Being (George Ritzer) and Nothingness: An Interview[*]

Steven P. Dandaneau and Robin M. Dodsworth

George Ritzer is Distinguished University Professor at the University of Maryland, College Park. Known for his scholarly contributions to studies of consumption, globalization, metatheory, and modern and postmodern social theory, Ritzer is also the author of *The McDonaldization of Society* (revised edition forthcoming, 2007), which is among the best selling monographs in the history of American sociology. His latest work is focused on the phenomenon of outsourcing.

***

D&D: True or false; Social theory is a form of reflection lost on most sociologists, who are bereft not only of education in social theory but of theoretical sensibilities as well.

Ritzer: True.

D&D: Okay, given that, what would you guess is the percentage of sociologists in the United States who possess sufficiently developed theoretical sensibilities?

Ritzer: One percent.

D&D: One percent?

Ritzer: Yes. I don't even think most sociological theorists have much of a sense of sociological theory. A colleague, who I highly respect, said to me once that I was probably the only person who had written a sociological theory text who had actually read the sociological theory. I often read things that people have written, and it's clear that they haven't read the original sources; it's second- or third-hand kind of stuff.

D&D: Well, beyond putting in the work, why is it that your career has taken such an unusual course? What made you one of the one percent?

Steven P. Dandaneau is associate vice provost and director of the Chancellor's Honors Program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. His contribution to American sociology is primarily three books, *A Town Abandoned: Flint, Michigan, Confronts Deindustrialization* (1996), *A Wrong Life: Studies in Lifeworld-Grounded Critical Theory* (with Maude Falcone, 1998), and *Taking It Big: Developing Sociological Consciousness in Postmodern Times* (2001). Dandaneau is currently writing a book on C. Wright Mills. He can be reached at sdandane@utk.edu. **Robin N. Dodsworth** is assistant professor in the sociolinguistics program at North Carolina State University. Her work is primarily in the area of quantitative sociolinguistics and its relevance for social thoery. She can be reached at robin.dodsworth@gmail.com.

Ritzer: The important thing that comes to mind is that I wasn't trained as a social theorist. My contemporary at Cornell was Jonathan Turner, although he was in the sociology department and I was in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations. Jon was trained as a social theorist and he went off to California to train others. I basically trained myself as a social theorist, and so I had to learn it all as I went. Consequently, I never wanted to read other peoples' summaries of what classical theorists had to say. I would read it myself. I would very often just teach a seminar. If I wanted to get a better handle on Parsons, I would teach a graduate seminar on Parsons. I've learned much social theory that way and continue to learn much social theory that way.

Ironically, I think one of my great advantages was that I wasn't trained in social theory, much less any particular perspective. I wasn't aligned with symbolic interaction or any theoretical perspective. I could pick and choose, change depending on the question, and I could find utility in all manner of theoretical perspectives. That's also, of course, behind the idea of an *integrated paradigm*, where I was working to integrate a lot of different stuff.

So, I've never had the blinders that a lot of social theorists have from buying into a particular perspective. Jonathan Turner, who I respect on a lot of other bases, developed his view about theory early in his life and based on his training, and he's operated with that throughout his whole life. In contrast, I've eclectically built a perspective as I've gone.

D&D: You're a self-trained social theorist, then?

Ritzer: Yes. I couldn't walk into a graduate classroom not knowing what I was talking about, and I couldn't write a book on the basis of half-baked knowledge of that material, so I felt that I had to simply do the work.

D&D: Are you self-taught in other ways as well? Where were you born? What was your upbringing like?

Ritzer: Well, I was born in upper Manhattan in 1940, kind of in the upper lower class, I would suppose. My father, for most of my childhood, was a taxi driver, and my mother was a secretary. We lived a pretty marginal economic existence. I have this strong memory of my father becoming ill with a very strange disease, which they thought he contracted in the taxicab from a passenger who had come from some faraway land. I think he almost died from that. I remember there was a point where we had this piggy—bank that my parents use to dump half dollars in, and things were so bad that my mother had to break open the piggybank in order to live off this money. So, we had a pretty marginal economic existence, but the area I grew up in was a working-class, multi-ethnic population, so I don't know that I felt deprived relative to anyone around me.

I suppose the key event in my life was going to the Bronx High School of Science, which at the time was the preeminent public high school in New York, maybe in the country, and maybe it still is. On the one hand, it was a fabulous experience in the sense that it was and remains the place where I encountered the brightest people I have ever met in my life. I mean, to have an IQ of 160, 180, 200 was not unusual. These were incredible students. The interesting thing is that I was a pretty average student at Bronx Science and I came away without understanding what a skewed comparison this was. I came away feeling that I was a pretty average kind of student, and it took me a long time to realize that I maybe was a little bit above average. So, that was a formative experience for me.

One thing that just popped into my head that describes the place. I had a friend (I know that's hard to believe, but I did have a friend). One year, we had this thing where we would read a classic novel and then go for a walk of maybe five or ten miles in which we

would talk about the book. So we would read *Crime and Punishment* and then walk around Manhattan into the Bronx, over the bridge, then back. It was *that* kind of a world.

But, as the name implies, my high school was heavily oriented toward science. Most of my classmates went into science or into medicine but I had no particular interest in science or math (which was also heavily emphasized). But it was just sort of known that if you were bright or saw yourself as bright then you wanted to go to the Bronx High School of Science.

D&D: Were you encouraged to then go to college?

Ritzer: Well, we had very little money and my father never graduated from high school, so he had no particular great aspirations for me educationally. He was a very bright man who simply grew up in a different time. But neither of my parents really emphasized or pushed or even knew so much about higher education, "do you want to go to Harvard or do you want to go Columbia?," that sort of thing. It was more, "go to college because that's what people are doing," instead of that classic middle class Jewish family push to go to the elite universities.

D&D: You ended up at City College, right?

Ritzer: CCNY was then kind of at the end of its run as a great free university, just before they made that transition to the open university system. It was seen as a respectable place for relatively impoverished New Yorkers to go. I could live at home and save money, because we lived in upper Manhattan and CCNY was in the middle of Manhattan. So, really, I don't know that I applied to very many other places. It was just assumed that. . . .

D&D: Do you remember any of those other places?

Ritzer: I think of Boston University, but I'm not sure why, maybe NYU. But I also won what was called the New York State Regents Scholarship, which was good wherever you went. Here was the added attraction: I could go to a free university (because City College was still free at that time) *and* I could get money from the state. So, my parents' marginal economic position was such that this was a good thing to do.

D&D: Do you have siblings?

Ritzer: I have a younger brother. He is retired, actually; I keep working. (Everyone laughs)

D&D: What did you study at City College?

Ritzer: Somehow I thought that I wanted to go into business, so I started out at the business school, which actually was downtown, the Baruch School of Business. I think I was going to major in accounting. It was clear that I was the world's worst possibility for an accountant or even to be in a business school at all. But the other reality was, I had become a very poor student or a marginal student. I was not a good student. The main reason being, I think, I resented reading what instructors wanted me to read. I would read what *I* wanted to read, and I would be reading all of the time, but if I had an assignment, I found it very difficult to do it. So I was a B/C student throughout most of my college career, especially at Baruch.

Anyway, I decided that business school was a poor choice for me, and I transferred uptown to the main campus and ended up majoring in psychology, which it was okay. Kenneth Clark, the psychologist who was instrumental in *Brown vs. Board*, was one of my professors. The Department of Psychology had some very good people and the quality of education was good, but I really wasn't very involved in it. I'd take the train down, take my classes, then I'd come back, and I was probably more interested in playing baseball or basketball than I was with my assigned readings.

D&D: Playing hooky with the guys in the 'hood then?

Ritzer: Yeah, we had a lot of different groups that we would play sports with and, actually, given my height, I was a pretty good basketball player. I played a lot of basketball, a lot of baseball, a lot of sports generally. But I was always a reader, even if I wasn't very academically inclined.

So, then, when it got close to graduation, my father assumed that I was going to go to work. And I'm not sure how all this arose, but I decided that I wanted to get a masters degree. I decided that I wanted to go back in the direction of business, and I don't know that I can explain to you why that happened, but it did. So I applied to the MBA program at the University of Michigan. I never had good grades but I always did well on standardized tests. I forgot what Michigan used, probably the GRE. I did well on it, got admitted, and I received at least a partial scholarship. This was in 1962. I was 22, and I believe that was a factor in the sense that if you wanted to stay . . . I think the draft was in effect, so if you would get classified as a student . . . . I was postponed in terms of being drafted. So, I think that was a factor, now that I think about it.

D&D: Being in Michigan in 1962 conjures the SDS and Port Huron, the Civil Rights Movement, not to mention the Missile Crisis. What was your feeling about the times? This was your first time living outside of New York City, right?

Ritzer: First of all, New Yorkers thought New York *was* the world and they still do. (I mean, people still don't understand why I ever left New York.) But I recall that I read the *New York Times* systematically. Where I grew up was adjacent to Harlem. We use to play basketball, sort of white and black teams, but this was a time when you did not have the kind of racial antagonism that later occurred. I mean, CCNY was in the middle of Harlem and I never remember feeling uncomfortable.

But, yeah, absolutely, I was always attuned to the global situation. I remember going to the Michigan Union to watch the evolution of the Cuban Missile Crisis. It was sort of like the finals of the NCAA or something, holding your breath as the Russian ships approached the American line. I remember that vividly.

D&D: Many may not realize that you never earned a degree in sociology. It was psychology at CCNY and a MBA at Michigan.

Ritzer: Right, and I didn't really know what I wanted to do at Ann Arbor. For some reason, I got interested in what was then called personnel administration or human relations. But the interesting thing was that there was room in the MBA program where you could take other courses outside of the business school, and I *was* very interested in the Russian novel. So, I ended up having this very unusual curriculum where I was taking these very practical business courses and, for fun, I was going off and taking a course on Tolstoy or whatever. So my notions and ambitions were ambiguous and broad even at that point.

I should say that I became a better student at Ann Arbor, still not a great student but a better student. I loved Ann Arbor. I loved being outside of New York. I loved the small town life. I loved the whole college life, because CCNY didn't have any of that kind of thing. Nobody lived there and there was not really a sense of community.

At the end of that time, I got married. I also interviewed for and took a job in personnel administration at Ford in 1964. As it turned out, I was very uncomfortable at Ford.

D&D: So, you stayed in Michigan?

Ritzer: Yes, we lived in Ann Arbor. We got an apartment in Ann Arbor and Sue [Ritzer's spouse] started teaching.

D&D: And you were working at Ford?

Ritzer: Not for long. I think the defining moment for me at Ford was almost the first

day when I arrived. And it turns out that Ford had hired three people—they had made an offer to three people for this job—and all three of us had accepted. I had an MBA, another guy had a law degree, and the third guy had a bachelor's degree. The assumption was that two of three of us would have turned the job down, but we all accepted. Of course, this is an indication of why the automobile companies are in the crisis they are today. It was like, "okay, all of you come to work," so we all show up. They give us one office and, literally, we have one job that we have to divide among the three of us! If we had two hours of work a day, it was a lot.

But, of course, we had to *look* busy. This was a very defining moment for me. Because you didn't want your boss to see you doing nothing, whenever things were slow we would put on our jackets and go wander out into the factory. We would spend hours wandering around the factory watching people work. I was coming from a working-class background; I was sensitive to what the workers were looking at when they looked at me looking at them. And they *were* hostile to us, as well they should have been.

The foremen were extremely hostile to us because some times we would sort of pretend we were interested in something and ask them questions, and they knew what we were doing. They, of course, were working like crazy.

Added to that was a kind of class warfare going on *within* management, which had to do with the younger people like me, who came with advanced degrees and who thought of themselves as hotshots, and our bosses and even their bosses, most of whom had worked their way up in the ranks. They disliked us and they were always trying to put us in our place, and we deserved to be put in our place. My sixth-month performance review at Ford Motor Company was "satisfactory," with one line: "Ritzer barges into my office without knocking." I'll never forget that. That was the only thing that my supervisor could think to write about me.

Within a few weeks, then, I knew that I was not going to survive at Ford. This mostly had to do with the fact that they didn't want me to do anything creative. Anytime I tried to do something creative, they knocked me down. So, I very quickly applied to Ph.D. programs. Since my field was personnel administration, the place to go was the New York State School of Labor and Industrial Relations [Cornell University].

D&D: When did you arrive at Cornell?

Ritzer: We spent the year in Michigan and then went on to Cornell in 1965, in September. And of course that was interesting, in that, now, here I am in basically a business school again, and I think I'm going to get a Ph.D. in industrial relations. Well, in fact, that's what I did get a Ph.D. in, in the sub-area called organizational behavior, which had a number of sociologists and psychologists. It was a wonderful program. William Foot Whyte was in that program. A number of notable sociologists were in that program.

D&D: Did you work with Whyte?

Ritzer: Well, I was just starting the Ph.D. program. I thought that I had "been around" now. At Cornell, you had two weeks to pick your advisor, and so I kept going around asking people, "who is the person that is going to leave me alone?" That was my main criterion! I was kind of naïve. I didn't know that I wanted to work with William Foot Whyte. Anyway, it turned out that everybody recommended this guy named Harrison Trice, who was a sociologist interested in alcoholism and industry. Everybody said that Harry would let me do what I wanted to do, and so he became my advisor.

D&D: What was Trice like?

Ritzer: First of all, he was a sociologist. When we started talking about minor areas he said, "Why don't you minor in sociology?" I mean, that seemed reasonable to me, given

my psychology background, and I really wasn't interested in pursing additional study in psychology. My other minor areas would have been organizational behavior and labor unions. So, then you had to go and talk to people in each of these areas. So Harry sent me over to the sociology department to talk to Gordon Streib, who might have been chairman of the sociology department. He eventually went to Florida and retired form there. He turned out to be a big figure in gerontology in sociology.

But I'll never forget that because I walked into his office and I said, "I want a minor in sociology." Streib said, "Let's talk a little bit and see what you know about sociology." So we talked for two or three minutes, and it's clear that I know nothing about sociology. After awhile he cuts me off and turns around, reaches into his bookshelf and grabs Broom and Selznick's *Introduction to Sociology*. It was the big textbook of the day. And he says, "I think you ought to start here." Gordon was a very nice guy, but, in other words, I knew nothing. I should start where a freshman starts. I had never taken a sociology course. So, that was kind of an important meeting.

D&D: Did you read the book?

Ritzer: Oh yeah, and I loved it. I loved the stuff and I became more and more oriented toward sociology. Even though I was in the ILR School, I took several graduate sociology courses in the sociology department. It was my minor. There were two key developments there. One was, I took Robin Williams' course. Williams was Parsons' student and a big figure in the sociology of the day. I think it was a course in American society and it had a lot of students in it. There was a term paper, and I was very anxious to prove myself in sociology. So I ended up writing on the UAW, the sociology of the UAW. I remember it was 102 pages long. I knew I didn't know much, but I knew even then that if I wrote a lot, even if there was nothing in there, people would be impressed. I was very eager to get the paper back, and when I got the paper back I leafed through every page. There's not a comment on any page, but at the end there is an A+ with a comment: "This is too long not to be good." That was a learning experience for me: dazzle them with length. It was clear that he hadn't read it, and I couldn't blame him.

D&D: You mentioned two key developments. What was the other?

Ritzer: Margaret Cussler was one of the early women in sociology. In fact, she taught at the University of Maryland. Anyhow, Cussler was a visiting professor in sociology at Cornell and I took her course. I think it was a social psychology course, but this was a small seminar with advanced graduate students, and I am very insecure. I mean, these people know a lot of sociology. I didn't know nearly as much as they did.

Anyhow, she had an assignment sheet in which she said "here are four things: two hundred pages from *Mind, Self, and Society*" and three or four comparable things like that. "Choose any one you want, and read it." Well, I was so insecure that I read them all. So, everybody else in the class is, naturally, reading one and I'm reading them all, and what I discovered was that I could operate at their level, in part, because I could outwork them. It was very important to me, that course. And she was very important to me (even though I ultimately ended up supporting those who felt that she did not deserve to be promoted, but that's another issue). That course was very important to me because it really proved that I could do sociology.

Then it came to doing my dissertation, and Harry Trice, who was very good at getting grants, got a big grant from the American Society for Personnel Administration to do a study of personnel administrators. We did a questionnaire study of personnel managers. I didn't know anything about questionnaire construction and Harry didn't know anything about it either, but we somehow constructed this questionnaire.

I had gotten interested in various sociological questions about role-conflict and commitment (based on an old theory of Howard Becker's, the side-bet theory of commitment), and so I built-in these questions. I dreamed them up. I even dreamed up a whole series of hypothetical cases about role-conflict to put in the questionnaire. Not that the Society for Personnel Administration was interested in this; I was interested in this for my dissertation! So we got five hundred people to fill out these questionnaires, responding to these hypothetical cases, and I wrote my dissertation out of that part of it.

Now comes the dissertation defense, which involves Harry Trice, Gordon Streib (from sociology), and George Brooks, my labor union guy. I defended and George Brooks is very hostile. His fundamental hostility came from the hypothetical character of the questions, because he was a real-world guy. He came out of the labor movement, and he's saying "this hypothetical stuff is nonsense, this isn't really the way you . . . ." I suspect he was right, but it turned out that he just had no sympathy for social sciences, especially for social science methodology. I don't think he really knew early on what kind of dissertation I was going to do. Anyway, I leave the room, and eventually I hear screaming going on, and I hear George Brooks saying, "There is no way I can pass this dissertation. There's no relationship to reality." I was out there a long time. I don't know if they simply outvoted him 2 to 1 or if he eventually decided to go along. Anyway, I successfully defended my dissertation, which, the next year, was published by the New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations as a book.

D&D: And so you're on your way. From Cornell to Tulane, and then onto Kansas before finally being named Professor of Sociology at the University of Maryland less than seven years after earning your Ph.D. That's unusual.

Ritzer: It was in some ways kind of undeserved, but had I stayed at Kansas they would have promoted me to full professor as well. But I was hired here [the University of Maryland, College Park] as a full professor and we came in '75. I was hired really on the basis of the draft of *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science*, which I think was the first thing that I done of any significance in the field of social theory. Everything else that I had done up to that point was visible in the sociology of work, which was my main area, but was not generally visible in sociological theory. So *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science* got me really, in draft form, the full professorships, and then that of course . . . That book opened up a lot of other doors for me from '75 on.

D&D: What doors did that book open? Where did your work in theory go from there?

I was very proud of that book, its application of Kuhn to sociology in general and to sociological theory in particular. It's identification of three major paradigms in the field was of some influence at the time both in and out of sociology. The book led me in three directions.

One was to deal with the problems created by the differences and conflicts between extant paradigms and to the creation of what a more integrated paradigm. That eventually became *Toward an Integrated Sociological Paradigm: The Search for an Exemplar and an Image of the Subject Matter* (1981). (By the way, it will come as a surprise to some who associate me with a Weberian perspective that the exemplar for this paradigm turned out to be the work of Karl Marx; I have always been a great admirer of the elegance and importance of Marx's theory.) That book led to the greatest disappointment of my academic life—it was "remaindered" by the publisher (Allyn and Bacon) almost immediately upon publication because of some change in the tax rules relating to the warehousing of books. Anyway, almost no one ever saw, let alone read, that book. I think the idea of an integrated paradigm was important and it certainly foreshadowed the grow-

ing importance through the 1980s and early 1990s of micro-macro and agency-structure integration. Relatedly, I wrote an essay in *Social Psychology Quarterly* in the early 1990s arguing we needed to supplement "methodological individualism" and "methodological holism" with a new orientation that I called "methodological relationism." I see more and more of the latter kind of work, although it is not dealt with under that rubric.

The work on paradigms led me more broadly into the area of metatheory and I wrote a great deal on that in the 1980s culminating in *Metatheorizing in Sociology* in 1991. I continue to think metatheorizing—theorizing about theory—is important—and I occasionally write essays in that area to this day. It is also part of the broader movement toward meta-analyses of all kinds within the social sciences. Social theorists are particularly likely to do work like this, but they are not always clear what they are doing and how it differs from theorizing about the social world. One of the things I did in *Metatheorizing* was to develop a typology of such work based on its objectives—a greater understanding of theory, a new theory, a new meta-(overarching) theory. There is a lot more that can and should be done in this area.

One other thing about all this abstract metatheorizing over about two decades was that it eventually led me to grow a bit tired of it and to dramatically alter the kind of theorizing I came to do after about 1990.

Finally, in terms of the directions taken after the publication of the multiple paradigm science book in 1975, I have to mention the various theory texts, most now in fifth, sixth, or seventh editions, that I began publishing in the 1980s. I wanted to clarify abstract and obscure theories for undergraduates and beginning graduate students (and in the process clarify a great deal for myself). Generations have learned their theory and prepared for Ph.D. comps using those texts. Over the years, I have revised those books often by learning and writing about new theories. For example, I have just finished a new chapter for the next edition of my *Classical Sociological Theory* text on Tocqueville. It was a real revelation reading his work systematically (as well as secondary sources on it). I think his work is greatly underappreciated; there is an important grand theory in it on the relationship between equality, centralization, and freedom. It anticipates a lot of important later work in theory (e.g., Foucault on "governmentality"), but it has been largely ignored as theory, even within the French tradition. Writing those texts has helped me learn a lot about theory. In addition, writing and revising such texts is not divorced from scholarly work—I have had many ideas as a result of work on those textbooks that led to scholarly papers. I have one in mind now on Tocqueville.

Of course, there is a whole other story to be told about much of my work in theory from 1990 forward.

D&D: Okay, let's get to that work. If *Sociology: A Multiple Paradigm Science* opened doors, *The McDonaldization of Society* knocked them down. When did you originate the idea?

Ritzer: Well, I got tired of writing books that nobody was buying. I wanted to move into an area where more people were reading what I was writing. I had in 1983 written an article on McDonaldization, but it had not been very successful in the sense that it disappeared into the ether like most of the things that I had done in academia. I think I gave a paper on it at the ASA meetings in 1991. The idea derived from Weber, the idea of hyper-rationality. If you combined Weber's four types of rationality and saw them as interactive, you would create a hyper-rational system. I thought that it was a really neat idea. I still think it's a good idea, although I never really went anywhere with it. What was interesting about it was that I presented that paper on a very illustrious panel. After-

wards, almost all of the discussion was on McDonaldization, which I had mentioned in passing in talking about hyper-rationality.

So, you want to know about writing the book? Well, pretty much directly after that ASA meeting I set about to write the book and basically, pretty much, used the framework that existed in the paper that I had written ten years earlier, and I think that there's a fair consistency in terms of the structure of that paper and the structure of the book. So it was a relatively easy book to write.

D&D: How long did it take you?

Ritzer: I'd say somewhere between six months and a year. It's increasingly hard for us, especially in the computer world, to say how long it takes to write a book, because when you've got infinite reviseability (you constantly go back and revise things), it's very hard to say how long you've spent on it.

Would one have had computers in '91, home computers? That might have been one of the first things that I did on a home computer. By the way, that revolutionized writing for me, the ability to not be constrained by a type-written manuscript!

In any case, I think a first draft took me about a year. There was a guy who was the editor at Lexington Books at the time, Paul O'Connell. I wanted to publish it as a trade book. I had an interest in this sort of public sociology and so I thought that this could be a trade book, a public book rather than an academic book. So I signed a contract with Lexington Books. Lexington had the capacity. We negotiated a contract where I believe there was a clause (which for them was a huge concession), where they committed $10,000 to advertising the book in the *New York Times, The New York Review of Books,* and *The Los Angeles Times.* It was very specific about what it was they were obligated to do. So, the book was written with that in mind, or at least my sense of what a trade book, a popular book, would be like, and that was where we were headed.

I think the book was about finished and about to go into production when Raytheon, which owned Lexington Books, sold Lexington Books to Free Press, and Paul O'Connell left. My contract was in limbo. So, then, I tried to deal with Free Press, and Free Press was headed by an infamous guy in publishing, Irwin Glickes, a very . . . kind of your sense of a very egotistical publisher, a very tough-minded guy. He simply would not move on the book, just sat on it, sat on it, and sat on it. A long period of time went on there, maybe a year, where he just refused to move. So, finally, he agreed to meet me in New York, and I went up to New York and we had one of these . . . . I would describe it as a New York Jewish confrontation. Glickes was trying to overwhelm me with his wit and sarcasm, his highly verbal nature and power. I come out of the same tradition, so I was giving as much as I was getting. We did this for awhile and, as I recall, he threw up his hands and said, "Okay, I give up. I see where you're coming from, and we'll work this out." (Parenthetically, he had had a major heart attack shortly before our meeting and had been advised to cut back on his work, but he obviously was as tough-minded and dedicated to his work as before. Shortly after this episode he died of a heart attack.)

But anyway, the upshot of that was he finally signed a release on the book. He didn't want to publish it. Free Press, by that time, had moved in a much more conservative direction. I think they published that Dinesh D'Souza book. D'Souza was a very conservative guy. He was a Dartmouth undergraduate at that point. In fact, when I was having this meeting with them in New York, somebody was walking back and forth; they were in the process of negotiating the paperback rights to the D'Souza book. A guy walks in and says, "We got $95,000." Glickes says, "Ask for more."

D&D: But *McDonaldization* wasn't published by Free Press. What did the new editor do?

Ritzer: I remember this vividly. I said to him at one point . . . . (You know, Free Press was, for example, Parsons' publisher.) I said something like, "Why did you desert sociology." He said, "I didn't desert sociology. Sociology deserted me!" He felt the quality was no longer there, but their ideologies had changed too.

In any case, I finally got the rights back from Free Press and I think we were approaching the ASA meetings in 1992. I had no publisher. I was back to square one and the manuscript was getting old. It had been ready to go. It was ready to go at Lexington and now it had sat around, in my recollection, something approaching a year. So I was pretty desperate by the time of the '92 meeting. That's when I ran into Steve Rutter.

Steve had been an editor at several presses and I knew him from those other jobs. He was starting this new Pine Forge imprint for Sage and he was looking for manuscripts. He was actually looking specifically for textbooks, but he was interested in whatever he could get at that point. He looked at the manuscript, liked it, and I know he got a lot of people to look at it. And he decided to take, what was for him, a big risk in terms of publishing the book.

D&D: Did things flow smoothly at that point?

Well, there occurred a very funny meeting at my old house here in Silver Spring. Steve Rutter came over and we were to negotiate the terms. I was insisting on the astounding sum of $5,000 as an advance, and Steve didn't want to give any advance at all. I said, "Look, I'm not going to do this unless you give me an advance." The conversation got more and more heated, and finally Steve got up and stormed out of my house and I thought that was the end of the negotiation.

Now the reason I was sort of playing hardball was that I had been told by McGraw-Hill that they were going to offer a contract on the book. I guess I felt, even though McGraw—Hill didn't usually publish this kind of stuff, at least they were a known commodity whereas Pine Forge was a new press. So I didn't really care that much that I might lose the Pine Forge contract if I was too tough in terms of negotiation. So, Steve stormed out and I said, "Well, I guess I'm going to have to do this with McGraw-Hill."

Literally, the next day, my editor from McGraw-Hill called me and said that his boss had vetoed the idea, that this was not their kind of book. I got off the phone and here I was back at the starting point again: I had no publisher. I had alienated Steve and McGraw—Hill was now out, so I'm thinking I have to start all over again. But the next day or so, Steve called. He was somewhere on the road in the south, and he said that he had reconsidered and would be willing to go with the $5,000 in advance. At that point, I would have done it for nothing or paid *him* money to publish the book! So, anyway, we then agreed to do the contract.

D&D: And the rest is history?

Ritzer: Well, we kind of made each other in the sense that the book made Pine Forge, and I think Pine Forge helped *McDonaldization* to succeed. One edition (I don't think it was the first edition), Steve got into guerilla marketing, and so at one ASA meeting he got these things to hang on the door of the hotel rooms which said, "Do not disturb, busy reading *The McDonaldization of Society*." What happened was a number of the cleaning staff came to these things and they thought, "Well, I guess I can't go in there." They sort of read it as the usual do not disturb sign. Pretty soon there were these huge protests all over the hotel because nobody's hotel room was clean. Then Steve got a call and he was in deep trouble with the hotel because . . . . (Everyone laughs).

Steve was great at that stuff. But he was also interested in ideas. Editors who are interested in ideas are just about gone. I remember the first editors that I ever signed with. They were scholars themselves. They were intellectuals themselves, and you talked ideas. Well, these days, editors rarely if ever read the books that they're signing or publishing. They rarely talk to you about ideas.

D&D: You've described the arch of your life and career, from New York and the Bronx High School for Science and City College, through Ann Arbor, Ford, and ILR at Cornell, to the early '90's and your self-conscious desire to write critical books for a reading public. Some have described you as an emergent critical theorist. Is that accurate?

Ritzer: Well, in the broadest sense I think that's right. If you pick up my work from the early 1990s on, that is, from *McDonaldization*, it's all critique . . . It's all really one book actually. It's all a book about what most worries me and irritates me in the world today. I don't think I have the sort of burning passion that a Mills or a Marx would have, but there is a sort of development in the social world that I find very troubling. I realize it's not like "the billion people who are starving in the world" or something like that. I understand where my focus stands. But for some reason this whole issue of consumer society and structures of consumer society, and what it is doing to us, that's where most of my critical attention has been drawn in the last 15 years.

D&D: Which is the case, maybe more than with any of your previous books, with *The Globalization and Nothing*.

Ritzer: Yeah, I'm just finishing up the second edition of *The Globalization and Nothing*. It has actually turned out to be a major revision of the book. My mindset remains very Weberian, though. You know, the whole iron cage imagery, and the whole issue of emptiness, and loss, is very central to me. Weber was in an era (which was true of Marx, too) in which it made sense to talk about production in those days, because that was the great change that was taking place in the social world. We hadn't yet entered the great era of consumption; therefore, the focus of the early economists on production was quite explicable. What's not explicable is in 2006 to focus on production or to focus exclusively on production. Related to that is this idea that I develop in *The Globalization of Nothing* about "loss amidst monumental abundance"; it's the same kind of frustration that Weber talks about at the end of *The Protestant Ethic*. This is another way of getting at what concerns me.

What I see when I look around me is obviously monumental abundance. The amount of stuff that exists and, for a large numbers of people is affordable (largely due to its being dumped on the American marketplace), is incredible. We live amidst monumental abundance, but what are we losing as a result of that? In terms of *The Globalization of Nothing*, it's the loss of "something."

This also relates to the question of whether one can derive gratification or satisfaction from consumption? My work points to the fact that is it is difficult, if not impossible, to do so. This also relates to my belief about social theory: it has to emanate from something you feel strongly about. I mean, there are a lot more important problems in the world than "consumption," namely, hunger or genocide in Darfur. But for some reason or other, I have been drawn to this problem, which is very much a problem of the developed and wealthy countries because the poorer countries in the world don't have monumental abundance; therefore, don't have the loss. In fact, in my terms, they're ironically doomed to "something."

D&D: So, let's say you're an emergent critical theorist, which isn't inconsistent with the fact that you've long held up Marx is the "exemplar" of integrated social theory. But

you seem decidedly more comfortable comparing yourself, tongue-in-cheek, to *Seinfeld*'s George Costanza than to a figure like Marx. But why *not* Marx or, better, why not Adorno? After all, Adorno wrote about Betty Boop, astrology columns, addressed himself on not rare occasion to mass audiences and cared about the same things that you care about.

Ritzer: Yeah, but he was much more philosophical, much better trained than I am, much stronger philosophically. I think the truth is, he came out of that European tradition (which is dying), of people who are classically trained, and for all intents and purposes, I'm self-trained. That would be my view of my own greatest limitation. On the other hand, the way I often get introduced is in terms of my ability to bring the most abstract of social theory to bear on the most mundane aspects of the social world, but I think somebody like Adorno, his reach is much greater than mine. What's impressive about those guys is their ability to go from the most abstract of philosophical ideas to, well, movies. I try to do that, but I don't think I have the reach that they do. I might have the reach down to the movies. (laughter)

D&D: Not movie-hero type heroes, perhaps, but do you have heroes? Do you have contemporaries who you truly admire?

Ritzer: That's a good question. I guess what I want to first say is that the heroes are dead or dying. But what popped into my mind is someone like Zygmunt Bauman, who I've got to know pretty well. He goes back to that European tradition of classical training, an incredible base in the history of knowledge and the history of philosophy, which, all the critical school people and the great classic theorists, they all had that. You don't see that in the United States, and I don't think you see it Europe anymore either. That style of scholarship is dying. It's hard for me to think of people who I think of as a hero today. I mean there are people whose work I like and dislike, but I don't know about the label hero.

D&D: But wouldn't it be the case that, if someone could take the content of the classical tradition and render it accessible, without losing the most important elements of the content, then such scholarship would stand a chance at inspiring social change?

Ritzer: I don't take myself or what I do that seriously. I do it because I like to do it. I do it because I love to do it. I do it because it's, to me, like carving or whittling. I like to produce the product. The project in itself is rewarding to me. I'd like it to have some kind of impact, but I almost never know what the impact is going to be. You have to remember that most of my books are not trade books; therefore, they do not get the kind of wide national distribution. I suspect that my books have more impact outside the United States than they do in the United States. For example, the Turkish publisher of *The McDonaldization* said that there had been a protest where they closed down a McDonalds, and many of the students involved in that had been students who had read *McDonaldization* in its Turkish translation.

I think that it's kind of a criticism of American academia, American sociology; and in part, it's a criticism of me (but that's another thing). In America, my books are seen as textbooks. They are books to be used in classes. Now, I try to have them framed in other ways but I've been mostly unsuccessful. But also, in self-criticism, that was the niche in which I discovered I could make a significant amount of money from my books, so I am culpable here.

But in Europe, I don't think my books are necessarily seen as textbooks. You're much more likely to see my books in bookshops in Europe and Asia than you are in an American bookshop. And, of course, there's the anti-intellectualism of the U.S., which limits what Americans will read. So, they will read Eric Schlosser's *Fast Food Nation*, which is

not a bad book (I find useful information in there), but they won't read my book. So, his book will sell millions and my book will sell a couple hundred thousand, which is quite substantial by academic standards but nothing in comparison to *Fast Food Nation*.

D&D: We'd better draw to a conclusion. Looking back, if you had to choose, would you rather see an intellectually coherent professional sociology or a sociology that somehow contributed to coherent social change?

Ritzer: I don't think sociology is or should be intellectually coherent. I think the efforts to make it coherent are misguided and doomed to failure. If sociology was coherent, I would be even more marginal than I am in the discipline. So I would say that it would be much more important . . . I mean, this goes to public sociology and work, and a lot of the issues that I have been involved in related to sociology . . .

D&D: But isn't your work in metatheory an effort to achieve coherence?

Ritzer: It was to make sense out of the incoherence of sociology. So, in a sense, it becomes a kind of ideal type. And, of course I was just doing it for myself, because I'm not trained as a sociologist, so I had to always make sense of it for myself and I . . . I mean, to me, one of the great ironies is, here I am in a position where I wasn't trained in the discipline but I have spent much of my life explaining the discipline to others.

Note

* The interviewers would like to thank Shannon Williams of the Department of Sociology at the University of Tennessee for his many hours of meticulous work transcribing four hours of recorded conversation.

Copyright of *American Sociologist* is the property of Transaction Publishers and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.