspective*, in *Ronald revisited*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio,1983, p.137.

¹¹ Michael R. Steele, *What Can We Learn From Ronald*, in *Ronald revisited*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio,1983, p. 130.

Ill(McDonald's main office) encourages this decentralization as much as possible.¹² And as Ted Perlman, a long time supplier, observed, "You never know who is really in charge of anything at McDonald's".¹³ We should say McDonald's, or to a large extent the American culture, has a mindset for devolution. When they naturally (not artificially) work with such mindset, its effect is felt by many of McDonald's franchisees. Rettenwender, former director of McDonald's Germany, noted that German managers of other American fast-food chains invariably have to clear their decision through layers of decision makers at corporate headquarters in the US. By contrast, Rottenwender was shocked when he was given the complete power at age of 27 to decide for himself how to spend the advertising budget, what products to promote, how many new stores to open, and what property to buy. " I was given the responsibility before I was ready for it", he said, But that makes you grow into the job fast. It was like learning to swim by being thrown into the water. At first you are almost drowning, but then suddenly, *Freischwimmen---* you swim free". Even when the decisions of its foreign partners run counter to the preferences of its managers in Oak Brook, McDonald's nearly always yields....¹⁴

Decentralization is also found in the concept of check and balance in the management of McDonald's restaurants as Love, McDonald's biographer writes in his book: "the entities in McDonald's are so diverse and power is so fragmented that the system has no master. A large part of the real strength of McDonald's can be attributed to the fact that the relationship between the corporation's managers, its franchisees, and its suppliers is one based on the concept of check and balance."¹⁵ The phrase "check and balance" sounds in a more considerable way like a political term than a business jargon, and here in economic field it is employed to indicate that democracy is not merely a political term as some people understand it, but one that is related to economy as well. More can be found as Love goes on to write, "The history of McDonald's is the story of an organization that learned how to harness power of entrepreneurs...it is run by decision and policies considered to be common good. But the definition of common good is not set by a chief executive or by a management committee. Rather it is the product of the interaction

¹² Gene Huddleston, McDonald's Interior Décor in Ronald revisited, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983, p.46..

¹³ John F. Love, McDonald's---behind the arches, Bantam Books, NY, 1995, P. 7

¹⁴ John F. Love, P. 431.

¹⁵ Ditto., P. 8.

between all the players.”¹⁶ The way how McDonald’s manages its corporation shows that decentralization plays a significant role and the essence of democracy is amply expressed, in the light of its management, that decentralization is the main core from which everything about democracy grows.

The franchise system performed by the McDonald’s tells even a better story of decentralization. Franchise originates from French, meaning “freedom from servitude or restraint”¹⁷. As its origin has already suggested, franchise system is to decentralize the power from the top “master” (who performs the servitude or restraint) in order to let people (the oppressed) enjoy the freedom. In McDonald’s, the franchisees “were legitimate partners in the enterprise and were given ample opportunity to express their creative energies”¹⁸, by which the top power is decentralized. Also, franchise system provides multinationals with the local knowledge of entrepreneurs¹⁹, and therefore, enough attention is paid to the minor (the local) to indicate equality that arises from the effect of decentralization. This, as a result, contributes to democratic significance, because in legal term, franchise operations are technically independent operators; they are usually considered to be self-employed and therefore not ‘owned’ or controlled by the multi-national.²⁰ In the real food service, too, there are slight menu variations to conform largely to local beverage tastes: wine in France, beer in Germany, tea in England.²¹ This further indicates the local wisdoms are respected by McDonald’s without having to stick rigidly to all the rules regulated by the top management, or without having to centralize their power to the authority. Because of the decentralization, equality and freedom are naturally and automatically ushered in.

2. Standardization (Uniformity) with Equality

As McDonald’s is a federation of hundreds of independent entities connected by intricate web of partnerships, that the participants of the system have “common standard of quality,

¹⁶ Ditto., P. 8.

¹⁷ Tony Royle, p.36.

¹⁸ John F. Love, P. 380.

¹⁹ Tony Royle, p.35.

²⁰ Ditto., p.35-36.

²¹ Kenneth I. Helppand, *The Landscape of McDonald’s in Ronald revisited*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio,1983, p.44.

service, and cleanliness”²² become necessary. For standardization, Kottak writes that an American’s devotion to McDonald’s rests in part on uniformities associated with almost all McDonald’s: setting, architecture, food, ambience, acts, and utterances...to create a setting as familiar as home.²³ For many students who studies McDonald’s, its standardization, or its uniformity should more or less leave them considerable impression, and such standardization is to a large degree indispensable to McDonald’s success(as well as in the understanding of democracy). For example, Love says, “The fundamental secret to McDonald’s success is the way it achieves uniformity...without sacrificing the strengths of American individualism and diversity. McDonald’s manages to mix conformity with creativity.”²⁴ And Royle mentions that McDonald’s works “through a rigid and detailed rules and procedures,...”²⁵ to indicate the impressive standardization. Among the four basic dimensions of the McDonaldization proposed by Ritzer, three(the 2nd, the 3rd and the 4th) are related to standardization, which are: (A)quantification and calculation. Quantification is equivalent to quality, and calculation involving time that you spend on eating²⁶. Time is standardized in producing food and serving people. (B) Predictability. The Egg McMuffin people eat in NY will be, for all intents and purposes, identical to those they have eaten in Chicago, and LA, or the one they order this week will be the same as that in the next year. Predictability is the consequence of strict working procedure that is required of with standardization, and without standardization, there would be no predictability; (C) Control. The humans who work in fast food restaurants are trained to do a limited number of things in precisely the way they are told to do them. The human beings who eat in fast food restaurant are also controlled, albeit more subtly and indirectly. Lines, limited menus, few options, and uncomfortable seats all lead diners to do what the management wish them to do---eat quickly and leave., and so on.²⁷ The purpose of control is to expect everything is not over- or under-done in order to bring them to standard. Kottak classifies such uniformity of McDonald’s in the US into 5 categories: (1) Utterances across each spotless counter are standardized²⁸; (2) Nonverbal behavior of McDonald’s agents is also programmed; (3) costumes

²² John F. Love, P. 7.

²³ Conrad P. Kottak, p.54.

²⁴ John F. Love,P. 7.

²⁵ Tony Royle, p.13.

²⁶ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 1993, P.10.

²⁷ Ditto., P.10-11.

²⁸ The standardization of McDonald’s may be seen clearly as we quote in length from Conrad P. Kottak (p.55), *Not only are customers limited in what they can choose but also in what they can say. Each item on the menu has its*

for the staff are uniformed; (4) the menus are usually located in the same place in every restaurant. Food and price are similar²⁹; (5) ambience and setting are of standardization too.³⁰

What role, then, does standardization play in the fulfillment of democracy? Standardization is related to democracy in that standard means equality. Anyone who visits McDonald's may enjoy the same standard. Anyone including all the people, whether he be rich or poor, young and old, from lower or higher class, regardless of their sex, race and age will predictably be treated to the same standard. So Malcolm Waters writes, "America is the only country where the rich eat as badly as the poor, the appeal of such 'gastronomic leveling' can serve as a magnet for others elsewhere"³¹. These people come to pay the same price for the same food and the same service, which consequently lead to equality. They do not have to feel embarrassed or unequal to see people at neighboring table enjoy something more luxurious. The workers in the restaurants also are required to use the same service to entertain any customers all the same without prejudice. In the US and most of Europe, to eat at McDonald's is relatively cheap, which means that they are affordable to the majority, especially the poor. Seeing the Golden Arch in distance, the customers know how much they are going to pay without worrying too much about their budget and they already know, before going there, what setting and ambience they are going to dine in, but they will not expect anything that one to be more authoritative and unequal may happen there in the restaurant. All these are brought about by standardization, which, along with it, comes the equality that consists of democratic elements.

3. Popularization, Making Decentralization Possible

"We are in the people's business,"³² said Fred Turner, former president of McDonald's. Today, few doubt the popularization of McDonald's because a casual observer knows from reading the sign under Golden Arches that McDonald's has served more than a 100 billion hamburgers. ... In an industry that has nearly 200,000 separate restaurant companies, McDonald's captures 14 percent of all restaurant visit in the US---one out of every six---and

appropriate McDonald's designation: "quarter pounder with cheese" or "filet-O-fish" or "large fries". The customer who asks, "What's a Big Mac?" is as out of place as a southern Baptist at a Roman Catholic Mass. ... phrases uttered by the salespeople are just as standard as those of the customer..."

²⁹ Price may only vary outside of the US in accordance with the local costs for supplies

³⁰ Conrad P. Kottak, p.54-57.

³¹ Malcolm Waters, "McDonaldization and the Global Culture of Consumption" in George Ritzer, McDonaldization, the Reader, Pine Forge Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, p.215

³² "McDonald's Twentieth Anniversary", p. 36, cf. Sarah Sanderson King & Richard A. Sanderson, p.137.

commands a 6.6 percent share of all dollars Americans spend on eating out. It controls 18.3 percent of the \$72billion fast food market in the US---more than the next three chains combined. McDonald's sells 34 percent of all hamburgers sold by commercial restaurants and 26 percent of all French fries ...³³ Also, McDonald's control of such market has given itself an impact on the food processing system in the US that food processors do not comprehend. ... It purchases 5 percent of the entire US potato crop harvested for food, and 2 percent of all the chicken. Because of its insistence on product quality and consistency, McDonald's has wrought revolutionary changes in meat and potato processing.³⁴ If anyone still suspects its popularity after reading those figures, there could be more. Yet to quote just a few is enough to indicate McDonald's popularity.

While we believe decentralization is the basis of democracy, the meaning of decentralization also comes to multi-centeredness, i.e., not just one center, but many centers, or diversity in power distribution. By this, we further mean that the center (of power) should be distributed around, i.e. it should be popularized. Therefore, to decentralize may to a large extent mean to popularize. Alternatively speaking, popularity could be regarded as the indicator, or index of decentralization. The more it is popularized, the more decentralized it becomes. One can hardly imagine a situation of democracy without popularity. When dictatorship causes the authorization of almost of everything, there are only a few or minority in number who may enjoy such privileges. The privileged few, therefore, can never be popularized and what it may have, if power be shared by the few, is not popularity at all. Yet McDonald's, although motivated by making as much money as possible and driven by profit through popularity, has popularized in reality not only its products, but also its ideology, so that people here and there, home and abroad, poor and rich, young and old, may enjoy the equal service it offers and accept the cultural message it has brought along with them. On the other hand, culturally speaking, the American meals can be "de-familized" (i.e. de-differentiated) insofar as all members can cook, purchase, and consume the same food.³⁵ This cultural trait helps in a way either popularize fast

³³ John F. Love, P. 3.

³⁴ Ditto., P. 3.

³⁵ Malcolm Waters, p.215.

food like McDonald's, or shape the American way of thinking. As a result, it becomes the integral part of American culture and changes the eating habits of most Americans.³⁶

Look at the small item Egg McMuffin in McDonald's and see how it was made popular. When the Egg McMuffin as the first item on its breakfast menu appeared in the early 70s, English muffins were big sellers only in certain regions of the country. By popularizing the muffins nationwide, McDonald's has helped create a major market segment that has grown twice as fast as the baking industry as a whole. Its Chicken McNuggets had much the same type of impact since its introduction in 1982. Now, chicken nuggets are widely duplicated, and McDonald's --- the hamburger king--- has become the second largest purveyor of chicken (behind Kentucky Fried Chicken)³⁷. In this way, McDonald's was slowly made big and popular with growing impact of these foods, along with its cultural implications. McDonald's impact is also evident in the competitive positions of major companies in the food processing business. Take Coca-cola for example, it alone accounts 5% of its sale in the US. Although few know about this, its impact may be found in non-food industries as well. The real estate that is controlled by McDonald's, for example, has 500,000 people's employment, and is one of the largest employers in the US.³⁸ When we argue that decentralization is fundamental to democracy, popularization, too, is an indispensable tool, with which the fulfillment of decentralization is made possible.

4. Localization, the Freedom of Choice

When democracy contains such elements as freedom, freedom of choice holds such an significant position that the absence of it may stop democracy from working. When democracy embraces the element of equality, it means one thing: regardless of its low or high status, whether it be the powerful or the unprivileged, any party should be respected and enjoy the equal right. If one checks the local menus at McDonald's restaurant in different parts of the world, he can never see McDonald's ever forces its franchisees to accept what the headquarter has prepared for them. One would probably, instead, find in their menus something like the spicy

³⁶ John F. Love, P. 4.

³⁷ Ditto., p. 4

³⁸ Ditto., P. 4.

fillings in China³⁹, McSpaghetti noodles in the Philippines, teriyaki burgers in Japan, McLakes salmon rolls in Norway⁴⁰, and so on. McDonald's does not only adjust itself to the local habits when it expands abroad, but also suggests in a practical way that the local customs are to be respected, and McDonald's does not play the big game which asks or even force the other parties to follow suit and take what it has for them. In addition to its effect on business standards, McDonald's has also been instrumental in changing local customs. By popularizing the idea of a quick restaurant meal, as one study suggests, McDonald's led to the easing or elimination of various taboos, such as that on eating while walking in Japan. McDonald's also flattens the social strata during dining -- there is no problem of losing face for certain customers (who might be embarrassed when someone else ordered a more expensive item in a restaurant; as the food at McDonald's is all similarly priced, this ceased to be an issue). Here one will find it an equal environment to eat in the McDonald's restaurant, which implies one aspect of democracy.

On the other hand, localization is part of globalized culture, whose key feature is to suggest that the world is one place not because it is homogenized but because it accepts only social differentiation and not a spatial or geographical differentiation.⁴¹ Success in Canada clearly proved the wisdom of extending to international operations the same franchising concepts and local operator control that was the secret of McDonald's success.⁴² The respect for local wisdom shows the equality between the top management and its subjects. Also, American fast food could be a big hit in a Japanese culture seeking to identify with the success of the West, but the company that attempts to sell it must look 100% Japanese---from the boss down to the crews in the stores.⁴³ Unlike what it is in the US, the Japanese operator also refused to build the restaurants in the suburb. In addition, so far as McDonald's ambience is concerned, integration between users of a building and its designers, will result in the kinds of local art variously known as native art, folk art, vernacular art, primitive art, people's art, and community art.⁴⁴ Such changes of McDonald's by locality, is candidly observed by Watson: Eat Asian consumers have quietly, and in some cases stubbornly, transformed their neighborhood McDonald's into a local

³⁹ See the McDonald's menu in one of its restaurants in Chengdu, China.

⁴⁰ Tony Royle, *Working for McDonald's in Europe---the Unequal Struggle*, Routledge Press, NY, 2000, p.17.

⁴¹ Malcolm Waters, "McDonaldization and the Global Culture of Consumption" in George Ritzer, *McDonaldization, the Reader*, Pine Forges Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, p.216.

⁴² John F. Love, *McDonald's---behind the arches*, Bantam Books, NY, 1995, P. 421-422.

⁴³ Ditto., P. 423.

⁴⁴ Gene Huddleston, *McDonald's Interior Décor in Ronald revisited*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983, p.50.

institution. In the US, fast food may indeed imply fast consumption, but there is certainly not the case everywhere. In Beijing, Seoul and Taipei, for instance, McDonald's restaurants are treated as leisure center, where people can retreat from the stress of urban life.⁴⁵

Both of popularization and localization function mutually. The popularization of McDonald's is attributed to localization, and localization makes McDonald's popular. Meanwhile to localize, tolerance is necessary. The process of localization in a sense is the process of tolerance, and tolerance is part of democracy too, as Gutmane writes, "Obviously, tolerance needs some preconditions. ...Tolerance as a mental state does not mean to give somebody complete license, because it is closely related to our image of the person as well as the system of government which we defend. In societies which do not allow complete tolerance, the law and force are used against those who are different, who differ from us. In customs, morals, language, religion, everything at variance is weeded out."⁴⁶ When political and religious tolerance bring people the peace, McDonald's tolerance brings profit, popularization and the redefinition of democracy. In today's world when people see the globalization as "Americanization", localization may turn easily the "Americanization" into a real globalization.

5. Globalization and Democracy as the Universal Value

In 1992, McDonald's generated \$8.6 billion in food sales outside the US or fully 19% of its sale came from overseas.⁴⁷ In Japan and other Far Eastern countries, McDonald's was faced not only with the task of introducing the hamburger but with an even more fundamental challenge of establishing beef as a common food. All things considered, the job of going international seemed even more complicated than diversifying. ...While Japanese and German auto producers were devouring the American market, McDonald's was quietly becoming the number one food service chain in Japan and Germany, not to mention the UK, Canada and Australia.⁴⁸ In Japan alone, McDonald's has more than 2 thousand restaurants, serving 2 million hamburgers each day.⁴⁹ Today, the company operates more than 20,000 restaurants in 100 countries on six continents....Today, on average, McDonald's opens a new restaurant every three hours.

⁴⁵ James L. Watson, "Transnationalism, Localization and Fast Foods in East Asia" in George Ritzer, *McDonaldization, the Reader*, Pine Forges Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, p.223-224.

⁴⁶ MARGITA GUTMANE, <http://www.lvavp.lv/pages>

⁴⁷ John F. Love, P. 417

⁴⁸ Ditto., P. 415

⁴⁹ U.S. News & World Report, January 20, 1997, 57.

McDonald's expects to open at least 2,500 restaurants this year - about 2/3 of those will be located outside the U.S. ...The sun never sets on the Golden Arches. As a matter of fact, the northernmost McDonald's is located in Oulu, Finland. The southernmost McDonald's is located in Invercargill, New Zealand. The world's easternmost McDonald's restaurant is in Gisborne, New Zealand - and the westernmost McDonald's restaurant is in Western Samoa - as they are the closest to either side of the international date line.⁵⁰ These figures, as well as the description above, has made McDonald's a very global restaurant and a global symbol of American culture. More significant is McDonald's has exerted such influence that there are some tendencies to result in the McDonaldization of other businesses as well (whether these businesses belong to the US or not), that is, the process by which the principles of the fast food restaurants are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as of the rest of the world.⁵¹

McDonald's is one of the most influential developments in 20th century America. Its impact is felt far beyond the confines of the US and the fast food business. It has influenced a wide range of undertakings, indeed the way of life, of a significant portion of the world.⁵² As a matter of fact, McDonald's has added to the globalized culture which admits a continuous idea, information, commitment, values and tastes, mediated through mobile individuals, symbolic tokens...⁵³. "The Everywhere Community" that the American Helppand refers McDonald's to, "is becoming international". More importantly, he goes on, it is not just in global communication and shared culture communication, but now beginning to share identical products and identical landscape elements. He then proudly announces that "McDonald's is a product of our culture and a harbinger of what our landscape may become."⁵⁴ McDonald's has been attacked occasionally in foreign lands with such understanding, or misunderstanding that McDonald's represents the American imperialism. As McDonald's is closely identified with United States culture and lifestyle, its international business expansion has been termed as tool of Americanization and American cultural imperialism, for which McDonald's remains a target of anti-globalization protesters worldwide. Nevertheless McDonald's goes far and wide around the world, and when it

⁵⁰ <http://www.licenseenews.com/news/news167.html>

⁵¹ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, P.1.

⁵² Ditto., P.1.

⁵³ Malcolm Waters, "McDonaldization and the Global Culture of Consumption" in George Ritzer, *McDonaldization, the Reader*, Pine Forges Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, p.216.

⁵⁴ Kenneth I. Helppand, *The Landscape of McDonald's in Ronald revisited*, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio, 1983, p.44.

goes global, it at the same time harmonizes itself with elements from other cultures, as seen in localization, and these alien elements work well with McDonald's. As a matter of fact, McDonald's has conquered the foreign lands that the US Army has never succeeded in. This is what is recently called by Harvard University Professor Joseph Nye, "the soft power" which is the influence on another level from McDonald's, especially upon the alien cultures. Despite it, as Love writes, McDonald's is such an integral part of American culture that competitive and economic significance of its more than 14,000 restaurants worldwide is rarely measured in a meaningful way.⁵⁵ On its way to globalization, McDonald's too has exported some sort of American values to the Third World, so Hogan observes. Fast food also has "Americanized" much of the developing world....as American culture spreads to these other lands, so does the growing demand for American-made or directed consumer goods. Fast food... is now a booming commodity in the new global market. ...in some sense, what became "American food" in the US during the 1920s may now be on the road becoming a "world food".⁵⁶ When people are discussing McDonald's global impact, few notice the universal values that are innate in McDonald's way of business management and the commodity itself. The food style is accepted by people worldwide because of the democratic elements that this essay has previously mentioned: decentralization, standardization (equality), localization (tolerance of diversity, freedom), etc.. Human being potentially demands dignity, which requires respect, i.e. respect for himself and his own culture, hence diversity of the food choice, from the party he interacts with. Human dignity also demands equal treatment and tends to enjoy the power he is born with, without the disturbance from any other party. It is this values that give people the world over a common experience, common expectation etc.. It is these common values that outdo the American army who failed in other foreign lands. Love says, to succeed abroad, McDonald's had to introduce a major cultural change.⁵⁷ The successful story of McDonald's indicates that peaceful means is always much better strategy to spread American cultural values than the choice of violence to push democracy. Barber tells us, when discussing the fast food, that each of the imperatives of McDonaldization is "trans-national, trans-ideological and trans-cultural. Each applies impartially to Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, and Buddhists; to democrats and

⁵⁵ John F. Love P. 3.

⁵⁶ David Gerard Hogan, *Selling' em by the Sack---*White Castle and the Creation of American Food, New York University Press, NY, 1997, p. 179.

⁵⁷ John F. Love, P. 415.

totalitarians; to capitalists and socialists”.⁵⁸ Those imperatives for this essay are what we have aforesaid: decentralization, standardization, popularization and localization.

6. Theoretical Association with the “McDonald’s Phenomenon”

The “McDonald’s Phenomenon” is associated with the modern theories in some essential ways. Interpretation of these theories is an effort to better understand what the restaurant may mean for democracy. The fact that Kottak views all the standardizations of McDonald’s as the causes of its ritual seems to be related to the theory of consumerism when he says, “Careful observation of what goes on in any outlet in this country reveals an astonishing degree of formality and behavioral uniformity on the part of both staff and customers. Particularly impressive is the relative invariance in act and utterance that has developed in the absence of a theological doctrine. Rather, the ritual aspect of McDonald’s rests on twentieth century technology—particularly automobile, television, work locales, and the one-hour lunch.”⁵⁹ Consumerism is appropriately attributed to McDonald’s not only because all McDonald’s activities are for consumers as commercial business, but also because consumerism believes that the mass production since after the Industrial Revolution has greatly reduced the function of theology, namely, de-sanctified the world into one where people have turned, since then, from God-worship to material worship, theology to mammonism, religion dominated to consumer-dominated. Again one will see that de-sanctification is actually an act of decentralization because power was no longer monopolized by religion, centered around the church and the theological power is no longer totalitarian, authoritative and mysterious because as standardization (of social moral, justice, etc.) has provided a chance for the public to be equal with all the rules, consumerism has helped to shift power from one center to diversified centers, i.e., decentralized. Standardization and popularization are open to the public and all the participants of the commercial activity know their own right to enjoy such standard. Consumerism therefore in a way supports my argument about decentralization not only because going to McDonald’s is itself a behavior of consumption, but also because such behavior has already made devolution possible and available from the God or the church as a center to the ordinary people as a whole, or as multi-center.

⁵⁸ Benjamin R. Barber, *Jihad vs McWorld*, in George Ritzer, ed., *McDonaldization, the Reader*, Pine Forges Press, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, p.196.

⁵⁹ Conrad P. Kottak, p.53.

McDonald's is said to have linked with modernism, too, by some (George Ritzer) and with post modernism by the other (Allen Shelton). Ritzer is justified in ascribing McDonald's performance to modernism because of its rationality, but overlooks the identical essence that both share. McDonald's fit in some way the theory of Fordism which holds mass production of homogeneous products; inflexible technology such as assembly line; adoption of standardized work routines. Economy of scale requires of deskilling, intensification and homogenization of labor in order to improve productivity. McDonald's is dominated by homogeneous products; assembly line is seen in the fast food industry.; the worker routines are highly standardized; the jobs are deskilled; even the action of customers are homogenized by the demands of fast food restaurant; how is consumed and what is consumed is homogenized by McDonaldization.⁶⁰ However, there are some elements that may link McDonald's to postmodernism, but not because of its "emblem of post-modernism", and "moral symbol that acts as a signpost for the times", as Allen Shelton puts it.⁶¹ In my argument, McDonald's is more associated with postmodernism. People may have noticed that McDonald's started its big career since the 1940s, and the theory of post-modernism showed up in the 1960s. Both became very popular all around the world in the later 70s till now. The fact the these two, one coming from practice, the other from theory, attracted the world's attention almost in the same time is by no means co-incidental. McDonald's association with postmodernism lies in: (1) its decentralization as postmodernism advocates multi-centralism, and like the postmodernists who attach attention to "petit history", postmodernism believes the weaker and the minor deserve as equal respect as the tougher and the major do; (2) its intimate nature may be easily accessible to the public. For this, what Hogan writes is worth quoting at length, "Common features of most true ethnic food are that they are easily cooked, convenient, inexpensive and tasty. Their ready accessibility and affordability, in fact, are what identify them with the working or lower classes and hence often make them less desirable to the most affluent or more 'cultured'. Although usually plain and inelegant, such ethnic foods remain the sustenance of the majority of the world's population and---in conjunction with language, history, and belief systems---help define particular people and cultures"⁶². As McDonald's has become a cultural symbol, it may as well be one of the ethnic foods that identifies the nation from the rest of the world. Material things like architecture are,

⁶⁰ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, P.155.

⁶¹ Cf. ditto., P.157-158.

⁶² David Gerard Hogan, p. 3.

for a nation, the carriers of cultural message. The same is true to the food which does not only have cultural implication, but also may, when its activities are participated by the peoples of the world, convey the universal values recognized, accepted and shared by all.

7. Reflections on the “McDonald’s Phenomenon”

When we are discussing the democratic elements in McDonald’s, we do not mean to eulogize this gigantic multi-national; nor do we refer to McDonald’s as the corporation who intentionally promote democracy either in the US or anywhere else around the world. On the contrary, McDonald’s never intends or claim to promote democracy. All its ultimate, and probably only, intent as commercial business is to make money, and all those McDonald’s have done above are for the single purpose: to bring more profit and make money faster through their performance of decentralization, popularization, standardization, localization, etc. For example, in franchise system, the franchisees “need not worry about acquiring the correct standard and quality of supplies”⁶³, all have been done in order to make profit gain easier. Even worse, as people criticize, the McDonald’s also control people by such a standard means as using nonhuman technology to replace human workers⁶⁴, and nonhuman technology is looked as the basic components of a rational system, yet it is called, “the irrationality of rationality”⁶⁵ that causes the nonhuman harm, though it looks like standardization with equality. However, this essay is not dealing with such problems. What we mean to say in this essay is: although this company does not do anything to promote democracy, no one should refuse to see that there are some elements of democracy in their performance which the company does not necessarily become aware of. On the other hand, we also try to provide some clues to the myth of McDonald’s in the light of American culture, the universal values etc. through my own analysis, discussion and reflection.

For this purpose, therefore, we again ask the previous questions in the introduction: why McDonald’s other than other companies or industries? why in the US other than anywhere else? My answers to them start from the issue of the tradition of democracy immutable in American

⁶³ Tony Royle, *Working for McDonald’s in Europe---the Unequal Struggle*, Routledge Press, NY, 2000, p.39.

⁶⁴ George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society* P.11.

⁶⁵ “Rational systems often spawn irrationalities. The rational systems serve to deny human reason; rational systems can be unreasonable. For example, the fast food restaurant is often dehumanizing setting in which to eat and to work. People lining up for a burger, or waiting in the drive-through line often feel as if they are dining on an assembly line, so are those workers who prepare the burger on the assembly line”. See George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, P.12.

culture. In their tradition, democracy is not only a type of a system of government, it must also become a way of life for every individual.⁶⁶ For example, the American people tending to dress themselves equally may be found in their own history. Referring to people's way of dressing in the North America colonial society, Boorstin finds, "In America, it was far more difficult than in England to tell a man's social class by what he wore..."⁶⁷. Even after the industrial machine era in 18th century when people were able to afford clothes, the America "provided not alone abundant clothing at a moderate cost for all classes of citizens", but they "have given them at the same time that style and character in dress that is essential to the self-respect of a free democratic people". The nation's new clothing industry, in many unpredicted way, then, "could be an agent of democracy"⁶⁸. The same thing happens to other areas too: the American way of speech that made people better understand, as was observed by Alexis De Tocqueville in his great works "Democracy in America"; the T- Model by Ford Company that has once helped standardize the assembly line production, which was emulated by Ray Kroc⁶⁹, and popularize the average family car in the US, and so on. Even the franchise system found in their tradition predated McDonald's by many years: Singer Sewing Machines was involved in franchising prior to the Civil War, retailers such as Rexall and IGA were franchising by the 1930s, and in the fast food industries A&W Root Beer was the pioneer in 1924.⁷⁰ All these practice in American people's daily life has turned democracy into part of American tradition, and democracy have in turn contributed to one of the elements in American culture that finally became the lifestyle of American people. Apart from the American tradition, the American reality is also conducive to such a democratic way of thinking and behavior. The suburban and road environment, for example, have been significant to the franchise system, as one American says, "Our suburban and road environments have fostered a landscape of franchises, largely automobile oriented commercial establishments".⁷¹ From here we reason that democracy, as a way of life rather than as a means of government, ought to have come from within one's culture, and must have grown naturally, but ought not to be imposed upon. There should never be true democracy in any culture if

⁶⁶ MARGITA GUTMANE, Democracy as a way of life, Bulletin "Tagad" nr.4, 1999.

⁶⁷ Daniel J. Boorstin, The Americans---the Democratic Experience, Random House, NY, 1973, p.91.

⁶⁸ Ditto., p.100.

⁶⁹ Margaret J. King, Empires of Popular Culture---McDonald's and Disney, in Ronald revisited, Bowling Green University Popular Press, Bowling Green, Ohio,1983 p.109.

⁷⁰ George Ritzer, "September 11, 2001: Mass Murder and Its Roots in the Symbolism of American Consumer Culture", in George Ritzer, McDonaldization, the Reader, Pine Forges Pree, Thousand Oaks, CA, 2002, p.202.

⁷¹ Kenneth I. Helppand, p.43.

democratic value were to be forced to accept. If democracy is to be pushed to, and to be nurtured in, other cultures, it must be localized harmoniously with the native elements in a decentralized way before it may be accepted, become popularized and consequently globalized as a human value.

If the verdict that democracy plays a significant role in the American tradition, way of thinking and behavior, is reasonable (which we believe is true), it may be well safe to say that this tradition is a very important part of human common value, and because of this, “the story of McDonald’s reminds us that businesses can still succeed...by relying on typically American traits”⁷², and finally “Hamburgers grew to become cultural and ethnic symbol, emerging as its most identifiable ethnic food”.⁷³ Actually, in every culture, there are always something more or less that are contributive to the world civilization, and these contribution will usually be accepted by the world and become a common human value, and part of the world culture. When McDonald’s becomes accepted by the alien peoples, it certainly represents part of the human common value. That’s what makes “his (McDonald’s) formula works everywhere, the style and imagery slipping without the slightest modifications into local streets and alien lives.”⁷⁴ This formula, unlike the integration of McDonald’s into the local elements, are identified with its democratic value and has finally become the common property of human civilization.

American culture itself is viewed as a popular culture, which, like McDonald’s, is usually characterized with popularization and decentralization. People may want to know how the phrase popular culture is defined: “Popular (culture)”, says Raymore Williams, “refers to those objects or practice that are well like by a lot of people, deemed inferior or unworthy, working deliberately setting out to win favor with people; it is commercial work that is produced to be consumed; objects or practice actually made by the people for themselves”⁷⁵. Popular culture also “includes other beliefs and practices that comprise our everyday life experience: the food we eat, the clothing we wear, the people we spend time with, the gossip we share, the roadways we travel, and so forth.”⁷⁶ Most of the definitions that are so far searched may in many ways connect

⁷² John F. Love, P. 8.

⁷³ David Gerard Hogan, p. 175.

⁷⁴ B. Appleyard, “Big Mac vs Small Fries”, in *The Independent*, July 4, 1994, p.17.

⁷⁵ R. Williams, *KEY WORDS*, Fontatna, London, 1983, p.237.

⁷⁶ Chandra Mukerji & Michael Schudson: “Introduction: Rethinking Popular Culture” in Chandra Mukerji & Michael Schudson, ed., *Rethinking Popular Culture: Contemporary Perspectives in Cultural Studies*, University of

with the idea of popularization and decentralization, as well as with the postmodernism and consumerism. With popular culture thus defined, it is not difficult for one to conclude that McDonald's is the right object to be categorized into one of the objects of popular culture. And more significantly, these ideas also conform to the essence of democracy, which in a sense helps make the re-understanding of democracy available. Because American culture is marked with popular culture, the "McDonald's Phenomenon" has thus been realized not only in the fast food industries (which have already generated Burger King, Taco Bell, Kenturkey, etc.), but also McDonaldizes other businesses, and even some of the prostitution houses and terrorist organizations as well.⁷⁷ Since McDonald's has come to occupy a central place in popular culture (and it can be a big event when a new McDonald's opens in a small town)⁷⁸, McDonald's is absolutely conveying the message with democratic value, which is silently and implicitly accepted and recognized as human's common value. Also, when, "democracy as compared with other ways of life", John Dewey told people more than 60 years ago, "is the sole way of living which believes wholeheartedly in the process of experience as end and as means"⁷⁹, popular culture, popularized and decentralized itself, has been defined and, is in reality, a way of life.

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