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MÜNCH(ING) ON MCDONALD(IZATION) OF SOCIAL THEORY

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Leaving aside many of the specifics (and the overheated rhetoric) surrounding the debate over Richard Münch's (1991; 1993) work on the national character of sociology, especially social theory, I find myself generally sympathetic to his overall position. Indeed, I take an even stronger stance on some aspects of the issue than he does.

Münch draws on my work (Ritzer, 1996), especially in his 1991 essay, to argue that American social theory¹ has been McDonaldized, specifically that it has been standardized (much the way the Big Mac is made to uniform standards around the world), and that it is busy exporting its way of doing social theory to the rest of the world, especially Europe. This argument fits with my general view that the principles that lie at the base of the success of the American fast-food industry are being exported to many other societies and settings, including academia in general and social theory in particular. While highly desirable and alluring, these principles bring with them a series of irrationalities. What Münch has done is to emphasize one of those irrationalities – the loss of creativity – as it is manifest in social theory in the United States.

Evidence to support Münch's thesis is abundant in contemporary social theory. On the one hand, one is hard-pressed to think of more than a few, if any, contemporary American social theorists who are doing the kind of innovative, ground breaking work that is likely to have a powerful influence on the course of social theory (viewed universally) over the next several decades. On the other hand, there is a rather long list of European thinkers who are likely to have such impact. I was struck by this fact, once again, in the last year or two immersed in the literature on poststructuralism and postmodernism. The major theorists operating from these perspectives – Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Zygmunt Bauman – are all Europeans and their impact *will* clearly be felt for decades to come.

Why has social theory come, once again, to be dominated by Europeans? There are undoubtedly many reasons for this, but at least one of them is the McDonaldization of American society in general and academia in particular. In fact, the rise and spread of this process in the 1950's and 1960's is coincident

¹ I shall focus on social theory rather than sociology as a whole because that is clearly Münch's major concern.

with the beginning of the demise of the hegemony of American social theory. I am certainly not suggesting that McDonaldization is the cause of this decline, but there is an interesting correlation between them.

Münch has touched on only one factor in this decline in his discussion of the standardization of American sociology. More generally, it is clear that today's American theorists have been raised in a McDonaldized society, trained in McDonaldized schools and universities, employed by McDonaldized institutions of higher learning, and are participants in the increasingly McDonaldized discipline of sociology. The result is a strong propensity to do their own theorizing in a highly rational way. This leads, for example, to the need to create a large amount of theory as quickly and efficiently as possible. This, in turn, leads to an emphasis on producing a large quantity of work that tends to suffer as a result in terms of quality. It also often leads to the use of various shortcuts in the production of theory (not carefully and systematically reading the work of predecessors, not spending as much time as needed to carefully craft a theoretical piece) and these, too, tend to negatively affect quality. The tenure system at American universities, with its emphasis on number of publications, exacerbates this problem.

Thus, there are many reasons for the comparative lack of creativity in American social theory. In fact, Münch has focused on one that happens to be of comparative insignificance to American social theorists. The pressure to produce the standard journal article falls much more on those who are doing sociological research than social theory. There is greater variation in the structure and length of the typical theory article and, in any case, theory work is at least as likely to appear in book form as it is to find its way into sociology journals. I think Münch is largely right about American social theory, but for the wrong reason.

Of course, a significant part of my thesis (and Münch recognizes this) is that McDonaldization is not only a process that is spreading throughout American institutions, but it is also making significant inroads throughout the world. The implication is that European sociologists are apt to lose at least some of their comparative advantage as their societies, and their sociologies, grow increasingly McDonaldized. As European societies grow more homogenized as a result of the process of McDonaldization (and many others), the possibilities of cross-fertilization among the theorists of different nations extolled by Münch are likely to be greatly reduced. If Münch is right about American social theory, and I am right about the process of McDonaldization, then European social theorists are in the early stages of the "American disease". Furthermore, it should be borne in mind that the roots of the theory of McDonaldization lie in the work of Max Weber and it was Germany that produced the early paradigm

for the rationalization process – the bureaucracy. One could envision a scenario in which Germany once again takes the lead in the rationalization process with powerful effects on social theory not only in Germany, but throughout Europe and the rest of the world.

In his critique, Alexander (1995) excoriates Münch for focusing on the nation-state and for ignoring the process of globalization. To Alexander, the globalization process, as it is manifest in social theory, serves to erode the significance of the nation-state as a force in molding social theory (and, for that matter, many other things). While globalization theory is hot in world sociology today, I think it underestimates the continuing significance of the nation-state. In terms of my focal interests these days, the fast-food restaurant, the credit card, and other new “means of consumption”, they are, and in many ways could only be, products of the United States. Similarly, I believe that in spite of the growing importance of global processes, the nation-state continues to be of continuing importance in shaping social theory. For example, poststructural and postmodern social theories are heavily dominated by French social theorists. In many ways, it is only French society and the French intellectual community that could have created these theoretical perspectives.

My major disagreement with Münch is his argument that the professionalization² of American social theory is linked to standardization and more generally to McDonaldization. I do not see professionalization as an integral part of the process of rationalization; indeed, in many ways they are in conflict with one another. Thus, rationalization is often linked to bureaucratization; in fact, the two are closely intertwined in Weber’s work. However, bureaucracies and professions are in many ways different methods of organizing work. For example, bureaucracies seek top-down control, often by non-professional managers, while the professions seek autonomy and self-control. Thus, the professions have often resisted bureaucratization, and rationalization more generally. When the professions have fallen prey to these twin processes, the result is often a process of deprofessionalization. In other words, rationalization leads to the loss of at least some degree of professionalization (Ritzer and Walczak, 1988). It is not professionalization, but rationalization, that is the source of the problems in American sociology discussed by Münch.

I am not suggesting that McDonaldization is the only, or even the central, factor in the problems confronting American social theory. However, it does offer us an interesting way of connecting theoretical issues to some broader social trends. Once known for its steel and automobiles, America has come to

2 Part of the problem is that Münch is not using the term in its formal, sociological sense, but as the opposite of amateurism (which he associates with European sociology).

be known for its junk food. Once known for the work of thinkers like Parsons, Merton, Mead and Homans, is American social theory destined to suffer a similar fate and come to be known for the theoretical equivalent of junk food?

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