



Comment on Lightfoot

George Ritzer

Geoff Lightfoot's commentary is so personally offensive, so poorly done, and so wrong in so many ways and places, that my first inclination was to ignore it and let it die the rapid death it deserves. However, the more I thought about it, the more I decided that there are many things in the essay that cannot be left to stand without correction and clarification. The author needs to be called on many things. I call him on those things in this response even at the risk that such a response will only serve to bring more attention to his reprehensible piece of work.

I also think the journal needs to be admonished for allowing this commentary to be published in its present form. It is one thing to publish an academic critique of my work – in this case *The Globalization of Nothing* – but it is quite another thing to allow the author to use such a critique to criticize me so personally and to extend his critique to a wide range of things, many of which have nothing to do with the work in question. Below is an iteration of at least some of the things about which the author is wrong and/or wrong-headed.

1 – Most damningly, the author clearly does not understand my most fundamental theoretical concept – ‘nothing’ (and therefore ‘something’). If the author does not understand the most fundamental idea in the *Globalization of Nothing*, how seriously are we to take the rest of his critique? Early on, the author wonders whether one of my statements implies that I (“self”) and my “work and academic endeavour” are nothing. While this allows him to take a cheap shot at me, the author is so anxious to demean me that he demonstrates his ignorance of the meaning of nothing. Recall that nothing is defined as a social form that is centrally conceived, centrally controlled and lacking in distinctive content. Unless one assumes there is some malignant evil force out there (later the author does mention “dark forces”, but never states what they are) controlling me (my publisher? my university? the U.S.? capitalism? Darth Vader?), it is impossible for me and my work to be nothing. It may have its weaknesses, but it is mine, warts and all. That it is mine is clear in a series of consistent themes that run through all of my books of the same genre as *The Globalization of Nothing*. My work is, by definition, the opposite of nothing, it is something because it is indigenously (in this case, personally) conceived, controlled and rich in the distinctive content that informs all of my work.

Similarly, near the end of his diatribe, the author attacks the McDonaldization thesis (inappropriate in a critique of the *Globalization of Nothing*, but not in an all-out assault

on me and my work) for being “scarcely a local response” (something) and therefore being nothing. Why is the McDonaldization thesis nothing? Because it is “nearly as widely distributed as the eponymous restaurant”. While this allows the author another cheap shot (the analogy between a scholarly work and a restaurant chain), the fact that the book has sold well and widely has nothing to do with whether the thesis expressed in that book is nothing. Of course, on the contrary, it is the ultimate in that which is something, it was created by and is the unique product of a single individual. Once again, the author shows his lack of understanding of the central ideas of something and nothing.

It is also asserted that the “promulgations” of the McDonaldization thesis have made it nothing and have McDonaldized the McDonaldization thesis. Do original scholarly monographs and scholarly articles (to say nothing of edited volumes of analysis and critique [Alfino, Caputo and Wynyard, 1998; Smart, 1999]) on the McDonaldization of the church (Drane, 2001: 2007), higher education (Parker and Jary, 1995; Hayes and Wynyard, 2002), social work (Dustin, 2007), etc., make the thesis nothing (centrally conceived, etc.) or McDonaldize the thesis (make it more efficient, predictable, etc.)? I think not. Rather, the fact that other scholars have found the idea useful and applied it in a wide array of contexts demonstrates its strength and its broad applicability.

2 – The author appears not to understand the nature and function of a review of the literature. Much is made of my review of previous work on nothing. I am accused of “shamelessly comparing it [my ideas on nothing] to other luminaries who write about nothing”. It is sarcastically noted that I “carefully established [my] right to talk about nothing”. That is, of course, exactly what I was trying to do and that is the function of a review of the literature. Further, these ideas influenced my thinking – as previous work always does – in various positive and negative ways. Thus, the author suggests that there are “some problems with the originality of [my] work” because, for example, the ideas of my predecessors (e.g. Simmel) have “seeped” into my analysis. Well, of course they have and they should have. Theoretical ideas from my predecessors – Marx, Weber, Simmel, Baudrillard – have strongly influenced all of my work.

The author is apparently unaware of Isaac Newton’s (and Robert Merton’s) ideas on building on the ‘shoulders of giants’. I have explicitly built on the work of others in all my work – the McDonaldization thesis is built mainly on Weber’s theory of rationalization, thinking on the cathedrals of consumption on Weber and Baudrillard, work on credit cards on Simmel and his philosophy of money, etc. Even the idea of ‘globalization’ is developed on the basis of an analysis of the idea of ‘glocalization’, most often associated with Roland Robertson. Does the fact that they are built on the work of important predecessors make my work unoriginal? Perhaps, but the alternative would be to practice the ‘cerebral hygiene’ that characterized the work of Auguste Comte.

Guilty as charged! I did try to carefully establish my right to talk about nothing. I did build on the work of predecessors. Silly me! I thought that was sound scholarship.

3 – In a related attack later in the essay, the globalization of nothing is described as “recooked McDonaldization” This, like much else, is asserted and not explained. In

what ways does the later book recook McDonaldization? In fact, as I see it, the *Globalization of Nothing* is an effort to raise to a more general and more theoretical level my previous work on fast food restaurants, cathedrals of consumption, credit cards, etc. The ideas developed in that book overarch and extend my previous work.

4 – Interestingly, after seeming to accuse me of devoting too much attention to and being too dependent on, the work of my predecessors, the author then goes on to say “somewhat oddly for a sociologist of consumption, nothing is said of the many theorists who have ploughed this earthy furrow”. I’m damned if I don’t and damned if I do. The main goal of the author is damn me whatever I may do.

5 – My work is accused of being “part of the ‘unacceptable’ attempt to partition off ‘critical’ knowledge”. However, if my work is anything, it is critical... critical of McDonaldization, of the consumerism spawned by the cathedrals of consumption, of the hyper-indebtedness fed by credit cards, and most generally of the destruction of something by the globalization of nothing.

6 – The author uses the terms ‘good’ and ‘bad’ to describe various places and non-places. This is done without recognition of, and in spite of, my assertion (see p. 13 of the first edition of *The Globalization of Nothing*, and elsewhere) that: “nothing, as well as something, are ideal types that offer no evaluative judgment about the social world”. I further argue: “no overall value judgment needs to be made here – forms laden with content (something) are *not inherently better* than those devoid of content (nothing), or vice versa” (p. 140).

7 – The Abstract implies that the paper will deal with my use of a 2x2 matrix. However, that is not the focus of the paper and it is not dealt with until the closing section. Everything that precedes that final section is irrelevant to a critique of 2x2 tables (which seems to have much to do with some grievance against management thinkers). That critique, when it comes, seems to be little more than an excuse to excoriate me and my work in the preceding pages. The author is not content to critique *The Globalization of Nothing*, but uses the occasion to attack – quite inappropriately – many other aspects of my work and, most inappropriately, to attack me personally. Among the examples:

- a. It is implied that I am guilty of snobbery,¹ of McDonaldizing my own work, and of being greedy (“pursuit of the dollar”). I have never met this author (that I can recall) and he knows nothing about me as a person and certainly nothing about my motives. Why has this journal allowed this person to impugn my motives, without any evidence, in a journal ostensibly devoted to scholarly pursuits?
- b. Related to the latter is the author’s seeming obsession with the 5,000 pounds (it came up twice in his critique) I was supposedly paid to give my keynote address. First, he is wrong on the amount and he should not have reported, or been allowed to publish by this journal, a rumor (“allegedly”) about my fee. Secondly, whatever the amount, it has nothing to do with the scholarly merits of

1 I anticipated this critique and many others in the Appendix to the first edition of *The Globalization of Nothing*.

The Globalization of Nothing. Indeed, it has nothing at all to do with scholarship.

- c. The author fails to understand the nature of a keynote address in critiquing me for giving what appears to be the same address in Australia and in Manchester. (That he does not know this, but is surmising it, is clear when he says that my power points were “seemingly the same”.) First, unlike a paper at a conference, one is NOT expected to give an original paper in a keynote address. In fact, I am almost always asked to speak about my best-known work such as that on the globalization of nothing or McDonaldization. While it is not expected of me, I often make a strong effort to relate my talk to the themes of the conference.

Second, it is highly unlikely that those in the audience in Australia would have turned up in Manchester; the material was (largely) new to that audience.

Third, I cannot assume that any of my audiences, often in fields different from my own, had read my previous books and articles.

Fourth, and once again, all of this has nothing to do with the intellectual merits of *The Globalization of Nothing*, the ostensible concern of the essay under consideration here.

- d. The author indicts me for something that “crops up in the sales blurb”, but as any book author knows, such blurbs are written by the publisher’s marketing people and authors generally do not see such things until a book is published.

Enough! However, I can’t close without noting that the commentary in question is not only studded with innuendoes, but that much of what the author says is both elusive and allusive. As pointed out above, while some of the negativity is quite overt, much more of it is to be found just below the surface. I trust that there is no ambiguity about my distaste for virtually everything about this critique of me and my work.

references

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