



# Who is McDonald's?

Hamburgers, Cheeseburgers, Big Macs, Quarter Pounders (Royals (with cheese or not) in Europe, as Pulpfiction viewers might remember), McFlurrys, McChickens: if there is an almost universal symbol "for the process that Columbus started" – globalization - then it has to be the golden arch of McDonalds, home of the introduction of Adam Smith's division of labour into the food production process (Veseth).

Currently, McDonalds operates within 122 nations, operates 30.000 locations and caters 51 million daily customers. In the United States, where McDonalds is the largest private operator of playgrounds, nearly one in eight workers has at some time been employed by McDonalds (Schlosser). The Economist bi-yearly publishes its Big Mac Index, coming to conclusions as:

*"Our annual Big Mac index suggests ... the euro is overvalued by 17% against the dollar. How come? The euro is worth about \$1.22 on the foreign-exchange markets. A Big Mac costs €2.92, on average, in the euro zone and \$3.06 in the United States. The rate needed to equalise the burger's price in the two regions is just \$1.05".* Clearly, the Big Mac has transcended its status as the burger you get when you order Meal #4.

Today, there are about twice as many "reasonable authentic Italian restaurants outside Italy" as McDonalds franchises worldwide, therefore "Italian restaurants have a stronger claim to globalization even though their visual variety makes them blend into the background" (Veseth), as it is often overlooked that globalization is not just about the spread of "plastic food". Nevertheless, we live on "McWorld", not "PastaWorld", our increasingly America-centred, media-driven, capitalistic planet. We do not mind the cultural diversity of Chinese, Italian and Indian restaurants wherever we are, but once our eyes catch a glimpse of the "Golden M", we fear imperialism & obese kids wolfing down Junior Meals. Who is McDonalds? The dark force damning cultural diversity into oblivion!

In language, the Mc-prefix is frequently used to attribute qualities as "massproduced, interchangeable or undistinguished", thus basically everything that is McX is "crap" (Veseth). Nevertheless, even though the world has become a culturally complex space, both in food and more generally, McDonald's cheap and standardized "cooking" appears to be everywhere. But who is McDonalds? Who is the figure behind what is perceived as "the Trojan horse for global capitalism" (Veseth)?

Originally, it was the McDonald brothers, who revolutionized the fast-food world in 1948, by specialising on the mass-production of standardized hamburgers. "If we gave people a choice there would be chaos", they observed, and hoped that people would not mind if their orders were taken and fulfilled within 30 seconds. Even though their products were not an immediate hit, "speed, consistency, and low price found a market" (Veseth). As throughout the history of McDonald's global unfolding, McDonald's created its own markets and filled a gap previously unknown to exist. Its product line is not based on local adaptation, even though exceptions exist (you can get drunk at McDonalds in Germany, but not in the US), but instead its customers are urged to adapt. Sometimes, help is needed, as Den Fujita, an opportunistic entrepreneur who delivered Big Macs to the Japanese, sold the alien hamburgers as "revolutionary" and made bold statements along the lines that Japanese are short and yellow "because they have eaten nothing but fish and rice for two thousand years". Den Fujita did not tell his potential clients (with average Japanese men standing 1,65 meters tall and women 1,55) that Japanese have a live expectancy of 80,80 (#4 in the world) and US Americans of 77,26 (# 42 in the world; Worldfactsandfigures.com). Who is McDonald's? The provider of food that makes us stronger and taller, or in the case of California 2005, the food that renders us obese and diabetic, as Arnold Schwarzenegger recently banned the sale of fast food on school premises.

However, McDonalds is no prototypical transnational corporation, exclusively owned by its greedy stock-owners. Instead, it is a "fair and generous" system of cooperation, equally rewarding for its stock-holders and its global business partners, as more than 70% of McDonald's restaurants around the world are locally owned and operated. This ownership of creative entrepreneurs secures McDonald's sustainability, as franchise-partners are not dumbed down, but allowed extensive creativity within their markets. With its wide-ranging stock option programme, the "who" of McDonald's constantly diffuses. Therefore, notions of anti-Americanism were always easier to handle for the "Golden M" than for classic transnational corporations, as a prototypical McDonald's is locally owned, locally supplied and a provider of exclusively local jobs. Of course, service fees and rent have to be paid to the US mother company, but in essence, any McDonald's franchise is owned by either a national McDonald's USA offspring or individual franchise-holders, a "company owned primarily by all the participants of the system" (Love). Who owns McDonalds? In a strict sense, nobody does.

But McDonalds is more than a mere restaurant chain, as it has McDonaldized the food supplies industry and distribution sectors wherever it spread, thus started transformations far beyond its cultural influence on local eating habits. Its business-model is vertically integrative. McDonald's franchise-holders are urged to make their presence felt within their communities – U.S. franchises actively promote themselves as "your neighbourhood McDonald's" - McDonald's is thus furthermore the provider of jerseys for youth sports teams, the sponsor of local Ronald McDonald houses or a generous financier of Christmas parades. Who is McDonalds? In part, the force which helped to Americanize business practices, in part the force one can locally turn to if public events are in need of funding.

For some writers, McDonald's transcends sizzling burgers, overweight kids and traffic jams at the drive-thru, as McDonald's delivers not only "Value Meals", but peace in a realist world. McDonald's is part of Francis Fukuyama's "end of history", one might conclude when reading Thomas Friedman's "Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention". As "people would rather buy hamburgers than take up arms", it comes as no surprise that no two countries with McDonald's stores have ever gone to war (even though it ought to be mentioned that after the publication of Friedman's "The Lexus and the olive tree" NATO's invasion of Yugoslavia violated the Golden Arches Theory). As McDonald's apparently only expands into safe, sophisticated markets, the appearance of a franchise in one's country of residence appears to be an important stepping-stone towards a safer future. Whoever has Big Macs is safe!

In conclusion, besides its stockholders (of whom I was a part in 03), its franchise-holders, managers and staff-members (of whom I was a part in 98-00, even though McDonald's is not overwhelmingly generous in such relationships), each one of its 51 million daily customers (of whom I am a part every once in a while) "is" and constantly remakes McDonalds. McDonalds has just become what it is because people worldwide embraced its product line, its initially unique family-focused attitude, and attributed a cultural meaning far beyond a simple meal towards the standardized line-up of mediocre Quarter Pounders, Big Macs and crispy fries (at least this is how they are advertised for). Who is McDonald's, one of globalization's strongest symbols, yet so unlike many typical villains in the game of globalization? To a certain degree, most of us are, as the legacy of McDonald's is not limited to its premises. In a way, McDonald's has supersized itself.