THE MCDONALDIZATION THESIS AND CRUISE TOURISM

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Abstract: This paper explores the extent to which current trends within the cruise ship sector exemplify the five core principles that underpin the McDonaldization thesis. There are some ships that possess attributes consistent with the core principles: efficiency, calculability, predictability, control, and the "irrationality of rationality". However, these vessels also exhibit qualities that are, in certain ways, inconsistent with some of these principles. Risk and post-Fordist customization, for example, have influenced cruise tourism in ways that are sometimes difficult to reconcile with McDonaldization thesis. This paper demonstrates that this thesis does not adequately speak to the nature of production and consumption on board "supersized" cruise ships. Keywords: cruise tourism, McDonaldization, risk, post-Fordism.

INTRODUCTION

The cruise ship sector has expanded in recent decades. In 1970, 500,000 worldwide vacationed on board (Hobson 1993), with growth to nearly 10 million in 2000 (Kester 2003). Many factors account for this increase. The mass-market cruise holiday was essentially created by Carnival Cruise Lines. This company, established in 1972, promoted its vessels as "Fun Ships" (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997). They (and not the ports of call) were advertised as the main holiday destinations for tourists. Various aspects of these ships were (and still are) considered to be "fun": the themed décor, and the shipboard boutiques.
entertainment, and activities. By the 80s, Carnival started to advertise on television in the United States. The company’s spokesperson was Kathy Lee Gifford, a popular American entertainer (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997).

Television has promoted cruise tourism in more than one way. The popularity of “The Love Boat” television series in the United States in the 70s and 80s contributed to the sector’s expansion and success (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997; Douglas and Douglas 2001; Wood 2004). The ship, which was owned by Princess Cruises, was portrayed as a site of romance and excitement. Brochures produced and distributed by this company still make reference to “The Love Boat”.

Pleasure travel by ship, once considered the preserve of the wealthy elite, became comparable in price to mass-market resort holidays (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997). The development of mass-market air travel enabled tourists from across the United States to reach cruise-ship disembarkation points swiftly and affordably. There is a certain irony that characterizes this relationship between air travel and cruise tourism. The rise of commercial air travel in the 60s offered a faster alternative to ship travel, after transcontinental ship travel virtually disappeared as tourists opted to travel by airplane (Hobson 1993). However, by the 70s and 80s, a marked “popularization” of cruise tourism was underway, a process that has continued to the present time, as total capacity within this sector increases. In 2002, 37 new cruiseships were on order (Kester 2003:344).

In the 80s and 90s, several companies started to build “supersized” cruiseships that could accommodate over 2,000 (and sometimes as many as 3,000) tourists at once. Over 40 currently in operation worldwide can accommodate 2,000 or more passengers (Golden 2003:55–106). These enormous (and mobile) vacation enclaves contain casinos, exercise facilities, health spas, performance halls, bars, restaurants, discotheques, and boutiques. Travel writers have compared them to theme parks (Boorstin 2003), Wal-Mart stores (Hilton 2002; Sarna and Hannafin 2003), and McDonald’s restaurants (Grossman 1991). This restaurant chain is, in fact, the namesake of the McDonaldization thesis that is discussed and critiqued in this paper. Developed by Ritzer (1993), it represents one way to interpret the nature of production and consumption on board supersized cruiseships. The restaurant chain as an icon is indicative of a more widespread social process referred to as “McDonaldization”. Ritzer’s thesis is not about fast food as such, but about the process of rationalization. This thesis states that the principles that dictate the way in which fastfood restaurants function have come to dominate many sectors across American society and other parts of the world (1993:1).

A number of tourism researchers have already studied various aspects of cruiseships. Recent scholarship has examined the expansion of the sector (Douglas and Douglas 2001; Dowling and Vasudavan 2000; Miller and Grazer 2002; Wood 2000, 2004) and the ways in which it has affected port communities and island economies (Braun, Xander and White 2002; Dwyer and Forsyth 1998; Jaakson 2004; Wilkinson 1999). Researchers have also studied customer service (Petrick 2003;
The notion that institutions and societal structures have become more rationalized, standardized, and routinized has been addressed by a number of commentators (Habermas 1981; Lukács 1971; Mannheim 1940; Ritzer 1993; Weber 1968). A present-day exemplar of these trends is the popular fastfood chain, McDonald’s. While bureaucracy, in Max Weber’s view, epitomized rationalization in the 19th and early
20th centuries, the fastfood business best exemplifies the contemporary rationalization process for Ritzer. He contends that these restaurants operate in accordance with five main principles: efficiency, calculability, predictability, control, and the "irrationality of rationality". These shape the way in which food preparation, service delivery, and even consumption take place. They also determine how many institutions operate—in particular, schools, hospitals, and workplaces.

Ritzer’s Weberian approach has been criticized because it emphasizes rationalization but not the commodification process (a Marxian critique) and the notion that commodities possess value as a result of the symbols and emblems that they bear (a postmodern critique) (Kellner 1999; Smart 1999). A number of commentators have also indicated that the McDonaldization thesis is insensitive to variations across different countries and cultures (Watson 1997). This paper offers a different critique of the thesis. Risk and post-Fordism customization are identified as tendencies that affect the nature of production and consumption on board supersized ships and that are, in some ways, at variance with certain principles that underpin the McDonaldization thesis. The main contention here is that the cruiseship sector exhibits some qualities which are easily reconciled with this thesis and other qualities that are more at odds with it. Ritzer does examine the notion that rationalization has irrational consequences (the "irrationality of rationality"), but there are some serious omissions from his work. The McDonaldization thesis does address how production and consumption within a variety of tourism- and pleasure-oriented realms have become more systematized. At the same time, however, it must be understood that rationally structured systems are tempered by processes and tendencies that run counter to them.

Ritzer does not explicitly discuss risk in his work. On occasion, risk may exemplify his notion that rationalization has irrational outcomes. Unanticipated events and circumstances can undermine how efficiency, predictability, calculability, and control manifest themselves within built environments. As rational systems become more complex, risk sometimes becomes more of a concern for both corporations and consumers (Beck 1992, 1999; Perrow 1984). It is evident, too, that certain types of risk can be controlled. Rationalization has reduced and even eradicated certain types of risk. Of course, accidents and certain hazards have not disappeared completely. Risk does endure; it often exists in tandem with rationalization.

Post-Fordist customization is perhaps more difficult to reconcile with McDonaldization. While Ritzer emphasizes that the thesis is oriented around mass production and mass consumption, other commentators (Piore and Sabel 1984) contend that there has been a broad shift within modern society whereby uniformity and predictability have been supplanted by variety and choice. Post-Fordist customization is a concept that can account for product diversity within the cruiseship sector and the enormous number of choices and options available to tourists on board supersized vessels. This concept conflicts with Ritzer’s belief that products and services have become more uniform and standardized (Ritzer 1993:138–139).
The McDonaldization thesis has been used to interpret broad trends and tendencies across the tourism industry (Ritzer 1998; Ritzer and Liska 1997) and the way in which Disney themeparks operate (Bryman 1998). A number of tourism-oriented environments exhibit traits consistent with the principles that underpin Ritzer’s thesis. The corporations, for example, that own and operate themeparks and enclave resorts try to provide consumers with efficiently produced products and services that possess relatively standardized features. This standardization ensures consistency, predictability and certainty, so that tourists often receive precisely the experiences they anticipate. When they visit a themepark or an enclave resort, efforts are made to “contain” and control them in ways that increase onsite purchases. Various control mechanisms are also used within tourism-oriented workplaces: service employees are required to abide by certain scripts and perform tasks in a prescribed order (Leidner 1993). It is no accident that many McDonaldized spaces are popular with tourists. Their popularity and profitability can be directly attributed to careful market research which renders tourists calculable. Their desires are, in a sense, “written into the texts” of consumption-based environments.

The McDonaldization thesis addresses the structured and ordered nature of production and consumption within realms that are supposed to evoke pleasure and earn profit. In many ways, cruiseships are similar to themeparks, casinos, and enclave resorts, repeatedly contents Ritzer (1998, 1999). Ritzer has described these domains as “cathedrals of consumption”. A tension exists between rationalization and enchantment within these cathedrals (Rojek 2000). On the one hand, they operate in a rationalized manner and are oriented around commerce. The way in which they function is discussed and determined in corporate boardrooms; their ability to earn revenue is monitored and measured. On the other hand, cathedrals of consumption provide tourists with an opportunity to escape from the rationalized world, with simulated (and often themed) environments that seem far removed from calculated concerns. Rationalization and enchantment also exist in concert and in tension with each other on board supersized cruise ships; these vessels contain consumption-oriented realms that enchant tourists and simultaneously possess attributes consistent with the five core principles of McDonaldization. These principles will be discussed in turn.

MCDONALDIZATION AND THE CRUISESHIP SECTOR

For Ritzer (1993), efficiency involves the selection of the optimum means to achieve a desired end. Expediency and convenience are desired by many consumers. As a result, many companies within the retail and tourism sectors try to ensure that consumers achieve satisfaction as swiftly as possible. Efficiency is typically shaped by institutionalized rules and broader social structures, helping individuals to select—or determine—certain course of action. Efficiency, then, can circumscribe choice; the rules and structures that ensure it may also restrict an individual’s choice of means to ends.
One way that cruiseship companies have increased the efficiency of the retail transactions on board is via debit cards issued to tourists when they embark. They are required to use these cards (which also serve as room keys and shipboard identification) for onboard purchases. Before receiving their debit card, they must provide the company with their credit card number. Purchases made with the debit card are then billed directly to the credit card. The debit cards make shipboard consumption seem far removed from the actual expenditure of cash. As a result, this technique maximizes expenditure because it stimulates consumption that may not otherwise take place (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997:115).

These debit cards provide other efficiency-related benefits. For instance, there is no need for these companies to pay for cash custody and cash security. The use of debit cards also means that cruiseship cashiers do not have to handle different currencies; opportunities for employee-perpetrated crime are reduced, thus eliminating the possibility of cash theft (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997:129).

Perhaps the facility on board a cruiseship that best exemplifies the concept of efficiency is the kitchen. On board supersized ships that can accommodate as many as 2,000 or 3,000 tourists, the kitchen is an elaborate food preparation factory. There are usually over 100 kitchen employees (Griffith 1999). The food preparation process to which the kitchen staff must adhere has a strict timetable:

Everything must be done by the book with no room for exceptions. The dishes are timed to be cooked just before they are served, so that if the first sitting is at 6:30 pm, the servers will have the orders in to the galley by 6:45 pm and begin serving the appetizers. The first of the main entries will start coming off the line at 6:55. By 7:30 the first dirty dishes will be coming in (to be immediately washed and reused for the second sitting) and desserts and coffee will be coming out. By 8 pm people will begin to leave (they have to if they want to catch the first show—a graceful way to empty the dining room)! This leaves time for the servers to reset the tables with clean linen and tableware for the second sitting at 8:30 (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997:87).

A serious deviation from this timetable can disrupt the entire food preparation system and even prompt customer complaints. To ensure that food is prepared in a timely fashion, production quotas are sometimes implemented. The kitchen workers of Royal Caribbean International, for example, are required to plate and serve over 1,000 meals in approximately 22 minutes (Phillips 2002). Efforts to achieve efficiency often involve the imposition of strict production benchmarks.

For Ritzer, calculability addresses the notion that size and measurement are important to both corporations and consumers. Volume is an important criterion used to evaluate the value of products and services. In fast-food restaurants, consumers often assume that enormous portions contribute to a better meal. Quantity, then, is quite often a proxy for quality. By the same token, cruiseship companies emphasize the sheer scale of their supersized vessels in their brochures, indicating that there are a wide array of activities and facilities on board. In fact, there is considerable competition between cruiseship companies in
terms of the amenities they offer to tourists. This competition could be seen as a type of one-upman “ship”.

The concept of calculability can be extended to encompass efforts made by corporations to collect information about (prospective) consumers. Within the service sector, for instance, many corporations obtain data from consumers via questionnaire cards (usually referred to as comment cards) and telephone surveys (Swarbrook and Horner 1999). Such surveys enable corporations to understand and “calculate” the preferences of their customers. The evaluations and comments are used to “fine-tune” their vacation products. One executive interviewed by the author stated that comment cards are taken very seriously by the company for which he works; in fact, he claimed that data from comment cards “run the business”.

Beyond quality control, cruise ship companies compile data about their customers for purposes of product development. In 1999, Royal Caribbean collected data about current and future customers when it commissioned a market research company to interview 1,000 Americans about their vacation preferences (Fishman 2000). The resulting data demonstrated that Americans want access to a variety of facilities and amenities on board. In order to satisfy this preference for choice and variety, the company commissioned the construction of several enormous and elaborate ships that can accommodate over 3,000 passengers. These vessels have a wider selection of onboard services and activities than those owned by the main competitors (Sarna and Hannafin 2003).

Predictability is tied to the imposition of order, systematization, routine, and consistency (Ritzer 1993). It is apparent that predictability is closely tied to the dimension of calculability. In fastfood restaurants, patrons expect food portions of constant size and quality. They enter the establishment with certain expectations about the items they will order and be served. Even in venues other than fastfood restaurants, individuals have certain preconceived expectations about products and services they may wish to purchase. The desire for predictability, certainty, and standardization also extends the way in which a product or service is provided. For the most part, individuals in Western societies expect bureaucracies and institutions to operate smoothly, predictably, and in accordance with certain standardized rules and procedures. These bureaucracies and institutions include insurance companies, banks, and hospitals. In order to achieve predictability, both private-sector firms and state-run bureaucracies standardize procedures, services, and administrative techniques. Predictability is an important attribute of McDonaldization and various practices and devices (routine inspection and comment cards, for example) are used to ensure consistency and monitor quality.

The way cruise vacations are scheduled is meant to ensure that tourists have predictable vacation experiences. A supersized ship will typically travel the same itinerary (usually three-, five-, or seven-day) for several consecutive months or even years. The circuit itinerary is usually described and mapped in cruise-vacation brochures. As a result, tourists can determine in advance which port destinations the ship will visit and when.
Predictability is also reflected in the types of cruiseships that are currently built. Many ships are built from nearly identical sets of architectural plans. This practice enables companies to benefit from economies of scale. It also ensures product uniformity. With similarity in size and onboard services and facilities, a cruiseship company can provide its customers with consistently similar vacation experiences.

There are three cruiseships within the fleet owned by Carnival Cruise Lines that are practically identical to each other: *Carnival Destiny*, *Carnival Triumph*, and *Carnival Victory*, which are referred to as the Destiny-class ships. They each accommodate over 2,600 passengers (Sarna and Hannafin 2003). The economies of scale and replication achieved by Carnival are substantial. One business writer has noted that this company reduces costs considerably because it standardizes its ships “down to the bedspreads and barstools” (Boorstin 2003:145).

It is not only Carnival that commissions the construction of cruiseships “cloned” from a prototype. Three within the fleet owned by Princess Cruises are essentially identical vessels: *Grand Princess*, *Golden Princess*, and *Star Princess*. Each can accommodate over 2,600 passengers. Many smaller companies have commissioned the construction of smaller “cloned” vessels almost identical to each other (Golden 2003; Sarna and Hannafin 2003).

Finally, control is necessary in order to ensure efficiency, calculability, and predictability. It is usually the case that control is directed towards humans (consumers and workers) as they represent a core element of uncertainty and unpredictability. This control may be both subtle and more coercive. A number of researchers have examined how control is often exercised over tourists (Dann 2000, 2003; Wood 1994), including the way they behave and consume. For example, tourists are usually not permitted to purchase alcohol ashore and then consume it on board (Hilton 2003; Reynolds 1997). When they board with bottles of alcohol purchased ashore, they must turn them over to the shipboard employees who monitor the embarkation ramps. The alcohol is then stored in a secure room until the end of the cruise. This practice ensures that passengers purchase alcohol from shipboard bars.

The “soft” control that is sometimes exercised over tourists resembles persuasion and enticement rather than coercion (Ritzer and Liska 1997:106). This type of control is subtle, but it does manipulate human behavior and prompt certain actions that would perhaps otherwise not occur. Interior spaces on board are constructed and positioned in ways meant to induce certain types of behavior. Typically, casinos, bars, and boutiques are situated in areas close to frequently used pedestrian walkways. The sheer number of bars is also meant to prompt consumption.

Good ship designs incorporate a lot of bars and serving stations. The idea is that you should be able to get a drink wherever and whenever you want it. Equally important, designers recognize that since the sale of drinks is as often an impulse buy as it is a planned purchase, bars need to be situated in high-traffic areas. In a well-executed ship design, the most convenient way to go from your cabin to the dining
room should take you past a lounge of some sort, where you can stop for a cocktail before dinner or a drink afterwards. And because most ships sail in warm waters, you also need a highly visible bar by the pool—or even in it! In fact, one can argue that there should be a bar everywhere! Some lines even station waiters near the library in case people want a drink while browsing (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997: 270–271).

The placement of bars and other concessions is not haphazard. Onboard facilities that offer extra-fee products and services are positioned in ways that are meant to maximize revenue.

Ritzer addresses the notion that the rationality of the system imposed by McDonaldization spaws irrational tendencies. While the process of McDonaldization has created numerous benefits for both corporations and consumers, there is a certain sense that rational systems can undermine themselves. Rationalization can have irrational consequences. Ritzer (1993) refers to these consequences as the “irrationality of rationality”. Many individuals seem to accept McDonaldization as “normal” and desirable even when the consequences may contradict their interests and needs.

A number of irrational tendencies manifest themselves on board supersized cruiseships. Passengers produce an enormous amount of waste. “Rationally” structured holiday pleasure can harm the environment, which is rather irrational consequence of shipboard hyper-consumption (Klein 2002). It is commonplace on board supersized ships for people to queue at buffets and when they disembark and reboard at ports of call. If McDonaldized systems are so efficient, why do tourists have to wait so often? There are then serious paradoxes that can impair the smooth operation of McDonaldized institutions. The rationalization process may even threaten the mystery, romance, and sentimentality that are sometimes associated with the cruise-vacation experience. That banality and routinization may stifle fantasy and enchantment possibly means that companies will have to reenchant those elements of the cruise vacation which rationalization and McDonaldization have disenchanted (Wood 2004:143).

The McDonaldization Thesis: A Critique

There is ample evidence to demonstrate that vacations on board supersized cruiseships have been McDonaldized in a variety of ways. This thesis aptly addresses the ordered and structured nature of service provision and consumption on board these ships. It has been demonstrated in this paper that there are numerous aspects of cruise tourism that are consistent with the five key principles that underpin McDonaldization. The enchantment that supersized ships offer exists in concert with the rationalization process.

Ritzer’s thesis is not immune to criticism, however. While he does address certain irrational tendencies that run counter to the other four principles that underpin McDonaldization, risk and uncertainty are simply not mentioned in Ritzer’s oeuvre. His thesis, too, only examines variety and diversity in Western economies in a very cursory fashion.
The notion that production and consumption have become more standardized deserves scrutiny. Risk is explored comprehensively in works by Beck (1992, 1999) and Giddens (1990, 1991). Their ideas about its pervasiveness in contemporary society have been discussed by several researchers in relation to tourism (Bauer 2001; Elsrud 2001; Gottdiener 2001). That theorists such as Beck and Giddens consider risk and uncertainty to be widespread is inconsistent with Ritzer’s contention that Western societies have become more predictable in nature (Elliott 2002; Turner 2003). Many researchers have noted that risk and uncertainty affect the tourism industry (Cothran and Cothran 1998; Prideaux, Laws and Faulkner 2003; Sonmez and Graefe 1998).

The concept of post-Fordist customization can be used to temper Ritzer’s view that rationalization, standardization, and routinization completely dominate contemporary Western economies. Post-Fordist customization and McDonaldization should not be viewed as mutually exclusive processes. The ascendancy of McDonaldization is far from absolute. A number of cruiseship companies demonstrate an extraordinary ability to identify and serve different market niches. The thesis, as articulated by Ritzer, cannot account for the existence of niche markets and customization practices that are post-Fordist in nature. When Ritzer writes about McDonaldization, he emphasizes its capacity to promote and spread uniformity. He does not discuss the way in which institutions that possess such qualities actively strive to offer variety and choice. In this paper, the concepts of risk and post-Fordist customization will be addressed in succession.

Risk and Accidents

There are numerous types of risk that can pose problems for cruiseship companies (Lois, Wang, Wall and Ruxton 2004). While some risks (inclement weather and turbulent seas, for instance) are provoked by nature, others are caused by human activity and by the complex nature of supersized ships. These ships possess many features that can intensify certain risks. For example, a common feature on board many supersized cruiseships constructed since the 90s is a multistorey atrium. There have been some concerns about these atriums because they could potentially promote the spread of a shipboard fire. When a fire occurs on board, the first safety precaution is to contain it. But it is impossible to close off an atrium deck by deck. A fire could potentially travel its way up an atrium as if the atrium was a chimney (Heller 1989; Jenkins 1988). While there have been many cruiseship fires in recent decades, there is no documented case of a fire that has actually spread to (and up) an atrium. This scenario, however, has been discussed and studied by safety experts. In order to produce more profit and more spectacular ships, companies may actually create seaborne environments that could be unsafe.

A fire at sea is one of the most hazardous situations that cruiseship tourists and employees can encounter. When a ship is distant from shore, it may be quite far from other ships that could provide assistance.
if a fire occurred on board. There have been numerous fires in recent years. In summer 1998, one occurred aboard *Carnival Ecstasy* (Hamer 2001; Sharp 1998). There were no fatalities, but 60 tourists and crewmembers were hospitalized and treated for smoke inhalation. The ship was removed from service for several weeks and repaired at a cost of $15 million (Verrier 2000). Other ships that have had onboard fires in recent years include *Carnival Celebration*, *Carnival Tropicale*, *Carnival Victory*, and *Carnival Destiny* (Jones 1999; Lois, Wang, Walland Ruxton 2004; Verrier 2000).

The problems posed by fire are intensified by the sheer size of super-sized ships. It remains uncertain if a cruiseship that accommodates so many people can be evacuated quickly and safely at sea. For the most part, supersized ships have elaborately built and complexly structured interior environments that could potentially disorient and confuse tourists in a hurry to evacuate. There is the potential for even more complications to arise. Once the evacuation takes place, how quickly can other ships reach the scene of the accident and rescue evacuees? The sheer size could therefore make evacuation and rescue extraordinarily difficult (Harrison 1998).

When accidents and mishaps take place on board, it is usually not the causal connections between events and consequences that create surprise, but the occurrence of certain events (fires, disease outbreaks, and mechanical breakdowns, for instance) at particular places and times. Business executives within the cruiseship sector are quite aware that such situations happen. Even many tourists realize that cruiseships are not immune to risk. While, in a very broad sense, it is anticipated that such events will occur, the probability of a particular occurrence is so small that it is still a surprise when it does occur.

Terrible accidents take place despite efforts to prevent them. Efforts to identify and control risk can never be comprehensive; human error and system malfunctions will never completely disappear. Even with the best of preparations and precautions, risk and McDonaldization are inescapably intertwined; they exist in tension with each other. On the one hand, McDonaldization can minimize, neutralize risk, even “tame” risk and the uncertainties that are often associated with it. On the other hand, the process cannot eliminate risk and uncertainty entirely, which in some instances, may even be more pronounced within McDonaldized environments. Indeed, certain types of risk have become a more serious concern as cruiseships increase in size.

*The Threat of Disease*

A company strives to ensure that the ships within its fleet are clean and sanitary environments. On occasion, however, cruiseships are sites of disease outbreaks (Klein 2002), efforts to prevent these outbreaks are not entirely successful. A company can only act in response to these outbreaks not predict exactly when and where they may occur.

In 2002, many tourists and employees on board several ships owned by Carnival Cruise Lines, Holland America Line, and Disney Cruise
Line were infected with a Norwalk virus (Boorstin 2003; Kalb 2002; Klein 2002; Paulson 2002). The name “Norwalk” is actually applied to a class of viruses (named after a small town in Ohio, where the first identified outbreak of a Norwalk virus occurred in 1968). Afflicted individuals experience severe nausea, abdominal pain, severe dehydration, and diarrhoea (Charatan 2002); they may also vomit repeatedly. The confined quarters of a cruise ship provide exemplary conditions for Norwalk viruses to multiply and be transmitted (Bond 2003; Treaster, Canedy and Grady 2002). While a cruise ship is a “tourist bubble” that shields people from certain perceived hazards, its insularity can also pose a potential threat if a disease outbreak occurs on board.

Several companies temporarily removed ships from service for disinfection (Grady 2002), sacrificing revenue while their ships were inactive. Even when disinfected, disease outbreaks still occurred; several ships were the site of more than one outbreak. It was eventually concluded that outbreaks of the Norwalk virus were not due to inadequately disinfected washrooms and kitchens on board. Rather, tourists were infected by these viruses even before they boarded the ships. Once on board, they spread the virus to both tourists and employees (Bond 2003; Grady 2002). Perhaps the noteworthy aspect of these outbreaks was not that a Norwalk virus can spread rapidly, but that it did so within a controlled environment where it was believed that sufficient precautions had been taken.

Risk and the Consumer

The production of commodities and commodified experiences often involves risk. A particular product or service will not necessarily be popular with consumers. Indeed, some view certain products and services with suspicion and even fear. Many consumers, for instance, are hesitant to take a cruise vacation.

There are several reasons for this hesitancy (Dickinson and Vladimir 1997; Golden 2003). First, some consumers believe that cruise ships are excessively circumscribed holiday environments. They are afraid that they will experience a form of entrapment while on board a ship. The bounded and controlled enclave environment that offers various “creature comforts” may actually be a potential source of boredom or anxiety. Second, there are those who have concerns about seasickness, perhaps being afraid that this ailment will ruin their holiday. Third, consumers have expressed concerns about medical facilities on board, worried that they will receive poor medical treatment should they have a health problem or accident.

Efforts made by companies to address the concerns of (potential) customers demonstrate that they do not act passively when confronted by risk. In fact, they have actively responded to the hesitancy of some first-time consumers. These responses include the incorporation of statements and descriptions into brochures that will supposedly ease certain concerns. For instance, brochures typically emphasize that cruise ships are holiday environments that have many onboard activities...
and facilities, described in detail in order to preempt worries about boredom. Brochures also downplay the frequency of seasickness. In response to concerns that cruiseships cannot provide adequate medical care, companies mention that their ships have on-duty medical staff and well-equipped facilities.

**Post-Fordist Customization and Product Differentiation**

Ritzer contends that efficiency and predictability have caused standardization and uniformity to increase within contemporary economies; this proposition is debatable. There are still tourism-oriented businesses that clearly benefit from and exploit economies of scale. It is also apparent, that product variety within the industry has increased considerably in recent years (Ioannides and Debbage 1998; Swarbrooke and Horner 1999; Torres 2002). Economies within Western countries are not nearly as uniform as Ritzer seems to believe. In fact, they have become complex combinations of diverse activities and production forms.

It is Ritzer’s contention that many consumers seek predictability and want the products and services that they purchase to be the same over time and across many places. There is some truth to his observation; often consistency is viewed as an important determinant of quality. This desire for consistency does not mean that consumers do not want choice and diversity. In fact, there is considerable choice available to those who want a vacation on board a supersized ship (Golden 2003; Sarna and Hannafin 2003).

The ships operated by Carnival Cruise Lines have whimsical and fanciful decor oriented around particular themes, which has been described as “party-hearty” (Sarna and Hannafin 2003: 116). In contrast, ships operated by Royal Caribbean International and Princess Cruises have more muted ornamentation and offer an onboard experience quieter and more sedate than ships within Carnival’s fleet. Those using Holland America Line have been described as “fairly sedentary, 55-plus North American couples” (Sarna and Hannafin 2003:175). Carnival’s Clientele is considered to be more boisterous.

Costa Cruises (a company that offers Italian-themed cruise vacations) operates a number of supersized ships. Tourists on board these ships can prepare their own homemade pizza and pasta, take up tarantella dance, and play bocce ball on the sun deck. The ships cater to aficionados of Italian food and culture. While one could question the authenticity of the Italian-inspired milieu on board, there is no doubt that many tourists derive pleasure from this cruise-vacation product.

Many companies that operate supersized ships (Carnival Cruise Lines, Princess Cruises, Costa Cruises, and Holland America Line) are currently owned by Carnival Corporation. This acquisition of certain cruiseship companies has made some consumers nervous. When Carnival Corporation purchased Holland America in 1989, there were concerns expressed by consumers that Holland America would become “Carnivalized”, meaning that it would offer a cruise-vacation product.
similar to Carnival Cruise Lines (Slater and Basch 1989:7). The Chief Executive Officer of Carnival Corporation has stated, however, that he has been careful to preserve different brand identities. Indeed, he is aware that he could ruin the reputation of a particular brand if he does not preserve its distinctiveness and autonomy (Boorstin 2003).

The McDonaldization thesis, as it is set forth by Ritzer, assumes that tastes and preferences have become standardized across the world (1993:138–139). This (supposedly increased) standardization of tastes and preferences is understood to mean that more consumers in more countries desire predictable sameness and consistency. Ritzer, however, does not take into account that there are important variations in tastes and preferences across different countries and cultures (Watson 1997). Indeed, some cruiseship companies own ships that are built to serve certain national markets. One owned by P&O Cruises, Oriana, can accommodate over 1,800 tourists and caters mostly to the British market. On board, the breakfast buffet features a number of popular British ‘delicacies’: kippers, smoked haddock, and baked beans. That afternoon tea is served on board reinforces the ship’s British extraction (Scull 1996). The dinner menu features quite essentially British fare such as steak and kidney pie and roast beef.

Of course, the claim could be made that Oriana is merely a McDonaldized cruiseship that possesses certain British attributes. The vacation experience that is offered onboard is in many ways similar to what is offered by Carnival Cruise Lines. One could certainly make the case that variation and diversity have perhaps been McDonaldized to the point where different companies offer consumers a circumscribed set of bland choices. It could be said that post-Fordist customization only accounts for minor deviations from a standardized norm. This view would probably be endorsed by many who are disaffected with and alienated by present-day hyper-consumption.

It is possible, however, to interpret variation and diversity in another way. There are important palpable and worthy differences between Oriana and ships owned by Carnival. Ritzer’s thesis underestimates the importance of trends and processes that run counter to standardization. While individual market niches may possess McDonaldized qualities, market niches are distinct from each other—and the sheer existence of different niches within the cruiseship sector demonstrates that it is not a uniform entity. Ritzer’s thesis bluntly conceptualizes diversity as a manifestation of standardized sameness. This connection between diversity and sameness is rather crude because it depicts post-Fordist customization as a process purely subordinate to McDonaldized standardization. Instead, McDonaldization and post-Fordist customization should be viewed as processes that influence each other in a reciprocal fashion.

Variety and Choice

A recent trend within the cruiseship sector has been the introduction of various extra-fee services and facilities (Golden 2003; Sarna
and Hanna 2003). While casinos and bars on board have traditionally offered tourists extra-fee products and services, companies have built ships that feature even more extra-fee facilities. These facilities include extra-fee restaurants, duty-free shops, hair salons, and health spas. Tourists can, to some extent, customize and individualize their cruise vacations with the purchase of various extra-fee items, serving the interests of both cruiseship companies and tourists, providing the former with additional sources of revenue. In fact, when a cruiseship is at sea, the tourists on board become “captive consumers”. Various extras provide tourists with more choice and access to more than a standardized bundle of products and services. Research conducted by companies indicates that many tourists prefer choice and variety, even if they come at a price (Fishman 2000). Many, it would seem, do “buy into” the notion that supersized ships are places where they can purchase extra-fee products and services. Their availability seems to contradict Ritzer’s belief that many tourism-oriented environments simply provide standardized and uniform holiday experiences.

Tourists can also customize their cruise holiday when they reserve a stateroom that possesses certain attributes or is of a certain size. A supersized ship often has many different types of accommodation on board: staterooms without windows or balconies, staterooms with windows, staterooms with both windows and balconies, and even multi-room suites. Other factors that vary include bed and bathroom sizes. On board supersized ships owned by Carnival Cruise Lines, Royal Caribbean International, and Princess Cruises, there may be as many as 20 different stateroom classes. Tourists clearly have some choices in terms of onboard accommodation.

The ability that companies have to mass produce diverse and “destandardized” products and services is perhaps best conceptualized as an example of “mass customization” (Lyon, Taylor and Smith 1994; Pine 1993; Taylor and Lyon 1995; Taylor, Smith and Lyon 1998). In essence, mass customization is a hybrid process by which a company creates particular products and services that can be produced in abundance but are customized at the same time. Both mass customization and McDonaldized standardization promise efficiency and economies of scale. Within the cruiseship sector, companies that own supersized ships can serve an enormous volume of tourists and simultaneously cater to diverse tastes. Ritzer (1998) mentions mass customization in his work, but he addresses it in only a cursory fashion. This paper indicates that his thesis requires some revision in the context of more customized production methods (and increased demand for more tailor-made products and services), an opinion that has been reached by other commentators (Lyon, Taylor and Smith 1994; Taylor and Lyon 1995; Taylor, Smith and Lyon 1998).

CONCLUSION

The McDonaldization thesis is a recently conceived interpretation of contemporary society that deserves more consideration from tourism
researchers. It offers an innovative but ultimately incomplete interpretation of production and consumption on board supersized cruise-ships. While this thesis does address the ordered and structured nature of shipboard production and consumption, it does not satisfactorily examine tendencies that may run counter to McDonaldization. A more complex and nuanced view of society (and cruise tourism) would account for these tendencies. The purpose of this paper has not been to discredit Ritzer’s thesis. Instead, the paper has demonstrated that supersized ships possess some attributes easily reconciled with this thesis and others that are more difficult to reconcile.

Risk is compatible with Ritzer’s notion that rationality often has irrational consequences, but he does not provide a comprehensive analysis of it. There are instances when risk undermines certain elements of the rationalization. Ritzer also understates the pervasiveness of post-Fordist customization. His thesis overemphasizes the extent to which consumption-oriented realms offer consumers sameness and uniformity. When McDonaldization is considered in tandem with the concepts of risk and post-Fordist customization, it offers a more complete interpretation of developments and practices within contemporary society.

An issue that deserves more study from tourism researchers is how tourists experience McDonaldization on board cruise-ships. Ritzer himself concedes that individuals do not react uniformly to McDonaldized environments (Ritzer and Ovadia 2000). A variety of research questions arises from his concession. Why do some tourists choose to take holidays within McDonaldized environments? Why do others avoid these environments with such vehemence? How do tourists perceive various risks and hazards on board? To what extent do they believe that cruise-ships offer a diverse array of products and services? To date, research that examines their experiences within enclosed holiday environments is rare.

Tourists, it should be noted, are not the only individuals who experience McDonaldization. Onboard employees are often required to behave in accordance with the principles that underpin the thesis. The way in which they perform their work merits attention. How do they both adapt to and resist McDonaldized work routines? To what extent do they improvise their interactions with tourists despite the control that is exercised over them in the workplace? Research addressing these questions would enhance the ability of researchers to understand how shipboard service employees experience the McDonaldization process.

The measures that cruise-ship company executives adopt in order to address risk could also be explored in more detail. Without doubt, these executives are aware of risk. They understand that it can affect the production and consumption of the cruise-vacation product. What sorts of “rational” schemes, then, have these executives deployed in order to minimize risk? Do these schemes necessarily achieve their intended aims? To what extent are there trade-offs among different types of risk? Risk is a variable that can be influenced (but not necessarily eradicated) by corporate decisionmakers.

The research discussed in this paper is restricted in scope as it only examines cruise tourism and, more particularly, supersized cruise-ships.
Other sectors of the tourism industry do possess features that are consistent with the principles that underpin the McDonaldization thesis (Bryman 1998; Ritzer 1998; Ritzer and Liska 1997). However, researchers who examine the McDonaldization process should also be conscious of tendencies that are not clearly compatible with it. Theoretically robust scholarship that explores complexity and contradiction offers a more nuanced way to understand contemporary tourism and society.

Acknowledgments—The author thanks Reiner Jaakson, Susan Ruddick, Jock Galloway, Ted Relph, Paul Wilkinson, and Doug Pearce for their valuable assistance with this paper.

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