

Zeitschrift: Swiss review : the magazine for the Swiss abroad
Herausgeber: Organisation of the Swiss Abroad
Band: 20 (1993)
Heft: 4

Artikel: On "Racial theory" : an error with fatal consequences
Autor: Lenzin, René
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-907427>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 01.02.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Racism, xenophobia's twin brother, has raised its ugly head in Switzerland too. Our picture: a desecrated cemetery. (Photos: RDZ)

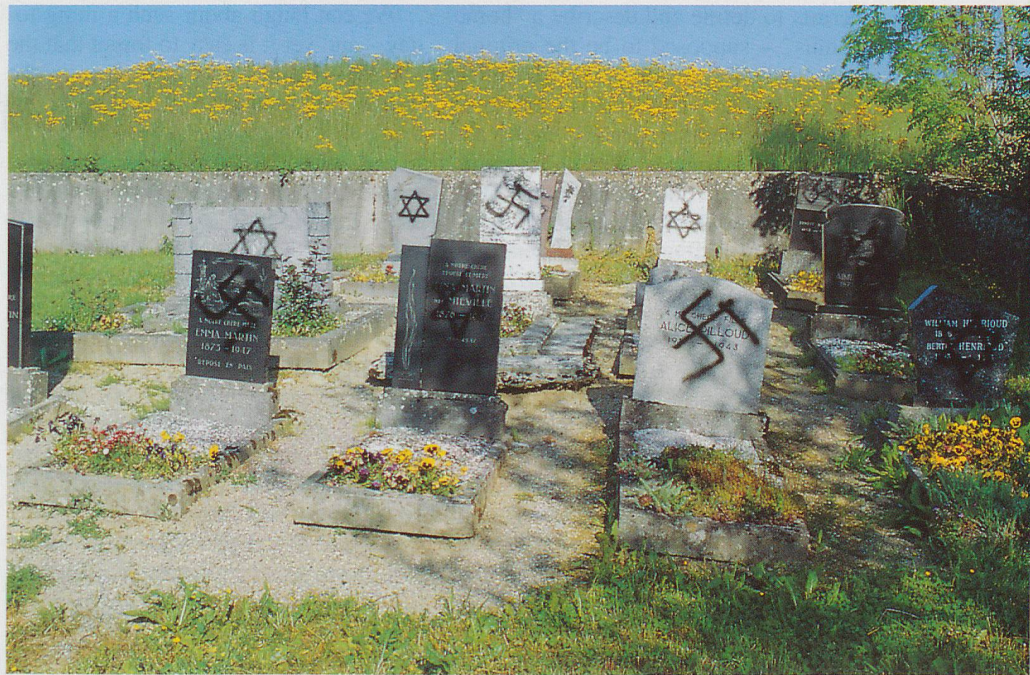
ems

The three-circle model

If Switzerland had become a member of the European Economic Area (EEA), the situation of most foreigners in the country would have changed greatly. All nationals of west European countries would have obtained full freedom of movement and establishment throughout the EEA. Voting analysts are united in thinking that fear of free movement of persons played an important role in last December's rejection of EEA entry by Swiss voters.

The No vote has led to Switzerland maintaining its laws on foreign residents. But even if it does not join the European Economic Area, changes are bound to come. The government's present policy on foreigners is based on the so-called 'three-circle model'. The first circle is liberalisation of immigration policy for nationals of west European countries and abolition of the seasonal worker status; the second circle is easier entry for people from Switzerland's traditional labour recruitment countries, such as ex-Yugoslavia, Turkey, the United States and Canada; and the third circle is work permits for nationals of other countries only in exceptional circumstances.

But the statistics already noted do not really clarify the situation of foreigners in Switzerland. More figures are required, as well as more information about the economic role of foreigners in Switzerland and official policies on the subject. One-third of foreigners permanently resident (between 300,000 and 400,000 – no precise figures are available) were born and schooled here – these being second and third generation foreign residents. In addition, there are over 100,000 first generation foreigners in Switzerland (again there are no official figures) who have lived here for several decades. Vittorino Pozzo from Renan is one of these. In spite of their foreign passports, many of them are even more Swiss in their feelings and thoughts than many Swiss. ■



On "Racial Theory"

An error with fatal consequences

Racism is a phenomenon of modern European history. As a scientific discipline it leads nowhere; as an ideology it is catastrophic.

Xenophobia and racism have hit the headlines in Switzerland as elsewhere in the last few years. If the Federal Council and parliament had their way, Switzerland would sign the 1965 UN convention declaring war on racism. But in the debate on tightening the law to implement this convention, political right-wingers have used hair-splitting arguments about freedom of opinion against this intention. One Auto Party member of parliament even said that the proposed new law was aimed "against the white race". This shows that belief in racial doctrine – although long unmasked as a myth – is still widespread.

The theory of "races" goes back to the time of the Enlightenment in Europe. Disciples of the Swedish court doctor and botanist, Carl von Linné, who in 1735 published a book called "The Complete System of Nature", tried to extend his classification of species to humankind and arrange them in a sys-

tem. Their original criteria were colour of skin and shape of head, but in the course of time they worked out ever finer measures of distinction – until they had to admit that the differences within a "race" were often greater than those between "races". The logic of this so-called scientific research finally led to the conclusion that racial doctrine could be upheld only if each human being was regarded as a "race" of his own.

In spite of this, the idea of arranging people in "racial" categories could not be expunged. The terrible thing was that the original and basically harmless physical and facial distinctions were compounded in the nineteenth century with moral and social values. This meant that other "races" were defined as inferior, which justified taking them under domination or even annihilating them. It is perhaps not surprising that Europeans declared themselves to be the highest products of creation. In this way "racial theory" was used to justify colonial conquest by European powers. But of course by far the worst consequences were seen in Nazi Germany where racialist madness cost the lives of millions of Jews and others.

Switzerland was not spared by the currents of "racial theory". In the 1930s, attempts were made by examining army

recruits to define and describe a "homo alpinus" – supposed to be the original Swiss, indelibly marked by the Alpine landscape. But the Zurich professor, Otto Schlaginhaufen, finally had to admit that amongst 35,511 recruits examined only 500 were "pure" representatives of the "Alpine race".

We can laugh about such a thing today – and yet it is easy to forget that the ideology behind it is still alive in the minds of many of us. In view of increasing excesses against foreigners all over the world, such considerations give ample food for thought.

René Lenzin

but only to a limited degree – in just two cantons: Neuchâtel since 1848, and Jura since it came into being in 1978. Geneva and Vaud recently refused to let foreigners vote with 75% majorities against. In Ticino an initiative with the same aim did not even attract sufficient signatures for the matter to be put to the vote. In a number of German-speaking cantons, including Berne and Zurich, the electorate will soon be asked the same question – but there is little chance of their agreeing. In addition, a parliamentary initiative by the Labour Party (communists) proposing that resident foreigners should be given the right to vote at the federal level was overwhelmingly rejected at the June session of the National Council.

Most Swiss prefer the idea of easier naturalisation to giving foreign residents the vote. The federal government and parliament also look more favourably on this solution, particularly for young people born here.

Political rights and integration of foreigners

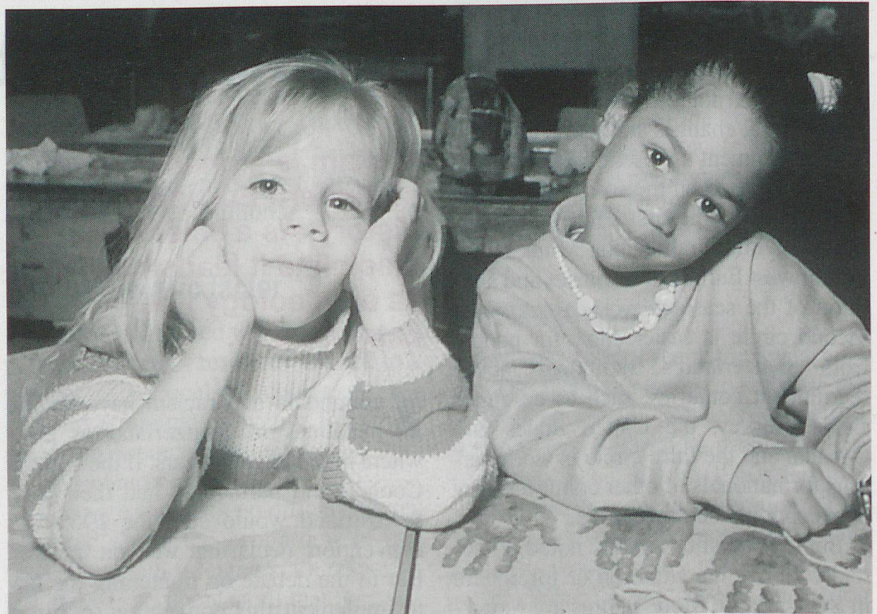
The challenges of a mixed society

Latest statistics show that there are 1.2 million resident foreign nationals in Switzerland, which amounts to 18% of the total population. The proportion has never been so high – a fact which brings bitter controversy in its wake.

Some people judge this trend favourably since it will create a modern multi-cultural society. But the situation causes anxiety leading to defensive reactions in some parts of the popula-

Giuseppe Rusconi

tion. This is reflected in remarks like: "If foreigners take our workplaces and force their ideas upon us, we won't be masters in our own house any more". Economic recession can transform such anxiety into xenophobia. In Switzerland as elsewhere, there is an increasing tendency for violent youth gangs to terrorise foreigners. The large number of attacks on hostels for asylum-seekers bears evidence of this.



Foreign children are different and take more time, but they enrich teachers' experience.
(Photo: Vivian Olmi)

The Muslim girl

The emotional effect on people in Switzerland caused by the problem of foreigners was shown in the uproar caused by a recent decision of the Federal Supreme Court. This excused a Muslim girl from compulsory swimming lessons because her father felt the Koran prohibited her from appearing uncovered in front of men. The real problem being dealt with here was just how far people from other cultures and other traditions should be forced into adjusting to ours.

Refusal to grant voting rights

Fear of foreigners has been expressed not only in letters to newspapers – as in the case just described – but in reactions to a number of cantonal initiatives to grant voting rights to resident foreigners. For the moment such rights exist –

The school as opportunity

School deserves a special mention in the integration of foreigners, since it is here that Swiss and foreign children are forced to mix. It provides many different types of opportunity to get to know and understand each other. Foreign children can also represent a challenge and an enrichment for teachers, even though the unknown quantity of different ways of thinking may increase their work load. In this area as in many others, the creation of a genuine multi-cultural society leads to many practical everyday problems. But it is well worth while facing the challenge with optimism. ■