

Food & History

Volume 7 - n° 2 2009

Public Eating, Public Drinking
Places of Consumption from Early Modern to Postmodern Times

Edited by Marc R. Forster & Maren Möhring

The “Automat”

A History of Technological Transfer and the Process of Global
Standardization in Modern Fast Food around 1900

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Sonderdruck

Brepols Publishers n.v.
Turnhout, Belgium

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Abstract

The “Automat”, the first automatic restaurant world wide, opened its doors in Berlin in 1896. This article traces the history of its technological transfer around 1900 throughout both Europe and the US where it developed into the world’s largest restaurant chain (Horn & Hardart). In terms of technology, food and consumption practices, the Automat may be interpreted as not only an outcome but also a promoter of the global process of standardization. However, a closer look at the case study of the Automat shows how this process of standardization was interwoven with both the creation of new and the reconfirmation of existing local and national differences.

Keywords

*Automatic restaurants
Consumption practices
Fast food
Globalization
Help Yourself
Hidden labour
Standardization
Stollwerck Bros.
Technological transfer
Vending machines*

In June 2005, a new restaurant called “Automat” opened in London’s posh Mayfair district. Writing in *The Times Magazine*, journalist Giles Coren mused about the meaning of Automat – a word whose meaning he had “not known for the longest time without bothering to look it up”.¹ Recalling *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, he correctly assumed that it must have been some sort of automatic restaurant in the United States in Marilyn Monroe’s days (and a long time before that, too, as I intend to show). This association fitted in perfectly with the all-American food served at the London restaurant. When Coren first entered the Automat in Dover Street, however, he

¹ Giles COREN, “Automat”, *The Times Magazine*, 25 June 2005, pp.79–80.

found it “absolutely stunning, though by no means automatic.”² Instead of being invited to serve oneself – a typical feature of an automatic restaurant – waiters and waitresses were doing their best to offer good service. Wittingly or not, the name of this restaurant and its New York counterpart, which had opened only a few months earlier, harks back to a far older and obviously forgotten story of automatic restaurants in Europe and the United States around 1900.

In 1896, a newly founded limited company opened the doors of the first automatic restaurant in the world in Berlin. The company was aiming to profit from one of the most urgent problems in big cities of the time: rapidly feeding hundreds of thousands of male and female employees during their lunch hour. The company not only ran such fast food restaurants but also sold them fully equipped throughout Europe and the United States. The name of the restaurant and the company were identical: Both were called “Automat”. Automat was a joint venture between the Berlin engineer Max Sielaff, who had been inventing different types of slot machines for many years, and the largest European chocolate maker, the Cologne-based Gebrüder Stollwerck. Before World War I, Gebr. Stollwerck not only sold most of its products through vending machines, but also held shares in multiple, often international joint ventures in the field of coin-operated distribution. To sell their Automats, they also founded small international subsidiaries with powerful business partners and friends of the Stollwerck family such as William Lever.³ Thanks to the business archive of Gebr. Stollwerck,⁴ we can trace these manifold activities and plans to open restaurants in Belgium, France, Switzerland, South Africa and many other countries.⁵ Unfortunately, the files of most of the international subsidiaries have not been kept in the main business archive.⁶ Because small companies usually do not archive their files, fitting together the pieces of the puzzles that have survived in numerous places is a challenging task. The all-inclusive

² COREN, “Automat” . . . , p.79.

³ For further details on the history of the family business Gebr. Stollwerck, see Angelika EPPLE, *Stollwercks Schokolade und die Homogenisierung der Welt (1839–1932). Eine Unternehmensgeschichte als Mikrogeschichte der Globalisierung* (Frankfurt am Main, 2010 forthcoming); Angelika EPPLE, “Gebr. Stollwercks Aufstieg zum Multinational: Vertrauen und ‘Controlling’ in Köln, London, Wien und Poszony”, in C. HILLEN (ed.), *Erfolgsfaktor oder Risiko? Vertrauen in der Wirtschaftsgeschichte* (Köln, 2007), pp. 27–43.

⁴ Fortunately, the business archive of the Gebr. Stollwerck company has been transferred to the Rhineland-Westphalian Business Archive (RWWA) in Cologne (RWWA 208.).

⁵ Together with William Lever, the German “Automat G.m.b.H.”, Stollwerck Bros. (a London-based British subsidiary of the German Gebr. Stollwerck) and August Weill ran automatic restaurants in Liverpool and Manchester (Manfred KUSKE, *Ausführliche Firmengeschichte* (Köln, 1940), p. 418, RWWA RW 208–09.).

⁶ Until now, we know about them only through the business correspondence of the aforementioned companies addressing other business topics.

history of the automatic restaurant in Europe, the United States and South Africa still waits to be written. Here, I shall present only my current findings.

The difference between the Berlin Automat and its rebirth in London and New York more than one hundred years later could not be greater: One of its highly unique selling features around 1900 was that no waiters were to be seen in the guest room. The Automat of that time was – at first sight – operated by vending machines only. "You absolutely help yourself" was one of its most prominent marketing slogans. Moreover, the German prototype of the Automat was sold to many European cities, including Cardiff, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Copenhagen and even Paris. In New York, the Automat became the most famous restaurant chain daily serving more than 800,000 persons in its heyday.⁷ Curiously, however, it gained cult status in Philadelphia and New York – as *Gentlemen Prefer Blonds* and other films confirm – while it was never a success in other American cities. It is also very surprising that we know so little about its life cycles in European metropolises.

This leads me to the main questions in this article: Where did the Automat travel? How was it transformed and adapted? Where did it succeed and where did it fail? As far as the documentation allows, this article traces the history of the Automat produced, sold or run by the German limited company "Automat G.m.b.H.". My main sources are the Rhineland-Westphalian Business Archive (RWWA) in Cologne, the Robert F. Byrnes Collection of Automat Memorabilia (1912–1990s) in the New York Public Library (NYPL) and different newspapers. On the one hand, this article is the history of a technical transfer that investigates both its local adaptations and its transformations. On the other hand, it goes beyond a history of transfers and becomes a case study in the field of the history of modern fast food. The main research question is how far the transfer history of the fast food restaurant the Automat can be seen as an outcome and, at the same time, as a promoter of a process of global standardization of technology, food and consumption practices. By underlining local and national differences, the article tries to show how the process of global standardization combined with opposite trends to create distinctions within one specific society as well as between different national societies.

The case study begins with the Automat's forerunners: vending machines and the *Bar automatique* – a Parisian singularity run by Philippe Leoni, a business partner of Gebr. Stollwerck. It then plots the Automat's spread throughout Germany after the first automatic fast food restaurant opened in Berlin, before moving on to its successors in Philadelphia and New York, where the Horn & Hardart Company transformed the German prototype

⁷ Daniel COHEN, "For Food both cold and hot, put your nickels in the slot," *Smithsonian*, vol. 16, no. 10 (1986), p. 51.

and laid the foundation for its tremendous business success. I shall then contrast the history of the Automat with a Swedish "Automat": another type of automatic restaurant that worked on both similar and different lines. In the conclusion, I shall discuss the process of global standardization in terms of technology, food and consumption practices around 1900.

1. Forerunners of the Automat: Vending machines and soda fountains

Coin-operated devices were reputedly already in use 2000 years ago.⁸ But it was only with industrialization in the nineteenth century that they gained momentum as a viable vending option. According to Kerry Segrave, the first patent for a fully automatic vending machine went to Simeon Denham of Wakefield in Yorkshire, England, in 1857.⁹ After inserting a penny, the device delivered a stamp.¹⁰ Other hardware soon followed.

Even more important for the emergence of automatic restaurants was the development of vending machines capable of dispensing liquids. Since the mid-1840s, perfume makers in the United States, Great Britain and France had been trying to produce automatic vending machines for fluids. Philippe Leoni, for example, a successful perfume maker from Paris, was one of the leading professionals in this trade. The inventors had to solve various problems: It was one thing to make the automat deliver the same amount of liquid every time, but it was another matter to make it accept a coin that would trip the mechanism. It was not until the 1870s that the first vending machines appeared in England. Parceval Everitt was the most famous among the countless engineers who constructed visionary automatons. He developed a vending machine that supplied sweets after a coin had been dropped into a slot. From London and other large cities, these vending machines rapidly spread throughout Europe and the industrialized world. Coin-operated machines, their attendant technology and corresponding practices of selling, buying, consuming or entertaining became an important and constant stimulus for global standardization.

This was not an anonymous process, however, but one promoted by individuals. Probably, Ludwig Stollwerck heard of vending machines when travelling to England to visit the family friend and business partner

⁸ Nic COSTA, *The History of the Coin Machine* (London, 1988), p. 7; Kerry SEGRAVE, *Vending Machines. An American Social History* (Jefferson, NC/London, 2002), p. 3.

⁹ Kerry SEGRAVE, *Vending Machines* . . . , p. 5.

¹⁰ The genealogy of the vending machine and its corresponding practices has not yet been analyzed sufficiently. Depending on the national focus, either Britons, Americans or Germans appear to have been the first movers. In fact, it was a transnational development that should be studied as a history of technological transfer.

William Lever of the Lever Sunlight Company. Ludwig Stollwerck immediately recognized the potential of this new invention and convinced his brothers to buy a patent for the device. Because the Everitt patent proved to be too expensive, Stollwerck began negotiations with Max Sielaff, a creative inventor in Berlin who had also developed a vending machine that worked with coins inserted into a slot.¹¹ The German confectioners began selling samples of different chocolates through vending machines. What started as an innovative advertising idea then acquired a life of its own.¹² Surprisingly, consumers were so entranced by vending machines that within a few years, Stollwerck was selling the largest part of its production through these so-called "mute vendors". In 1895, Stollwerck and Max Sielaff together founded a new company dealing exclusively with vending machines.

In France it was Philippe Leoni who seems to have been the "first mover".¹³ He promoted the development of vending machines for liquids, and went beyond his original interest in selling perfume. Leoni had the striking idea of selling beverages of all kinds from vending machines. He was probably responsible for producing one of the world's first soda machines. Once developed, the mechanism allowed the selling of any kind of liquid: soft drinks, milk, water or alcohol.

The *Bar automatique* in Paris, Montmartre

After launching the *Société Française des Fontaines Populaires* in 1891, Philippe Leoni was the first to assemble a collection of various soda fountains to create what he called a *Bar automatique*. An advertising booklet claimed "visitors enter our Bar just as they would a shopping arcade, but without being observed or approached by anyone."¹⁴ The *Bar automatique* was thus presented as a place where people did not need to communicate with each other. However, the booklet features a picture of the Bar in which people indeed interact (Figure 1).

In the centre of the picture, we see a man leaning against a pillar. His clothes seem to be simpler than those of the men in the foreground. The picture thus shows the *Bar automatique* as a meeting point for people of different

¹¹ Brief historical review of Ludwig Stollwerck (1909), RWWA 208-243-7.

¹² See, for example, the essay "Etwas über automatische Verkaufs- und sonstige Apparate", (probably 1893), RWWA 208-278-2.

¹³ "Automatic distributor of perfumes", *Scientifique American*, no. 63 (14 February 1891), p. 388; Kerry SEGRAVE, *Vending Machines* . . . , p. 10.

¹⁴ Booklet published by the "Société Française des Fontaines Populaires", p.12, RWWA 208-277-3.



Fig. 1. Booklet of the "Société Française des Fontaines Populaires", p.12.
Source: RWWA 208–277–3.

social classes. Though dominated by male clients, it is also a place for women and children. The relaxed nature of the scene and the easy interactions among the socially diverse customers has a powerful effect: consumption becomes associated with liberty and equality.¹⁵ Customers or visitors can come in, help themselves to whatever they want and begin a conversation if they feel like it – the Bar appears as a site of casual communication. It is a public space that is also accessible to women and children, turning them, too, into consuming individuals. The picture in the brochure also alludes to a city's typical business, but only by showing a single worker on the right-hand side. It suggests that consumption and work represent separate spheres of everyday life.

2. The "Automat" in Imperial Germany and the emergence of modern "fast food"

Although Leoni's *Bar automatique* was a new invention, it was part of a broader transformation. Quick meals are certainly not a modern phenomenon. In all societies and at all times, there have been many reasons why people frequently

¹⁵ Michael Wildt cites equality, liberty and universality as the three promises of the market principle, see Michael Wildt, "Konsumbürger. Das Politische als Optionsfreiheit und Distinktion", in M. HETTLING, B. ULRICH (eds.), *Bürgertum nach 1945* (Hamburg, 2005), p. 274.

lacked the time for a leisurely meal. Even the vending of fast food in urban spaces has a long tradition that can be traced back to medieval times.¹⁶ In a stricter sense, however, "modern fast food" refers not merely to the lack of time but also to a habit of consuming food in a specific manner. Following food historian Derek J. Oddy, it is "eating without effort", it comes "without any of the traditional work that previously went into meal preparation and has hitherto universally formed part of food culture." Personally, I would even go further. The term "modern fast food" also promises a potential replication of ingredients, appearance, quantity, consistency, amount and, most importantly, of taste and touch. In this specific sense, "fast food" is synonymous with completely standardized foods and drinks. When we think of the famous fast food chains of today, the term is also associated with a certain ambience; and, last not least, fast food is usually self-service. Fast food in the stricter sense emerged in all metropolises of the industrialized world more or less simultaneously in the last decades of the nineteenth century.¹⁷

Modern fast food has become a metaphor for the process of globalization itself, because it seems to deliver evidence for a global standardization. When it comes to the early history of modern fast food, however, we have to question some much-loved stereotypes. First, it is far more difficult to speak of the US as *the* "Fast Food Nation".¹⁸ Modern fast food is not an American invention; its origins are ubiquitous. As the example in this article shows, automatic restaurants were of German origin. Furthermore, and contrary to Claude Fischler, I am convinced that the logic of Taylorism and Fordism was implemented in the catering system long before the McDonald brothers¹⁹ – not only in automatic restaurants, but in quick lunch rooms in general. Second, this leads me to believe that using the term "McDonaldization" to refer to an assumed rise of global standardization is a major misnomer.²⁰ In his anthology on the "Golden Arches East", the ethnologist J. L. Watson has already shown how diverse the functions

¹⁶ According to Martha Carlin, "the vending of fast food – that is hot, ready-to-eat food, not food cooked to order – in medieval English towns flourished primarily not to serve well-to-do residents or travellers but rather to serve the urban poor." See Martha CARLIN, "Fast Food and Urban Living Standards in Medieval England", in M. CARLIN and J. T. ROSENTHAL (eds.), *Food and Eating in Medieval Europe* (London, 1998), p. 27.

¹⁷ Following Adri Albert de la Bruhèze and Anneke H. van Otterloo, snacks and fast food may be characterized as "the icons of the modern industrial trend to eat quickly and easily". Adri Albert DE LA BRUHÈZE, Anneke H. VAN OTTERLOO, "Snacks and Snack Culture in the Rise of Eating Out in the Netherlands in the Twentieth Century", in M. JACOBS, P. SCHOLLIERS (eds.), *Eating Out in Europe. Picnics, Gourmet Dining and Snacks Since the Late Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2003), p. 318.

¹⁸ Eric SCHLOSSER, *Fast Food Nation. The Dark Side of the All-American Meal* (New York, 2002).

¹⁹ Claude FISCHLER, "La 'macdonaldisation' des mœurs", in J.-L. FLANDRIN, M. MONTANARI (eds.), *Histoire de l'Alimentation* (Paris, 1996), pp. 859–879, p. 871.

²⁰ George RITZER, *The McDonaldization of Society. An Investigation into the Changing Character of Contemporary Social Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA, 1996).

of McDonald's restaurants can be in different Asian societies.²¹ In this article, I shall add some historical arguments to challenge such a simple understanding of global standardization. It is neither equitable with Americanization nor is it a uniform process. The history of the automatic restaurants shows how a technological transfer promoted not only global standardizations but also new distinctions. The technology of vending machines provided a standardized framework within which culturally different preferences could develop. Customers on both sides of the Atlantic learned to expect a reproducible taste and an identical amount of food for an identical amount of coins inserted in a slot. There is no evidence, however, that the food being served on both sides of the ocean was the same. Furthermore, within only a very short time, the food being served in the American Automat gained national appeal. As I shall show in the following, it was supposed to designate a typical American way of eating.

Global standardization is a complex process. At the same time as it generates new distinctions, it is itself the result of a history of transfers. This is also true, as I shall show, for the early history of fast food in automatic restaurants. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, people in many cities increasingly needed to eat quickly. Not only social and cultural changes but also technological innovations were triggered by the new demands accompanying industrialization. Adel P. den Hartog points out convincingly that the role of food technology in the development of eating out has been overseen for far too long.²² Many people had to be fed in a hurry. Huge amounts of food had to be brought into town. Agriculture intensified and overseas trade expanded. Food preservation and, most importantly, an unbroken cooling chain or the introduction of tins, bottles and also frozen foods were all technical innovations making it possible to transport food over longer distances.²³ There were a number of reasons for this development, closely associated with the process of industrialization, and it would go far beyond the scope of this article to trace them in more detail. Generally speaking, the most important changes were the shift in family structures, longer commuting distances to work, the new social groups of employees and a general increase in travel.²⁴

²¹ J. L. WATSON (ed.), *Golden Arches East. McDonald's in East Asia* (Stanford, CA, 1997).

²² Adel P. DEN HARTOG, "Technological Innovation and Eating Out as a Mass Phenomenon in Europe", in M. JACOBS and P. SCHOLLIERS (eds.), *Eating Out in Europe ...*, p. 267.

²³ Derek J. ODDY, Lydia PETRÁNOVÁ, "Marketing Food in Britain, 1860–1939", in D. J. ODDY, L. PETRÁNOVÁ (eds.), *The Diffusion of Food Culture in Europe from the Late Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* (Praha, 2005), p. 238.

²⁴ This development has been described extensively. On changing food habits in Imperial Germany specifically, see Keith ALLEN, *Hungrige Metropole. Essen, Wohlfahrt und Kommerz in Berlin* (Hamburg, 2002); Hans-Jürgen TEUTEBERG, "The Rising Popularity of Dining Out in German Restaurants in the Aftermath of Modern Urbanization" in M. JACOBS, P. SCHOLLIERS (eds.), *Eating Out in Europe ...*, pp. 281–299. On changing food habits in the United States, see the classic study by Harvey LEVENSTEIN, *Paradox of Plenty. A Social History of Eating in Modern America* (New York/Oxford, 1993).

The response to these challenges differed from country to country. In the mid-1890s, Philipp Leoni met Max Sielaff, the aforementioned inventor from Berlin, who was now running the Deutsche Automatengesellschaft DAG (German Automat Company) together with Stollwerck Bros.²⁵ It was Sielaff's idea to put together several machines to dispense hot and cold drinks and vending machines for food. He thus created the first automatic buffet presented at the Berlin trade exhibition in 1896.²⁶ His display was a tremendous success, and this prompted him to open the first automatic restaurant in Berlin in cooperation with DAG only a few months later.²⁷ They gave this new type of restaurant a one-word name: Automat. Automat G.m.b.H. was also the name of the limited company under which the restaurant operated.

In this restaurant, several vending machines were combined to make up a single automat with a continuous counter. Marble and mirror ornaments gave the restaurant an air of luxury. Marble also possessed the practical advantage of being easy to clean. At first, the compartments of the automat contained sandwiches. Later, they offered warm meals as well. Dropping a coin into the slot opened the relevant compartment, allowing the customer to take out and consume the meal.

It is particularly noteworthy that visual perception played a major part in this process. The food behind the windows was visible *before* consumption. Visual cultures had been changing fundamentally over the course of the nineteenth century.²⁸ With a "scrutinizing glance", the customer could confirm the quality of the food.²⁹ The Aschinger restaurant chain, the major rival to the automatic restaurants in Berlin, was also concerned with ensuring that customers could see their meals through the window display.³⁰ Visual perception was connected to the general discourse on hygiene, with the visibility of meals guaranteeing that they met the required hygienic standards. Contemporary advertisements for the Berlin automatic restaurant associated hygiene with luxury. The presentation of the restaurant in Berlin differed from that of the *Bar automatique* in Paris: A postcard from 1897 shows the interior with just one single customer who does not seem to be interested in communicating.³¹ He stands at a table, alone, but not lonely.

²⁵ RWWA 208-411-8.

²⁶ RWWA 208-F2063 - F2064.

²⁷ RWWA 208-F5725 - F5726.

²⁸ Window displays can be interpreted as an outcome of this development, see Nina SCHLEIF, *SchaufensterKunst. Berlin und New York* (Köln, 2004).

²⁹ On the growing importance of visibility as a criterion of truth in the life sciences, see Ute PLANERT, "Der dreifache Körper des Volkes. Sexualität, Biopolitik und die Wissenschaft vom Leben", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vol. 26 (2000), pp. 539-576; Philipp SARASIN, "Die Visualisierung des Feindes. Über metaphorische Technologien der frühen Bakteriologie", *Geschichte und Gesellschaft*, vol. 30 (2004), pp. 250-276.

³⁰ Keith ALLEN, *Hungry Metropole ...*, p.13.

³¹ Reproduced in John VITALE, "When Automatic Restaurants were New", *Vend*, 15 July 1963, p. 40.

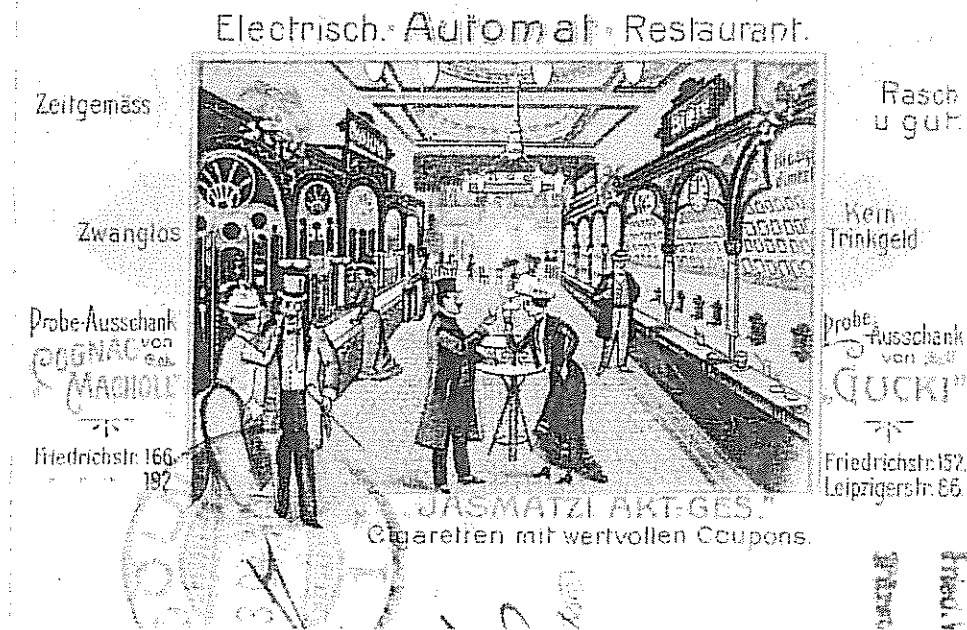


Fig. 2. Postcard (sent 1904), self-published by "Automat G.m.b.H.", Berlin. Source: Private collection.

In contrast to the *Bar automatique*, the restaurant was not presented as a space of casual and accidental communication. The male customer's only interest was in fulfilling a need quickly. We are thus shown a self-reliant, independent citizen demonstrating his autonomy in a positive sense: he is feeding himself – a slogan on the wall reads "*Bediene dich selbst*" ("Help yourself"), the new imperative of the age. Nonetheless, this businesslike conception of the first Automat seems to have been a failure. The first Automat in Berlin's Friedrichstraße closed after only a few months, reopening shortly thereafter in different locations in the city in quick succession.³² A later postcard shows a new presentation of the very same interior (Figure 2).

Through an illustration framed by text, the Automat G.m.b.H. wanted to make sure that tourists or other customers unfamiliar with the Automat concept would understand the purpose of this new type of restaurant: The recipient of the postcard sees two middle-class couples enjoying themselves over a drink. In the middle ground, two individuals use the self-service facilities; and in the background, the restaurant probably merges with a shopping arcade. The words framing the image read "up-to-date", "casual", "quick and good", "no tipping". Although this restaurant again links up with the French *Bar automatique*, it presents itself more as the pleasant culmination of a shopping expedition than a quick lunch for the hungry clerks of the growing metropolis Berlin. One should bear in mind that the picture was intended more as an

³² See RWWA 208-F5725 – F5726.



Fig. 3. Postcard (sent 1911), published by Globus. Source: Private collection.

advertisement than as an effort to illustrate reality. Further research is needed if we wish to learn more about the actual customers.³³

At present, I shall assume that ultimately, the automatic restaurants of Imperial Germany were places for men and that the advertisement for the Berlin Automat showing mixed-gender couples represented wishful thinking on the part of the operating company. The Automat G.m.b.H. sold many restaurants of this type all over Germany. A postcard of the local Automat in Chemnitz, for example, run by a Rudolf Gerecke, shows only men waiting for the restaurant to open (Figure 3).³⁴

The Automat had marked similarities with modern franchise chains.³⁵ The Chemnitz owner promoted his restaurant using the words already familiar to us from the Berlin-based Automat G.m.b.H. Above the display window, pedestrians could read "Help yourself!", "Quick and good", "Casual". A glance at the interior reveals the similarity of the Automats even more strikingly (Figure 4).

³³ There are very few scholarly studies on the early automatic restaurants. See, for example, Alec SHULDINER, *Trapped Behind the Automat. Technological Systems and the American Restaurant, 1902–1991* (Ann Arbor, 2001); Karl GRATZER, "The Making of a New Industry – the Introduction of Fast Food in Sweden", in B. JOHANNISSON, H. LANDSTRÖM (eds.), *Images of Entrepreneurship and Small Business* (Lund, 1999), pp. 82–114.

³⁴ The Automat G.m.b.H. sold a number of automatic restaurants to buyers in different German cities in the fiscal year beginning on 1 June 1903 and ending on 30 May 1904, including the one in Chemnitz. At 46,000 Marks, the price was relatively high. See RWWA 208–288–1.

³⁵ At first, Stollwerck Bros. rented vending machines to interested barkeepers. For economic reasons, they changed this practice in the 1890s, and from then on they only sold them. This is why I assume that all Automats were sold rather than rented. The RWWA holdings contain many bills for complete equipment. Although it was not actually a franchise system in the economic sense, it already anticipated essential attributes of that system.

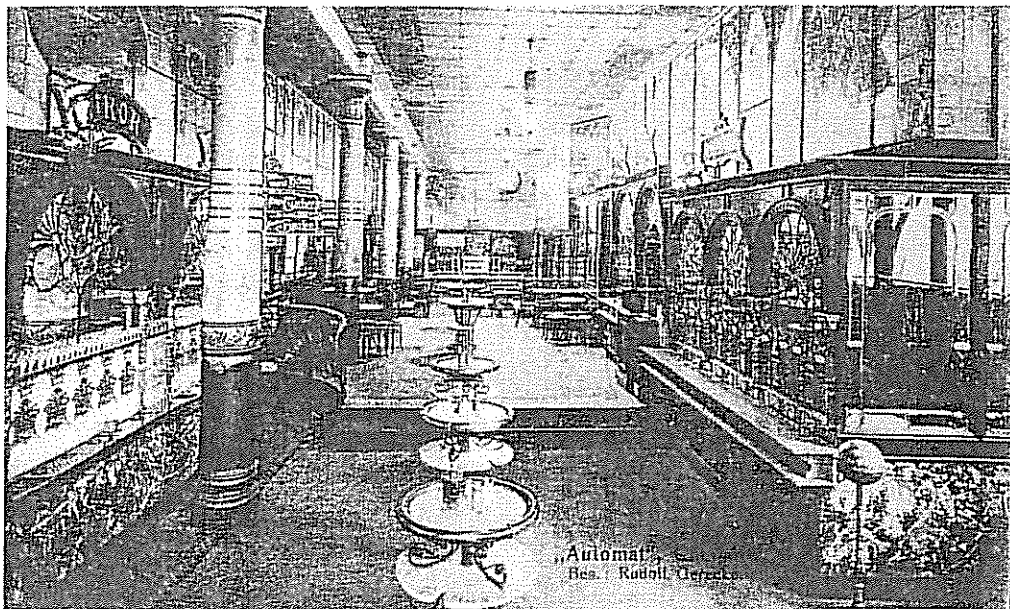


Fig. 4. Postcard (sent 1919). Source: Private collection

The picture's date is uncertain. We only know that the postcard was sent in December 1919. A comparison with pictures of the first Automat in Berlin reveals that the vending machines we see here are part of the very first generation of Automats produced by the Automat G.m.b.H., the subsidiary of Stollwerck Bros. with Max Sielaff in the first decade of the century.³⁶ The technological transfer within Germany was accompanied by a standardization of the food sold through vending machines as well as a standardization of consumer practices. As far as the plans of new restaurants show, the food on offer was more or less the same. The identical marketing slogans and the similar interior support the suggestion that the Automat G.m.b.H. was already targeting its restaurant concept on travelling salespersons and maybe also tourists. The company took advantage of Gebr. Stollwerck's experience with brand recognition features. Nonetheless, it is hard to say whether the Automat actually worked as a "brand" in Imperial Germany. Further research will be needed to answer this question. In Philadelphia and New York, however, the Automat definitely became a brand name.

3. The Automat goes American

At the same time as businessmen in Paris and Berlin were creating new automatic restaurants and comparable establishments, a similar development was taking place in the growing cities in North America. The tertiary sector of the economy was expanding much faster than in France or Germany. As a result, more and more female clerks and employees needed places to have a quick

³⁶ See, for example, the picture of the first Automat in Berlin, in *Vend*, 15 July 1963, p. 40.

lunch,³⁷ and restaurant owners responded to this need. Everywhere, cafeterias and so-called quick-lunch rooms sprang up like mushrooms. John Hardart and Joseph Horn, for example, opened a cafeteria in Philadelphia.³⁸

Joseph Horn became acquainted with Max Sielaff's first automatic restaurant in Berlin during one of his trips to the German capital.³⁹ Horn was deeply impressed. He decided that the Automat responded perfectly to the needs of his American customers, and he ordered a number of completely equipped restaurants of this kind.⁴⁰

Joseph V. Horn's autobiography *Then and Now* features a picture of the first automatic restaurant in the United States from 1902.⁴¹ We can see the same image on the following postcard from 1910 (Figure 5).

It shows a very similar communicative space to that in the Berlin and Chemnitz models. Everything has been retained: the clear focus on hygiene, the luxurious décor and the visibility of the food. The first Automat sent across the Atlantic was lost in a shipwreck off the Irish coast, and Stollwerck Bros. and Max Sielaff had to send a complete second set of equipment.⁴² In 1902, under the personal supervision of Max Sielaff, this second set was assembled as the first Automat in Philadelphia at a price of 37,000 Marks with no extra charges.⁴³ The postcard's claim to show the "Largest Automatic Restaurant in the World" was exaggerated. A brief comparison with the contemporary Automat in Chemnitz reveals that the latter was far bigger.

Nonetheless, the postcard documents the first steps in the Americanization of the Automat. Although neither the technology nor the appearance had been changed, the postcard reveals striking departures from the German prototype. Instead of technological or aesthetic differences, we find a shift in the social and cultural context. The fact that the postcard also shows a female next to a male customer may be only a subtle hint that this restaurant worked along different lines in the United States. There are many pictures of German Automats with no female customers. When we do see women, for example, in Berlin's reopened Automat, they appear to be not on their lunch breaks, but rather relaxing after a shopping

³⁷ It was not so much the increase in the number of women working outside the home as the shifts in the kinds of jobs they held that made the difference, see Harvey LEVENSTEIN, *Revolution at the Table. The Transformation of the American Diet* (New York/ Oxford, 1988), p. 161.

³⁸ Lorraine B. DIEHL, Marianne HARDART, *The Automat. The History, Recipes, and Allure of Horn & Hardart's Masterpiece* (New York, 2002), p. 21.

³⁹ See "Organizational History" in Robert F. Byrnes Collection of Automat Memorabilia (1912–1990s), NYPL.

⁴⁰ RWWA 208–285–7.

⁴¹ Joseph V. HORN, *Then and Now* (Philadelphia, 1937), see: Horn and Hardart Records, 1921–2001, Archives Center, National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution.

⁴² Lorraine B. DIEHL and Marianne HARDART, *The Automat ...*, p. 28.

⁴³ The installation of the complete Automat by German engineers was included in the purchase price, see RWWA 208–285–7.



Fig. 5. Postcard (sent in 1910), Automat in Philadelphia. Source: Private collection.

expedition. In the United States, in contrast, the automatic restaurant particularly appealed to women clerks, enabling them to have a hot meal in a public space.⁴⁴

The appearance of an African-American in the background of the picture points even more clearly to a different social context to that in Imperial Germany or France: It shows that the rules of inclusion and exclusion in East Coast American society differed from those applied in Berlin or Paris. Around the turn of the century, there were usually no African-Americans or visible immigrants in the restaurant interiors.⁴⁵ The only task considered appropriate for them was washing up. The man in the picture seems to be doing just this, but only after he has collected the dirty dishes. Thus, the only legitimate place for African-Americans was in the kitchen. While the technical side and the décor of the Automat were initially the same in Germany and the United States, the social contexts were very different – a fact that is also supported by the varying advertising strategies.

⁴⁴ This was true not only for the automatic restaurants, but also for all kinds of “luncheonettes” or “soda fountains”. Harvey Levenstein rightly stresses the role of Prohibition in this context. It brought women into former saloons that had previously been off-limits to them, and also encouraged men to frequent “tea-rooms”. See Harvey LEVENSTEIN, *Revolution at the Table...*, p.187.

⁴⁵ For the Automat, this remained true until at least the 1950s, see “Organizational History”, The Robert F. Byrnes Collection.

The first Automat, opened by Mr. Horn and his partner Mr. Hardart in Philadelphia on the 9th of June 1902, was announced in the local *Philadelphia Item* as the "new idea Lunch Room".⁴⁶ Around the turn of the century, lunchrooms of different kinds were already well established in North American cities. Almost every major US city boasted quick lunchrooms intended to meet the increasing need to consume meals on the run. Thus, the Automat was just a *new idea* lunchroom.

For example, since the 1880s a Swedish-born resident of Chicago had been running a "smörgåsbord" (essentially a sandwich buffet) to satisfy his customers' "quick hunger", and also offering hot coffee. According to the food historian Harvey Levenstein, the Swede invented a fancy name for his idea of a restaurant by adding the ending "-teria" to the Spanish word "café". In the years that followed, the American word "cafeteria" became the common name for this kind of "quick-lunch room". Horn & Hardart's Automats later became famous as so-called quick-lunch rooms cafeteria style. The *Philadelphia Item* advertisement of 1902 tells of the advantages claimed by the Automat within this North American context: "you absolutely help yourself, no waiting or delay, you see what you want and get it immediately." Thus alongside the boons of complete self-service and speed, the advertisement stressed the importance of visual perception: "... you see what you want ...".⁴⁷

Before the Food and Drugs Act was passed in 1906, hygiene was a highly explosive and hotly debated public issue in New York, and proved to be one of the main factors in the success of the automatic restaurants in both Philadelphia and, later, New York.⁴⁸ They experienced a major boom in the 1920s. In Imperial Germany, too, the Automats were on the rise. Before World War I, there were 125 automatic restaurants in Germany alone. However, with the start of the war their importance waned.

The Automat took a different path in Philadelphia and New York. Documents in the Rhineland-Westphalian Business Archive show that Stollwerck Bros. sold Automats not just to Horn & Hardart but also to August Weil of New York. To be precise, Weil bought four Automats at that time.⁴⁹ When the first of its kind opened on Broadway in 1902, an enthusiastic journalist wrote, "The wonder is that this idea is not of American, but of German origin."⁵⁰ In order to cope with the startling fact of the Automat's German

⁴⁶ This date is confirmed by various advertisements in the *Philadelphia Item* (see *Philadelphia Item*, 7 June 1902, p. 8 and morning edition, 9 June 1902, pp. 17 and 23.). Most books and articles on Horn & Hardart confuse the dates; see, for example, Mary Anne EVES, "The Return of the Automat", in *Foundation for Architecture Philadelphia Guidelines*, 2/2001, p. 1–6.

⁴⁷ *Philadelphia Item*, 6 June 1902.

⁴⁸ For the discussion on hygiene and the Pure Food Act, see Lorine Swainston GOODWIN, *The Pure Food, Drink, and Drug Crusaders, 1879–1914* (Jefferson, NC, 1999).

⁴⁹ RWVA 208–285–7.

⁵⁰ "The Automatic Restaurant", *Scientific American*, no. 84 (July 1903), p. 49.

roots, the author of the article offered alleged points of distinction between the German and American versions. Admittedly, he wrote, they were on the whole fairly similar: "It [the American Automat] is fitted up much more elaborately, however. Its electric lights, its dazzling mirrors, and its resplendent marble outshine everything on Broadway."⁵¹ It is curious that the author explicitly mentions electric lights, mirrors and marble as making the restaurant particularly American, since all of these elements belonged to the typical interior of the German automatic restaurants. This observation stresses the fact that the technological transfer definitely was accompanied by a process of standardization. The visual evidence is striking. Nevertheless, this process of standardization was obscured by perfusing the automatic restaurant and modern fast food practices in general with specific national meanings.

Even though Weil probably opened the first Automat in New York, it was the Horn & Hardart Company that dominated the business after their expansion into New York. It is noteworthy that the enormous success of the Horn & Hardart Automats in Philadelphia and New York essentially depended on certain transformations of the restaurant's presentation and technological side.

A look at the interior of a Horn & Hardart Automat on Broadway (Figure 6) in the 1920s immediately reveals the changes that this type of restaurant had undergone since its launch in Philadelphia at the beginning of the century: As in Paris in the 1890s, we see an interior that invites us to join in a casual conversation. The food is still displayed and sold in compartments. In his thesis on Horn & Hardart's automatic restaurants, Alec Shuldiner almost blends out the European background of the Automat and errs about its origin. He could not know about the Stollwerck archive that had not yet been opened to the public at that time. However, he rightly points out that what has changed is the outward appearance of the automat itself: It is far larger, offers more products and choice, and coffee has become its central feature.⁵² It has a less luxurious air, although even in the 1920s, we still see some resemblance to the original German prototype with its *Art Nouveau* elements.

The transformation of the Automat imported from Germany into a typical American phenomenon of presumed American origin, however, had occurred within a much shorter time period. As early as 1910, a *Washington Post* article noted, "The automat was born in New York [but it never made great success in America]. It was exported to Germany, and there it has flourished like a green bay tree. It appears that the Germans have an idea that Americans never eat except the food and drink be served by a slot machine."⁵³

⁵¹ "The Automatic Restaurant ...", p. 49.

⁵² Alec SHULDINER, *Trapped Behind the Automat ...*, p. 37.

⁵³ Frederic J. HASKIN, "Quick Lunch Rooms", *The Washington Post*, 29 March 1910, p. 11.

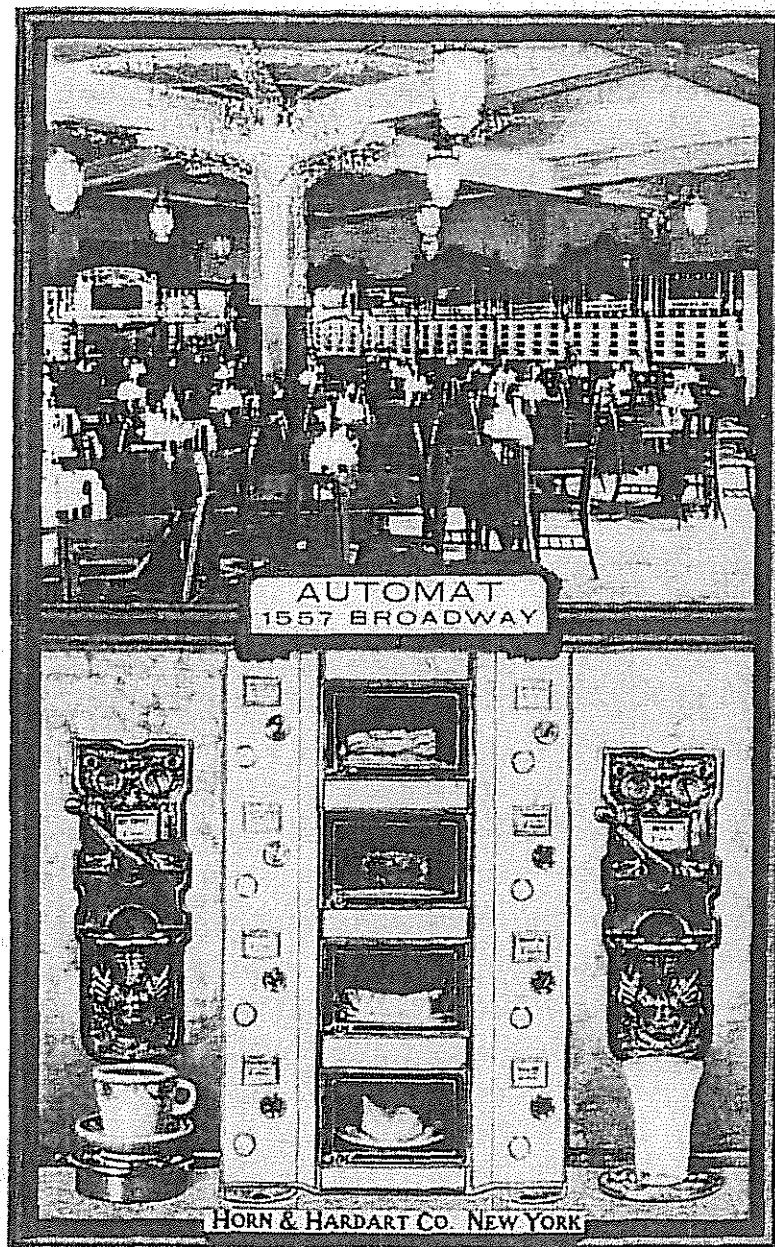


Fig. 6. Horn & Hardart Automat on Broadway. Source: The New York Public Library, Picture Collection, Image ID: 809530.

This historical reconstruction of the Automat as a successful American export to Germany completely turns facts on their heads only a few years after the import of the German prototype. At first glance, it might seem that the author of the article is deploring German opinion on American eating habits. His article ends, however, with a one-column long paean to the American "quick-lunch rooms" and their advantages. The article's climax proclaims, "But the crowning glory of the quick lunch room as an American institution is its democracy. The Wall Street banker and the Wall Street newsboy regularly

eat ... at the same place. With all its faults, the quick lunch room is an American institution of which we ought not to be ashamed."⁵⁴

As I have shown already, this kind of democracy did not include everybody. On the contrary, the economic success of the Automat in New York and Philadelphia relied on the exclusion of black people and immigrants, who could be perfectly "trapped behind the Automat".⁵⁵ It was their miserably paid labour that made food in the Automat so cheap.

The Automat success story is impressive. During Prohibition, and later in the 1950s, it did an enormous volume of business. Although Horn & Hardart only had cafeterias in Philadelphia and New York, it was at one time the world's largest restaurant chain.⁵⁶ In the 1970s, Burger King began to take over more and more chain restaurants.⁵⁷ Finally, on 15 May 1990, the last Horn & Hardart restaurant in Philadelphia closed its doors, followed on 9 April 1991 by the last Automat in New York.⁵⁸

4. Different and similar lines: The Swedish Automat

The spread of the Automat was not limited to Germany and the United States. As I have learned from the files in the RWWA, the Automat G.m.b.H. opened its first Automat in Great Britain in the Welsh town of Swansea in 1902.⁵⁹ Together with other business partners – perhaps even Philippe Leoni – it also distributed the Automat in big cities in Belgium, France, Spain, Switzerland and South Africa. From the 1930s onward, a similar type of restaurant, the "automatiek", became just as successful in the Netherlands as Horn & Hardart did in the United States.⁶⁰ Initially, it was imported from Germany in 1902.⁶¹

⁵⁴ Frederic J. HASKIN, "Quick Lunch Rooms" ..., p. 11.

⁵⁵ Alec SHULDINER, *Trapped behind the Automat* ...

⁵⁶ Carolyn HUGHES CROWLEY, "Meet Me at the Automat", *Smithsonian*, vol. 32, no. 5 (August 2001), p. 22; Daniel COHEN, "For Food Both Cold and Hot, Put Your Nickels in the Slot", *Smithsonian*, vol. 16, no. 10 (January 1986), p. 51. As early as the 1930s, the "glittering chain of coin-gobbling Automats alone attracted a quarter of a million customers a day". Harvey LEVENSTEIN, *Paradox of Plenty* ..., p. 50.

⁵⁷ "The Horn & Hardart Story", Robert Byrnes Collection of Automat Memorabilia, Box 1, folder 9, Annual Reports, 1932–1979, NYPL, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division. In 1953, the Horn & Hardart Company had a gross intake of upward of \$ 71,000,000 annually, see: Jack ALEXANDER, "Restaurants that Nickels Built", *Saturday Eve Post*, 11 December 1954.

⁵⁸ To cite but two articles, see "New York City's Last Automat Closes", *Monroe (Michigan) Evening News*, E-25, 802, 14 April 1991, and "It's the End of an Era as the Last Automat Fails to Find Buyer", *Rochester (New York) Democrat & Chronicle*, 11 April 1991.

⁵⁹ RWWA 208–246–3.

⁶⁰ The automatiek became even more popular in the 1950s, when the number of automatieks and cafeterias increased by 110 percent within six years, see: Adrie Albert DE LA BRUHÈZE, Anneke H. VAN OTTERLOO, "Snacks ...", p. 323.

⁶¹ Eric SHULDINER, *Trapped behind the Automat* ..., p. 210.

Although we cannot rule out the Automat G.m.b.H. as a possible distributor, unfortunately, we cannot confirm this either. We do know, however, that a partner of Max Sielaff acquired a patent for automatic restaurants in Sweden, and spent a couple of years selling at least 19 automatic restaurants to Copenhagen, Rotterdam and Trondheim. Unfortunately, no more detail is available, and more research will be needed on this.

Karl Gratzner, however, wrote an economic history on the life cycle of Swedish automatic restaurants.⁶² Although his research interest was neither the question of technological transfers from Germany nor the process of global standardization, we can still learn a lot about their economic success.

I would like to take a final look at this development of automatic restaurants in Sweden. Trends resembled those in Germany insofar as the number of launches of new automatic restaurants in Stockholm and other Swedish cities peaked around 1910. This was much earlier than in the Netherlands or in the United States. After 1929, they gradually fell to an equally low level with Germany. While only men ran the restaurants before 1910, an increasing number of women joined the company management in later years.

In 1898, two patents were filed in Stockholm, one by a (possibly French) company called Quisisana, and the other by Max Sielaff. In the years that followed, however, Swedes increasingly applied for patents and began to produce automats in their own country.

Although the "Svenska Automat" (Figure 7) located in the Stockholm Zoo shared its name with Sielaff's and Horn & Hardart's restaurants, it was designed along different lines. As in the US, tables were set up in the interior, thus enabling customers to communicate with each other. Presumably, meals in the Stockholm Automat were displayed in glass compartments as well. However, it could not compete with its American counterpart in size and selection. This is probably because eating out was not common at the time. What makes the Svenska Automat particularly interesting is a picture showing what the other images of automatic restaurants, and the restaurants themselves, kept hidden: the human labour behind it all. This picture shows four women working in the kitchen area behind the automats, hidden from the customers' view (Figure 8).

Only in this context can we fully understand the imperative "*Bediene dich selbst*" or the phrase "you absolutely help yourself" and its function. The promise of equality, which particularly fascinated the American press, conceals the inequality upon which the system was based: it hides the black dishwashers in New York as well as the cheap (female) workers in Europe. This fits into the

⁶² Karl GRATZNER, *The Making of a New Industry . . .*, p. 11.

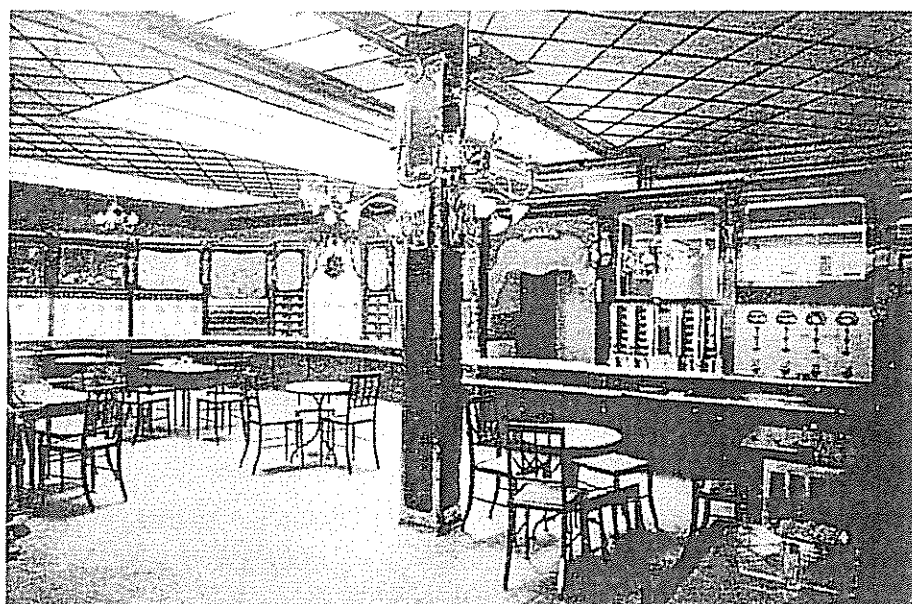


Fig. 7. Svenska Automatenfabrikens, catalogue from 1907 (photographer unknown). Source: Kunglia Biblioteket, Stockholm.

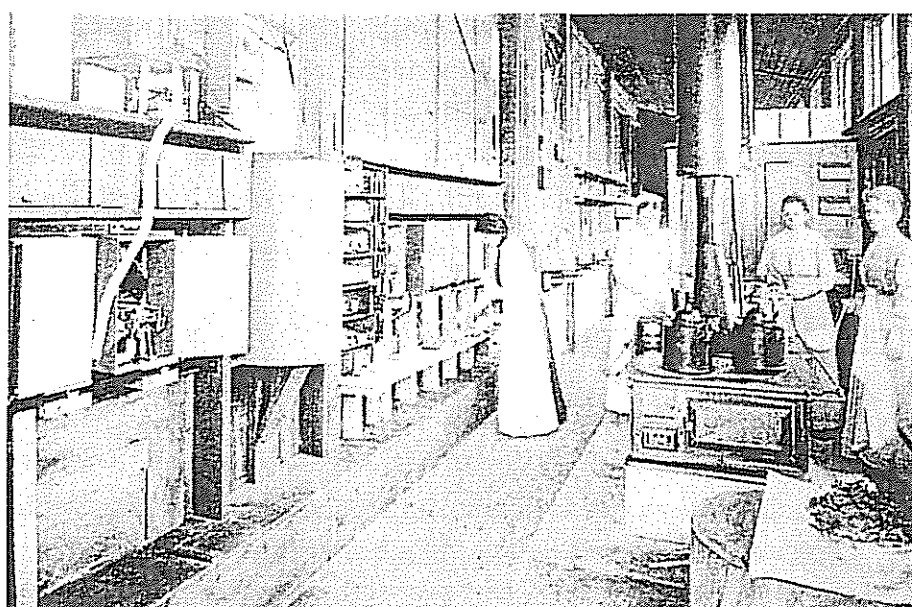


Fig. 8. Four women working in the kitchen area behind the automats in Svenska Automatenfabrikens, catalogue from 1907 (photographer unknown). Source: Kunglia Biblioteket, Stockholm.

far longer history of hiding unacknowledged work. The work in the kitchen is only one example of work that seemed to be like work never done.⁶³

This picture of the Svenska Automat also shows how technical standards differed from country to country – Swedish Automats were significantly less well equipped than those in New York and Germany.

⁶³ Kirsten SCHLEGEL-MATHIES, *„Im Haus und am Herd“. Der Wandel des Hausfrauenbildes und der Hausarbeit 1880–1930* (Stuttgart, 1995) p. 36.

5. The process of global standardization in fast food technology and consumption practices

Hygiene, communication, the problem of time and the making of consumption practices – these are the topics that interest me the most in connection with the emergence of automatic restaurants in Europe and the US. I would like to refer to these issues when summarizing my empirical findings: Automatic restaurants were a reaction to society's need for fast, hot, wholesome and cheap meals outside the home. The widespread discussion of hygiene in all industrialized countries around 1900 helped to heighten their appeal. Within this discourse, visual perception was considered particularly crucial, because it made quality control possible. Particularly in New York, the time factor played a major role, since the rapidly growing social group of employees (both male and female) needed to be fed as quickly as possible. Thus, a large number of different kinds of "quick-lunch rooms" were launched at more or less the same time. Automatic restaurants in Germany appealed to a different and significantly smaller clientele.

In New York, the factor contributing most to the success of the Automat was its presumed cross-class communicative space. The hospitable and warm design of the interior promoted this function. A similar development could be observed in Sweden; apparently, however, the Automats there could not establish themselves as communicative spaces after 1910.

Concerning technology, food and new consumption practices, automatic restaurants may be interpreted as an outcome of the global process of standardization (as can also be seen in the pictures discussed here). At the same time, they also evoked and accelerated this very process of standardization. The standardization of products through vending machines, the ubiquitous reproduction of experienced taste, training in certain modes of consumption (as required by the display cabinets), the idea of self-service that shapes our lives today – all these aspects were becoming increasingly standardized within all industrialized countries.

At the same time, this standardization brought about new differentiations or confirmed pre-existing distinctions in new ways. Take the particular example of the American journalist mentioned above: Only ten years after the import of the German prototype into the US, he was praising the Automat as a truly "American Institution" – now poised to be exported worldwide (by which he meant to Europe) – that would shape European perceptions of Americans. This appropriation of the Automat was not simply intended to disassociate American from European institutions; it also served to cement exclusionary distinctions within North American society itself. Unlike the newsboy who could sit next to the banker, black dishwashers or other low-wage workers were banished from the interior of the restaurant. Labour – and typically menial labour – was hidden.

An equally clear, unspoken separation ran between consumers and non-consumers. Especially in the United States, automatic restaurants appealed to women. Other studies have shown a considerable number of female managers in the American restaurant business.⁶⁴ In the case of the Automat, we have no similar statistics. In Sweden, on the other hand, we know that many women managed automatic restaurants – but not until they had proved to be increasingly unprofitable.

Finally, the empirical findings bring us to the conclusion that although early fast food could serve to establish distinctions within and between nations, it was not yet aimed at global consumers. The Automat did not aim to attract the very same consumer in New York and in Berlin – an aim shared by global fast food chains nowadays. Of course, McDonald's branches do differ locally in respect to taste, marketing and production; they fulfil different functions in South Korean society than in, for example, German society. Nonetheless, they *also* attract tourists and other travellers all over the world because they provoke a feeling of ubiquitous familiarity. Even though their main customers may well come from local neighbourhoods, they simultaneously try to address global consumers, particularly in global localities such as airports or in so-called global cities.

The Automat around 1900 had no global clientele, although it may already have had a translocal clientele in Imperial Germany where more than 125 restaurants had been launched in different cities. From the 1920s onwards, the Automat became a local peculiarity of New York. Its success was particularly due to being embedded perfectly in the social life of this metropolis. The importance of a global consumer did not grow until the 1950s, when this would trigger a new set of distinctions – both between and within nations and societies. This global history of fast food from a transnational perspective still has to be written.

⁶⁴ Harvey Levenstein suggests that by 1925, close to 60 percent of restaurant patrons were women. LEVENSTEIN, *Revolution at the Table ...*, p. 188.