

The Limits of Convenience

After returning from a recent visit to the U.S. — land of convenience — my life here seemed more laborious than that of my counterparts across the Atlantic. Chugging up a hill on my bicycle, I suddenly felt sorry for myself, grumbling, “I shouldn’t have to be doing this at my age.” Three weeks of exposure to the convenience sirens’ seductive cries: “drive-thru,” “24/7,” “no waiting,” “home delivery” had made me resent any activity that involved physical effort or extra time investment on my part. Convenient, according to my Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary, means “suited to personal comfort or to easy performance.” When I was growing up, I associated the word with kitchen gadgets and household appliances to make housewives’ lives easier. In the meantime it seems to have become something close to a God-given right of Americans, at least those who can afford it. For most Americans, having to walk further than 10 meters is an affront, unless of course you’ve driven somewhere to walk for fitness. I venture to guess that a direct link could be found between the rise of convenience as a cultural value and the increase in obesity.

On several occasions over the 19 years I have lived here, I have needed to refer to “convenience” to explain some aspect of American culture, e.g. what is appealing about McDonald’s or why a supermarket would stay open 24 hours a day. I quickly realized that there is no equivalent word in German. The closest I could get was “praktisch” (practical). I rejected “Bequemlichkeit” (comfort, indolence) because of its lazy undertone. Maybe I didn’t want to add to the prejudices against the U.S. or maybe I sensed that there are moral issues lurking underneath the surface.

When convenience foods were introduced here a couple of years ago, I noticed that Migros didn’t even try to find a German expression and simply called it “convenience food”, probably hoping that the inherent sexiness of English would counteract any resistance to the concept. Something French might have been a better choice. Sales of convenience food seem not to have not taken off as Migros had hoped. They have now launched a new gourmet convenience food line, prepared by well-known chefs and clearly declared as containing no preservatives. That was enough motivation for me to try a meal, but I won’t become a regular, because I love the process and results of my own cooking too much. Maybe they’ll have more luck with other consumers.

Convenience is, in fact, a founding principle of the Migros. When it began in 1925 and for decades thereafter, Migros sold its goods from vans which went from neighborhood to neighborhood, literally bringing the supermarket to the consumer. In addition, Migros introduced the idea of one-stop shopping and shopping in quantity: not quite wholesale (en gros), but halfway there, i.e. mi-gros. Although the idea was to make life easier, especially for housewives, it faced skepticism from the start. Not everyone regards saving time or money or labor as necessarily a good thing. This is, after all, the country that produced Calvin, and with him the Protestant work ethic. Work is still regarded as intrinsically good. And the belief in a labor of love is very much alive.

Many Swiss will not shop in a Coop or Migros because they prefer to support small local groceries where, even though the prices might be higher, the experience is more personal. The opponents of convenience also fear

that large chains will encroach on the charm of Swiss landscape and culture. They dread the worldwide spread of the garish anonymity of the American strip mall — those miles of chain stores and fast food restaurants, fronted by huge parking lots, that extend like tentacles from U.S. towns and cities.

While I do not shop at Marktplatz with a basket every day and wouldn't want to have to do so, I would feel a tremendous loss if it were no longer possible. Now that there's going to be a McDonald's at Marktplatz, we're one step closer to turning Marktplatz into a parking lot. That would certainly make shopping in the center of Basel more "convenient."