I focus in . . . this article on the social geography . . . of the McDonaldization of society. This, of course, is based on Max Weber’s famous work on rationalization and his vision of the social world as being increasingly encased in an “iron cage” of rationalization. This metaphor can be interpreted in various ways, but one that has not been explored systematically is from the perspective of social geography.

On the surface, when examined from this geographic point of view, the image of an iron cage seems to convey the sense of an entire society, or even world, enclosed by an overarching system of rationalization. Although this is one geographic image, the fact is that Weber famously lacked a sense of society (let alone the world) as a whole but instead focused on specific structures, institutions, and domains. Thus, it could be argued that it would be more accurate to say that Weber envisioned a series of iron cages rather than a single, overarching cage. He did see such cages growing more numerous.
with more and more sectors of society coming to be rationalized. In addition, he believed that the bars on these cages were growing stronger, thicker, and harder. However, this does not yield a view of a society as a whole (or the world) growing increasingly rationalized.

Whatever the real possibilities of a seamless system of McDonaldized sites arising in the future, the fact remains that today it is more accurate to think of those sites as islands of McDonaldization.

In fact, Weber’s actual image of the social geography of rationalization comes closer to another social geography—Foucault’s sense of a “carceral archipelago”—to which it is often contrasted. On the surface, the image of an iron cage communicates a totally enclosed system, whereas that of a “carceral archipelago” conveys a sense of relatively individual, even isolated, rationalized systems with great gaps—the relatively free and open “seas”—between them. However, as we have already seen, Weber, like Foucault, envisions just such a series of “islands” of rationalization and the iron cage imagery is clearly in line, at least on each of the islands, with Foucault’s carceral vision of what those islands are like. For his part, Foucault, especially in his thoughts on “discipline,” has a rationalized view of the world—or at least of the islands in the archipelago—not unlike that of Weber.

However, when we turn to the contemporary rationalized world—one that I have described in terms of McDonaldization—the issue arises as to whether either of these images—iron cage (at least in the totalistic sense in which it is usually interpreted) or carceral archipelago—is an adequate description of it. In fact, it is clear almost immediately that both are inadequate. In no way can we think of society as a whole as an iron cage of rationality. Although we can certainly think in terms of islands of McDonaldization, those islands lack bars; they are not carceral in any sense of the term; people are not locked into these islands. Thus, I would like to use this article as an occasion to develop a vision of the social geography of McDonaldization that, although it is related to Weber’s “iron cage” and Foucault’s “carceral archipelago,” differs from both in significant ways.

The appropriate phantasmagoric social geographic image, with a bow to Hollywood and its “B” movies, is islands of the living dead. Notable sources for this view are George Romero’s movies *The Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and especially its sequel *Dawn of the Dead* (1979). The latter, in fact, takes place in one of the most important of these islands: a shopping mall.

**ISLANDS**

Foucault’s vision of an archipelago is far closer to the metaphor being developed here than the image conveyed by those who interpret Weber as offering
a sense of an overarching iron cage. It is clear that there is no way that we can think of society today in terms of an iron cage and, furthermore, it is almost impossible to envision a scenario—especially one involving the increasing prevalence and preeminence of consumption settings—in which the result is such an all-embracing phenomenon in the future. The abysmal failure of the Soviet Union to create such a system would seem to make it clear that its successful development and implementation is, to put it mildly, unlikely. Developments in capitalist societies indicate that McDonaldized systems are likely to grow more numerous, and the “bars” that surround them are likely to grow thicker and stronger, but they are likely to remain enclaves of rationalization in a larger society that is less—or even not—rationalized.

It is far more accurate to think in terms of islands of rationalization or McDonaldization:

- Factories are increasingly rare in the United States and those comparatively few that continue to exist are likely to be surrounded by decaying and destroyed remnants of the far greater number of factories that used to dot the American landscape;
- in the city, any given block might have a fast-food restaurant or a Gap store, but in between we are still likely to find traditional, individually owned and operated, small shops and businesses and even abandoned shops or empty lots;
- the suburbs are likely to be dotted with highly rationalized shopping malls composed almost exclusively of McDonaldized shops and businesses;
- small towns are likely to see their downtown business areas decimated by fast-food restaurants and a Wal-Mart, all built on the road out of town or on its periphery;
- every 20 miles or so on the main highway from Washington, D.C., to New York City (and many other highways) one finds rest stops now exclusively offering food from one of the many fast-food franchise systems that are so increasingly prevalent;
- even on the Las Vegas Strip with its famous, and highly McDonaldized, casino-hotels, there are numerous non-McDonaldized small businesses remaining in the spaces between them;
- on a cruise ship, the tourist may be trapped on a McDonaldized “island,” and may visit the areas of “real” islands along the way that are almost as McDonaldized, but just beyond the ship’s railing, as well as the borders of the island enclaves that are visited, are far less rationalized, even non- or irrational, worlds; and
- Disney World is clearly a McDonaldized island and innumerable other such islands have grown up around it in Orlando, Florida (as well as around the other Disney theme parks in California, Japan, and France [and now Hong Kong]), but there remain areas in the environs that have not yet been McDonaldized.
One could extend such examples but it is obvious that in none of these locales do we find an iron cage of McDonaldization but rather many islands defined by their high degree of rationalization. Although it is true that there are an increasing number of such islands, and that number is likely to increase even further in the future, this allows us to see that there remain non-McDonaldized areas, often quite vast in scope, in the interstices that exist between the islands. These interstices can be undeveloped land; non-McDonaldized settings; non-rational or irrational domains; areas that once were, but are no longer, McDonaldized; as well as areas that have not-yet-been, but likely soon-will-be, McDonaldized. Thus, it is not only possible but remains quite easy, at least from a social geographic point of view, for those who so wish to avoid the McDonaldized islands and seek out and find non-McDonaldized alternatives.

Of course, that leads, almost immediately, to the issue of why so many people are increasingly drawn to the McDonaldized islands and, conversely, are so unwilling to venture off into the non-McDonaldized spaces that offer alternatives to them. There is clearly a kind of magnetism associated with McDonaldized settings and consumers are increasingly drawn to them. That magnetism comes, of course, from the clever, attractive, and aggressive marketing and advertising campaigns undertaken by the firms that own McDonaldized settings. Thus, the magnetism is not intrinsic to the systems but manufactured by them, especially their public relations, marketing, and advertising arms or firms hired by them. The non-McDonaldized alternatives—for example, independently owned businesses—lack the resources to make themselves similarly magnetic. Thus, although the “sea” of settings continues to be overwhelmingly populated by non-McDonaldized systems, many consumers are drawn to the islands of rationalization and routinely bypass the numerous nonrationalized or less-rationalized alternatives along the way. Why people do this is also linked to the next section of this analysis: the “living” that takes place on these islands.

LIVING

There is a great deal of living taking place on the McDonaldized islands being analyzed here; there is much that is lively, full of life, associated with them. This is often lost sight of in the focus on the critiques of rationalization and McDonaldization, especially the irrationalities of rationality intimately associated with them. We must attend to the fact that large numbers of people are drawn to these islands and seem to derive a great deal of pleasure from their visits. For example, people seem to enjoy the food at fast-food chains such as McDonald’s, Burger King, Taco Bell, Pizza Hut, and Starbucks. Egg McMuffins, burgers, tacos, pizzas, and double espressos are downed with great gusto and in huge quantities. Furthermore, in many senses, it is more the fun associated with fast-food restaurants than the food
consumed in them that attracts consumers. This is most obvious in the case of children drawn by the toy and movie promotions and the carnival-like atmosphere of at least some fast-food restaurants. Adults seem to enjoy watching their children having fun and, in addition, derive their own gratifications from visiting fast-food restaurants. Similarly, the shoppers at the Gap, Old Navy, and Banana Republic arrive in droves and joyously grab clothing from the racks, try on various garments, and bring them home in great numbers. Whatever scholars may say of a critical character about such settings—how they manipulate customers, the mediocre quality of what they have to offer—we cannot ignore the fact that so many people seem to be having such a terrific time in them and in consuming what they have to offer.

This is even more true of the large and famous islands in the archipelago of McDonaldized consumption. The Mall of America, Disney World, the Las Vegas Strip, and the Destiny cruise ship are among the most desired destinations for not only American consumers, travelers, and tourists but those from much of the rest of the world as well. Disney World’s self-designation as “the happiest place on earth” also could be employed by these other settings, and the behavior of visitors to these settings does little to belie such claims. At the Mall of America, people seem to be having a great time shopping and shuttling between the mall and the amusement park found under the same roof. For children, and their parents, a visit to Disney World seems like the culmination of a lifelong ambition. Joyous faces abound on the rides, in the attractions, and in the various hotels, shops, and restaurants. Gamblers in Las Vegas are in the world mecca of gambling, and they act like it (at least until they have to tote up the inevitable losses), and the transformation of the town into more of a family tourist attraction makes even the nongamblers happy as they can visit indoor malls attached to casino-hotels, see circus acts at Circus Circus, watch a sea battle at Treasure Island, view the water show at Bellagio, and take a gondola ride at the Venetian.

Thus, a great deal of living takes place on these McDonaldized islands; there is a lot of life to them. The critical orientation to be discussed in the following section should not cause us to lose sight of this fact. There is certainly a paradox here; a paradoxical relationship between the life of these islands and the “death” we are about to discuss, a paradox we will deal with in the conclusion to this article.

DEATH

In what senses can we think of McDonaldized islands as “dead,” as being associated with “death”? Of interest, Jean Baudrillard focuses on the cemetery, which in terms of this article can be considered a means of consuming
death and the dead. Indeed, at least some cemeteries (the famous Forest Lawn Cemetery in Los Angeles) have, similar to other cathedrals of consumption, sought to become spectacular to attract a larger “clientele.” However, the key point is that modern cemeteries represent the separation of death from life, whereas in earlier societies the two were intimately related. Cemeteries were (and are) “ghettos” for the dead and, in a sense, the McDonaldized islands being discussed here are similar ghettos separated from life. According to Baudrillard, death is controlled “in anticipation of the future confinement of life in its entirety.” We can think of McDonaldized islands as settings in which large portions of life have come to be confined—in which some of life has clearly come to be separated from the rest of life. Furthermore, Baudrillard is making it clear here (as we have above) that the confinement of life in its entirety—Weber’s iron cage—is not yet a reality. Baudrillard seems to believe unequivocally that such a fully carceral system is an inevitability, but at this point, such a reality only looms in the distance. Regardless of whether Baudrillard is right about the future, his vision of the present is consistent with the island metaphor being employed here.

People are, as we have seen, living on these islands, but it is a life that, by definition, is clearly separated from the rest of existence (the “sea” surrounding the islands). Separation implies alienation, and it could be argued that life in those settings is alienated from the rest of life. Instead of life flowing naturally into and out of these islands, the living that takes place on them tends rather to take place in largely autonomous settings; it is a relatively segregated form of living that takes place in these settings. Furthermore, the life on one island is different and separated from the living that is to be found on other islands. Thus, one is virtually forced to leave one’s everyday life to participate in the living found on the Vegas Strip, Disney World, or Mall of America. This is even true of more local and everyday islands such as the nearby mall, superstore, or even franchise restaurant. Furthermore, one must leave the life experienced in one setting to experience the form of living to be found on another island. All of this is certainly living, but it is a ghettoized form of living taking place in a similarly ghettoized context. It is living, but a form of living separated from the rest of life.

Although there is life on McDonaldized islands, it is arguably at least a different form of life, if not less of a form of life, than that found in at least some of the non-McDonaldized interstices between the islands. One way of looking at what is different about life on McDonaldized islands is Weber’s conception of life in the rationalized world and its cold skeletal hands. Clearly, Weber associates death with rationalization in general and, more specifically, with the death of the life-affirming character of sex. However, we need not go back to Weber for a theoretical resource on this—Baudrillard offers a similar view in his discussion of the segregated world of death and cemeteries as “a meticulously
McDonaldized islands fit Baudrillard’s view that life “is no longer anything but a doleful, defensive bookkeeping, locking every risk into its sarcophagus.” Thus, in contrast to Ulrich Beck’s view that we live in a risk society and the fact that risk undoubtedly remains a reality in the interstices between the islands, life on McDonaldized islands is virtually risk free. Although in some senses this is highly desirable, in many other senses it is undesirable, especially in leading to a dull, boring, routine form of existence. This is at least one of the senses in which we can say that those who “live” on these islands are “dead.” This is clearly the case for the workers who do nothing but dull, boring, and routine work. Furthermore, the workers spend a considerable part of their day on the islands. However, it is also true for customers, although they spend far less time there. For example, the food that they eat, and what they are required to do to get the food, are well described as being dull, boring, and routine.

Following Baudrillard, death characterizes life on these islands in another way. McDonaldized settings seek to optimize rationalization; according to Baudrillard, they seek “perfection.” That is, they seek to be all positivity, to eliminate all negativity. However, such an approach renders a world in which everything resembles “the smile of a corpse in a funeral home.” A more lively setting would permit positivity and negativity to coexist. To put it in other Baudrillardian terms, McDonaldized systems are dead because they lack “evil” (as well as “seduction” and “symbolic exchange”). Therefore, what they need is an injection of such evil. That is, they need more of the things associated with life—instability, seduction, ambivalence, “the natural disorder of the world.”

McDonaldized systems are also, again in Baudrillard’s terms, “ecstatic” systems. That is, they are hypertelic, expanding in a seemingly limitless manner (see Stephenson’s association of franchises with viruses). Expansion seems out of control with the result that the system as a whole “shines forth in its pure and empty form.” One of Baudrillard’s major examples of ecstasy is cancer, and thus, the association of McDonaldization with this process clearly also links it to death. The ecstatic expansion of the growth of McDonaldization not only means more islands of McDonaldization but also more empty, dead, or dying settings.

Furthermore, in Baudrillard’s view, the dead are transformed into a “stuffed simulacrum of life.” One is tempted to describe the diners who have finished their massive “value meals” in fast-food restaurants in similar terms, but the idea of simulacra has broader applicability to the islands of McDonaldization. That is, these islands are characterized, even dominated, by simulations. Examples are legion, including the various casino-hotels in Las Vegas (Paris, Mandalay Bay), all of the “worlds” in Disneyland, “eattertainment” sites such as Rainforest Cafe, and so on. Is real life going on there, or is the living that we find there merely a faint copy of what life should be all about? If we answer yes to the second question then this is a
second sense in which we can associate what transpires on the islands as being associated with death. That is, it is nothing more than a simulation of life, not life itself. Furthermore, living, at least for a time, in these simulated worlds, can people do anything but live a life dominated by simulation?

The most direct association between the geographic settings of concern here and death is Kowinski’s work on the shopping mall and what he calls the “Zombie Effect.” That is, the structure of malls induces consumers to wander about them for hours in a near-endless pursuit of goods and services. Of course, the idea of zombies brings us back to the living dead, specifically the movies of George Romero. In *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), Romero’s zombie-consumers are set loose in a Cleveland shopping mall. This image can be extended to all consumers in all McDonaldized settings who are simultaneously alive and dead: the living dead—zombies.

**CONCLUSION**

This article has made the case not only for a social geography of the McDonaldized world but a specific social geographic image—“islands of the living dead.” This is seen as a more accurate image, at least for the time being, of the state of McDonaldization in society. It may be that at some point in the future, Foucault’s vision of a “carceral” archipelago or even the view . . . associated with Weber of an all-encompassing “iron cage” might be more accurate, but that remains to be seen. The strength of the image presented here is that it accurately conveys a sense of still-isolated “islands” of McDonaldization; it makes it clear that there is much that is positive about these islands (the “living” that takes place on them); and it offers a critical orientation toward them, their “dead” structures, and their tendency to deaden the life that transpires within their confines.

**Thinking Critically**

1. Do you feel like you live in a carceral archipelago?
2. Do you feel like you live in an iron cage?
3. Do you feel like your life is spent moving from one island of the living dead to the next?
4. In what ways are you alive on these islands?
5. In what ways are you dead on these islands?
Chapter 4 reports on an empirical study to determine whether the entire restaurant business in the United States has been McDonaldized, specifically whether it has come to be dominated by chains. The author distinguishes between fast-food and full-service restaurants and finds that while, as expected, fast-food restaurants are dominated by chains, the latter have made only minimal inroads into the full-service sector. The implication is that full-service restaurants have not been highly McDonaldized. Of course, being part of a chain is related to, but far from a perfect indicator of, a high degree of McDonaldization. That is, it is possible that full-service restaurants have grown increasingly McDonaldized even though they are not part of chains.