

## McBastards: McDonald's & Globalization

Paul Feine

On a recent trip to Paris with my family, I was standing inside a McDonald's restaurant gazing out at the street as my wife ordered Le Happy Meal for our two-year old. My son at the time was happily tugging away at my hair from his perch in his baby backpack (one of the most significant technological innovations in recent history, to my mind).

We hadn't traveled to Paris with the intention of eating at McDonald's, but we were looking for a quick fix for our hungry little boy, and McDonald's represented a cheap alternative to the more traditional cafés. Typical Paris cafés are not only far more expensive, but as previous experience made clear, they tend to be filled with Parisians who are less than charmed by the presence of toddlers.

As I pondered the differing cultural attitudes toward children and stared out onto the busy Paris street, my gaze rested on an elderly French man, whom I instantly categorized as quintessentially French, complete with black beret, long black trench coat, and a cane. The man hobbled by the entrance to McDonald's, stopped, turned to look inside, spat loudly, and sneered "bastards," or its rough equivalent in French.

I sipped my coffee, which was very good (Café Jacques Vabre, I learned later), while our son used his pommes frites as a ketchup delivery device and my wife drank from bottle Evian. We both chuckled as I shared with her image of the authentic anti-McDonald's activist I had just witnessed.

### McWhipping Boy

As the symbol for cultural imperialism and multinational corporate greed, McDonald's takes a lot of heat. [McSpotlight](#), the anti-McDonald's website, for instance, boasts over one million hits per month. Critics demonize McDonald's for its unabashed pursuit of profits, its disregard for nutritional value and the environment, and the way it panders to children.

Most recently, McDonald's has been condemned for systematically seeking to addict naïve youngsters to its fatty fare, just like its evil older brothers in the cigarette business. In fact, crusading public interest lawyer John Banzhaf (whose van sports a license plate with a shortened version of "sue the bastards") is [suing McDonald's](#) in an attempt to hold them responsible for fast food addicts' health problems.

Indeed, though this multinational giant controls 43% of the US fast food market, McDonald's avarice seems to have no bounds. As [Nick Gillespie of Reason magazine points out](#), "McDonald's is so desperate for customers that it's held prices essentially constant over the past two decades, while boosting portion sizes (burgers, fries, and drinks are all bigger than they used to be), expanding its menu, and building elaborate play structures for kids while simultaneously throwing increasingly sophisticated toys at them."

As anyone with small children knows, safe and secure McDonald's Playlands can be a dream come true, especially when you're stuck inside on a rainy day with kids who desperately need to burn some energy. Tiny plastic toys are received with as much delight as any large plastic toy they might have received last Christmas and, it must be emphasized, they're free.

Maybe, just maybe, McDonald's, in its unwavering pursuit of profits, has figured out the secret to succeeding in business—you've got to give the people what they want.

### McCulture?

Okay, maybe McDonald's is fine for the US. Perhaps we're too value conscious, gluttonous, and superficial to care that our landscapes are littered with gleaming arches that have already polluted our bodies and our minds. But surely the same cannot be said for other societies around the world. Isn't it true that places that still have truly authentic dining experiences should be protected from the barbaric McHordes that are clamoring at their gates?

*Golden Arches East*, a recent book edited by James Watson, seeks to gain a better grasp on how McDonald's is affecting Asian culture. The results of this inquiry are in many ways surprising. For instance, one essay tells the story of an unintended and unanticipated consequence of McDonald's invasion of Hong Kong—the rest rooms in the city became cleaner.

Before the first McDonald's opened up in the mid-1970s, restaurant restrooms in Hong Kong were notoriously dirty. Over time, the cleanliness standards of McDonald's were replicated by other restaurants eager to out-compete the increasingly popular restaurant.

In Korea, McDonald's established the practice of lining up in an orderly fashion to order food—the traditional custom, it seems, was to mob the counter.

When the first McDonald's was opened in Moscow, it was necessary for an employee to stand outside the McDonald's with a blow horn in order to explain to those in the queue that the smiling employees were not laughing at them but, rather, were pleased to serve them.

Moreover, and in contradistinction to the widespread assumption that McDonald's is having an implacably homogenizing effect on global culture, *Golden Arches East* is filled with examples of the pains McDonald's takes to appeal to the unique local tastes and customs of people around the world. My own experience with the decidedly leisurely attitude of McDonald's employees in southern Spain further attests to McDonald's ability to adapt to the local culture.

### **Is It True That No Two Countries with McDonald's Have Ever Gone to War?**

Long before I'd enjoyed the Andalusian version of McDonald's, I traveled to Belgrade, in what was then Yugoslavia, and I must admit that I was ecstatic to see a sign for a recently opened McDonald's. I'd just spent a couple of months consuming nothing but souvlaki, salad, and Ouzo in Greece, and the very thought of Quarter-Pounder and a Coke made my mouth water.

My traveling buddy and I proceeded to wait in line for more than an hour and, as I stood happily munching on a french fry that brought back sweet memories of childhood Sunday-after-church treats, I looked across a sea of dark haired Yugoslavians into the eyes of two beautiful, blonde, obviously American women (actually it turned out they were Canadian nurses, but who am I to complain?). Absurdly, we waved to each other and fought through the crowd to greet one other like dear old friends. The memory of that day in Belgrade still brings a smile to my face.

Although you often hear people say it, it's not quite true that no two countries with McDonald's have ever gone to war—both the US and Serbia, for example, had McDonald's during the conflict between the two nations. But even if McDonald's isn't a kind of multinational for-profit god of peace, McDonald's does provide cheap food, decent coffee, and free entertainment for kids, not to mention a salad-in-a-cup for health-conscious parents.

Around the world, this increasingly popular symbol (like it or not) of America is encouraging healthy competition—competition that, in many cases, is leading to improved sanitation standards and civility. And sometimes, just sometimes, McDonald's even brings people together and creates a few smiles...just like its commercials say it does.

The bastards.

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*Paul Feine is a program director at aWorldConnected.org.*