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Comment

SOCIAL CAPITALISM: AN IDEA THAT HAS LEFT A DEEP MARK ON SWISS LIFE

The largest non-public company in Switzerland happens to be a non-profit organisation. It is probably due to this fact that the Migros federation of cooperative stores could have acquired such an overwhelming importance on the Swiss retail market. Last year, its 440 supermarkets and ten sales lorries marked MMM sold 4,856 million francs worth of goods and registered a 12.9 per cent increase of their turnover. Migros' great rival, the Co-op chain of stores, also recorded similar figures and is not far behind Migros in turnover. As a result, nearly all retail food sales in the country go through two vast organisations whose statutes preclude profits and place them at the service of their customers.

With its modern supermarkets standing out in every town or district of any importance, Migros and its ubiquitous "M" symbol, not counting its many sidelines (do-it-yourself shops, oil, banking, holidays, etc.), might at first sight be considered as a glaring example of capitalistic might. The fact that it is not considered by the Swiss as a Monopoly, or as an unsatisfiable conglomerate with all-embracing power on society, is due to the ideals behind the creation of Migros. Indeed, Migros could never have grown as it did without the non-commercial and humanistic ideals of its founder, Gottlieb Duttweiler. In revolutionising the retail trade in Switzerland earlier than in most countries of Europe, these ideals have profoundly affected the way of life of the Swiss. These ideals are embodied in the organisation's statutes. These state that 0.5 per cent of the turnover of regional cooperatives and 1 per cent of the turnover of the Migros Federation should be devoted to cultural, economic and social objectives. As a result, Migros sponsors evening courses and cultural events of all kinds. It has bought land for

environmental purposes, campaigns for various causes and considers that it has a vital role to play in making Switzerland a better place to live.

Duttweiler's philosophy pertained to social capitalism. He claimed that the interests of consumers and the national interests were identical — this community of interest being underlined by the simple fact that everyone is a consumer. The purpose of a business was therefore to serve the community of consumers above all private and monopoly interests.

The Co-op is moved by the same ideals. Both the Co-op and Migros have about 900,000 members and issue widely-read weeklies of cultural and humanistic inspiration. Duttweiler even founded a party represented in Parliament (The Independents) and a newspaper (Die Tat). This shows that Switzerland has been ahead in consumer-protection for a long time. Because so much of everyday shopping is carried out at Migros, Co-op or other cooperative organisations, or some private ones, such as Denner, who strive to undercut everybody, rising prices do not cause so many grumbles as elsewhere. With prices rising by 11.9 per cent last year, Swiss housewives have faced the same problems as British housewives. But at least they know that this was not the fault of Migros and others because they are confident that these organisations are doing all they can to keep prices down and abide by the ideals laid down at their foundation. In Britain, on the other hand, a glib politician has claimed that supermarket organisations were cashing in on rising food prices and realising 25 per cent profits. As British supermarkets are in the hands of private organisations perhaps less generously motivated than the founders of Migros, such declarations were more likely to find credence among the British public, particularly during an election campaign.

The Swiss have achieved a large degree of industrial peace because Unions and Management have recognised that their interests were not necessarily in conflict. Likewise, peace has been found between consumers and their suppliers. This collective relationship between millions of consumers and one or two highly respected retail organisations has become a salient feature of the pattern of Swiss life.

SWISS EVENTS

100 KMH SPEED LIMIT HAS BEEN VERY EFFECTIVE

The Members of Parliament who supported the introduction of a 100 kmh speed limit on all Swiss roads with the exception of motorways should be very satisfied with its results after one year of implementation. The number of road accidents fell by 9 per cent with respect to 1972 and the number of fatal accidents dropped by 16 per cent. The 100 kmh speed limit is considered as having saved the lives of 272 people. Introduced on 1st January, 1973 for an experimental period of three years, the new regulation helped to decrease the number of road casualties from 1,722 people killed in 1972 to 1,450 last year. Fatal accidents on motorways have increased from 56 to 73, but none have been recorded since 17th November, when an all-round 100 kmh speed limit was introduced to save petrol. If the results of the speed limitation are as conclusive this year and the next, there is no doubt that it will be maintained indefinitely. Over half of fatal accidents happen outside built-up areas on straight stretches or bends. They are nearly always due to drivers not adapting their speed to road conditions, refusing to give priority or being inattentive at railway crossings. Drunkenness is responsible for 15 per cent of fatal accidents.

New law on foreign aid probably to be postponed

The Swiss people should be called this year to express their position on Swiss aid to the third world in a Referendum expected to be launched by Mr. James Schwarzenbach and his conservative friends. This referendum will take place, however, if the law whose draft is nearing completion is voted during the next session of Parliament starting in March. The two houses disagree on some points of the planned legislation, which will place Swiss public aid within a firm legal framework and increase it as well. There are rumours that the Government will ask for a 2-year postponement of the final vote in order to take account of recent developments, namely in regard to the petrol crisis, which have come about since the new law was first proposed. Mr. Pierre Gruber, Head of the Political Department, is said to be in favour of a postponement of the planned parliamentary vote in order to amend the draft law and accord it to these new developments. Swiss foreign aid would therefore be inscribed in the statute book in 1976 only, at which time the Swiss could eventually oppose it in a Referendum.