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The velvet cage of educational con(pro)sumption

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ABSTRACT

In the year that George Ritzer publishes the ninth edition of *The McDonaldization of Society*, moving his famous theory firmly *Into the Digital Age*, critical educator Petar Jandrić and sociologist Sarah Hayes invited George to a dialogue on the digital transformation of McDonaldization and its critical application to Higher Education. In this article, George first traces for us the origins of his theory that has endured for four decades. A key dimension of McDonaldization is the 'iron cage' of control, via rationalization. Once contained within physical sites of bricks and mortar, now, we encounter a 'velvet cage' in sites of digital consumption, at the hands of non-human technologies, that threaten human labor and autonomy. Whilst the concept of the McUniversity is not without some critique, this interview provides compelling reasons to open new dialogue about McDonaldization in augmented settings such as Higher Education. With the rise of prosuming machines such as blockchain and bitcoin, that can both produce and consume without intervention from human 'prosumers', universities cannot afford to ignore the challenges of prosumer capitalism, which George concludes, will explode into unprecedented and unpredictable directions in the years to come.

Introduction

George Ritzer is a sociologist best known for his work on McDonaldization of society. His work is widely used in diverse academic fields from sociology through education to economics, and his most famous book, *The McDonaldization of Society* (1st edition, 1992; 9th forthcoming edition, 2018), is generally considered as one of the most important sociological works of the late twentieth century. Alongside his theory of McDonaldization, George has written many refereed articles and influential monographs dealing with sociological theory, consumption, and globalization. Other important books include *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science* (Ritzer, 1975), *Toward an Integrated Sociological Paradigm* (Ritzer, 1981), *The McDonaldization Thesis: Explorations and Extensions* (Ritzer, 1997), *The Globalization of Nothing* (Ritzer, 2004a), *Globalization: The Essentials* (Ritzer, 2011a), and *Introduction to Sociology* (4th edition forthcoming in 2018). George has edited three encyclopedias,

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including the *Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* (Ritzer, 2007; 2nd ed. forthcoming). Over the last decade, most of his writing has been in the form of often cited articles and essays on prosumption.

In the forthcoming 9th edition of *The McDonaldization of Society*, George reinvents his own theories conceived in the brick-and-mortar world of the McDonald's restaurant in and for the digital age. The critical educator Petar Jandrić and the sociologist and linguist Sarah Hayes have invited George to a dialogue about these developments and their implications for Higher Education as well as wider society. Back in 2002, Hayes and Wyngard presented some criticisms of the concept of 'McDonaldisation' and considered the consequences of the process of McDonaldisation for universities. They raised the notion of the 'therapeutic university' as an explanation of the seeming acquiescence of academics and students to the bureaucratizing aspects of McDonaldization (Hayes & Wynyard, 2002). If it is inevitable that the university in the twenty-first century will borrow aspects of the McDonaldisation process and the presentation of consumption from many sectors of society including the shopping mall and the fast-food restaurant, then this latest interview with George Ritzer is significant as a platform to provoke further discussion on what this now means for universities as McBusinesses in digital and augmented settings. An increasing reliance on data and algorithms for ranking universities, publications and academics and for choosing on behalf of students now joins an established consumer culture in universities. At a time when technological unemployment due to automation is an impending threat to human labor and education, the McUniversity lacks distinctive content in McDonaldised degrees. Yet George argues that at the face-to-face level professors can still make a difference even when they exist in structures operating against creativity. Conducted in September 2017, our live online conversation was supplemented through several email exchanges which took place between September 2017 and January 2018. Covering diverse themes such as the digital transformation of McDonaldization, globalization, digital prosumer capitalism, the velvet cage properties of educational pro(con)sumption, the rise of prosuming machines, cryptocurrencies, and future development of prosumer capitalism, this article offers a glimpse into the most recent developments in George Ritzer's work on prosumption and invites new discussion on the implications for students, academics and leaders of Higher Education in the McUniversity.

The digital transformation of McDonaldization

Petar Jandrić & Sarah Hayes (PJ & SH): Back in early 1980s, what inspired you to look at social phenomena using the metaphor of fast food restaurants (Ritzer, 1983)?

George Ritzer (GR): I grew up in New York City. In the 1940s and the 1950s, New York was a very European city. I only understood that fully around 1975, when I lived for the first time in an actual European city (Amsterdam). When my family and I went shopping in Amsterdam, we went to the local baker, cheese store, butcher, fruit and vegetable store, and we got to know all the people who worked there; it was a very friendly, human kind of experience. My neighborhood in New York City in the 1940s was much like that.

I saw my first McDonald's in 1959 in rural Massachusetts, and it was very quickly clear to me that the McDonald's model was of great importance, but also threatening to this way of life that I maybe idealized. In the early 1980s, I was teaching Weber's (1904–5/1958)

theory of rationalization and bureaucracy as the major example of rationalization; in Weber's day, it certainly was. At that time, I began to think that a fast food restaurant had become a better contemporary example of rationalization than bureaucracy.

PJ & SH: Please describe development of your theory of McDonaldization during almost four decades of research.

GR: I would say that, up until the new edition, my theory of McDonaldization remained largely the same since 1983 – I merely tweaked it in a variety of different directions (Starbuckisation, credit cards, globalization, etc.). The major changes occurred in the recent, ninth edition of the book, where I came to the realization that my early thinking on this was embedded in the brick-and-mortar world of the McDonald's restaurant. However, I have become increasingly attuned to the digital world, so the ninth edition of *The McDonaldization of Society*, forthcoming in 2018, carries this telling subtitle: *Into the Digital Age*.

I've tried to revise the book quite significantly, to deal with the ascendency of digital sites such as Amazon.com over McDonaldized brick-and-mortar structures. These days, I am more thinking in terms of McDonaldization as it applies to the Internet. Admittedly, the term 'McDonaldization' is a bit unfortunate and maybe I should rename it 'Amazon.-comization' (although it does not sound very good), or something of that ilk. However, the fact is that the principles of McDonaldization – efficiency, predictability and so on – apply as well, or even better, to Amazon.com and other online enterprises, and I think digital consumption sites need to be analyzed from this point of view. Generally, these sites are at least as McDonaldized as the brick-and-mortar structures that predominated in my early thinking.

PJ & SH: What is the relationship between McDonaldization and technology? When does one become the other, in terms of connections between the brick-and-mortar and the online?

GR: In the new edition, I claim that the brick-and-mortar and the digital can and do augment one another. To some degree, for example, Amazon.com has moved into the brick-and-mortar world. They have opened bookstores, convenience stores, and they recently purchased the Whole Foods chain of supermarkets. They are augmenting their digital presence with a brick-and-mortar presence. While brick-and-mortar settings will never be as important for Amazon.com as the digital settings, they augment each other in various ways. The offerings at their bookstores, for instance, are pretty much shaped by the online algorithmic popularity rankings and reviews, and the information from the bookstores further augments the knowledge that Amazon.com has about shoppers, which, in turn, shapes the digital offerings at Amazon.com.

PJ & SH: What is the role of algorithms in these processes?

GR: The role of algorithms in choosing things for us involves a scary trend. One of the main dimensions of McDonaldization, control, is increasingly achieved through non-human technologies. Algorithms are paradigm cases of non-human technology that are in control of human technology. Being a Weberian, and owing a lot to the work of Bauman (1989), I think that the ability to control us by these digital means is, in at least

some ways, way beyond anything that was possible in a fast food restaurant or even in a concentration camp. In terms of the latter, 'only' millions of people were trapped in those camps, while billions are now ensnared in the iron cage of McDonaldization.

PJ & SH: Given the trend to replace people with nonhuman technologies, what elements of human labor, skills, or qualities, are likely to survive and / or prove difficult to replace by machines?

GR: Obviously, the most creative and the most innovative kinds of labor are going to be the most difficult to replace by non-human technologies. However, one of the things that worries me is the degree to which these technologies are creeping into creative labor and innovation. I just do not think there is any inherent barrier to the expansion of these technologies and McDonaldization in general. Being an academic, I may be harder to replace than somebody who works on the assembly line, but somehow, the way things are going, I think that there are going to be ways to replace me fairly soon by artificial intelligence. I should admit, if it is not already abundantly clear, that I have a fairly grim view of the world …

PJ & SH: Or perhaps you are 'just' a realist! Speaking of McDonaldization, you often use the metaphor of the cage (e.g. Ritzer, 2004b). Why?

GR: In my theory, there are three basic types of cages. The first is Weber's 'iron cage'; then there is the 'rubber cage'; and the 'velvet cage'. The iron cage is Weber's notion that because the cage has (at least figuratively) iron bars, one cannot get out. One is trapped in this rational world from which one cannot escape. The velvet cage is the idea that people love being trapped in that cage. The rubber cage is somewhat more flexible, so people can pull the bars apart and get away when they want to get away.

I think that relatively few people see McDonaldization as an iron cage. This is scary – they just don't see the degree to which they are being confined to a cage which is characterized by a high degree of rationalization. I think that most people now see McDonald's and McDonaldization as a velvet cage … they like it, even love it! Together with the third group of people, I see McDonaldization as a rubber cage. I see its cage-like qualities, know that I'm surrounded by it, but I'm privileged enough to be able to pull the bars apart and escape when I want to escape. Many people don't see the iron cage at all even though they are firmly locked into it. That is a big problem.

From something to nothing and back again

PJ & SH: What, for you, is globalization? How does it relate to McDonaldization?

GR: I have a formal definition of globalization, which was mainly influenced by Bauman's (2000) work on liquids and flows:

> Globalisation is a transplanetary process or set of processes involving increasing liquidity and the growing multidirectional flows of people, objects, places and information as well as the structures they encounter and create that are barriers to, or expedite, those flows … (Ritzer, 2010, p. 2)

McDonaldization is one of these transplanetary processes, it is a global process, and McDonald's is one of the structures that could expedite or impede these flows. I look at globalization in terms of multidirectional flows and the barriers that they encounter, the ways in which they are stopped by these barriers, the ways in which they get around these barriers, etc. For example, this seems to apply well to the massive recent influx of migrants in Europe, and to all of the efforts to erect (often-inadequate) barriers to those flows. Globalization is the dialectic of flows and structures, where structures can both impede, but also expedite, flows.

PJ & SH: What is 'nothing'? How does it relate to 'something', to theory of globalization at large and indeed education?

GR: *The Globalization of Nothing* (Ritzer, 2004a) was a controversial effort to generalize the McDonaldization thesis. I regard McDonald's, the food that they serve, and the people who work there, as nothing. The latter point is guaranteed to offend everybody, maybe even you. 'Nothing' is defined as any social form, such as a restaurant or its food products, which is centrally conceived, controlled, and lacking in distinctive content. For instance, McDonalds' headquarters in Oak Brook, Illinois, centrally conceives and controls all of McDonalds' operations all around the world and ensures that they all lack distinctive content.

Have you seen the movie *The Founder* (Hancock, 2016)? It is about Ray Kroc, the founder of McDonald's, and it is very interesting to see how they invented company procedures. McDonalds' hamburgers are centrally conceived and centrally controlled, and the goal is a hamburger that is much the same everywhere in the world.

You can take these principles of the globalization of nothing beyond fast food restaurants to education, which I know you are interested in, and to the goal of producing uniform kinds of educational procedures. I was teaching a few years ago, and students asked me if I had a rubric. I said: 'What is a rubric?' So I learned that a rubric is a set of guidelines to ensure consistent and predictable education over time. When, increasingly over the years, they kept asking for a rubric, I said: 'No, I can't do that. This is just going to McDonaldize the whole educational process!' In terms of McDonaldization and globalization of education, you can find many more examples in Dennis Hayes and Robin Wynyard's book *The McDonaldization of Higher Education* (2002).

PJ & SH: Are you saying that 'nothing' is the result of these forms of rationalization, whether physical or augmented? Can we take all of these as forms of rationalization that move us away from variety?

GR: Yes, rationalization – or McDonaldization – produces an endless number of forms that can be described as 'nothing' in the material, digital and augmented worlds. Clearly, all of this produces more homogeneity and less variety.

PJ & SH: When might work in McDonald's become 'something'?

GR: When I was speaking about this some years ago, a woman came up to me and she was greatly offended: 'So I worked in McDonald's and I am not nothing!' I said that didn't mean

she and others like her were nothing as human beings. It is that their jobs have all the dimensions of nothingness – central conception, control, and the lack of distinctive content. Something and nothing are the poles of a continuum. For example, there is extreme somethingness when work is free, creative, and unconstrained by these processes, and there is extreme nothingness where work lacks freedom and creativity, largely because it is highly constrained. Work in McDonald's (and other highly rationalized settings) might become something when people refuse to be constrained – but that might get them fired.

Work in McDonaldized settings tends to be dehumanized – McDonald's and Disney employees tend to be scripted. They know what they need to say and in which context. The degree to which they rebel against dehumanization is the degree to which they move towards somethingness as opposed to nothingness. In my case, to give in, and teach the rubric, takes me in the direction of nothingness. If we refuse, and if we deviate, we are closer to somethingness. From my point of view, the more one deviates the better – because my preferred state here is somethingness, not nothingness.

There is a personal side to all this. I got an MBA from the University of Michigan, and my first job was at Ford. Early on, they asked me to do a study, and when I gave the report to my boss, he furiously walked up to my desk. I asked: 'What's the problem?' And he said: 'You don't put your name on the report; you put my name on the report!' He was more concerned about who was seen as the author than the content of the report. This is one of my favorite stories, because it was the point at which I decided to quit my job at Ford, to apply to PhD programs, and eventually go to Cornell. I like to work free of control. That is what I like about academia – I pretty much do what I want to do.

Digital prosumer capitalism

PJ & SH: You write: 'It could be argued, as many have, that the focus in modern capitalism has shifted from the control and exploitation of production to the control and exploitation of consumption' (Ritzer, 1997, p. 70). However, things are far from simple – in order to avoid the false dichotomy between consumption and production, you use the term prosumption. Please describe this dichotomy. What is the relevance of Karl Marx's theories under these circumstances?

GR: In terms of the latter, I published a paper in *Sociological Quarterly* entitled 'Prosumer Capitalism' (Ritzer, 2015a), where I argued that the focus of capitalism has shifted from exploiting producers, which was the case in Marx's day, to perhaps exploiting consumers in the post-World War Two era. Now capitalism is increasingly focusing on exploiting prosumers. This idea first appeared in *The McDonaldization of Society* (1992), in the section on 'putting consumers to work'. In that respect, I think, McDonald's was quite revolutionary, although supermarkets had done it before. Basically, they are having con(pro)sumers do unpaid work. Instead of having waiters in McDonald's, they have the con(pro)sumers carry their own food and clear their own tables. There are all kinds of examples in McDonald's and elsewhere; the shift towards con(pro)summers is just a part of McDonaldization.

In 2009, I was invited to give a keynote at a conference on the prosumer in Frankfurt (Ritzer, 2009). As has often been the case with speaking invitations, at that point I had no idea what the prosumer was or why I was being invited there, but I find it very

stimulating to relate my ideas to new perspectives. In preparation for that trip, I started reading about the prosumer, and found out that the concept comes from Alvin Toffler's book *The Third Wave* (1980). Since then, most of my work has been on the prosumer. We have always both produced and consumed more or less simultaneously. However, prosumption is universally the case online. For example, at Amazon.com, we produce our order and then we consume it.

I am increasingly interested in the prosumer, prosumer capitalism, and the degree to which prosumers are being exploited. People are doing more and more tasks for no pay thus replacing, progressively, people who have in the past been paid to do the work. Prosumers, especially online, are quite happy about this. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg has become a multi-billionaire and one of the most influential people in the world, because we produce our Facebook pages and consume the Facebook pages of others for no pay. Similarly, Jeff Bezos at Amazon.com has relied on the prosumer to make him rich because he doesn't need that many employees. Prosuming is rooted in putting the customer to work in McDonald's, but it is much broader than that now. I think that is the way the world is moving.

PJ & SH: If McDonald's have taken a calculated approach in turning their customers into prosumers, can you comment on the process by which the phenomenon of 'serving ourselves' and indeed 'servicing ourselves' has developed now in this new digital era of datafication and self-tracking?

GR: In a fast-food restaurant, we have no choice but to be a prosumer. We could sit there forever, in a fast food restaurant, but we are not going to get served. The same point applies online. You can go to the Amazon website but nothing will happen until you do something; until you produce something. When we give Amazon.com the information on what products we want, we are consciously producing for them. However, the most serious aspect of all of this is the unconscious provision of information. When we go to Amazon.com, everything we do is being tracked. Then there are the tracking devices themselves, such as Fitbit (2017), which are the gold-mines of the future.

We are back to the exploitation of the con(pro)sumer. We are producing for Amazon.com and Facebook free of charge, and entrepreneurs are growing fabulously wealthy as a result of that. In some ways, you could argue that Facebook should be paying us for all the information that we give them. There is a quote from Jeff Bezos at Amazon where he said something like 'I don't really care about selling books (and myriad other products). I want the information that selling them gives me … That information allows me to sell all kinds of other stuff and it is information that I can sell to others.' Information is the source of riches in the future, and I think that Bezos says, in effect: 'I'll sell a book at a loss as long as I can get this information about people and their preferences'.

PJ & SH: Should the prosumers be paid (or somehow otherwise rewarded) for their work?

GR: Just recently, I wrote a blog post which I'd like to reproduce as my answer.

> A recent New York Times article made the case that users- prosumers – provide highly valuable information to internet sites such as Google, Facebook and Amazon.com. That

information is currently worth $1,000 per user, an amount that will rise rapidly in the coming years. The argument is made that these companies, as well as the data brokerages (with current revenue of $150 billion a year) that purchase and sell such data, ought to be taxed. While this a radical suggestion, at least as far as those who run these companies are concerned, it does not go nearly far enough. If we are willing to say that these companies should be taxed for this information, a far more consequential change would involve actually paying prosumers for the information they now provide, consciously and unconsciously, free of charge.

Hidden from view is the fact that the vast success and wealth of Google, Facebook, Amazon.com, and other companies of their ilk are based largely on the free labor provided by prosumers. As things now stand, prosumers are even more exploited than the workers in traditional capitalist businesses. Such workers have generally been paid as little as possible (the fast food industry is a notable example), but those prosumers who "work" on these online sites receive no pay at all. They are expected to be satisfied with rewards such as the ease of ordering products online and of maintaining contact with, and being informed about the lives of, family and friends. This is just not enough!

After all, those at the top of these digital businesses are billionaires many times over largely because of this free labor. (Admittedly, these entrepreneurs deserve to be rewarded for their ideas and for the infrastructure they provide online prosumers that allows them to consume and produce). In thinking about paying prosumers, consider how much it would cost these digital businesses to hire traditional market researchers to collect and compile all of this data. In fact, given the vast and rapidly growing amount of data, it would be impossible for them to do this at any price.

Digital businesses are getting an incomparable gift from their users. It is time for them to offer economic rewards to these prosumers commensurate with their contributions to the corporate bottom line. (Ritzer, 2017a)

PJ & SH: Considering the increasingly augmented nature of bricks-and-mortar and digital sites, can you comment on how these developments might affect the theories drawn from Bauman on liquidity and weightlessness of humans in global society?

GR: In our work on globalization, Bauman and I were concerned with both liquids and solids. That is basically my concern with globalization, flows and barriers to those flows. It is built into Bauman's approach when thinking about the social world. I have talked before about how Amazon is using its material, solid bookstores to augment its knowledge in the more liquid, digital world. So, I think that augmentation will continue but increasingly the predominance will be with the digital world. Amazon may make some money from its bookstores (or from the Whole Foods supermarket chain that it has taken over), but that's dwarfed by the amount of money that it will make from the digital world. What is interesting is that Walmart, which is now composed of largely brick-and-mortar structures, is moving in the direction of digital presence. In today's news, there is a report that IKEA bought an online site (TaskRabbit) to help customers build its furniture. This is a great example of a prosumer, right? You walk in there and get the components for building a bookcase. You take the components home, but it is almost impossible to figure out how to put these pieces of wood together, so IKEA has bought this online company that will explain that to you for a few dollars.

We are right up to date here. This is not just classical theory – we are taking it to today's developments and the Internet world. It is very important to pay attention to current

events and relate them back to scholarly work. I move back and forth between reading, for example, Baudrillard (on simulations, for example) and relating his ideas about current developments and events (such as new simulations in, for example, Disney World).

The velvet cage of educational con(pro)sumption

PJ & SH: You apply prosumption to the area of hospitality (Ritzer, 2015b). Can we also apply prosumption to the production and consumption of learning?

GR: Anybody who is learning anything is consuming information from books and teachers. They are also producing their sense of that knowledge, for themselves. If you could imagine education as pure consumption (although I always think in terms of a pro-duction-consumption continuum), then a student would just absorb what teachers tell them without producing anything of their own out of it. That would be a terrible edu-cation … The best education involves teaching which leads students to produce their own ideas and perspectives, so good education is always prosumption.

PJ & SH: Perhaps we could apply the same thing to teaching?

GR: Absolutely. Teaching to me implies that I produce some ideas and information, and that I consume body postures, expressions, to say nothing of the questions and ideas, that the students pose for me. I would look at the students and say: 'You didn't get that or understand that, right?' Most often, the students would agree, and I would go back and explain it in a different way. I don't think that you can be a good teacher without con-suming your audience in various ways and senses. That is one of the problems with online teaching and MOOCs. In that world, teachers do not have the ability to consume, or digest, how their audience is experiencing the lecture.

PJ & SH: 'Cathedrals of consumption' (online and offline) are designed to attract and service large numbers of customers and rationalize operations (Ritzer, 2010). Experiences are often required to be instant. How might such expectations affect our ability to under-stand our own experiences as humans and to be self-aware and self-critical for the pur-poses of learning?

GR: I think that the cathedrals of consumption seek to reduce or eliminate self-awareness and self-criticism. The underlying idea is to get one to do things, especially consume, in a largely unthinking kind of way. When people wander through a supermarket, they and their kids often pick up products in a random sort of way. I have long been interested in the ways in which the cathedrals of consumption are structured to get people to consume in a certain way. Product placement in a supermarket has a great impact on sales. Customers are most likely to pick up things found on the endcaps of supermarket rows, and producers pay dearly to place their products in these spots. Similarly, putting products on the lower shelves encourages kids to grab things they (or their parents) may not have thought they needed. To me, the cathedrals of consumption are structured in order to lead people into a mindless type of excessive consumption.

I often used to go to Las Vegas, to study the casinos and the way in which they are structured to get people to spend – and lose – lots of money. For example, once you are inside a casino, its structure makes it difficult to get out: they are structured in a circular way, so you are likely to get lost. Eventually, you are likely to say to yourself, 'Well I might as well gamble some more, since I can't easily get out of here'. I vividly remember walking along Las Vegas Boulevard, when I approached one of the big casino hotels. I said to my wife: 'Let's get on this escalator'. Well that escalator took what seemed about ten minutes; the casino was that far away from the street! I felt that I had to see the casino, since I had spent such a long time getting there. I knew it would take longer to get back to the boulevard, because there was no escalator to get back (now there is a moving walkway). So, I thought: 'Well I might as well stay here and lose some money'. There are all sorts of ways that cathedrals of consumption are constructed to lead to hyper-consumption, and consumers often do not understand that.

PJ & SH: Can we tempt you to theorize education as a cathedral of consumption?

GR: Students are increasingly seen, and see themselves, as consumers of education who are there to get their money's worth. Universities seek to be spectacular with enormous football and basketball stadia. Student unions are increasingly attractive including, among other things, food courts with various fast food chains. They are set up to attract students (and their parents) to the university and then to keep them on campus to, in part, spend money. As far as education is concerned, universities are increasingly cathedrals of consumption.

PJ & SH: In line with that, universities are getting more and more expensive, while ever more teaching is done by poor adjuncts (Peters & Jandrić, 2018). What are the main consequences of these developments?

GR: There is clearly a decline in teaching in general, and especially undergraduate teaching. Fewer students have access to truly great teachers because of the high cost. We have a very stratified system of education in the United States. If one can afford $75000 or $100000 a year, then one can gain access to great teachers. If one is relatively poor, then one needs to go to a community college, where one is not likely to experience such great teachers. What access one may have there, is likely to be through online recordings offered by the great teachers. However, these media do not offer personal interaction between students and teachers. One result is that poorer students are now poorly educated. The wealthier students go to the most expensive universities and still have access to the best education, although they may not take full advantage of it.

Also, we really do not reward teaching. I get rewarded for how many articles I have written and what my citation rate is, as Petar has pointed out (see Jandrić, 2017). But for being a good teacher? I have won all the major teaching awards at the University of Maryland, but I don't know whether I have ever had any kind of promotion or economic reward for that. It has always been citations and how many articles I have published that mattered most. It is 'publish or perish' at major U.S. universities. In consequence, I do not think that we are doing a very good job of educating our students.

PJ & SH: What should teachers do about these developments? What, in your opinion, should be the role of teachers and researchers in contemporary academia?

GR: My first answer is that there is not a lot they can do because they are locked into these iron cages of education. Most of the power lies in the iron structure and those who control it. However, from my own experience, I think that a professor's greatest power lies in the confines of the classroom. I think that one can insist on teaching small classes rather than large ones. Or, one may not be able to insist on small classes, but one can still teach in creative and innovative ways. At the face-to-face level, the micro level, professors can make a difference even when they exist in structures operating against creativity.

PJ & SH: What responsibilities do students have concerning these developments?

GR: It is tougher on them because they have to overcome everything that they have seen and learned over the years. They have often been in regimented McDonaldized grades and high school classes. Somehow, they need to reject all that and learn to think in a non-McDonaldized, creative way. It is a great challenge to work with students who come to my classroom already 'trained' in this regimented way. They ask, 'What's the rubric?' That's the way that they have been educated – by the rubric. My teaching philosophy is to come up with as many interesting and explosive ideas as I can. I want to provoke students. When they say to me, 'Is that going to be on the exam?', or, 'Does that fit into a rubric?', then that it is a real challenge for me. It is a greater challenge for the students than it is for the professors. As teachers, we are more likely to think and work outside of that box. Some students have only known that box, that velvet cage of education. A key component of the velvet cage is the rubric, another is the multiple-choice exam … When a professor tries to go outside of that cage, then the students are lost; they can't understand why you are doing it. They love the velvet cage of education.

PJ & SH: Why?

GR: Velvet is soft, cuddly, and comfortable. Education that is soft, cuddly and comfortable is attractive to students … and perhaps to many teachers. The problem is that the velvet cage may not produce the best education, or lead to the most creative students.

The rise of prosuming machines

PJ & SH: Sociology focused for decades on social relations and person-to-person encounters, but tended to ignore mutually constitutive relationships between people and things. What is the role of posthumanist theory (Barad, 2014; Hayes & Jandrić, 2014; Mol, 1999) in relation to McDonaldization?

GR: With brick and mortar settings, you have humans who are scripted, but that is especially the case in the digital world, which is the home of non-human relationships. Consistent with the posthuman view of the world, I think that non-humans will increasingly dominate McDonaldized settings. People will, I think, be increasingly treated as,

and even become, things, with the 'thingification' of our world. I think our social inter-action will increasingly be the interaction among things or among people who are treated as, or act as, things.

PJ & SH: Would you say that it is also the other way round; that machines are treated as people?
GR: We are in the robotization of society. It is moving that way and avatars will interact with each other; that sort of thing. So, yes.

PJ & SH: Can you give us an example of this?

GR: I would again like to refer to my recent blog post, where I wrote:

> In 2015 I published an article on 'prosuming machines', or those that are able to produce and consume more-or-less simultaneously and increasingly without the intervention of human prosumers. While the human prosumer has recently been rediscovered in the academic litera-ture and much attention has now been devoted to the topic, the irony is that the human pro-sumer is in the early stages of being supplanted by prosuming machines. A few recent developments in this area are worth mentioning.
>
> The most advanced prosuming machines, at least the ones that seem closest to wide-scale acceptance and use, are self-driving automobiles (including taxis), as well as trucks. Auto-mobiles are difficult to automate since they must be able to navigate crowded and complex city streets. However, since much of their time will be spent on straight, often nearly empty, highways, it is proving to be much easier to automate trucks, especially those devoted to long-distance hauling. Furthermore, trucking companies have a huge incen-tive to bring self-driving trucks online since they will lead to a dramatic reduction in various costs associated with human drivers such as pay, insurance, and other expenses (e.g. lawsuits) associated with accidents caused by human error. Of course there will be other kinds of losses associated with the automation of trucking, such as jobs (especially long-haul truck drivers) and those now to be had in truck stops.
>
> In the area of Artificial Intelligence (for example, Google's AutoML), we will see the elimination, at least to some extent, of highly skilled human prosumers. This will occur as a result of auto-mating the production of new forms of AI (and algorithms) based on algorithms that learn (a form of consumption) on their own. This development is driven, in part, by a shortage of humans (as prosumers) skilled enough to do the work.
>
> Then there are the advancements in smart (or digital) pills (e.g. anti-psychotics such as Abilify). Such pills have built-in sensors that are not only consumed by humans to, hopefully, produce the desired effect on them, but more importantly to produce information on their use to be consumed by other interested parties (relatives, doctors, etc.). The goal is to help insure that people, especially the elderly and the mentally ill, not only actually take the medications pre-scribed for them, but that they use them in the appropriate manner (dosage, timing, etc.). Another objective is to be sure that patients (e.g. those who have just had surgery) do not abuse the use of drugs such as opiods. Also in the works, as well as in limited use, is the "exer-cise pill" (or "exercise-in-a-pill"). After such a pill is ingested (consumed), it produces biochemi-cal changes with the beneficial effects (lower blood pressure, lower cholesterol, and weight loss) associated with exercise, but without the need to move a muscle.
>
> There will continue to be dramatic advances in prosuming machines further limiting, if not eliminating, the human prosumer. (Ritzer, 2017b)

PJ & SH: Speaking of prosuming machines, what is your take on cryptocurrences?

GR: It seems clear that cryptocurrencies such as bitcoin will play an increasingly central role in consumer culture. On the one hand, they will be something to consume – to buy, save and sell. There is already a huge and growing market for cryptocurrencies and that can only grow, although given the highly speculative nature of the market for them, there will certainly be periodic crashes along the way. On the other hand, cryptocurrencies will be used more and more by consumers to make a wide range of purchases.

Both bitcoin and blockchain are *global* systems in that they are available, at least potentially, to anyone in the world with access to a computer and the internet; are highly liquid; involve multi-directional flows of resources; are not easily impeded by global barriers; and *are* produced globally by those involved in these systems and are *not* produced by any source linked to a single nation-state. Bitcoin (and other financial technical- fintech-systems) constitutes a challenge to the centralized financial organizations (especially those embedded in nation-states) that have traditionally dominated global finance. Bitcoin is created by peers who participate in this system; it is a peer-to-peer global system (Nakamoto, 2008).

PJ & SH: What, in your opinion, is the appeal of cryptocurrencies?

GR: Fintechs, especially bitcoin, began to boom after the global financial crisis of 2008 which had made it clear that a major source of the crisis was the failures of traditional centralized financial organizations. These failures included the role of these organizations in creating the crisis as well as in failing to prevent it, to mitigate its effects, and to eliminate its fundamental causes. Fintechs are especially important to developing countries where the financial crisis of 2008 had its most devastating effects. As a result, many people there have lost faith in central banks and their traditional currencies, many of which have spiraled out control and lost much of their value (e.g. in Zimbabwe, Venezuela).

Blockchain can be seen as a new global infrastructure for bitcoin (the first application of blockchain [Swan, 2015]), as well as for other cryptocurrencies and fintechs. It is a cloud-based, decentralized, self-governed, distributed trust method. It is an open and (potentially) widely shared, distributed and immutable data structure or ledger (like a spreadsheet), for accumulating, transferring and consuming data on bitcoins. It is used for much else, including anything that can be expressed in code. It is especially useful for other asset classes, including deeds and titles of ownership, financial accounts, and insurance claims.

The unpredictable explosion of prosumer capitalism

PJ & SH: Please link cryptocurrencies, globalization and McDonaldization.

GR: Both bitcoin and blockchain promise to reduce the trend toward an increase in the *globalization of nothing* and to produce more *globalization of something*. Without a main source, bitcoin and blockchain are unlikely to produce centrally produced and controlled forms that are lacking in distinctive content. Rather, since the forms will be

produced by a wide range of prosumers, we are more likely to see the production of forms that are locally created and controlled and that have distinctive content.

Both blockchain and bitcoin serve to *McDonaldize* many things, including financial transactions. The non-human technologies at the heart of bitcoin and blockchain make it more *efficient* for people throughout the world to engage in financial transactions. These largely automated systems operate in a highly *predictable* manner. They are, of course, based on *calculable* processes and outcomes that are tightly *controlled* by the system itself. While *irrationalities* are possible (e.g. the theft of bitcoins), they are rare, and at least at this point, highly manageable.

PJ & SH: What is the dynamic between production and consumption in the context of cryptocurrencies?

GR: Both bitcoin and blockchain involve the process of *prosumption*; they are *new means of prosumption*. Blockchain constitutes a threat to traditional means of production (as well as means of consumption). For example banks are threatened by bitcoin, law firms by having legal documents verified and executed on a blockchain, and publishers and manufacturers since payments for music or books can be made directly between those who create and purchase them. More generally, the distributed trust of Blockchain threatens to supplant the centrality, legitimacy and power of *all* central network positions, especially those tied to a nation-state (Seidel, 2017).

There are *no* producers or consumers on these systems; all involved both produce and consume; they are *prosumers.* As Popper (2015; italics added) puts it, those involved in bitcoin are '*both customers and owners* of the bank and the mint.' Bitcoin (and blockchain) involve *both* the production (especially by 'miners') *and* consumption of data by all 'nodes' in the system. A 'node' is defined as a core bitcoin client on a computer (or other machine) in possession of the complete blockchain (www.coindesk.com/bitcoin-nodes-need/). (The term nodes is to be preferred to 'users' since the latter implies something close to consumers rather than prosumers who operate on these nodes.) In other words, bitcoin is a distributed, peer-to-peer system run by the participants themselves (prosumers). They come to a common view of the system on, among other things, how to add new blocks of information (records) to a continuously growing and interrelated set of records, as well as how to track changes in the system. Anyone (with a computer) can join or leave a blockchain; no permission is required. Those involved need not be identified.

While all involved in bitcoin are prosumers, some are at times more producers (prosumers-as-producers) functioning as 'miners' who solve difficult computational problems. They are rewarded for their solutions with small quantities of bitcoin for every bundle of transactions – a *block* of information – that they discover and add to the blockchain. Miners transform electrical power into bitcoins by using large amounts of computer cycles to solve the complex cryptographic equations necessary to 'mine' a new bitcoin. For this action, the node owners ('miners') are compensated with a 'fee' in the form of a fractional bitcoin. Miners also serve as prosumers-as-producers when they verify transactions thereby helping to secure the bitcoin network. They then select the header of the new block and insert it into the blockchain under a hash. Then they are required to offer a 'proof of work' indicating that the creation of the information (the block) was difficult and costly in terms of hardware, energy and time. While all of this is challenging

for the miner, it is easy for others involved in the blockchain to check (to serve as prosumers-as-producers) to be sure that the requirements were met. Other bitcoin nodes automatically verify the proof of work each time they receive a block (Bitcoin Mining, 2011–2017).

PJ & SH: You are describing a totally new approach to money, George! Who controls these processes?

GR: As in many other cases today, it is *not* prosumption that is new. What *is* new are the technologies that make possible the entire system on blockchain and bitcoin. There is no leader, intermediary, centralized authority, producer, or even capitalist in a blockchain system; the computer code reigns supreme. For example, instead of being run by a traditional corporation, it is under the control of a 'Distributed Autonomous Organization' (DAO) (Morris, 2016). It is a peer-to-peer system in which the 'peers' involved *produce* and maintain the system and also have access to, and *consume*, the data on the blocks and their interconnections that are the system.

   While individual prosumers matter in blockchains, it is the blockchains themselves that are central. Blockchains can be seen as *prosuming machines*. They – and their algorithms – operate largely beyond the control of individual prosumers (although they can create their own algorithms). For example, as an open distributed ledger, a blockchain automatically records transactions and, more importantly, can be programed to automatically trigger transactions (e.g. additions to and deductions from bitcoin wallets; smart contracts that can be partially or fully executed automatically by, for example, automating payments and fund transfers) (Iansiti & Lakhani, 2017). The various nodes on the blockchain can check automatically whether a transaction can be made (i.e. if the node associated with the transaction has sufficient resources to make the deal) (*The Economist, 2015*). It is this automaticity that makes blockchain a prosuming machine. It is not totally beyond human control, but much of it operates without human intervention.

PJ & SH: Please situate cryptocurrencies into the context of contemporary capitalism (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010).

GR: While we are already well into the era of *prosumer capitalism* (Ritzer, 2015b), it will explode and take unprecedented and, in many ways, unpredictable directions in the years to come. It is clear that prosumers and prosuming machines will lie at the base of this new and emerging form of capitalism. It is also clear that bitcoin (or some other digital currency) will further the interests and expansion of global prosumer capitalism. In addition, as in the case of other peer-to-peer systems (the 'sharing economy' including Airbnb, Uber, Didi Chuxing, etc.), it seems highly likely that bitcoin and blockchain technology will come to be controlled by, and further, capitalist interests. The idealistic, libertarian aspects of the sharing economy have already been subverted by capitalist interests. Bitcoin and blockchain have far more safeguards and it would be much more difficult to gain control over them (e.g. to control bitcoin, one entity would need to gain control of 51% of its blocks). However, it is at least possible that the decentralized dream associated with bitcoin and blockchain will suffer a similar fate. In the meantime, capitalists invest in bitcoin and a range of crowdfunded venture capital funds.

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