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Shadow war and interpreting the present times

Georg Kohler, a professor emeritus of political philosophy at the University of Zurich, is conducting political observation and analysis of the election campaign in Switzerland throughout 2015 on behalf of the Swiss Abroad.

GEORG KOHLER

The row, currently at boiling point, over the significance of Swiss history is essentially about the future. It concerns the question of whether and how Switzerland should adapt to the transformed European situation. The past shows us what we are, and we have become what makes us distinctive because of it. This is the theory advocated by those who believe the spiritual essence of Switzerland is in jeopardy. This essence has nevertheless only ever been clearly defined during times of major crisis. It therefore loses its clear form when, as at present, we find ourselves in times of peaceful reorientation. That Switzerland has needed a rethink since the radical upheaval of 1989 is an objective reality, it is just that people refuse to accept it. It has now diffusely penetrated into the consciousness of the majority.

It comes as little surprise that a reorientation is difficult to find. A nation like Switzerland, situated in the middle of Europe, but which ever since 1914 has essentially defined its own political identity by how it is different finds itself in trouble when the nature of its variance appears to be at stake.

The opportunity for Switzerland to claim the special-case status that it has always asserted is very limited in present-day Europe for various reasons. Perpetual, armed neutrality, the small size of the nation and institutions geared towards direct participation by citizens are (or were) the fundamental elements of Swiss self-perception. They shaped the nation's highly successful period from the start of last century until close to its end. Their radical revision unfortunately has to be considered today.

We are surrounded by friends, which makes it hard to justify the rationality of a neutrality status that perceives "others" as bellicose power states. In Switzerland too everyone was aware that "armed neutrality" could only prosper under the aegis of NATO. The notion of the "small state" dominating the debate also appears ambiguous. It does not concur with the fact that it is home to one of the world's largest financial centres and is a medium-sized political and economic power as an exporter of capital. It was not



without reason that Switzerland sought a passenger's seat, so to speak, in the G20 club. At least the nation's diplomatic functionary elite has always understood that Switzerland is inextricably entwined in the constraints of the system and legal structure that determine the present day. The ingloriously lost battle over banking confidentiality is the most salient paradigm of this. It is also evidence of the power of global political flows which directly counteract the central stratagem of our democracy, namely the notion of being able to separate the political from the economic.

The globalised economy nevertheless requires the organisation of politics and law which results in the transnational bundling of interests and supranational regulations. This model is diametrically opposed to the existing modus operandi of Swiss global orientation consisting of market globalism in addition to political isolation from foreign influence. It cannot be denied that the unrestricted autonomy of the directly democratic sovereign is also a victim of this trend.

To sum up from a social theory perspective rather than that of historical legend, the idea of power political neutrality has become less important because the epoch-specific factors are no longer the possibility of war but instead the requirements of organised trade.

The national state democracy is therefore no longer in the position to guarantee the solid ground for a system and development that is militarily secure and internationally accepted as legitimate by itself and without taking account of transnational interests. Not the lack of appreciation for the old lessons of history but instead the new reality of the issues of international civilisation are therefore responsible for the nation's current identity problems. Considered objectively this reality presents the issues that the Swiss identity debate has to tackle.

Instead, we are witnessing a shadow war: the defenders of the Swiss founding myths against the historiographical academics who are critical of both the factual accuracy of the traditional narrative and its relevance to the actual situation. It is a battle over the shadows of history in which the present cannot be forgotten.

