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SWISS SOCIETY IN A RESTLESS AGE

By Dr. Peter Vogelsanger

Dr. Peter Vogelsanger (Ph.D.) was born in 1912. He grew up in Lucerne, attended secondary school there, then followed theological studies in Zurich, Bonn and Basle and won his doctorate in 1952. He is the founder of the journal "Reformatio". For 5 years, he served as Pastor of the Protestant community of Wohle-
rau in the Catholic Canton of Schwyz. He went to Schaffhausen in 1951, and in 1956, he was appointed to the Fraumunster in Zurich. He has participated in numerous radio and TV broadcasts. His books include: "Ein Weg zur Bibel", "Max Huber — Recht, Politik, Humanitat aus Glauben" (1967), as well as numerous other publications.

The following article (by courtesy of "Pro Helvetia" Foundation) shows his acute awareness of what are the problems of Swiss Society. He touches on the students' unrest and the "generation problem".

Is Swiss society sick?

The question will bring a smile to the face of many people familiar with our bustling cities, our well-oiled and successful economy, our institutions and officialdom so remarkably free of corruption, our intense cultural life, our intelligent youth, our lively civic awareness, and the degree to which we are blessed with the good things of life, both physical and spiritual.

And yet we have finally had the happy experience of home-grown riots and demonstrations. Our French-speaking compatriots, proud of their radical traditions and more progressive in their political leanings than we German-Swiss, are almost a bit envious that these momentous events should have happened in Zurich, of all places, rather than in Lausanne or Geneva. Up to now the **Suisse Romande** has regarded as the "esprit typiquement zurichois" the very embodiment of conservatism and the Establishment, as I was recently told by a clever Geneva journalist.

Zurich's riots came with typical Swiss tardiness and, compared to the murders of Martin Luther King and Senator Robert Kennedy, or even to the disturbances in France, Germany, England and some Communist countries, were relatively tame and harmless. There was street fighting and a great deal of noise, all of which, in the absence of genuine domestic fuel, had to be fed with imported slogans and battlecries. No reasonable person would ascribe to them genuine revolutionary character. A true revolutionary movement needs two things: a genuine burning need and a clear goal. But the boldest leaders of the Zurich disturbances were mostly the spoiled offspring of a prosperous society, whereas the local workers, who have in fact already attained many of their goals, energetically disclaimed any solidarity with the

rioters. All the talk of structural changes in society and the struggle against the Establishment sounds so vague that one has difficulty taking it seriously. During all the trouble there were no signs of genuine subversion. I regard the incident largely as infantile emulation of foreign events.

Nevertheless the phenomenon is here in all its manifestations, from uncut hair to New Left phraseology. And while there is no need to treat it as front-page news like the sensationalist press, we would do well to think about it self-critically and with a genuine desire to understand.

Many a prosperous father who has worked hard all his life and risen from humble beginnings to a comfortable state, and has been all too willing to give his children whatever they wished, now finds himself shaking his head in disbelief and indignation when, in a discussion which has been put off too long or else carried out with paternalistic high-handedness, he hears his son spouting unabashedly left-wing or anarchistic ideas. What, he thinks, has happened to our good old Swiss ways? What has happened to gratitude, to a feeling for the genuine, the tried-and-true, the traditional? His bold offspring, on the other hand, is ready to interrupt his father's every sentence to show how superior is his wisdom to that which the older man has garnered by experience; and each time the discussion begins to break down, the youngster smiles in tired sympathy at such muddleheadedness and senile impotence. Injured indignation on the one hand, arrogant aggressiveness on the other, both leading inevitably to a hopeless impasse . . .

But to return to our original question: No, modern Switzerland is certainly not a sick society. Just one brief look at the rest of the world, and we are prone to an attack of pride and self-righteousness, even with regard to our youth. Whatever our present malaise may be, it is not a Kierkegaardian "sickness unto death"; at most it may be compared to an epidemic of measles, or perhaps a slight hysterical neurosis.

The diagnosis is not an easy one, however. In psychological terms we might say something like this: The aggressivity of today's youth reveals an unfulfilled need for tenderness on the part of the offspring of a prosperous society whose parents have given them everything, from giant teddy bears to their own TV sets, from weekend trips to Venice to clattering motorbikes. But what those parents have failed to provide is time, understanding, a calm and patient dealing with their children's questions, a sense of shelter and love, the example of a moral and pious way of life. Carrying our psychological analysis further, we find that today's university students — and it is primarily among students that the rebellion is taking place rather than among proletarian youth, who today can only be found in Switzerland's poor mountain regions — are plagued by a very important but rarely men-

tioned factor: a hidden sense of inferiority. Even the most hard-working and responsible students, at a time of life when others are earning often provocatively high salaries, feel unjustly that they are trapped in a sterile round of books, papers and examinations. This sense of inferiority easily gives rise to an exaggerated need to "be somebody", a need for action. And this need to count for something is lent emphasis by the spotlight of publicity provided by today's mass media of communications.

But the real cause goes deeper, of course. I asked a young woman student what it is she finds wrong with Switzerland today. This was not a quarrelsome girl who has no use for anyone older than herself, but a thoroughly responsible, intelligent and serious student. Her reply was as surprising as it was honest: "Nothing, really. Everything is fine. But — everything is just a little **too** fine. We've become an over-organised, over-perfected state. There are institutions for everything, good institutions and proud of being good. Everything runs like a well-oiled machine. We have problems about reforming the university curriculum and building more schools, of course, but everyone is confident that we can solve them with good will and good sense. Aside from that, though, we really have nothing much to complain about. And it's just that that makes life almost unbearable sometimes. There's no room left for creative thinking. No room for idealism and sacrifice and risk. We are a hopelessly saturated and satisfied people. That's why young people often have the feeling that they'll suffocate here — and so they emigrate somewhere else".

Here, I believe, is the point at which some honest self-criticism is needed. The irrational outbreaks which took the form of rioting in Zurich, although they did not even approach the destructiveness of similar outbreaks in other countries, point to the fact that we have neglected the irrational side of our lives. Yet it is evident that people's need for the irrational does not diminish. In our rationalised, organised society we have given short shrift to our youth's need for the irrational, for idealism, the fulfillment of fantasy, belief, acts of courage and hope and selflessness, the battle for human goals. And wherever these irrational elements have appeared, they have been doused again by covert or overt commercial considerations, by opportunism and our much-praised Swiss sobriety. We must give our young people more room for expression. We must not react to every suggested change, whether clever or not, with official indignation and pacifying phrases. All is **not** for the best, and this is **not** the best of all possible worlds.

Another thing: There is some validity in the loudly voiced criticisms of the Establishment. (The odd thing is that the loudest, most anti-American critiques operate almost entirely with Anglo-Saxon concepts and phrases.) Most of it is nonsense, of course. Every human society, no matter how small or how liberal, tends

towards formation of an Establishment, a consolidation of forms, rules and authorities. And those who have created and are responsible for these forms and rules, have an understandable tendency to keep a firm hold on their influence and their positions, and sometimes to abuse them slightly. To change this would require the excision of man's sinful nature and the fabrication of chemically pure, selfless human creatures.

At the same time it is also true that every Establishment tends toward petrification, sterility and maintenance of the status quo, and can under some circumstances become quite inhuman. In this context I could say a great deal about an area in which I have some personal experience — that of state-run and church-run welfare institutions, which can be distorted from humane undertakings into bureaucratic power structures run by petty dictators. Particularly in a liberal state, the necessary Establishment must be balanced by an equally necessary critical sense. can come only from faith, however, from a feeling of the responsibility of all citizens before God, a feeling which can, more than any other, make me critical not only of others but of myself.

One last point: Switzerland is a nation, and as such it has a right to its existence whether or not it fulfills a special mission on earth. It is a state with excellent institutions, by no means corrupt, some of them exemplary, others still in need of improvement (for example, we need to introduce nationwide women's suffrage and to eliminate the discriminatory religious clauses from our Constitution). Switzerland is not merely a tourist paradise or a folklore museum. It boasts a stable and highly productive economy, and a very high intellectual standard. All of this is the product of long generations of hard work by all segments of the population. This is something that our young people must be made to see and appreciate.

But Switzerland is something more — and this is what our older people must be made to see and appreciate in the intoxication of their prosperity. It is the embodiment of an idea which must be borne with both pride and humility — the idea of a state and a society in which public order is supported not by a web of interests but by a fabric of responsibility and confidence in which all participate. This has nothing to do with chauvinism. It is a concept which calls for more than declamatory speeches on our National Day, First of August, and the holding high of historic images. Particularly in our so-called "modern pluralistic society" it requires constantly renewed personal effort to keep it a living concept rather than a stiff and dead catchword. Can we embody this idea in so vital a way that coming generations will feel the courage, pride and humility to carry it on and defend it? And are we grateful for the privilege of embodying this ideal in our national and personal lives? These are the basic questions which each Swiss must answer for himself.