

# Comment

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## COMMENT

### NO STRIKES BUT MORE SUICIDES

In a book called "The Sane Society", the American psychiatrist Erich Fromm makes the paradoxical point that those societies which appear to be the most stable, prosperous and harmonious are those with the highest suicide rate. He naturally mentioned some Scandinavian countries in illustrating his point but also Switzerland, which, if I remember rightly, was placed in first or second position.

This was in the mid-fifties. The situation had changed slightly by 1966, a year for which I happen to have figures. Hungary came first with 29.6 suicides every year per hundred thousand inhabitants, followed by Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Sweden and Finland. Switzerland came in seventh position with 18.4 suicides for every hundred thousand inhabitants, way above the U.S. (10.9) and Britain (10.4).

One could look for explanations to Switzerland's particular "score" while ignoring its way of life. But this would be treating Switzerland as a special case. This procedure would work if Switzerland had a higher number of manic-depressives, old people, students and divorcees, among whom suicide rates are exceptionally high. Switzerland has a higher number of foreigners than most other countries and, indeed, the loneliness which is often the fate of aliens leads to a high suicide rate among that category. But Switzerland was already a high-suicide nation in the fifties, before the wave of immigration which is now causing worry to some of our patriotic circles. This shows that the suicide rate must somehow be connected with deficiencies in the Swiss way of life.

For many of us who have the occasional opportunity of going back home, the change from Britain to Switzerland is tremendously refreshing. As soon as one lands at Kloten or Cointrin, one feels the air more invigorating, colours sharper, objects more neatly etched out. One passes through gleaming airport installations, all built in stainless steel and glass, formalities are efficiently carried out, waiting at the luggage shoot is minimal, and a smart red bus whisks you away in no time to the centre of town along a

superb motorway and clean residential suburbs.

One quickly feels at home in a Swiss environment. The atmosphere is cleaner, buildings more robust and shiny, the economic wheel runs more securely, life is organised more efficiently. There is a sense of wholeness which helps one to feel better and colours change from brownish grey to bluish hues.

The return to England always requires re-adaptation, although this is mainly because it usually means a return to work and the more unpleasant realities of existence. Still, as the airliner floats over the unending amber lights of London, most passengers feel that they are landing in another world. Sometimes a question creeps up about the purpose of one's stay in England. The British reality is less prosperous, comforting and protective.

Yet it is also true, as I can testify from personal experience, that a break in England after a continuous spell of a year in Switzerland is quite liberating. There is no doubt about it: one breathes better in full view of old fashioned buildings, along less well kept streets. There is poetry in the drab areas of London and the large industrial cities of the North. This may not be cheerful poetry, but it is better than the total absence of it in the functionalism and perfection of some of the new estates in Switzerland where children are not allowed to step on beautifully tended grass that isolates glass cubic blocks.

Even the drop in efficiency and the slowness in the pace of business activities, which might raise blood pressure in those people faced with it all their lives, are endowed with charm to the Swiss tourist. There is something to be said for "taking it easy", spending time for a lunch break at the pub, communicating. It's a pleasure to cross at a zebra crossing when the lights are red with a policeman ignoring you a few yards away. In Switzerland, one is fined 5 francs for any non-use of a zebra crossing when one is within fifty metres.

This reverse aspect explains why Britain exerts such an attraction to many Swiss, despite its weather. It is true that

the English language, the appeal of "swinging London", the strong buying-power of the Swiss franc, the ease of travelling and the requirements of business explain most visits to Britain. But many people are definitely attracted by its liberating and less stifling atmosphere.

A train journey across any part of Switzerland will amaze many a foreigner by the tidiness of the countryside. He will delight in those neat and trim villages and model factories, and be ready to consider what he sees as a summit of successful development. Yet some of these prim villages are often depressing. I remember one particular trip to the Linthal area along a road that followed the upper Glarus valley. I was vividly struck by the neatness and boxiness of the houses, but at the same time upset by their dryness, dreariness and near inhumanity. Many people would doubtless shudder at the prospect of living in such villages and prefer a Yorkshire mining community any time.

Another facet of the quality of life in which Britain surely scores better than Switzerland are social exchanges. Although class barriers, convention, conformism and loneliness are the sad traits of our western civilisation, it seems to me that their effects are stronger in Switzerland. This is probably due to fairly general middle-class tendencies among the Swiss. Barriers between people are much stronger in this category. Since Switzerland can be considered as having accomplished a middle-class revolution (forgetting the foreign workers) it seems fair to trace back the difficulties of making contact and the shyness of Swiss people to their middle-class values more than to anything else.

The British are traditionally said to be distant and reserved. They are never supposed to speak to anyone without being introduced. This is true, however, of the kind of Briton that have projected the Empire-image and perhaps of parts of the lower-middle classes. However, cockneys, Welshmen, people from the north, etc. are as warm and outgoing as anywhere else. This is also true of "simple" folk in Switzerland but surely less so. For one, there are fewer "simple" people as objectives and conventions traditionally attached to the bourgeois classes are a much more potent reality.

The Swiss are supposed to be content people and yet their suicide rate is nearly double that of Poland (9.9 suicides per hundred thousand people), a dictatorship in which life is very hard indeed. We are touching, of course, on the eternal theme of man not being able to live on bread alone.

Unfortunately, I do not have figures showing the suicide trend in Switzerland throughout the years. This would allow one to see whether any kink in the curb reflects a particular phase of Swiss evolution. But what information I have indicates that the rate of suicide is not on the increase in Switzerland and that the country's position in the suicide

league has fallen. For example, Hungary was by no means a high suicide nation before the war and is probably less so today with a stabilisation of the Communist regime over there. If the Swiss suicide rate is on the decrease, this could correspond to the opening-up of people and society, the gradual seeping-in of fresh air which we are witnessing today. The increasing questioning of accepted

standards and facts, the straining at traditional structures seem to have a beneficial effect on the human soul. A little trouble and a few jolts seem to increase one's zest for life. There are no strikes in Switzerland — but more suicides. This proposition may however lose its truth sooner than expected.

P.M.B.

go or be content with yearly and seasonal workers' status. At the end of 1972, the 1,052,300 registered foreigners of all categories living in Switzerland constituted 20.1 per cent of the resident Swiss population which was estimated at 5,236,700 persons.

#### **Oberriet crime: Police pick up valuable leads**

A fortnight after the attack on a customs office at Oberriet (SG) in which two customs men were killed and an Austrian civilian fatally wounded, Police in Switzerland, Germany and Austria were reporting steady progress in tracing back to the criminals behind this apparently pointless murder. The Oberriet crime had been definitely connected with a bank robbery which committed the day before at Buchs. An Italian gang was suspected of being behind both incidents and an international arrest warrant was issued against its leader, Carlo Gritti, a 26-year-old ex-convict wanted in Italy for murder and armed robbery. Two other Italians had been arrested in Constance, and a third man seen near the scene of the robbery at Buchs was beginning to talk after two-weeks' detention at St. Gall's jail.

#### **CHILEAN REFUGEES GET TO KNOW SWITZERLAND THE HARD WAY**

Some forty Chilean refugees of all

## HOME NEWS

### **A new fighter aircraft to be evaluated**

The Federal Council has decided to have a new aircraft, the American Northrop F-5E "Tiger", evaluated by military experts with a view to introducing a new fighter-jet in the Air Force. Following rejection of the "Mirage" and the "Corsair" after years of painstaking evaluation, the whole process is to be resumed. This time, however, it will be apparently limited to a single model. According to the NZZ, this new plane satisfies Switzerland's requirement in respect of cost, adaptation to geographical conditions and to the country's particular defence organisation. This would warrant concentrating pre-purchase studies to this one aircraft, writes the Zurich daily.

### **HOW TO SETTLE THE FATE OF HALF A MILLION UNWANTED FOREIGNERS**

Signatures are being collected in favour of a new initiative sponsored by the "National Action" against excessive foreign presence and over-population. Swiss citizens are being asked to back proposals consisting in a reduction of the resident alien population to 12 per cent of the Swiss population in every canton with the exception of Geneva, which is allowed 25 per cent by 1977. Allowing for hospital workers and international officials, which are spared by the Action's initiative, this would reduce the present population of 1,052,300 foreign persons to 560,000 during the next three years. 492,300 persons will presumably have to

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