

GEORGE RITZER

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

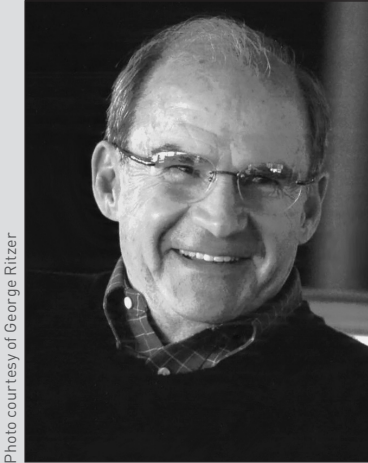


Photo courtesy of George Ritzer

My intellectual biography can be summed up by the cliché “one (damned) thing after another.” While this process can be seen negatively, in my case it describes a happy process that has led me to move—sometimes bumpily—from one theoretical interest to another. Overarching this discussion is my interest in metatheory (see Chapter 13) since a biographical sketch like this is a form of metatheory. Biographical and autobiographical work is useful in helping us understand the work of sociological theorists, and of sociologists generally. The historian of science, Thomas Hankin, explains it this way:

[A] fully integrated biography of a scientist which includes not only his personality, but also his scientific work and the intellectual and social context of his times, [is] . . . still the best way to get at

many of the problems that beset the writing of history of science. . . . [S]cience is created by individuals, and however much it may be driven by forces outside, these forces work through the scientist himself. Biography is the literary lens through which we can best view this process.

(Hankin, 1979:14)

What Hankin asserts about scientists generally informs my orientation to the biographies of sociological theorists, including myself.

One of my early theoretical interests was the work of Max Weber, especially his theory of rationalization. I began thinking about whether the bureaucracy—the paradigm of rationalization in his day—was still the leading example of that process. I was led by my interest in the economy—as well as developments all around me in the social and economic world—to the idea that a better contemporary example of rationalization was the fast-food restaurant, especially the industry leader—McDonald’s. That led me to the idea of updating Weber’s theory and calling it the “McDonaldization of Society” (Ritzer, 1993; 2015a).

While I had first thought about the fast-food restaurant in those theoretical/metatheoretical terms, I began to realize—belatedly—that it was *both* a site of work (a long-term interest of mine [Ritzer, 1969; 1972]) *and* a site of consumption. The sociology of consumption was virtually unknown in the United States when I began working on the fast-food restaurant, but its extensive development, especially in Europe, was beginning to permeate American sociology. Consumption quickly became a focal interest and that led me to think beyond the fast-food restaurant to—using Marxian terms—other major “means of consumption.”

Enchanting a Disenchanted World: Revolutionizing the Means of Consumption (2010a; initially published in 1999) was once again deeply indebted to Weber’s work, but rather than rationality, the focus was on his ideas of enchantment and disenchantment. While rationalization

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