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The family complete – evolution of

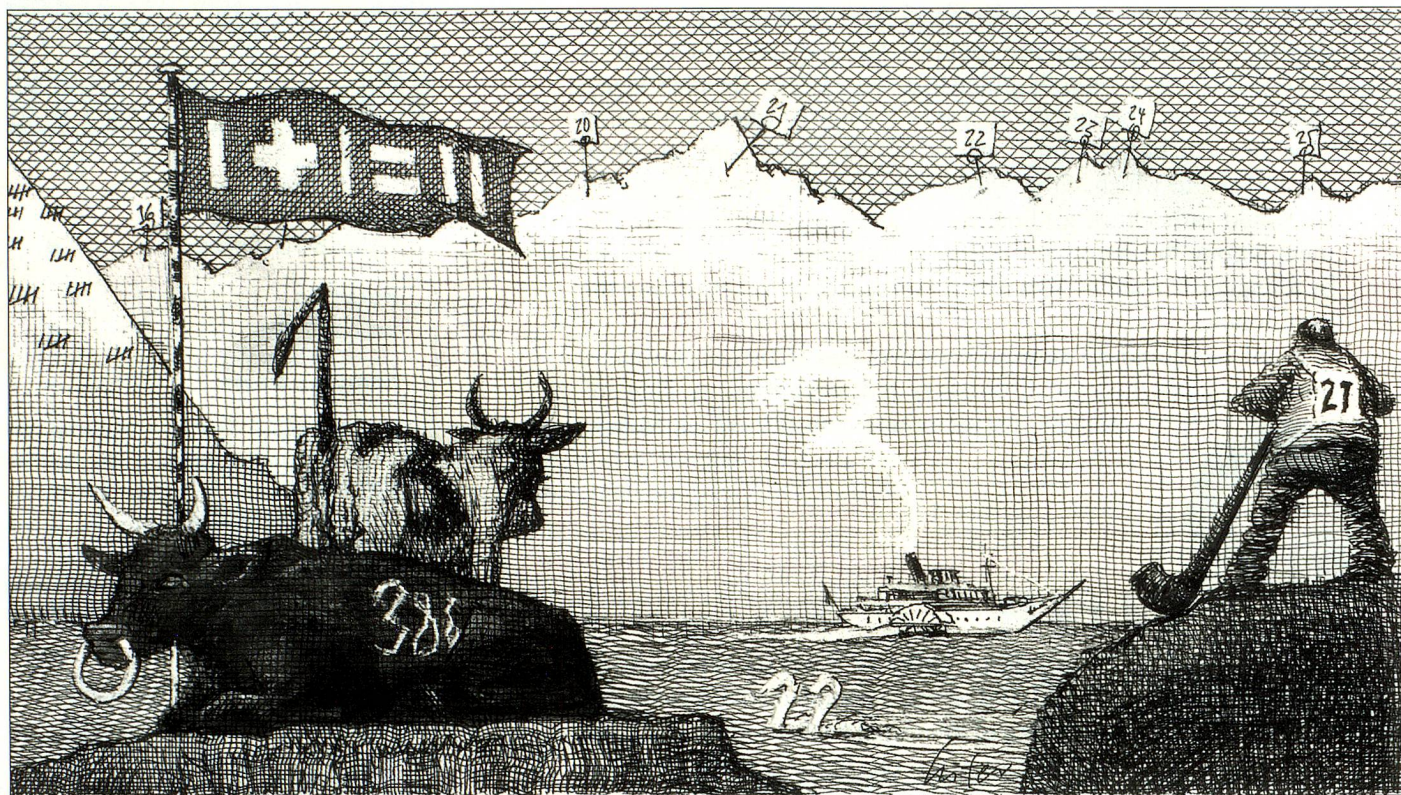


Figure it out. A numerical view of Switzerland.

BY VIVIANNE BERG

The family is not yet extinct, despite repeated records in divorce statistics over the past 30 years. In their search for a shared future, many couples live together first before marrying.

THE FEDERAL OFFICE FOR STATISTICS does not count singles and does not acknowledge bride or groom. What they count has to be reliable, continual and registered based on identical criteria. Formerly, engagements

were not acknowledged since they were not registered under civil law. In any case they now belong to another era, as does the question of consummation of marriage.

However, marriages and divorce draw some dramatic curves: The registrar puts his official stamp on the "I do" ceremony, whereas the judge seals the lid on the last "No". There's no indication of whether the happy couple arrive at the registrar's office in a horse-drawn carriage or make do with the signing ceremony alone. Nor can we determine what happens during the most harrowing phase when the happy couple becomes an unhappy couple.

Boom in divorce for long-married couples

One thing is clear: divorces do not necessarily result from the seven-year itch, but more usually happen after five to nine years of married life. But since more and more couples have begun living together, this curve is declining. And the number of divorces after around 20 years of marriage has increased

since 1975. Whereas in the 1980s over 10 percent of long-married couples divorced, this rose to 20 percent by the end of the 1990s.

Since the 1970s experts have become accustomed to announcing new divorce records. In 1970 6,405 divorces were awarded, while in 1985 this figure rose to 11,415. In 1998 this number rose to a record of over 20,000. Yet the following year a grand total of 20,809 divorces put all previous records in the shade.

Nor all couples are deterred by such statistics. People still get married, if in fewer numbers: In 1970 46,693 couples promised each other lifelong love, 38,776 in 1985 and 38,683 in 1998. In 1999 a resounding 40,646 marriages were recorded – on 9.9.99 alone, 2500 couples tied the knot, primarily in German-speaking Switzerland. An average of 100 marriages took place on other days of the same year.

Love is also increasingly crossing national boundaries: Between 1992 and 1999 20 percent more Swiss citizens were married to

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an institution

partners of another nationality. Generally speaking, couples do not let their optimism be dampened either by divorce statistics or their own disappointment, because 15 percent of Swiss women and 18 percent of Swiss men married for at least the second time in 1990, 20 percent and 22 percent in 1999.

Mirror of social change

Marriage is only one option for not living alone, and divorce statistics only illustrate probabilities. Whereas formerly one was either married or single, now there are countless forms of cohabitation which fall somewhere in between. This is demonstrated by the form which everyone has to complete for the upcoming national census. A "member of the household" can declare himself or herself as "sole resident", "live-in partner" or "single parent". In households inhabited by couples with or without children, both partners are regarded as members of the household.

Social change is also at times reflected in the vocabulary used by the Federal Office of Statistics staff. While some count "illegiti-

mate children": more progressive statisticians, acknowledging the antiquated nature of the term, prefer to use the more neutral expression "children of single mothers" to refer to the maternal status recorded at the birth of a child.

A similar change is documented by the statistics for child acknowledgement: In the 1970s, 30 or 40 children a year were acknowledged by their father even before birth. This rose to 144 in 1980 and to 1270 ten years later. Of the 78,949 live-born children recorded in 1998, the mother of every twelfth (6580) was single. In France in the same year, over 40 percent of births were by unmarried mothers, and in Sweden over 50 percent.

Later marriage

Formerly the birth of the first child signalled the establishment of the family. In these more pragmatic times, families are started before marriage. People with live-in partners only formalise the partnership when a child is on the way.

Young people are enjoying the social and financial comforts of living at home more frequently than before and are taking longer

to move out. They are also older when they marry for the first time or expect their first child.

Since around 1990 the gap between non-Swiss and Swiss in these areas has increasingly widened. The average age at which Swiss women entered their first marriage was 25.6 in 1970. In 1999 this rose to 28.2. In 1999 Swiss women bore their first child at age 29.5. However, the average age of all women giving birth for the first time in 1999 was 28.5. The age at which non-Swiss women gave birth for the first time cannot be determined for 1970, but for 1999 the average age is estimated at 27.1.


In all, an average of 146 children were born per 100 women – too few in the estimation of the "Social Report 2000", since 210 children is the figure required to ensure a "renewal of the generation" However, there is no need for panic since, thanks to non-Swiss women who bear significantly more children than Swiss women, and thanks to naturalised foreigners, the Swiss population is not threatened with extinction. 



Photo: Heini Stucki

In 1999 Swiss mothers bore their first child at the average age of 29.5.