

## 8 Coca-Colonization

**I**n 1947, in an old potato field twenty miles outside New York City, a former U.S. Navy engineer named William Levitt began to create what would one day become the most famous suburb in the world. Levitt's innovation was simple. In a standard mass production system, goods move along an assembly line as highly specialized workers each perform a particular task involved in their production. Obviously, a system like this is good for making cars, but it cannot be used to build houses, for the simple reason that houses are too large to move along an assembly line. So Levitt created what amounted to a mobile assembly line. Instead of the goods moving and the line staying in place, he kept the goods in place and simply moved the line over them. He put together work crews to perform highly specialized tasks, one step at a time, then started churning out houses.

In so doing, he also created a phenomenon that would have an indelible impact on North American consciousness—the suburban “tract” home. In order to achieve the benefits of mass production, each house in the original Levittown development was identical. He built over 6,000 of the original “Cape Cod”-style homes before diversifying the product line, introducing the slightly modified “ranch” style. The reason for this uniformity was clear: it allowed him to produce houses at a prodigious rate. At a time when an average builder could make only five homes a year, Levitt managed to produce thirty homes *a day*. And the prices were unbeatable. When

the houses went on sale in 1949 (at a price of only US\$6,999, including both free TV and a washing machine), Levitt sold 1,400 on the first day.

Levitt's methods, and his buildings, were soon being imitated by developers across North America. In fact, if Levittown looks eerily familiar to most people, it's because almost everyone has been in one of the two homes. (Thinking back to my childhood in Saskatoon, I realize that two of my friends lived in knockoffs of the Levittown Cape Cod-style home.) Generations of children had the experience of growing up in exactly the same house as many of their friends. Even now, most people have no need to ask where the bathroom is when visiting an older suburban home.

Needless to say, critics of mass society were apoplectic. Lewis Mumford summed up the dominant view when he described suburbs like Levittown as "a multitude of uniform, unidentifiable houses, lined up inflexibly, at uniform distances, on uniform roads, in a treeless communal waste, inhabited by people of the same class, the same income, the same age group, witnessing the same television performances, eating the same tasteless pre-fabricated foods, from the same freezers, conforming in every outward and inward respect to the same common mold." A generation of comics made a good living with jokes about the Organization Man coming home from a long day at the office, pulling up to the wrong house, making love to the wrong wife and so forth.

For critics like Mumford, Levittown dramatized the Faustian bargain at the heart of mass society. While the houses were cheap, they were also nasty. There appeared to be a straightforward trade-off between price and variety. And it wasn't just houses. As franchising became an increasingly popular business model, one area of life after another seemed to fall victim to the homogenizing tendency of late capitalism. Fifty years later, these concerns have become even more acute. With increased globalization, many fear that the cultural uniformity that swept the United States will now extend to the entire planet, eradicating non-Western cultures,

absorbing everyone into the undifferentiated nexus of rampant consumer capitalism.

Yet one major question remains unanswered. Does capitalism actually have a homogenizing tendency? Is Levittown the rule, or the exception?

## II

Suburbs built on the Levittown model have had such a powerful impact on the popular imagination that much of the critical discussion of urban issues is completely disconnected from the realities of modern suburbia. After all, most members of the chattering classes live downtown—not just because they want to, but because they are obliged to. Thanks to the critique of mass society, suburbia is now widely regarded as synonymous with brain death, so it's difficult to be taken seriously as an intellectual without living either downtown or in the country. As a result, many of those who criticize suburban living have never actually spent more than a few hours in the suburbs any time since childhood.

I came to this realization one day when my brother-in-law, the proud purchaser of a lot in a brand new suburban development, asked me to come help him select the "options" on his yet-to-be-constructed home. Ever since I bought a fixer-upper of a Victorian home in downtown Toronto, I've become something of an expert in cosmetic details: painting, replastering, fixing baseboards, laying tiles, changing light fixtures and the like. I'm the guy you see at the Home Depot asking the wood-aisle attendant what thickness of plywood to use to patch a century-old tongue-in-groove fir subfloor. So it seemed like I would be the right person to offer some advice on how to equip my brother-in-law's new home. I accepted, with visions of Levittown and *The Truman Show* dancing in my head. Picking options on a suburban home—how hard could that be? I figured it would be like picking options on a car—they would give you a sheet of paper with about fifty choices, and maybe three or four package deals.

Imagine my surprise when I arrived at the "town center" and the developer's representative thumped a binder down in front of us, a solid two inches thick, listing all of the available options. Seems that the suburbs are not quite what they used to be. Any ideas that I might have had of uniformity or of cookie-cutter homes were quickly dispatched. The number of options was truly staggering. Half of the stuff I had never even heard of before. And the options were not just cosmetic. Basic structural features of the home were all reconfigurable. For starters, there were twenty different base houses in the development, ranging from 1,400 to 3,400 square feet, each of which came in three different "elevations": brick, stone or siding. The elevation in turn determined the configuration of balconies and windows. The developer would not build two of the same house next to one another—specifically to avoid uniformity in the streetscape. This meant that after you had decided which house you wanted, you had to find a lot where you would be allowed to build it.

Once you had a house and a lot, then the real business began. How high would you like your ceilings to be? Eight feet or nine? Would you like skylights? How many, and where? Do you want the basement finished or not? What kind of floors? Hardwood, laminate, tile or carpet? What kind of banister on the stairs? Smooth or rough ceilings? Plaster moldings? Plate rack? What kind of electrical system, standard or double-amp? Island in the kitchen? With or without a sink? What countertops—Arborite, granite or Corian? Only once these structural features of the house were chosen could one turn to the cosmetic details. Here the number of options multiplied, from hundreds to thousands. In order to make the decision more tractable, options were grouped together by price into different "grades," each grade containing multiple styles, and then each style was available in a wide range of colors. For example, there were five grades of tile, each containing about twenty different styles; four grades of carpet, each with ten styles; six grades of baseboards; and an essentially infinite number of kitchen cabinets. Finally, we were supposed to choose how many

phone jacks, cable TV plugs and Ethernet connections there should be, and where they should be located.

Obviously there was no question of making all these decisions in one sitting. I made a few general observations about the virtues of good baseboards and oak flooring, then left my brother-in-law and his wife to spend the next week mulling over floor plans, product samples and their binder full of options. What they were doing, in effect, was directing the construction of a custom home for themselves. Yet the price that they were paying was lower than the average resale price of a home in the City of Toronto. Thus they appeared to be getting all the price benefits of mass production, but with very few of the constraints.

As we watched the house being built over the course of the next couple of months, it was easy to see how the developer was able to pull this off. Mass production techniques have become vastly more sophisticated since the '50s. Levitt used essentially generic building materials, then applied mass production techniques to the construction of complete houses. Since then, houses have been broken down into a set of modular components, all of which are mass-produced off-site. Construction in many cases involves simply snapping these components together into different configurations. Roof rafters, for example, all come preassembled and are nailed into position using premolded aluminum brackets. Vinyl siding simply locks into place, with no nails or screws, once the strapping is hung. Laminate floors snap together, with no nails or glue.

The second very conspicuous feature of the developer's business model was the use of Japanese-style "lean production" techniques. There was essentially no standing inventory. One day all the bricks would show up, along with masons to install them on all the homes that needed brick. The next day several tons of shingles would show up, all of which would be laid by the evening. Furthermore, the developer did absolutely none of the actual construction. Not only were the materials modular, so was the work. The entire construction project was broken down into discrete jobs, each of which was subcontracted to an independent firm. The

developers had only four employees to supervise and coordinate the construction of over 200 houses.

The effects of these flexible construction techniques could be seen quite clearly in the finished product. Only the meanest suburbs are still constructed on the cookie-cutter model. Manufacturing technology has evolved to the point where one no longer requires uniformity in order to achieve the cost savings associated with mass production. And one can see similar developments in many different areas of manufacturing: Go to a modern automotive plant and you can see different cars being simultaneously produced on the same assembly line.

This raises the suspicion that the homogeneity associated with mass production is not an intrinsic feature of "mass society," it is merely a stage in the development of the forces of production. But if this is true, then it knocks a huge chunk out of the counter-cultural critique. According to this theory, capitalism requires conformity among consumers because it needs to create a system of homogenous desires in order to dispose of the "surplus" of identical commodities generated by the mass production system. But if mass production no longer requires the production of identical commodities, there is absolutely no reason to think that the capitalist system requires conformity.

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Of course, none of this addresses the more fundamental question: What's wrong with homogenization in the first place? If people voluntarily choose to live in similar houses, wear similar clothes and participate in similar activities, then who are we to criticize them? As long as it's what they really want to do, then it's very difficult to make the case against it. Furthermore, if mass production allows individuals access to goods that they would otherwise not have been able to afford, it would be obnoxious to deny them the opportunity on the grounds that we don't like the aesthetic consequences. This is something that intelligent critics of mass society, such as William Whyte (author of *The Organization Man*), realized

early on. In "Individualism in Suburbia," Whyte acknowledges that while "rows and rows of identical ranch houses are a dispiriting sight," this type of construction "is the price that must be paid for moderate cost of housing. And the price is not so very steep; unless one believes poverty is ennobling, the new housing is much less antithetical to the development of the individual than the rows and rows of drab tenements it helps supplant."

In other words, given a choice between reducing poverty and reducing homogeneity, most people would prefer to reduce poverty. And if that choice results in acres of suburban tract homes, then we simply need to accept that as a consequence of our decision. Homogeneity is only really a problem when it is the product of coercion rather than choice—when people are either penalized for a failure to comply or tricked and cajoled into doing something they don't really want to do.

The real question, then, is not whether markets promote homogeneity—no one could deny that, in certain respects, they do. The question is whether this is illegitimate or not, whether it reflects people's voluntary choices. And there are many reasons why people might want to consume similar products. For example, many goods generate what economists call "network externalities." The fax machine is the typical example. It's impossible to send a fax unless the person you are sending it to also has a fax machine to receive it, so each individual who buys a fax machine creates a slight positive benefit for all the other fax owners by increasing the number of people they can, in principle, send a fax to. This is why low-priced fax machines, which became available in 1984, never really took off until 1987. At first the machine wasn't worth the price for most people, simply because there were so few people one could send a fax to. Thus only 80,000 units were sold in 1984. Yet as the number of users grew, the system reached "critical mass," the point at which there were enough people who could receive faxes to make the purchase of a machine worthwhile. One million fax machines were sold in 1987. (E-mail and cellular phones have developed in very much the same way.)

Whenever there are network externalities, there will be benefits associated with standardization. Because keyboard layouts are standardized, we can sit down in front of any computer and start typing. Because nuts and bolts come in standard sizes, we only have to have one set of wrenches. Because cars are standardized, we know which pedal will be the gas and which will be the brake. Because fast food restaurants have a standard ordering system, we can show up anywhere in the world and get a meal within five minutes. Because of TCP/IP, the standardized protocol for communication among computers, we can all enjoy the wonders of the Internet.

It is not just in the case of material goods that we derive benefits from standardization. Many cultural products are also valued because of the benefits that individuals derive from being members of a large audience. A large part of the pleasure of seeing a movie, watching a TV show or reading a book comes from talking about it later, with friends or co-workers. This is what explains the “blockbuster” phenomenon. A movie can reach a critical mass when, because so many people are talking about it, others feel obliged to see it, just so that they can participate (or because they want to know what everyone is talking about). The book market has the same structure, which explains why there is such a huge gap between the sales figures of ordinary books and bestsellers. Thus, it is precisely because goods are consumed in a *social context*, and not by isolated individuals, that people often want to consume the same things as others.

The success of reality TV shows, for instance, has to do with much more than simply the content of the show. People like these shows because they like talking about these shows—which suitors are worthy or unworthy, and why; which contestants deserve to win or lose, and how their strategies succeeded or failed. In the early era of broadcast television, people had no choice but to “witness the same television performances” (as Mumford put it). That technological constraint has now been lifted. Yet what we discover in the 500-channel universe is that people actually have a strong desire to watch many of the same shows. These shows provide, for

most North Americans, the only stories that people from different walks of life still share.

Of course, when goods that are associated with network externalities are consumed, the outcome is not always the best. It is possible for everyone to get stuck in a local equilibrium that is suboptimal. More concretely, it may mean that people choose an inferior good rather than some other that is available, simply because it is the one that everyone else is using (VHS video versus Betamax is the classic example). Innovative new products and standards that are, in principle, superior to old ones may have difficulty penetrating the market, because their value will not be fully realized until they reach a critical mass.

The same phenomenon can be seen at work in books, television and movies. Even if people hate summer blockbusters, they may go to see them just to have something to talk about. There can also be a sort of leveling-down effect, in which people purchase the goods that they *think* will be the most popular even before they become so. People may buy a more generic home because they are worried about its resale value. If large numbers of people do this, it will become a self-fulfilling prophecy—most people will buy the home just because it seems like the sort of thing that most people will buy.

Of course, for companies that need to push consumers away from a prevailing standard in order to sell their product, the critique of mass society has provided an inexhaustible supply of advertising concepts. For example, computer operating systems are very much like keyboard layouts—users derive enormous benefits from standardization and compatibility. IBM and, later, Microsoft were able to dominate the market by establishing themselves early on as the standard. Rival corporations like Apple Computer have therefore tried to promote their products by suggesting that those who use the standard are merely conformists, victims of groupthink. Consider Apple’s famous “1984” commercial. Before legions of dronelike workers, arranged in orderly rows, Big Brother appears on a giant viewscreen, addressing the crowd: “Today, we celebrate the first glorious anniversary of the

to spread from one area to the next, the reduction of communication and trade barriers in our society has made the spread almost instantaneous.

Thus a certain amount of the homogenization of taste that occurs in consumer markets is a straightforward consequence of consumer demand. Anyone who has bought a potato or a cob of corn recently is probably guilty of exacerbating this same tendency. The yellow-fleshed Yukon Gold potato, produced by researchers at the University of Guelph in Ontario, has been gaining market share at an extraordinary rate. And it is becoming increasingly difficult to find anything other than bicolor corn. In both cases, it is because consumers have a preference for these vegetables, enough so that they are willing to pay more for them. And since all of these crops are unadvertised, no one can claim that consumers are being unduly influenced. The most plausible explanation for the fact that everyone's eating Yukon Gold potatoes is that they are really good potatoes and people like them. If the overall result is homogeneity, how can we complain? After all, in order to avoid this outcome, someone would have to get stuck eating potatoes that they don't like.

There is a strong argument to be made for keeping less favored plants from becoming extinct, in order to maintain biodiversity. But it is much more difficult to make the case for keeping them in commercial production. Sumpweed was abandoned not only because the plant is noxious, but because yields are low and the grains are not especially appetizing. As a result, it would be labor-intensive to produce, and thus more expensive, yet not very tasty. While we might like it if someone, somewhere, ate enough sumpweed to maintain diversity in agriculture, most of us have no desire to be that person (and, of course, if we force some group of people to consume it, by denying them access to other goods, it would be highly unfair to those people). So the question remains, who gets stuck holding the bag? We all want diversity, yet it is often our own consumer preferences that are driving homogenization.

Homogenization is especially pronounced in sectors that econo-

mists describe as "winner-take-all" markets. Since everyone wants the very best, and since developing technology has made it possible in many cases to deliver the very best to all consumers, the gap between first and second place has become enormous. Products that have only a very slight edge over the competition are able to completely dominate the market like never before. This is simply the aggregate effect of consumer preference. The "superstar" is a classic example: Hollywood celebrities, supermodels, pop stars and so on. Although constantly accused of being manufactured confections, no-talent media sensations pumped up by hype and advertising, superstars exist in many sectors where media manipulation and advertising play a far more limited role. The market for classical music, for instance, is still *primarily* driven by talent. Yet one can see the winner-take-all tendency just as clearly here. As economist Sherwin Rosen observes: "The market for classical music has never been larger than it is now; yet the number of full-time soloists on any given instrument is on the order of only a few hundred (and much smaller for instruments other than voice, violin, and piano). Performers of the first rank comprise a limited handful out of these small totals and have very large incomes. There are also known to be substantial differences between [their incomes and the incomes of] those in the second rank, even though most consumers would have difficulty detecting more than minor differences in a 'blind' hearing."

Naturally, when one star begins to dominate the market too completely, it creates an opportunity for those who want to stand out from the crowd to establish distinction by professing abhorrence for that individual. Thus true classical music connoisseurs have found Luciano Pavarotti to be unlistenable for years, not because he lacks talent, but simply because he is too "mainstream" or, more specifically, too "downmarket" (in their system of aesthetic judgment, he *can't* be good precisely *because* so many people like him). This quest for distinction ensures that there will be a constant rotation of personalities within the star system—today's idol will be tomorrow's has-been. Yet all of this is a natural consequence

of the structure of consumer preferences, not a product of manipulation or coercion. Corporations try to nudge the process in one direction or another, but fundamentally it is outside their control.

This does not mean that the market is always right. Markets often fail to fully reflect consumer preferences, especially in areas of cultural and intellectual production, where property rights are extremely difficult to exercise. But it does mean that markets are not always wrong. Furthermore, critics have a tendency to dismiss popular taste, to imagine that people couldn't *really* like McDonald's food or *really* enjoy listening to Celine Dion. Thus they vastly underestimate the extent to which homogenization is a consequence of genuine consumer preference.

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Of all the bobo food products that have been introduced in the past decade, the most amusing by far is the "free-range" chicken. Sparked no doubt by concern over living conditions in factory farms, where chickens are confined to small cages for their entire lives, consumers began demanding that animals be raised under more humane conditions. And they were willing to pay more for them. Soon after, someone came up with the brilliant idea of calling chickens that had access to the outdoors "free-range," and selling them at a steep premium. The new product quickly caught on. The name evokes images of the open prairie, with chickens roaming about on the horizon, the wind ruffling their feathers. It is an image that could make sense only to someone who has never actually seen or touched a live chicken.

Anyone who has spent any time on a farm knows that a free-range chicken is about as plausible as a sun-loving earthworm. On a nice summer day, the best place to look for the chickens will be in the darkest corner of the coop. Dozens of them will be piled on top of each other, usually sleeping, forming a compact ball. They just aren't the ranging types. (This was confirmed by a recent study that showed that only 15 percent of free-range chickens ever actually make use of the outdoor space that is available to them.)

The idea of "free range" is simply a projection of our own desires onto our food. No matter what we do, chickens will never be the rugged individualists that we would like them to be.

One wonders how much of the concern over mass production and conformity is a projection of these same sorts of desires onto consumers. The traditional critique of mass society assumes that consumers have extraordinarily heterogeneous desires, such that they must be tricked by advertisers into consuming the same mass-produced goods. The system must produce "mass consciousness" in order to facilitate "mass production." Yet there is a far more obvious explanation. Mass-produced goods are *cheaper* than custom goods, and consumers are price-sensitive. Given a choice between products that match their needs perfectly but are expensive and ones that meet their needs imperfectly but are inexpensive, people may very well opt for the inexpensive ones. It all depends upon how much they care about price (thus one can expect that the poor will be more likely to consume mass-produced goods than the rich).

Nevertheless, some have tried to argue that the market exacerbates these tendencies by squeezing out smaller players. The economist Tibor Scitovsky, for example, presents this argument in the following way:

Economies of scale not only cheapen large-scale production but by raising wages they also raise the cost and diminish the profitability of small-scale production. This in turn raises the minimum volume of sales necessary to render production profitable and thus leads to an ever increasing narrowing of the range of variants of products offered and neglect of minority needs and tastes in the nature and design of goods produced and marketed. The increasing neglect of minority preferences is a bad thing, because it is illiberal, makes for uniformity, and destroys to some degree the principal merit of the market economy: its ability to cater separately and simultaneously to different people's differing needs and tastes.

This argument moves a bit too quickly, though. Suppose that initially goods are custom-ordered from a small-scale supplier, who produces items that are tailor-made to each individual customer. A large-scale producer comes along who makes the same type of product, but only in, say, three styles. By limiting the number of styles, this producer is able to sell the goods at much lower cost. Scitovsky infers that the large producer will drive the small producer out of business.

But this is not necessarily the case. One must assume, given the variety of products made by the small-scale producer, that the three mass-produced variants will not exactly match the taste of at least some consumers. This means that these consumers will suffer a loss of welfare if they switch to the mass-produced goods. So if they do switch, it must be because they prefer the money they save to the inconvenience of purchasing goods not perfectly suited to their tastes. The small-scale producer would not go bankrupt if people with minority tastes were willing to pay more for the goods than those with majority tastes. Homogenization arises only because people are unwilling to pay the full cost associated with satisfaction of their preferences when low-cost alternatives that are close enough become available. There is nothing coercive or illiberal about this.

Of course, people with less mainstream taste may complain that they are being treated unfairly. Why should they have to pay more simply because they happen to have more uncommon tastes? There is, however, a decisive response to this question. Mass-produced goods are cheaper than custom goods because they require less time, energy and labor to produce. If you go to a barber to get your hair cut, it takes only fifteen minutes. If you don't like standard barbering cuts and want to express your individuality through a unique hairstyle, then you go to a salon. There a haircut will take one hour. It will also cost you four times more—and for good reason. It *should* cost you more to go to a stylist, because you are taking up more of someone else's time.

There is, in fact, an excellent rule of thumb to be had here.

Whenever you feel that society is forcing you to conform or treating you like a number, not a person, just ask yourself the following question: "Does my individuality create more work for other people?" If the answer is yes, then you should be prepared to pay more. Most institutions in our society have a system that they follow. At the fast food restaurant, at the bank, in a hospital, there is a standardized system for interacting with clients and delivering services. Such a system is generally designed to maximize the service that can be provided at a given price (or given certain budgetary resources). Individuals who refuse to follow the system not only cost more to service, they often gum up the works for everyone else. In this context, individualism often shades over into narcissistic disregard for the needs of others.

A wonderful example of this narcissism comes at the beginning of Kalle Lasn's *Culture Jam*. Lasn is describing his "moment of truth," when he realized that consumer capitalism was fundamentally unethical. He had gone to his local supermarket for groceries and was about to make his 25¢ deposit to obtain a shopping cart, "when it suddenly occurred to me what a dope I was. Here I was putting in my quarter for the privilege of spending money in a store I come to every week but hate, a sterile chain that rarely carries any locally grown produce and always makes me stand in line to pay. And when I was finished shopping I'd have to take this cart back to the exact place their efficiency experts have decreed, and slide it back in with all the other carts, rehook it and push the red button to get my damn quarter back."

Lasn ends this rather exhausting tale of consumerist maze-running with a triumphal flourish: he takes his quarter and shoves it into the slot, banging it with his key ring until it jams. This is not quite on a par with Michael Douglas going postal in the movie *Falling Down*, but everyone sticks it to The Man in his own way. Too bad the store now has to pay someone to come fix the machine, and in the meantime other customers will have to spend part of *their* precious shopping time hunting down the carts that are strewn all over the parking lot. The point is, while there is



nothing wrong with individualism per se, it is important that no one person's individuality be secured at the expense of other people's time and energy. After all, Lasn lives in Vancouver, a city that is positively overflowing with stores that will sell you locally grown organic produce, fair-trade coffee and homemade quiche, all staffed by eager college students who will never make you wait in line, much less stick a quarter in a cart. Lasn could easily find one if he just sniffed around a bit. The problem with these stores is that they are extremely *expensive*, because they have to hire twice as many staff ("Oh please, let me get that cart for you, Mr. Lasn"). This is as it should be. If your individuality is such that it requires other people to wait on you hand and foot, then you should be prepared to pay an arm and a leg.

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If there is one practice that has provoked fears of homogenization more than any other, it is franchising. One cannot fail to be impressed, when traveling around the United States, at the extraordinary *sameness* of it all. Every mall seems to be packed with the same old stores that you see everywhere else. And every major access road is crowded with the usual signs, for the same old gas stations, restaurants and donut shops. The "brandscapes" have become so uniform that many people would be surprised to discover that franchises and chains control only 35 percent of the American retail market.

The standard objection to franchises is that they destroy regional and cultural particularity. And no company has borne the brunt of this objection more directly than McDonald's. (In fact, the term "McDonaldization" has become synonymous in some quarters with all that ails the modern world, thanks to books like *The McDonaldization of Society*, *The McDonaldization of Higher Education*, *The McDonaldization of the Church* and, of course, *Resisting McDonaldization*.) According to George Ritzer, author of *The McDonaldization of Society*, the process of homogenization unleashed by franchising puts our very souls at risk. If

the world were less McDonaldized, "people would have the potential to be far more thoughtful, skillful, creative, and well-rounded than they are now."

The trajectory of Ritzer's thought is extremely clear. In his historical analysis of the rise of McDonaldization, he organizes the key events into the following sequence (these are the actual subject headings in one chapter of his book):

The Holocaust: Mass Producing Death

Scientific Management: Finding the One Best Way

The Assembly Line: Turning Workers into Robots

Levitown: Putting up Houses—"Boom, Boom, Boom"

Shopping Centers: Malling America

McDonald's: Creating the "Fast Food Factory"

This "from Auschwitz to our house" style of thinking shows, again, just how profoundly the specter of the Holocaust informs the critique of mass society. For many people, the mere fact that the Golden Arches are popping up around the world is enough to evoke memories of the Nuremberg rallies. In Ritzer's view, the people lined up to buy Big Macs are just as much victims of brainwashing as a group of Hitler Youth saluting the Führer.

Except Ritzer makes things a little bit too easy on himself by focusing on McDonald's. Being the oldest fast food franchise, McDonald's has both a menu and a set of business practices that are antiquated in many ways. Thus the discussion of franchising too often veers off into a debate over environmental issues, and the effects of ranching on the Brazilian rain forest; or into a debate over health concerns, and the epidemic of obesity sweeping the United States. While these are no doubt interesting questions, they are only tangentially related to the issue of homogenization that is at the core of the McDonaldization critique. To focus the issue, it might be helpful to shift the emphasis away from McDonald's, and to look at the second-largest fast food restaurant in the United States, Subway. While Subway is just as much a "fast food factory"

as McDonald's, there are no real grounds for complaining about either the quality of the food offered, the range of menu items offered or the environmental consequences of their business practices. Yet it seems somewhat less ominous to discuss the "Subway-ization" of America.

The emphasis on McDonald's also obscures another important point. Most members of the cultural elite profess a dislike for McDonald's food. In fact, since franchises serve the lower classes to a disproportionate degree, their products will inevitably serve as an affront to the higher aesthetic sensibility. But go into any successful franchise or chain store with an open mind and it is easy to see why they are successful. In most cases, it is because they offer a product that, for the price, is demonstrably superior. Wal-Mart sells premium brands at low prices and has superior inventory management. It offers discounted prescriptions to seniors. It offers free RV parking for vacationers. Home Depot hires aisle attendants who are genuinely knowledgeable. They will cut your wood for you, on the spot, no hassles. You can rent a van to take it all home. Subway sells sandwiches on fresh-baked bread, often still hot from the oven. You get to put it together precisely the way you like. Tim Hortons sells the best filter coffee around. And we sometimes forget that even McDonald's sells fries that are superior to what you can find at half the bistros in Paris.

These companies may advertise heavily now, but they did not build their businesses through advertising. When they were able to make significant inroads into a particular market, it was usually because that market was so poorly served before. Independent bookstores could have installed comfortable chairs and started serving coffee long ago; they just didn't get around to it until they started feeling the heat from Barnes & Noble or Chapters. Lumberyard attendants could have stopped being jerks or intimidating female customers years ago; they just didn't get around to it until the Home Depot opened up around the corner. Service stations could have stopped ripping off their customers whenever they wanted; they just didn't get around to it until chains like Midas

took away a significant chunk of their business. Coffee shops could have invested in an espresso machine any time they wanted; they just didn't get around to it until Starbucks came along. Department stores could have adopted "no hassle" refund policies from the beginning; they just didn't get around to it until the big chains started doing it. The list goes on and on.

Part of the reason that so many of these successful chains are American is that Americans have dedicated an extraordinary amount of time and thought to the question of how to produce an enjoyable retail experience. How many times have you walked into a store only to have the staff act as though they're the ones doing you a favor by talking to you? How many times have you looked at your mechanic and suspected that you're being taken for a ride? How many times have you been afraid to ask a question in the hardware store for fear that the staff would treat you like you're stupid? How many times has the waiter in a fancy restaurant rattled off the list of daily specials without telling you any of the prices? These are the sorts of negative experiences that drive customers away. A successful franchise generally has a system in place that eliminates these sorts of experiences—otherwise every branch and outlet suffers.

Finally, there is an important distinction to be made between a franchise (like McDonald's) and a chain (like Starbucks). This is often ignored. The writers of the anticconsumerist PBS series *Affluenza*, for example, draw a contrast between "big, absentee franchises" and locally owned businesses: "At a locally owned coffee shop, you might see artwork from someone who lives down the street. The shop is your coffee shop. At your independent bookseller, you stand a much greater chance of finding books from small presses who publish a wider variety of books than mainstream publishers." Apart from the dubiousness of these empirical claims (you can find artwork done by local children at every single franchise outlet of the Great Harvest Bread Company), the contrast that they draw between the franchise and the locally owned shop is based on a confusion. Unlike chains, in which each

store is owned and operated by the parent corporation, in a franchise the parent corporation simply licenses the business model and trademark to an independent businessperson, who then operates the outlet. The major fast food corporations, like McDonald's, Subway and KFC, are all franchise operations—which means that they are mostly owned and operated by local businesspeople.

Franchising allows the business to spread more quickly, because extending the operation requires no real investment of capital on the part of the parent company. It also limits cross-subsidization and other "dirty tricks" that are often felt to be unfair by competitors. Because Starbucks owns all of its stores, it may be willing to lose money at one location for a year in order to drive a competitor out of business—that loss simply gets pooled with the gains made elsewhere, as part of a global strategy. But a franchise operator is generally on his own, and the money lost ultimately comes from his pocket. In this respect, franchises are just like small businesses, and so cannot engage in the sort of nasty competitive practices that their opponents often accuse them of. Franchise operations, in other words, generally lack the means to implement a global strategy.

Obviously, franchises derive certain benefits from economies of scale in advertising. But their most important competitive advantage is usually just the underlying business model that the franchisee adopts. Most retail is incredibly competitive. In any major city, thousands of businesses open every year, and thousands of others go bankrupt. From this enormous sea of effort, one or two businesses will hit upon a successful format, which they will then "bottle" and sell. It is hard to see how there is anything sinister about this. Take, for example, the story of the Marvelous Market company in Washington, DC, which Ritzer tells in one of the more (unintentionally) amusing segments of *The McDonaldization of Society*. The company was founded during the '60s with the specific goal of combating the "Wonder bread" phenomenon. After all, you are what you eat and, according to one company brochure, "Food triggers moods and memories, reveals needs and desires, releases tensions and stimulates creativity."

Ritzer describes with great satisfaction how inefficient the operation was. "Its foods were unpredictable. Customers dealt with people rather than automats or robots." Of course, the company also made very good bread. And thus Marvelous Market quickly became a success. Sales grew so dramatically that the company began limiting bread purchases to two loaves per person. Eventually, the owner began to expand operations, opening a dedicated baking facility and starting to supply supermarkets and restaurants. The market for his bread continued to grow, and service at the original store became unbearably slow. Finally, he gave in and opened a second outlet. In an open letter to customers, he apologized profusely for this new development, emphasizing that the new equipment is still "not automated equipment; we make breads in the other bakery just as we make them here, slowly, by hand."

Some people might interpret this story as an example of the capitalist system functioning precisely the way that it is supposed to function. Good bread drives out bad. Ritzer, on the other hand, presents it as a modern morality tale, a dramatic example of just how seductive the siren song of McDonaldization can be. Yet he never explains one thing. In the end, what does it matter whether there is one Marvelous Market store, or two, or twenty, as long as the bread is good? Ritzer winds up simply fetishizing that which is erratic, unpredictable and uncommon over that which is simple, predictable and common. Yet surely that is just an individual preference, not a legitimate grievance over the organization of society. For Ritzer, as for many other countercultural rebels, the ideal individual seems to be some type of "random man" who, by refusing to follow any rules or conform to any code, winds up being phobic of any type of behavior that exhibits regularity. To his credit, Ritzer follows his own critique of homogenization through to this, its logical conclusion. In a section that outlines different strategies for resisting McDonaldization, he offers a series of suggestions as to how we can avoid becoming robots and automats. These include living in a house that you have built for yourself (or had built for you), doing your own oil changes, refusing to speak to

answering machines, using cash instead of credit, getting to know the local inhabitants while on vacation, boycotting domed stadiums and, most preposterously, avoiding all daily routine: "Try to do as many things as possible in a different way from one day to the next," he recommends.

It is difficult to know which of these suggestions are serious and which are not. Yet it is easy to identify the lifestyle that Ritzer is recommending. It is the lifestyle of a tenured university professor, with eccentric habits, a big fat paycheck and a lot of free time on his hands. Those of us with these nice cushy jobs can no doubt heartily endorse Ritzer's recommendations. But can we really expect the rest of society to follow suit? Again, there are two simple questions that one should ask before adopting this "random man" model of individualistic behavior: first, "Is my individuality creating more work for other people?" and second, "What if everyone acted that way?"

## II

All of the forces that we can see at work within our society to promote homogenization can also be observed on the world stage. Increased globalization of trade, combined with tourism and mass immigration, is gradually producing what would best be described as a state of "uniform diversity." Almost all of the increase in foreign trade in the past twenty years has involved diversification, rather than intensification, of trade. For example, rather than Canada importing all of its red wine from France and phasing out its own wine industry while France imports all its wheat from Canada and phases out that segment of its agricultural sector, increased trade has left Canada still producing pretty much the same range of goods that it has always produced. Trade is used primarily as a way of getting access to goods that have traditionally not been available in this country. So France imports Canada's maple syrup, while Canada now imports Provençal pottery.

As a result, the internal markets of every country have become much more diverse. Whereas once certain types of pottery could only be obtained in certain French villages, now they are available

in pretty much any major city (thereby eroding the distinction that they confer upon their owner). When I was young, you couldn't buy green onions or pita in the grocery store (much less imported cheese). Since 1970, the average number of items for sale in North American supermarkets has increased from 8,000 to 30,000. When my mother-in-law comes to visit from Taiwan (and, naturally, insists on cooking for everyone), she does not have to adjust her habits at all. Everything that she would buy in Taipei is available in Toronto as well. It may be true that the number of corporations doing business in some sectors of the economy has decreased, but it is difficult to think of any sector in which the number of different *products* being offered has not increased.

Yet because this process is going on throughout the world, anyone who travels will no doubt notice that every place in the world is starting to look more and more alike. It is no doubt distressing to be walking down the street in some faraway land only to see the same Guatemalan handicrafts being sold on the sidewalk (and, it would appear, the same band of Guatemalan musicians busking nearby). And no one really wants to see a McDonald's sign when touring Beijing (even though it is a great place to nip in and use the washroom). Yet if the Chinese want to eat Big Macs, who are we to stop them? It would be nice if the Chinese showed a bit more commitment to maintaining the purity and integrity of their culture, but who are we to talk? After all, we love having Chinese restaurants in our country (not to mention Asian fast food items like noodles, sushi and bubble tea). We also like shopping at foreign chain stores like Ikea, Zara, The Body Shop, Benetton and H&M. Our country is becoming a giant omnicultural hodgepodge of influences and styles, and most of us like it that way. But it means that we cannot then turn around and criticize others for following the same path.

Of course, many people feel that the United States exercises disproportionate influence in this process—that what is going on is not so much globalization of culture as it is Americanization. Ironically, this perception is for the most part just parochialism on the

part of Americans. First of all, Americans have a tendency to assume that everything is American, unless presented with specific evidence to the contrary. Most obviously, the distinction between Canadian and American influence is completely ignored. Of course, because the majority of Canadians speak English with an accent that is similar to that of the American Midwest, it is easy to make that mistake. Yet in other cases, there is no such excuse. I recall once reading a review of a video game in the *New York Times* that criticized it for being ethnocentric on the grounds that it featured "stereotypical Asian characters." The reviewer simply assumed that it was made in the United States. It never occurred to her that the game in question, like almost every console game sold in the American market, was a Japanese product, developed for a Japanese audience. What the reviewer saw as a stereotype was in fact an instance of genuine Asian culture; she simply lacked the knowledge of foreign cultures needed to identify it as such.

The second problem is that most Americans are able to spot American influences abroad but simply don't know enough about foreign cultures to recognize how much they influence daily life in the United States. Thus critics ignore the extent to which foreign cultures—Asian in particular—have been driving movies, television and fashion in North America. Almost all Hollywood action movies are now shot in the Hong Kong style. Television is completely dominated by "reality" programs, another cultural import. The entire aesthetic of the rave scene in North America is an imitation of Japanese style. Japanese comics and video games are extraordinarily influential among the young. And the Internet has massively extended these influences. The fad for "schoolgirl"-style plaid skirts across clubs in North America is due to the influence of Japanese pornography. The list goes on and on. While the United States remains a powerful cultural force on the world stage—especially through hip-hop—the jury is still out when it comes to deciding which nation will become the most dominant in the evolution of global culture.

Whether one approves of the growing cultural convergence or

not, it is difficult to see what could be done to stop it. In order to maintain the diversity of traditional cultures, some people have to be willing to live in these cultures and limit their exposure to outside influences. There are major costs associated with doing so. Bhutan, for instance, has gone to considerable lengths to isolate itself, to limit the influx of Western tourists, charging guests US\$200 per day for the privilege of being in the country. Yet without foreign currency earnings, they have little access to agricultural, manufacturing or medical technology. As a result, they suffer from poverty, malnutrition and poor life expectancy. The Bhutanese seem, on the whole, willing to accept this trade-off, in part due to the prevalence of deep religiosity. Yet one cannot expect everyone to feel the same way.

Again, the question is, if we want to maintain diversity, who will be left holding the bag? One can see this clearly in the case of language. There are currently about 6,000 languages in use in the world, but they are disappearing at a rate of about 30 per year. (This is a slightly misleading statistic, because over 1,500 of these languages are found in Papua New Guinea and are spoken by only a handful of people.) Many people treat these languages as though they were endangered species, which must be preserved at all cost. Yet in order to maintain the vitality of a language, one requires a large number of unilingual speakers in a territorially concentrated region. This can be difficult to obtain, since the value of a language is heavily determined by the number of other speakers whom one can use it to communicate with. In other words, speaking a language generates network externalities for all other speakers of that language (in the same way that buying a fax machine generates a positive externality for all other owners of fax machines). Certain languages, like English, reach a "tipping point," where so many people speak them that it is easily worthwhile for others to shoulder the costs associated with learning them. These become the hyperlanguages. Other languages fall beneath this threshold, and so require some very special motivation in order to remain in use.

So while we may lament the imminent disappearance of Kristang or Iuk or Lehalurup, we must recognize that preserving these languages would require a community of unilingual (or at least native) speakers. It is not enough simply to have everyone speak it as a second language—since the dominant tendency in that case seems to be a slide toward the hyperlanguage. Yet forgoing competence in the hyperlanguage in order to speak a minority language of this type may significantly limit a person's opportunities. This may not be a problem as long as we can find people willing to do it. Yet we can hardly blame those who do not volunteer.

## II

As we have seen, the tendency toward homogenization—or, more specifically, the movement toward “uniform diversity”—is the product of a very complex set of forces. Some of it is a reflection of consumer preference, some of it is due to economies of scale, some of it is caused by distortions in the market and some of it is caused by timeless, universal human tendencies. In many cases, it is not obvious that we can do anything about it; in many more cases, it is not obvious that we *should* do anything about it. The most important point, however, is that there is no single “system” at work producing this effect. There is simply a bundle of different, sometimes contradictory forces.

The countercultural critique, on the other hand, has aided and abetted the suggestion that there is one central homogenizing force at work in all of these different developments. According to this view, a system of repression and conformity is a functional prerequisite of the market economy. Cultural uniformity must be imposed in order to secure the discipline of the machine and the assembly line. When the market was limited to the national scale, this resulted in an erosion of individuality within each national culture. Now that globalization has extended the market to the international level, the system is leveling the differences between national cultures.

This analysis has led many leftist activists into making the disastrous political error of transforming their concerns over the

cultural effects of globalization into an opposition to *trade* between developed and underdeveloped nations. If it is the market producing all these effects, they figure, then the best way to limit the effects is to limit the extent of the market. Thus antiglobalization activists have taken to protesting every major gathering of the World Trade Organization (WTO), along with summits of heads of state. In so doing, they put themselves into direct conflict with representatives of precisely those Third World interests that they claim to protect. While there is, in the developing world, a lively debate over how integration into the global economy should be achieved, almost no one questions the desirability of this ultimate goal. No one believes in economic autarky (of the sort promoted by Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru in India). The only real question is whether trade liberalization and foreign investment should be instituted first, as a way of stimulating economic development, or whether a certain level of endogenous development should be achieved first, as a prelude to liberalization.

Many representatives of developing nations find themselves baffled by the spectacle of antiglobalization activists protesting *trade*. While they agree entirely with the concerns being expressed over environmental policy, labor standards, currency speculation, IMF structural adjustment policies and unfair terms of trade, most completely fail to see how any of this could be improved by limiting trade itself (or by opposing the WTO—a forum in which the democratically elected representatives of all these nations assemble in order to address precisely these issues). Again, the problem lies with the totalizing character of the countercultural critique. Instead of opposing specific trade policies that are genuinely harmful to the Third World, such as American and European agricultural subsidies, antiglobalization activists position themselves as opponents of trade in general, for example by denouncing trade in agricultural products on the grounds that it promotes “monoculture.” Thus one has the peculiar spectacle of developing nations on the “inside” of the WTO trying to pressure Europe and the United States on the issue of agricultural subsidies

during the Doha round only to have their meetings disrupted by protestors on the "outside" opposing the entire process.

One can see the totalizing tendency of the countercultural critique most clearly in Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's runaway academic bestseller *Empire*. Hardt and Negri simply take the Gramscian theory of cultural hegemony and apply it on a world scale. "The system," having conquered the national proletariat, has now gone global, becoming "Empire." Who cares if there is no evidence of any such Empire? The fact that there is growing uniformity among cultures, in their view, shows that there must be some underlying system of repression and control. The disorder, confusion and straightforward lawlessness that exist on an international level are simply a sign of the deeper nefariousness of "the system": "All conflicts, all crises, and all dissensions effectively push forward the process of integration and by the same measure call for more central authority. Peace, equilibrium, and the cessation of conflict are the values toward which everything is directed. The development of the global system (and of imperial right in the first place) seems to be the development of a machine that imposes procedures of continual contractualization that lead to systemic equilibria—a machine that creates a continuous call for authority. The machine seems to predetermine the exercise of authority and action across the entire social space."

Thus the "machine" creates the illusion of disorder in order to seduce us into accepting increased repressive conformity. In Hardt and Negri's view, the only possible solution to this is the anarchic resistance of "the multitude," who must resist the forms of subjectivity imposed upon them by Empire, in order to constitute themselves as the "new nomadic horde," or the "new barbarians." The authors do not particularly care what form these opposition movements take; anything violent seems to fit the bill. (They describe the Los Angeles riots in the following way: "The looting of commodities and burning of property were not just metaphors but the real global conditions of the mobility and volatility of post-Fordist

social mediations." This passage is quite revealing. Who would be tempted to think that the riots were *just* a metaphor?)

What Hardt and Negri fail to provide is any sort of explanation of why this so-called Empire is such a bad thing. They simply equate order with repression and disorder with freedom. Yet we all recognize that the rule of law is essential to securing personal liberty in a domestic context; why would we resist its extension to international affairs? What's wrong with "peace, equilibrium, and the cessation of conflict"? And why on earth would we want to live under the "new barbarism"?