

From the Chicago Tribune

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Part 1: The Supermarket.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT: SHOPPING RESTRAINT GOES INTO NOCTURNAL REMISSION

Last night I visited a Chicago supermarket.

I mention this because it was my first ever trip to an all-American grocery store, to a site that many Europeans see as the real realm of consumer culture, a burning hot spot of America's frenzied materialism.

I was in danger of losing my squeamish consumerist virginity. Sort of.

Let's get this right: Never in the last several decades have American and European consumer cultures resembled each other to such a great extent as now. The magic word is "globalization." As Americans, you buy and eat the same watery Holland tomatoes. Meanwhile a plethora of cereal brands recently have made it to European shop shelves and breakfast tables (where once they were nonexistent). We even share the same advertising. Always Coca-Cola. Everywhere.

I picked a Dominick's on Chicago's North Side as testing ground: a factory-size building surrounded by a huge parking lot. Its front was so unadorned I can't even remember exactly what it looked like. The inside of the store certainly was much more spacious and comfortable to walk through than most of the shops in Germany. But apart from that, the interior decoration is pretty much the same.

But there are still a few striking differences. For instance, your "buy-two-and-get-one-free" fever left me in one case with the problem of how to use all those extra containers of Basin Tub & Tile Cleaner. Moreover, America is apparently very much ahead in terms of cross marketing. I realized this when I spotted a "free video rental with Kraft grated Parmesan cheese." Perhaps for a cheesy film?

Many people in this country seem to be obsessed with creamy cakes, cookies and candies -- any of which could make a nutritionist faint. On the other hand, fat and calories appear to be major threats. I find the result pretty weird and tasteless: fat-free milk, fat-free yogurt or fat-free potato chips. After all it's a land of extremes.

Americans must always be on the saving side. They are trying hard to save money, calories -- and time. In the fruit and vegetable aisles of U.S. shops, tons of stuff comes already chopped, sliced and shredded. It was only there that I first came across baby-cut carrots. I wonder how Americans spend all that time they have saved buying ready-to-eat food.

Perhaps a great proportion of the spare time goes into the customer's decision process. At home I used to deal with only half a dozen types of chocolate bars, whereas here it is much trickier: I had problems counting them. That's the case with many products. One also can choose among 30 sausage brands. But you seem to have no choice whether you would like preservatives in your sausage or not. Says a fastidious German.

I still haven't mentioned the most exciting aspect of my supermarket experience. I indulged in what many Germans find bizarre, just incredible: I went shopping around midnight! Those who haven't been to the States can't figure out how you can keep supermarkets in America open 24 hours. In my home country, such a practice would call out the police force (plus our politically strong labor unions), or church representatives would march in protest.

It may well sound medieval: Due to strict German legislation, stores are faced with a fine up to \$28,000 if they open their doors on a Sunday. The labyrinthine shop-closing law imposes an overall shopping deadline at 8 p.m. (4 p.m. on Saturday) -- with a few exceptions such as at airports, train stations and gas stations. The 8 p.m. deadline rules and ruins people's daily planning.

Strolling late at night through an all-American store, I recalled some of the latest news from overseas: Recently thousands of Germans enjoyed shopping in a Berlin store unlawfully open on Sunday. If I had been there, I might have joined them.

September 28, 1999

Part 2: Watching joggers.
HIT THE GROUND RUNNING
CHICAGO VISITOR WILL HAVE LOTS TO JOG HIS MEMORY

Some evolutionary scientists claim our ancestors once wisely decided to climb off the trees, figuring they would be much better off walking. Apparently such theories don't account for the next step in evolution:

Americans started jogging.

Nowadays joggers are all over the place in this country. They were among the very first Chicagoans I noticed on my arrival to this city, and they keep following me at high speed and cross my way. They usually turn my morning walk to work into a duck and dodge down a slalom path. (Unfortunately I have the same trouble on my way home.)

Their great numbers make spotting American joggers a striking experience for me. (Full disclosure: I have never been a jogger, nor have hardly any of my German relatives or friends. But many people I have met in this country have been runners.)

However, quantity is only one aspect.

As a matter of fact, jogging seems to mean more than just man in motion; in the United States it comes as an entire lifestyle movement practiced mainly by merciless messengers of earnest eagerness.

Why else would Chicago students or business men and women rise as early as 5 a.m. to crowd the beach path between Ohio Street and North Avenue? I wonder why so many joggers don't mind running in dense car traffic where they can't help but take deep breaths of exhaust fumes. Some marathon wannabes even go for a sprint in the greatest midday summer heat.

Isn't sport supposed to be healthy?

American jogging is apparently not subject to convenience but to dogged dedication, if not to say addiction.

They don't care what they look like.

I can faintly remember the early '80s when the aerobics wave washed over to my continent. Somehow with it came this new sport that added another American word to German language: jogging. It never became that popular in Europe, though. Even numerous television news clips of an ambitiously jogging President Clinton couldn't boost its popularity.

It's not that Germans don't try to keep fit. We do. But if we are going to sweat, what's the point of doing it alone? Sports-loving Germans prefer running after a soccer ball to heading just nowhere and back.

I have always thought of America as a land of cars and riders. You know, those modern, steering-wheel kind of cowboys. Accordingly, a recent Berkeley study of national walking habits found that the average American walks barely 350 yards a day. How does that sit-and-ride behavior go with this nation's joggomania?

Interestingly, many Americans have a multipurpose approach to jogging. They combine it with taking out their dogs. You can watch mothers pushing a baby carriage with verve while being on the run. Pop star Madonna reportedly even snagged the eventual father of her daughter when she was jogging.

Well, if it really enhances the chance of bumping into Madonna, I might consider becoming a jogger.

September 29, 1999

PART 3: American Television.

READY, AIM, WATCH

A DAY OF AMERICAN TV: COURTROOMS, CRIME, COOKING

I got glued to a courtroom in Columbia, S.C.

Court TV endlessly covered the trial of a middle-aged female baby-sitter accused of two baby murders. The defendant seemed pale and apathetic. Camera zooms were often so tight to her face that viewers could notice every tiny jerk of her eyelashes.

Camera cuts to a slippery presenter who is smiling and sitting in a studio. "Under cross-examination," he boasts, "she seems to do fairly well." See you after the commercial break!

Well, no, thanks.

My dear colleagues at the Tribune had grinningly locked me into the TV critic's office to watch American cable television. All day, for the first time in my life. And one of the most offensive experiences, beside all the fun, was observing Court TV, where they put people in the pillory. It struck me because German law prohibits even taking photos during a hearing. It's treated as a serious privacy matter we still do not exploit commercially, just for entertainment.

After all, watching U.S. cable television can be pretty disturbing. It's not only the bearded guy rattling on about growing onions I spotted on Home and Garden TV. Seriously, it's the violence. I'm talking about all these shows that have "homicide" in their titles (or could, according to their content). Or take The History Channel's "History of Serial Killers." Are there any statistics on how many people are abused or massacred on U.S. television daily? Isn't there enough real life crime in the streets?

In fact, German programs also contain a lot of violent action. Crime, horror (and sex) sell everywhere. One of the tackiest German TV movies recently was called "Saskia, raped while being pregnant." But we don't have violent shows around the clock, including the supposedly family-friendly afternoon. A show like "Poltergeist--The Legacy" definitely wouldn't be on before 10 p.m. (and I saw it that day around 4 p.m.).

We share many of the U.S. programs: "ER" and "The X-Files" are big in Germany, also "The Simpsons" ("Futurama" is not yet out) and the notorious "Beverly Hills 90210." There are still many old shows around, such as "Dallas" or "Dynasty" (which is goofily named "Denver Clan" in Germany). All those shows are dubbed. It's funny to hear that the original Homer Simpson sounds even dopier.

Television is an excellent way to highlight cultural gaps. Regular Americans seem to feel much more comfortable and confident acting, especially entertaining, in front of a camera, whereas many Germans come out rather shy and stiff. "It's because at school they encourage us to speak up," a colleague tried to explain. "And because we watch so much television." Here we go.

I admit, it's senseless to search for sense in everything. But, who on earth needs 100 cable channels?

Until 1984 Germany lived in great television poverty. We had merely three -- yes, t-h-r-e-e -- channels, and one was evening-only. Nowadays, with cable and satellite broadcasting, there are about 30, including a few foreign channels. One-third is rather mainstream public television (still with the best news coverage) imposing a monthly \$15 license fee for TV owners. (Plus, a small though growing minority gains access to digital television, which offers nearly 100 channels.)

While Germans have to put up with similar epidemic junky talk shows (though not as lively as Jerry Springer), we lack most of the American special-interest networks. You know, that single-issue stuff where they show how to decorate wax candles and grow onions. Germans enjoy lots of cooking shows, yet not a complete Food Network (there I eventually learned "how to go easy on the garlic"). Consequently fitness machines are advertised during their breaks.

I loved the sophisticated History Channel, though it was showing the same black-and-white shots for ages about Berlin being laid in ruins and ashes in early 1945.

One of Germany's rare special-interest networks used to be a channel for women. Media tycoon Rupert Murdoch recently took it over. Now it's primarily showing top soccer games, which is perhaps most Germans' idea of an ideal television treat. Yours seems to be American football, baseball, boxing and, more surprisingly, wrestling. I didn't understand the wrestling rules, but I didn't mind, really. I'd rather go easy on garlic than watching these absurdly tough guys. They look like those kind of people you may spot again sometime--on Court TV.

September 30, 1999

PART 4: Rules.

THE LAND OF THE FREE *

* CERTAIN RESTRICTIONS MAY APPLY

Stepping into a Lincoln Park bar during my first week in Chicago, I was stopped by a beefy bouncer who demanded to see my identification. I thought that something had gone terribly wrong. Did he think I was an international fugitive pursued by Interpol?

No, I had just been introduced to America's puritanical side.

For Germans being "carded" is ridiculous, because we are never asked for our IDs before entering a bar. Underage drinking (which I certainly don't want to downplay) is not a big issue in Germany. Many people there don't even know for sure what the official drinking age is -- 16 for drinking beer and 18 for hard liquor.

But Americans don't seem to mind the rules. A female 30-something confided to me that she loves being carded at bars. She finds it flattering that others think she looks more than a decade younger.

For sure, this is a country that has generated many outstanding achievements such as the Bill of Rights, Manifest Destiny, "Super Size-able" burger menus and free refills. No wonder the national anthem repeatedly celebrates America as the "land of the free."

However, it's a land where you can feel free to be mothered, sometimes even patronized.

Undoubtedly, Germany has a tradition of pestering its citizens with rules, regulations and red tape. But this is less about controlling lifestyles than about keeping public order.

The story goes that Germans need a new license on basically any occasion, say, just for selling a few pairs of socks in a flea market. European Union bureaucracy is even worse. Cucumbers, for example, may be sold only if their shape and size suits the official EU cucumber standard.

But Europeans are loath to restrict lifestyle choices, such as smoking or should I say non-smoking. Americans have pushed smokers into the self-conscious margins of society. Because of tough smoking policies, people are compelled to loiter outside office buildings to have a cigarette. Not very cozy in winter, I assume. Smokers in Germany light up pretty much anywhere they choose, except in smoke-free areas, say, in restaurants, trains or offices.

Another issue for me is highway speed limits in America. They are vexatious, especially if you have to drive long distances in this vast country. (In fact, Germans are spoiled as there's no overall speed limit.) Moreover, before you even start (or stop) driving you can't just sit and rest without being annoyed by a insistent beep trying to get you to fasten your seatbelt, turn off the headlights or just go mad.

One thing that could also drive you crazy is trying to choose a table in an American cafe or restaurant.

The other day I was seated in a dim corner of a cafe, squatting at a tiny table narrowed by surrounding chairs. Half of the cafe was empty, but there was no way I might move to a nicer table. The other tables are for parties of several people, a waiter informed me. Nobody took them in the following hour. All I thought was: Good luck packing this place!

Finally, what strikes me in America are signs that seem to be everywhere, telling me how I should behave. In a restaurant they remind you to "limit your stay to 1 1/2 hours from the time your party was seated." Additionally, I learned that "table hopping and loitering in the aisles" (this is what usually makes my day!) is not permitted.

A German colleague also came across a restaurant sign demanding that he not indulge in "any loud or profane language" and, well, at one point he was ordered: "Don't spread diseases!" From my view all that these signs have in common is that they doubt people have any common sense.

Driving on a highway a friend noticed a sign saying, "Don't pick up hitchhikers. Prison Area!" OK, here's a sign you can use.

October 1, 1999

PART 5: Language.

LOST IN TRANSLATION

HOW AN IDIOM CAN MAKE A FOREIGNER FEEL LIKE AN IDIOT

On one occasion, I was trying to reach an elderly woman on the telephone. "Er, I'm sorry," said a voice, later identified as the woman's daughter. "I'm afraid she has passed away."

Passed away? No dictionary in sight. Passed away? I had a fairly good idea what it means to "pass" and "to be away." But what is it combined? It sounded like the elderly lady had just stepped out for a walk. To the grocery store perhaps.

"Well," I responded cheerfully, "when is she due to be back?"

Only since I arrived in America I have realized how much time I usually spend talking without having to think. All native speakers must do is use familiar words and phrases that make reasonable sense, more or less fit them into the correct grammar, and sound all right. But as a German among Americans, I often feel like a musician whose lifelong instrument has been stolen, leaving me with only a comb to play.

Like a lot of Germans I had to take English in school - in my case for some nine years. My textbooks preferred British English to the American version. The training kicked off with very basic phrases ("Hello, my name is Mr. Scott") and peaked with Shakespeare's sonnets.

I always felt my training was better suited to following a panel discussion with members of the British Shakespeare Society than to chatting with them afterwards in a bar. One of my few exposures to American English came from reading the lyrics to "California Dreamin'" by the Mamas & the Papas.

Should I blame the "passed away" confusion on some Americans' hesitation to use the plain (but perhaps painfully explicit) word "dead"? Maybe my mistake can be better attributed to a curious feature of American English.

Are Americans actually aware of the vast array of words and idioms they have available to them? The Oxford English Dictionary's 1989 edition contains 291,500 entries, more than twice the number of a German dictionary's 115,000-word standard. No wonder the Oxford Dictionary's complete 20-volume edition weighs 137 pounds.

It's hard to tell why English has so many words, more than any other language. Inventive writers such as Shakespeare should receive some credit. Perhaps credit also goes to the ostensible wordsmiths of America's product and entertainment industries -- songwriters, advertising brains and R&D wonks. They have a long history of fiddling with American English to make new products sound familiar and an old language sound hip. Thus a steady stream of new words.

Many Germans have adopted English expressions such as "kids," "fun" or "entertainment" because they sound snappier than our old words. Nowadays the German industry tries to give their products an American image. So we ended up calling cell phones "handies," which is neither English nor German.

English is notorious for having many idioms that can be devastating for beginners. Believe me, it's no piece of cake to learn what phrases like "piece of cake" mean.

A tiny and inconspicuous verb such as "set" can turn a conversation for me into a nightmare. According to the Oxford Dictionary, "set" has over 430 senses, producing some 60,000 words.

There are, it seems, endless sources of embarrassment. An American colleague once told me about a friend from France who was staying with her. "You live in such a homely place," her friend said.