

# *The Founder*: Hollywood's love affair with Ray Kroc and McDonald's

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*Directed by John Lee Hancock; screenplay by Robert Siegel*

American filmmaker John Lee Hancock's *The Founder* is a biographical drama about Ray Kroc (1902-1984), known as the man who "founded" McDonald's, and how he transformed the fast food enterprise from a small San Bernardino, California hamburger stand into a global empire. Unduly impressed with the Kroc success story, however, the film approaches its tale in a narrowly focused and uncritical manner.

In mid-1950s America, Ray Kroc (Michael Keaton) is a traveling salesman from Illinois struggling to make a living. His latest job is pitching the multi-spindle milkshake mixer. Spending lonely nights in hotel rooms, consuming too much alcohol and listening to self-help albums, he periodically returns home to his disgruntled wife, Ethel (Laura Dern), whose patience is wearing thin after a series of Ray's failed projects.

When Kroc unexpectedly receives an order for six mixers—then eight—from a burger stand in San Bernardino (some 60 miles east of Los Angeles), he travels cross-country to meet the McDonald brothers—Maurice, or "Mac," (John Carroll Lynch) and Dick (Nick Offerman), whose operation is unlike any other. The brothers originally opened a barbecue and burger restaurant in San Bernardino in 1940, but realizing that the service was too slow, invented an ingenious system (inspired by Henry Ford's operations) to make and deliver to customers hamburgers in a matter of seconds.

Their method involves a pared-down menu, a specially designed kitchen, the elimination of wait staff and disposable paper wrapping. They describe their operation to Ray as a "symphony of efficiency." (Company manuals, according to a 2016 report, specify that workers are to spend 20 to 25 seconds on order taking, 12 to 16 seconds on assembly and 10 to 16 seconds on presentation.)

Recognizing the potential for such a business model, Ray wants to "franchise the damn thing." He tells the brothers to "do it for America... McDonald's can be the new American church—feeding bodies and feeding souls." As Ray attempts to turn McDonald's into a national phenomenon, he runs into increasing resistance from the brothers.

Fortuitously, financial wizard Harry Sonneborn (B.J. Novak) approaches Ray and proves to him that his fortune does not lie in selling hamburgers, but in buying the land on which the

McDonald's franchises will be located. From there, it's a short step to pushing the McDonald brothers out of the company.

*The Founder's* main asset is Keaton's performance. The appearance of the real Kroc in a clip during the closing credits is enough to convince the viewer that Keaton and presumably Dern are far more appealing and intriguing human beings than the personalities they reproduce. Desiring to elevate Kroc to the status of an American hero, albeit with a few warts, the filmmakers are determined to look no further than their noses.

The assembly line production of hamburgers, invented or developed by the McDonald brothers, helped launch the industrialization of the food service industry, one of whose major efficiencies involved the ability to use unskilled labor.

According to one commentator, "The success of McDonald's was due mainly to the application of industrial mass production to a people-intensive service production system whose Fordist aim was to produce a high volume of low-priced standard goods speedily and cheaply. As with the mass production of cars, the mass production of burgers is characterized by fragmented and simplified work tasks, single purpose machines organized in the form of an assembly line, and the use of standardized parts and products." (Stephen Edgell, *The Sociology of Work: Continuity and Change in Paid and Unpaid Work*)

Kroc's marketing of the system was able to take off due to changes in American economic life in the postwar period, including the growth of suburbs. (His first franchise was in Des Plaines, Illinois, a Chicago suburb.) In recent decades, the fast food industry has been able to take advantage of the fact that working Americans, men and women, have less and less time on their hands due to the long hours they work.

How much is there to celebrate here? That Walmart and McDonald's are the largest private employers in the US (General Motors is 23rd on the list), and that famously each employs more people than the American steel industry, is a symptom of historic economic decline. McDonald's is also one of the largest real estate companies in the world.

The movie's producers boast in the press notes that McDonald's will be "pleased when they see the movie." And why not? There is no mention of the corporation's rap sheet. A cursory glance reveals innumerable instances of the fast food

giant's malfeasance on a global scale. In fact, its most notorious is the creation of what have been termed "McJobs."

A 2013 report in *USA Today* noted that "McDonald's has been in the news recently for offering a budget calculator that employees can use to balance their income and expenses. The company provided a sample monthly budget that makes unrealistic assumptions such as employees working two jobs, paying just \$600 per month in rent and somehow finding health care insurance that costs just \$20 per month."

State-by-state disclosures in the US of companies with the most enrollees in Medicaid, a bare-bones US government health insurance program for the poor, and other government-funded programs, usually show McDonald's only being surpassed by Wal-Mart. In 2015, a staggering 52 percent of fast food workers in the US were on public assistance. The average wage at McDonald's was \$8.69 an hour, or \$18,075.20 a year (on the basis of a 40-hour week).

Before it was shut down by the company in 2013, McDonald's McResource web site "advised employees to break their food into smaller pieces to feel fuller, seek refunds for unopened holiday purchases, sell possessions online for quick cash, and to 'quit complaining' as 'stress hormone levels rise by 15 percent after ten minutes of complaining.'" (*ABC News*, 2013)

The filmmakers don't present an entirely flattering portrait of Kroc, but, according to the production notes, "believe that the story of Ray Kroc and the McDonald brothers will serve to humanize the ubiquitous global fast food chain. 'I think when people learn about the story behind McDonald's, that it will give the company a human feel that I think they've [McDonald's] lost in the past five decades,' producer Don Handfield observes."

In order to accomplish the unenviable task of providing McDonald's with a "human feel," the movie limits itself to the period between 1954 to 1961, long before the company's anti-worker practices became notorious.

The big businessman (or businesswoman) is an entirely appropriate subject for film, fiction or drama. In fact, the novel emerged as an art form with the rise of "prosaic" bourgeois society. English novelists examined the new social order and its personnel from the early 18th century onward. In the following century, Dickens, Thackeray, Balzac and others paid close attention to what the "great" figures in their society were up to, which often turned out to be criminality.

Already by 1873, in the US, Mark Twain (and his co-author) were looking at greed and corruption, in particular in relation to land speculation, in *The Gilded Age*. The era of the robber barons helped produce Frank Norris' *The Octopus: A California Story* (1901) and *The Pit* (1903), along with Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* (1906) and Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), which all, in one way or another, deal with the growth of modern big business and its consequences. In non-fiction, "muckraker" Ida Tarbell offered *The History of the Standard*

*Oil Company* (1904).

The tycoon as a personality and social type found remarkable expression in Theodore Dreiser's *The Financier* (1912) and *The Titan* (1914). F. Scott Fitzgerald treated the millionaire as gangster in *The Great Gatsby* (1925) and movie mogul in *The Last Tycoon* (unfinished, 1941).

American filmmaking produced its most trenchant portraits of American business and businessmen in the 1940s, many of them, not coincidentally, on the eve of the anti-Communist witch-hunt. Of course, one of the most well-known films in history, Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane*, depicted an American business magnate. (Welles looked at a global financier-criminal in *Mr. Arkadin*, 1955.) The late 1940s witnessed a number of the most critical and scintillating works, including Edgar G. Ulmer's *Ruthless* (1948), Abraham Polonsky's *Force of Evil* (1948) and Max Ophuls' *Caught* (1949).

The "business" movie of the 1950s was a bit duller and tamer, but still had some bite: *Executive Suite* (Robert Wise, 1954), *Woman's World* (Jean Negulesco, 1954), *Patterns* (Fielder Cook, with a story and screenplay by Rod Serling, 1956) and *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* (Nunnally Johnson, 1956). One could add films like Douglas Sirk's *Written on the Wind* (1956), about oil wealth, and Billy Wilder's satire of corporate corruption, *The Apartment* (1960).

Most if not all of these works took for granted, more or less, that "big business" and "profits" were dirty words in the eyes of the general public, or at least highly tainted ones. At any rate, none of the novelists or filmmakers in question, it can be safely said, conceived of themselves as acting as a liaison between a giant corporation and the population, with the goal of "humanizing" the former. That innovation had to wait for our day. With figures like Steve Jobs and Kroc out of the way (David Fincher's *The Social Network*, 2010, about Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg, had a more critical edge), how long will it be before we are served up Bill Gates, Warren Buffett or Jeff Bezos with "a human feel"?



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