

#NEWSWITZERLAND

WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

Who are the „people“? Anyone who lives in this country or only those who have a Swiss passport? In Switzerland today, around a quarter of the resident population are not regarded as citizens of the country, not only because of high rates of immigration, but because Switzerland has the most stringent naturalisation laws in Europe. In everyday life many people are treated as „Usländer“ or „Papierli-Schwiizer“ based purely on their appearance, their name or the language they speak. The question to-day is whether or not our diverse population should continue to accommodate out-dated ideas and images of homeland? Or whether we should finally develop institutions and narratives that correspond to reality?

RANDOM FACTS

- The poem “The Alps” (1729) by Albrecht von Haller established the romantic idealization of the Alps by elites and city dwellers. Prior to this, the Alps were perceived as a dangerous and harsh living space – especially by the alpine residents themselves.
- Between 1945 and 2015, the share of people amongst the permanent resident population without Swiss citizenship rose from approx. 5% to approx. 25%.
- The Swiss national holiday on 1 August was celebrated for the first time in 1891, when nationalism in imperial Europe was generally on the rise.
- Since the Second World War, Switzerland has established the most restrictive naturalization laws in Europe.
- In 1911, the Federal Department of Justice and Police established a central “Gypsy Registry”, whose data was also used to perpetrate genocide during the Nazi era.
- Until 1952, Swiss women who married a foreigner were expatriated as nationality was conferred via the husband.
- In 1993 Babylon II by Samir was the first film in Switzerland where the term “Second@s” was used.
- In 2016 the first post-migrant Think & Act Tank of Switzerland was founded, the Institute New Switzerland (INES).

THE ARGUMENT

Don't worry, we know history and we also know that we are not the first to talk of a „New Switzerland“. In the 1930's the Frontists had already dreamed of a new, fascist Switzerland and in 1943 the SP (*Socialist Party of Switzerland – Translator's note*) presented a party manifesto to the „Swiss People“ using the same name. In the 21st Century however #NewSwitzerland is no populist-nationalistic project but rather a post-migrant intervention into the current crisis in Swiss democracy. The concept #NewSwitzerland doesn't promise a new idyllic homeland nor a multi-cultural vision of consumerist well being. Rather, it stands for the will to a common new beginning - beyond a staged cultural war enacted between a 1291 “Island Switzerland” idea and an 1848 idea of a liberal Switzerland. A prerequisite for this is the recognition of migration realities as well as an honest public debate about the role of Switzerland within a global context - and this also means with recognition of its migration and colonial history! #NewSwitzerland is setting the horizon for a pluralistic, democratic society in which all of those who live here today or who will come tomorrow can feel at home and be able to exercise their political rights, enjoy recognition of their multiple identities and have access to resources that provide for a good life.

BACKGROUND ANALYSIS

Every nation state is based upon myths, Switzerland included. That is neither good nor bad but rather an historical observation. The basic myth of modern nationalism insists that the people, the state and the territory form one sacred holy unity, which must be united over the course of history. Recent research, however, shows that it is exactly the other way around: modern national states are not the fulfilment of divine providence or natural laws, but products of the most diverse interests, struggles, events and coincidences. Nations are made. In modern *nation building*, identities were actively formed out of ideas, images, symbols and narratives. These ideas of what constitutes *the* nation are inscribed and effectuated in the minds and deeds of people, in everyday life, in state institutions and laws - and vice versa. The national self-image regulates which groups of the population are enabled in political, social and cultural participation, for example in the form of elections, naturalization procedures, social systems, schools, literature and national museums.

Democratic nation states are based on the principle that all citizens should have equal rights. The central question is, who is recognized as a fully-fledged citizen and who is not? Which population groups belong to the “people” and which do not? History shows us that nations have not only differentiated themselves against other nations in order to establish their own identity, but also against groups within their own population. Modern nationalism developed emancipatory and exclusionary, or even violent, dynamics according to the historical context - in Switzerland too. The invention of the nation state here was concerned with the incorporation of different denominations, cultures and language groups, as well as with exclusion: from 1848 on, the poor, vagrants, women, Jewish, servant children, Roma and Sinti – and obviously migrants – were not recognized as full-fledged citizens and were discriminated against accordingly. However the history of Switzerland also shows that the idea of *who* should have a right to participation can shift over time - in the course of social struggles and negotiations. In Switzerland, social movements, political organizations, scientific experts, cultural producers, church and trade union initiatives

were able to instrument (not least also due to international pressure) important stimuli to the on-going democratization of democracy.

Today, however, a noticeable democratic deficit prevails in Switzerland. Since the Second World War, Switzerland's population has altered and pluralised significantly - due to migration and globalization - without Swiss institutions having opened up or responded adequately to this change. Around a quarter of the resident population are not regarded as citizens of the country. And even with a red passport there is a demonstrable disadvantage to fellow citizens on the basis of origin, appearance, name, language and religion. Today there exists a huge and painful gap between the idea of who belongs to the Swiss people and the real population of the country. What proportion of our fellow human beings without civil rights is needed so that a democracy is not a democracy anymore? The urgent question is: how must the self-image and the institutions of Switzerland change in order to reflect the pluralistic realities?

For several years in Switzerland two conflicting national narratives have been propagated; a conservative one, which refers to 1291 as the birth of the nation, and a liberal one, which envisions 1848 as the founding moment. The first is rooted in a people whose culture remains unchanged over time. It is disciplined, neutral, well-fortified, staunch, white, Christian – and very masculine. The other understands itself as liberal and humanitarian, and propagates Swiss economic genius and discipline, international competition, mobility and human rights. 1291 and 1848 present themselves as polar opposites in the Swiss cultural wars of our time. Yet, the narratives ultimately form two sides of the same coin. Both of these national narratives share the same large blind spot: the migration and colonial history of Switzerland. It is imperative to deal with the historical role of Switzerland in a global context, in order to understand and democratically shape the new social reality and political dead end that has emerged because of it.

Even if it is not enshrined in the public consciousness, Swiss actors were heavily entangled in European colonialism – despite having no colonies of their own. They participated as investors, traders, missionaries, scientists, settlers and mercenaries. Already from the 18th century on cities such as Bern and Neuchâtel were profiting from the transatlantic slave trade. During the 19th and 20th centuries the local textile industry – and therefore the machinery and chemical industries – were firmly integrated into the cotton trade of global capitalism, based on the systematic exploitation of raw materials and slaves in colonies. It is no surprise then that historians have recently demonstrated that the legacy of Alfred Escher, the liberal hero of modern industrial Switzerland, was also based on slave labour in the Caribbean. Switzerland's global economic entanglements from this time continued to exist after the Second World War, for example in commodity trading but also in the field of “development co-operation”. In the context of the Cold War and decolonization, Switzerland was able to continue to make economic use of its colonial networks – for example, in trading with the Apartheid state in South Africa. At the same time playing the role of an “honest broker” in the field of humanitarianism allowed for a moral and political neutralization of having a history of colonial “complicity”.

Colonial connections, which since the 19th century have not only strengthened the economy, but have also contributed to the rise of ethnic nationalism in Switzerland. As adventurers, merchants and researchers in the colonies, Swiss foreigners brought ideas of strict racial separation and national pride back to

Switzerland (aside from wealth, souvenirs and works of art). Switzerland became a centre of international race-based research. The so-called “Human Zoos”, in which people from colonial areas worldwide were exhibited and made to perform in Switzerland as “exotic savages” since the late 19th century, also gave hundreds of thousands of visitors the opportunity to identify as being white, civilized and superior.

Nevertheless - or precisely because of this global outlook - Switzerland was relatively liberal in regards to immigration until the late 19th century. It was an important factor for the success of Switzerland's foundation - and part of the political model. Yet in the political and economic crisis of liberalism this changed. In 1893, the first people's referendum banned the slaughter of animals and in doing so demonstrated itself as being clearly anti-Semitic against Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe. Around 1900 talk of “alienation” (Überfremdung) arose - this term also being “Swiss made”. At that time the solution seemed to be forced naturalization not deportation. In diametrical contrast to today's dominant ideas, naturalization should precede assimilation in order to accelerate it. Within a short time, however, an explicit fear became widespread in Switzerland concerned with the “cultural peculiarities” and the genetic make-up of the “Swiss people” (Volk) similar to other European countries at the time. In 1911, the Federal Department of Justice and Police established a central register for “gypsies” whose personal particulars were ultimately used during the Nazi-era genocide. In 1917, the Swiss Federal Alien's Police branch was established, which surveilled thousands of people in Switzerland until well after the Second World War. In 1931, a restrictive Foreigners Act (ANAG) was adopted, which linked the residence and establishment of foreigners in Switzerland to ethnic and economic conditions (and which was in force until after the turn of the millennium). One could justly argue that this severe exclusionary migration apparatus was established as way to solve the political and economic crisis in Switzerland. In the wake of a truce between liberal, conservative and socially-democratic forces, a new nationalist consensus associated with the so-called “intellectual defence of the country” (Geistige Landesverteidigung) fostered the idea of the “Landi” Switzerland - as a mixture of alpine romanticism, industrial growth and social welfare -, a Switzerland, in which foreigners were not imagined as fellow citizens.

In the era of the so-called “guest workers” after the Second World War, alien prevention measures were continued. Hundreds of thousands of “foreign workers” were brought into the country, to work in factories, businesses, hotels, restaurants, and construction sites and on the fields to drive ahead the economic “boom”. The rotation model, however, stipulated that “foreign workers” should leave Switzerland as quickly as possible after the work had been done (which was effectuated by the infamous “seasonal worker” status). Many did so, many others remained. When the Schwarzenbach Initiative, which wanted to expatriate hundreds of thousands of guest workers and their children, was only narrowly rejected in 1970, the assimilation policy of the Federal Council ensured that the high demand for foreign workers could still be satisfied. At the same time, the fear of the country being flooded by immigrants was so great that the criteria for assimilation and naturalization became increasingly stringent. Even people seeking refuge were not necessarily welcomed with open arms in humanitarian Switzerland. For Jewish refugees during World War II, the message at the Swiss border was “the boat is full”. During the Cold War, only refugees from Communist countries, Hungary, Czechoslovakia and Tibet conformed to the self-image of liberal, anti-Communist Switzerland. Chilean refugees after the Pinochet

coups were also not officially welcomed. For all “foreigners” the same was enforced: Those who wanted to stay should assimilate themselves. This meant above all, they should subordinate themselves and make themselves invisible. Racist anti-immigration and patriarchal logic played hand in hand: Swiss women, who, as it is known were not accepted as equal citizens until 1971, were still expatriated in the 1950s if they married foreigners. “Guest work”, on the other hand, created the structural conditions for Swiss female workers to move from their jobs in factories to idyllic middle-class family lives, displayed in advertisements for washing machines or convenience food of the time. In short, the system of guest work gave Switzerland the opportunity to reinvent itself as a consumerist, patriarchal and ethnically homogeneous middle class society during the Cold War.

The last decades have shown that, despite international migration and globalization, the nation state does not simply disappear from the world stage, rather it is transformed. It still forms a primary political and cultural reference framework for claims to participation. But it is far from decided where the journey will lead. The nation state does not automatically mean a state founded on the rule of law or a democracy. Democracy must be fought for and won over and over again; Swiss women know it, but so do migrants: From the 1970s onwards, social movements and civil society initiatives, in which migrant and non-migrant actors collaborated together, have achieved quite a lot in affecting immigration realities, both on a municipal level as well as in the cities. That means that in everyday life, in the living rooms, schoolrooms, businesses, streets, clubs, community centres and associations, the diversity of #NewSwitzerland has long since begun, in which the differentiation “Swiss” and “Foreigner” makes increasingly less sense. However, freedoms and rights gained can also be lost again. The popular referendums of the last few years, the restrictive integration logic of “promoting and challenging” (Fördern und Fordern) shows that the times of the “Swiss makers”¹ (Schweizermacher) has not yet been overcome.

What remains of this brief historical digression: Both the 1291 and the 1848 self-portrayals of Switzerland largely ignore the historical legacies of immigration and colonialism, and thus also the on-going existence of racism and problematic global economic entanglements up until the present. This institutionalized blindness that still prevails today in public politics and media and which fails to see the shadowy sides of the “Swiss Success Model”, has its price. Many people in Switzerland are only perceived, when at all, as statistics – as was lastly the case with the votes on minarets, mass immigration and extraditions. Within the narratives of 1291 and 1848 many Switzerland’s inhabitants remain alien and without their own voice. Either they are a threat or they must enrich Switzerland, either a perpetrator or a victim. Alternative histories in Switzerland are scarcely present or valued. Structural racism can scarcely be objectively addressed in the public sphere. It is also necessary to deal with this reality of Switzerland, politically, culturally and scientifically, in order to be able to make an honest new beginning.

In Switzerland, many new (post-) migrant, post-colonial, and refugee-political voices and civil society projects have emerged in recent years that show courage as well as demonstrating that the wheel of time can not simply be turned

1 Translator’s note: „Schweizermacher“ is a film satire from 1978 by Rolf Lissy. It tells the story of two inspectors from the Alien Police, who must evaluate whether foreigners have enough assimilated in order to be naturalized.

back. We all bear responsibility for what direction it will go in. With the call for a #NewSwitzerland, INES intervenes in the construction of the Swiss political project.

Switzerland is a nation of will, or so one says. We take this national myth at its word and think & act for a common new beginning. Anybody else?

RECOMMENDED READING

- Benedict R. Anderson, *Imagined Communities. Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, (London: Verso, 1991).
- Regula Argast, *Staatsbürgerschaft und Nation. Ausschluss und Integration in der Schweiz, 1848-1933*, (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007).
- Kijan Espahangizi und Halua Pinto de Magalhaes: "Vergesst 1291 und 1848!", Die ZEIT Schweiz, 1. Oktober 2014, <http://www.zeit.de/2014/41/schweiz-erinnerungsjahr-migranten>
- Rohit Jain und Shalini Randeria, 'Wider den Migrationskomplex – Perspektiven auf eine andere Schweiz', in: Iwona Swietlik und Bettina Friedrich (Hg.), *Sozialalmanach 2015. Das Caritas-Jahrbuch zur sozialen Lage der Schweiz* (Luzern: Caritas-Verlag, 2015), 199-210.
- Patrick Kury, *Über Fremde reden. Überfremdungsdiskurs und Ausgrenzung in der Schweiz 1900-1945*, (Zürich: Chronos, 2003).
- Patricia Purtschert und Harald Fischer-Tiné (Hg.), *Colonial Switzerland. Rethinking Colonialism from the Margins*, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015).
- Jakob Tanner, *Geschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert*, (München: Beck, 2015).
- Andreas Zangger, *Koloniale Schweiz. Ein Stück Globalgeschichte zwischen Europa und Südostasien, 1860–1930*, (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2011).
- Willi Wottreng: *Ein einzig Volk von Immigranten*, (Orell Füssli, 2000)