ephemera ı reviews
theory & politics in organization

Disneyfying Disneyization

Philip Hancock

A refinement and extension of Bryman's previously published work on Disney theme parks and what he terms the process of Disneyization (see, for example, Bryman, 1995, 1999; Beardsworth and Bryman, 2001), *The Disneyization of Society* is a book clearly compiled for the introductory market and general reader or, as George Ritzer puts it in his cover endorsement, 'beginning students'. Owing much to Ritzer's own McDonald's flavoured vision of a rationalized social settlement (a fact readily acknowledged by Bryman himself), *Disneyization* is offered both as a description and diagnosis of the current trajectory of (post)industrialised societies – particularly with regards to the organisation of consumption both as an activity and a cultural logic.

As is often the case with such diagnoses of the contemporary condition, Bryman's argument centres on what he identifies to be four inter-related institutional practices each of which either individually, or at some level of combination, exemplify a process by which "*the principles* of the Disney theme parks are coming to dominate more and more sectors of American society as well as the rest of the world" (p.10, *emphasis original*). It must be noted straight away, however, that this in itself is something of an over-ambitious claim. For despite the book's title, rather than an account of fundamental social change, this is essentially a book about consumption and the proposition that the global organisation of consumption is increasingly conforming to a template provided by the practices and principles of the Disney theme parks. This is not to deny that potential changes in the realm of consumption (and indeed production) do not have consequences for social organisation – far from it. However, this is not a text that particularly demonstrates the nature of those potential changes outside its own relatively narrow sphere of interest.

Before I proceed to a critical commentary on the substance of the book, let me introduce you to these practices which Bryman argues are constitutive of a process of global Disneyization. The first of these, *theming*, is described and illustrated in the second chapter and refers to a mechanism directed at infusing objects with meaning above and beyond their immediate use or exchange value and, in doing so, creating experiential destinations rather than simply consumer outlets. This points, therefore, to the

preponderance of specific narratives or themes which are increasingly employed to provide coherence to a particular service or product *à la* Wild West theme parks, American style diners and even themed University halls of residence.

Next we are presented with what the author refers to as *hybrid-consumption*, the co-location of multiple consumption opportunities within a particular bounded space. A prominent illustration of this are the increasingly ubiquitous shopping malls with their combination of shops, restaurants, cinemas, amusement parks and even hotels and art galleries or, perhaps more bizarrely, sites such as hospitals where not only are health services provided but increasingly opportunities exist to take part in sport and other recreational activities as well as visit numerous shopping and dining outlets. Once again the importance of the destination is invoked here, as opportunities for hybrid-consumption convert the old fashioned afternoon at the shops into a fun-packed family experience or a trip to visit ill-relatives into the opportunity to have a swim and a pizza.

Related closely to such potential consumption practices is, Bryman argues, the importance of *merchandising*; the "promotion of goods in the form of or bearing copyright images and logos, including such products made under licence" (p.79). In this instance rather than destination it is 'synergy' which is identified as the underpinning principle of this particular process; that is, the mutual reinforcement of commodity visibility across product ranges as diverse as movies, fast foods, stationary and toiletries. As they used to say, see the movie and buy the t-shirt; which is today joined, or so it would seem, by wearing the pyjamas, waking up to the breakfast cereal, playing the video game, eating in the restaurant and so on. Interesting examples of this include the merchandising of people such as Princess Diana and the increasing importance UK universities are placing on income generated from merchandising activities – something I can personally identify with, having just witnessed around a fifth of my own institution's bookshop being given over to the sale of branded merchandise.

The fourth and final of these practices is identified as that of *performative labour*. This is, as Bryman notes, effectively a combination of what has been termed elsewhere emotional and aesthetic labour. Thus, employees of such Disneyized institutions are identified as frequently being expected to fulfil the role not only of service providers in the more traditional sense, but also of entertainers. Presentation of self is key to the 'successful' execution of this particular labour process, one underpinned by an ability to look, sound and feel right in the eyes of both employers and customers, by putting on an emotionally and more generally aesthetically pleasing show.

Now, as I noted at the outset of this review, *Disneyization* has clearly been written with an introductory market in mind. As such, it would be woefully easy (particularly in a journal such as *ephemera*) to denigrate it for what is an apparent lack of theoretical sophistication, imagination and sociological scholarship. Nevertheless, even an introductory contribution such as this is required to demonstrate something above and beyond a concern with narrative description, and this is a concern which the author appears, in this instance at least, to have overlooked. What strikes me first of all in this respect is the almost total absence of any meaningful attempt to make sense of a series of empirical observations within anything that one might recognise as the sociological tradition within which the book claims to be embedded.

After all, this is a self-professed piece of sociology that discusses commodification yet never mentions Marx; one that is, in part, beholden to the rationalisation thesis but omits Weber; concerns itself with surveillance and control in the workplace but sidesteps Foucault, and identifies the emergence of novel configurations of cultural production and manipulation but bypasses the Frankfurt School (amongst others). Nor is it a critical text as we might understand it. The author appears to pride himself in his social scientific objectivity; an objectivity that allows, for example, the siting of a Wild West themed McDonald's close to the location of the concentration camp at Dachau to pass completely without comment.

Without doubt this is a book that excels is in its ability to present, in a straightforward and immensely accessible style, a host of empirical illustrations of organisational locations at which one or more of these characteristics may be discerned. Page after page after page, of hotels, restaurants, theme parks and shopping malls – often condensed into simple lists – abound. But there, as one might suspect, 'is the rub'. For that is pretty much all one finds here, descriptions – many of which verge on, it has to be said, the banal.

In particular one cannot help notice that, despite the author's protestations that Disneyization must be understood as an organising principle that extends far beyond the actual realm of Disney and its various parks, practices and outlets, the bulk of the illustrations are examples taken from Disney theme parks; a somewhat tautological activity supplemented by what can in many instances only be described as the kind of bland description – most commonly of McDonalds, zoos, and other theme parks – that many an undergraduate is chided for.

This is not to say that some interesting historical observations and conceptual distinctions are not occasionally made along the way. For example, each chapter is at pains to detail certain historical antecedents to the practices the author then closely ties to the Disney corporation, while throughout the text he looks to make an important conceptual distinction between what is termed *structural* and *transferred* Disneyization – the latter referring to structural similarities between Disney and non-Disney organisations, the latter the direct and deliberate appropriation of them. Yet when it comes to the quality and sophistication of analysis and, more significantly, the case for extrapolation, we are frequently presented with the simplistic if not, as I have already suggested, the banal. Take as an illustration that which is offered as an explanation for why such theming, as discussed in Chapter Two, has become a significant element in the design of shopping malls

> Theming turns a mall from a neutral and otherwise potentially uninteresting group of shops into something of interest in its own right. In other words, in addition to differentiating itself from other malls, the themed mall becomes a *destination* in itself above and beyond being a place people want to visit and shop. (p.34, *emphasis original*)

Many more examples throughout the text display not only a similar vapidity but an attempt to extend the conceptual limits of Disneyization until they render it, if not meaningless, then most certainly inane. So while there is much to agree with in terms of observations about say, the spread of sites of hybrid-consumption and the increasing ubiquity of the themed consumer outlet, one has to question whether the overall power

of the case that is being made is assisted by, for instance, the inclusion of petrol stations within the list of current exemplars. Perhaps somewhat ironically given the technicolour subject he is writing about, even Bryman's photographic illustrations frequently appear unable to provide significant insight, seldom demonstrating any level of detail capable of substantiating the points they claim to be making (see, for example, Fig 4.1 on page 89).

Admittedly, the penultimate and final chapters do go some way towards addressing the obvious lack of theoretical or indeed even analytical content encountered thus far, but even here the attempt rarely exceeds the strictures of description and generalisation. Chapter Six is predominantly concerned with the existence of coercive control and surveillance which, according to Bryman, is necessary for the maintenance and stability of Disneyization. Yet while several types of potential control are identified ranging from control over consumer behaviour through the control of employees to that of the physical and cultural environment within which such Disneyized organisations operate, no effort is seemingly made to make sense of those underlying economic or political relations which render such activities necessary or institutionally desirable. Control is taken simply as enabling for the various institutions; even the issue of resistance by both employees and consumers is raised, but this is as far as it goes – Disneyization is posited as sufficient reason in itself, rather than as a potential element of larger socio-cultural reconfigurations.

Even the final chapter, which claims to explore Disneyization not only in relation to globalisation and the often posited dedifferentiation of culture and economy, but also the politics of anti-Disneyization, fails to inspire a more involved and convincing engagement from the author. Reiterating his belief (and extending Appadurai's (1990) terminology) that Disneyization represents a systemscape rather than a tightly defined set of practices or products – one directed towards the goal of "encouraging consumers to spend more than they would have done otherwise" (p.159) – he questions the proposition that Disneyization is in itself a globally homogenising force. Rather, Bryman seems to claim that if it does appear that way, it is only because consumers in various parts of the globe demand it (citing the apparent desire of Japanese visitors to Tokyo Disneyland for it to be an 'American' experience). Thus, it is a case of cultural diversity rather than centralisation as indigenous populations around the globe are granted the opportunity to sample an essentially alien culture – that of the USA.

Where this desire is not forthcoming, however, we are comforted by Bryman with the fact that what is more likely to occur is a process of 'glocalization' (Robertson, 1992) whereby local needs and conditions are met both in an anticipatory and responsive fashion as a response to the vagaries of local market demand. Here examples are once again listed such as the lifting of the alcohol ban at Disneyland Paris as well as the emergence of various themed restaurants that draw on vernacular narratives rather than imported ones.

Indeed, the author goes as far as to suggest that Disneyization not only allows such diversity, but indeed positively encourages it. For even though it is admitted that many of the institutional carriers of Disneyization, are themselves often "global brands and chains" (p.168) – he argues that not only are the local operations of such chains often

highly responsive to contextual conditions, but Disneyization is something that local producers and providers of services can apparently adopt without fundamentally affecting the localised qualities of the actual commodity or service itself. While the system may have originated in the USA, its institutional principles can, therefore, be translated into almost any market due to its inherent plurality, an outcome of the fact that as a system it is not reducible to any single product or theme.

Nevertheless, despite this somewhat positive appraisal of the capacity of Disneyization to promote a degree of cultural diversity in consumption practices, the final chapter presents us with what Bryman himself acknowledges is an attempt to "inject a more critical tone than is usually apparent in other chapters" (p.vii). Yet while such an endeavour is well taken, as with so much of this book, it manifests itself neither in the form of theoretical incisiveness or even self-righteous indignation, but rather in what is a somewhat cold and immensely derivative listing of potential objections; ranging from the manipulation of children to the destruction of the natural environment. Yet it is hard to remember at times that this book claims to be a sociological analysis of what is presented as a significant reassemablage of socio-economic practices and, ultimately, relations when issues such as the potential destruction of large swathes of the natural environment, the global exploitation of child labour and the widespread propagation of relations of social exclusion are reviewed over less than five pages of the entire 199 page text – C. Wright Mills would surely be turning in his grave.

Don't misunderstand me, I don't expect that every published text that concerns itself with the subject of global change, in whatever form it may be posited, should take up arms in the anti-corporate cause. My ultimate feeling about Bryman's work, however, is that it is just rather uninspiring sociology, lacking both theoretical depth or sophistication and, with an almost curious appeal to the romanticised ideal of the sociologist as scientific practitioner – the detached, honest seeker of facts – concerned only with bringing a kind of descriptive disembodied knowledge to the world.

And it is here that another irony raises its head for, not only is this an immensely bland book about a very colourful topic, it manages at the same time to take on a curiously Disneyfied quality of its own – note I said Disneyfied not Disneyized. Bryman is himself at pains to mark a clear distinction between the idea of Disneyfication and his own Disneyization thesis. For while his own concern is with describing a globally pervasive process of institutional isomorphism, Disneyfication he argues is a far more radical and, one gets the feeling that in the author's eyes less systematic, body of cultural criticism. One that focuses on the proposition that not only is the Disney corporation guilty of a systemic sanitisation and trivialisation of both a global cultural heritage as well as increasingly the everyday lives of people (particularly through its theme parks one might add), but that it has become an increasingly widespread phenomena across what Adorno (1991) once identified as the burgeoning culture industry.

Yet while Bryman explicitly rejects any identification with this position one cannot help but observe that in many respects this is a book that suits itself very well to criticism from this very position. For what Bryman appears to do is to take the dirty, messy and profoundly political activity of macro social analysis and reduce it to the detached

practice of the clinician. It re-imagines sociology's legacy in such a way as to render it inert, inoffensive and identical with a purely representationalist ideal of truth that has seldom ever existed. Equally, while issues such as the destruction of natural habitats, indigenous ways of life and the exploitation of child labour are briefly alluded to, these scary monsters are kept well controlled less they should frighten or upset the young and trusting student – unsettling their rosy view of an essentially benign Uncle Walt who, even beyond the grave is managing to make the world a more colourful and commodity rich place.

And just like the Disney canon, not only is this a work that is ultimately lacking in intellectual depth but one that, despite its accessibility, becomes increasingly enervating as one rapidly learns to anticipate the forthcoming content from page to page, list to list; each turn of the page increasingly diminishing any hope of critical insight or passionate engagement. This is not to say that passion was itself entirely absent from my reading of this book, for clearly there are interesting and important organisational issues contained here; issues which, somewhat annoyingly, deserved a far more rigorous treatment than they are accorded. For even if one may be quick to dismiss the actual term Disneyization as the product of a desire to inhabit a particular market niche – the concept provides at least one way of thinking about, and ultimately communicating, certain features associated with the current trajectory of global capitalism and its ongoing endeavours to penetrate ever deeper into the affective and aesthetic domain of everyday life in order to constantly renew its productive viability.

In conclusion then? Well, by all means adopt this book for teaching if you consider its broad subject matter appropriate. Indeed it somewhat pains me to admit that this may well prove to be a very popular book amongst much of today's student body. It undoubtedly provides a rich source of empirical illustrations not to mention attention grabbing anecdotes about a series of developments that resonate with many of the everyday experiences many of us will have had as producers, consumers and even academics. It is also incumbent, however, on those who do choose to employ Bryman's thesis to ensure that our students are also directed towards that body of literature and research which could genuinely enable us to start making sense of not only the context, but also the implications of such potential developments – whether Disneyized or not.

references

Adorno, T. (1991) *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, J. M. Bernstein (ed.). London: Routledge.

Appadurai, A. (1990) 'Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Political Economy', in M. Featherstone (ed.) *Global Culture: Nationalism, Globalization and Modernity*. London: Sage.

Beardsworth, A. and A. Bryman (2001) 'The Wild Animal in Late Modernity: The Case of the Disneyization of Zoos', *Tourist Studies*, 1(1): 83 -104.

Bryman, A. (1995) *Disney and his Worlds*. London: Routledge.

Bryman, A. (1999) 'The Disneyization of Society', *The Sociological Review*, 47(1): 25 – 47.

Robertson, R. (1992) *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture*. London: Sage.

the author

Philip Hancock is a lecturer in Organisation Studies at the University of Warwick
Address: WBS, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL, UK.
E-mail: philip.hancock@wbs.ac.uk