

Patriotism and democracy : in support of "patriotism light"

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In support of "patriotism light".

The white cross on a red background has become a fashion accessory, and Switzerland is back in favour with all segments of the population. A new, apolitical form of patriotism is in vogue. Sociologist and patriotism expert Kurt Imhof explains why. Interview by Heinz Eckert

SWISS REVIEW: *Just a few years ago, it was the done thing to criticise Switzerland. What was the reason for this negative attitude towards one's homeland?*

KURT IMHOF: The student movement of '68 started the political battle against the state in all its shapes and forms. They attacked offshoots of the Cold War like state surveillance, the Federal Police, the expansion of civil protection as well as the bourgeoisie and capitalism. We mustn't forget that – just like the Free Democratic Party – the Social Democratic Party (SP) was very much an establishment party after the Second World War. This too the student movement of '68 protested against. Added to this, Switzerland was seen as a perpetrator, not a victim, of north-south dualism. At the time, the revolution was expected to start in the south. The left-wing battle against the state was then adopted by the popular parties. In the 1970s, the FDP starting campaigning under the slogan "Less state, more freedom". Anti-statism therefore has a long tradition on both sides of the political divide.

That was long before Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, wasn't it?

Yes, Switzerland was a pioneer in terms of neo-liberalism. It was years before Reagan and Thatcher came to power with the same approach. In 1983, the Swiss People's Party (SVP) took over the "antistatist sceptre" from the FDP, merging it with the "Landi" patriotism which had won it many votes. In the 1990s, the mix of anti-statism and patriotism based on intellectual national defence was further strengthened to become a key in-

gredient in the SVP's recipe for success. *Was that a calculated move by the SVP?*

The SVP's manifesto filled a vacuum for many people, but I don't think it was calculated. Christoph Blocher is certainly a patriot. He makes no pretence.

But the patriotism of today has very little in common with that.

No. The SVP gave patriotism a very political edge. Those who promoted the Swiss



Kurt Imhof: "National identities devoid of party politics."

myth with flags had already clearly chosen their political camp. The Holocaust debate of the 1990s only reinforced that. This gave the SVP another chance to strengthen their specific understanding of "Swissness".

You coined the term "patriotism light". What does it mean?

This kind of patriotism stems neither from the conservative right nor from the political

centre or the left. Because of their globalised economic policies, centrist parties weren't able to focus on the nation state, and the left considered it politically incorrect to see Switzerland as good in any way. The new patriotism stems from young people who were not involved in the old political squabbles and simply love Switzerland.

How long ago did this form of patriotism first surface?

Reservations about globalisation not only helped the SVP, but also prepared the ground for this new patriotism. So when Expo 2002 celebrated Switzerland in a carefree way, this acted as a catalyst, strengthening the trend towards the new patriotism. Even the cultural sector took part at the time. This led to the emergence of an image of Switzerland untainted by party politics.

And since then people have been able to wear the Swiss cross on their chest with impunity again and it has even become fashionable?

Indeed. Expo turned the Swiss cross into a fashion accessory. All those who had used Swissness for their political ends or rejected it on economic grounds were outmanoeuvred by young people who discovered that they lived in a great country. These young people made comparisons and were suddenly proud of their homeland.

Have other countries had similar problems with patriotism?

The Italian left also had difficulties with the state, but it was more extreme in Switzerland than anywhere else. After all, Switzerland is a nation created by volition, without any

natural, historically-dictated self-identity. It has to be renewed again and again.

Were the Swiss virtues which young people value so highly today, such as cleanliness, security, punctuality and reliability, simply not perceived in the past?

On the contrary, they were even rejected. The left denounced them as narrow-minded and bourgeois, and centrists thought these

Swiss achievements would cost too much. So patriotism fell to the only party left: the SVP.

Do democracies need patriotism?

Democracy requires a belief in a common element. It requires loyalty and acceptance. Why else should we bow to democratic decisions? That is why democracy is completely unthinkable without patriotism. Amazingly enough, both left-wingers and centrists either overlooked or forgot this fact for many years. But that's not all. Switzerland was even rejected and condemned as an outdated model. Many people thought a globalised world no longer needed national identities anymore.

What role does the EU issue play?

A decisive one because it split the elites. In the past, politics and economics always went hand-in-hand. And this schism was not good for the country's national identity.

A lot of the patriotism has come from the "secondos" (second-generation immigrants, ed.), of all people. Shouldn't they be more multiculturalist?

That's the outcome of successful integration, which always leads to a kind of over-identification. The banlieues in France, where entire subcultures of un-integrated immigrants have developed, are witnessing the opposite effect.

Is this new patriotism fashionable around the world?

Yes. The nation state is undergoing a revival as a primary organisational model for the global society, and taking on more than merely a symbolic significance. People are identifying themselves through their nation state. That's a reaction to globalisation. At the same time, democracy is also increasingly being debated worldwide.

How important is national consciousness for one's own identity?

From the political standpoint it is of decisive importance. Democracies simply cannot govern or regulate without patriotic national consciousness. But the importance of national consciousness varies at the subjective level.

So you consider the current developments positive?

Absolutely. Our democracy would be unthinkable without sovereignty coupled with a self-image as a Swiss citizen.

Do "Euroturbos" (campaigners for immediate negotiations on Swiss entry to the EU, ed.) see it that way too?

The "Euroturbos" have forgotten that because they only ever see the primacy of the economy and the market as a regulatory principle.

Isn't identification with Europe enough?

The European identity is based on either defending against new wars, Christianity or enlightenment. Of these, only enlightenment is suitable as a common denominator for a European identity.

Patriotism is always also a question of mass.

How much can it tolerate?

It depends what the patriotism is based on. Ethnic patriotism excludes all others and is thus as dangerous as religious patriotism, which harbours the idea of being a chosen nation. There is too much of both of these around. By contrast, there cannot be enough open republican patriotism, which stems from an act of volition by the citizens of a state.

Will the new patriotism have a political impact on the next federal elections?

I'm certain of it. It just depends to what extent the political left and the centrists are able to offer projects and visions for Switzerland and focus their attention on their own country. Possible topics include education, the family, transport, concordance and democracy. If the SP, FDP and CVP take up the cause of Switzerland and its institutions, the SVP will lose momentum. European policies must also be based on sovereignty, and European politicians must set themselves the target of "swissifying" Europe. Then the objective will be achieved.

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to pay for bilateralism. They say Switzerland benefits from the opening of the new markets in central and eastern Europe, and must therefore also contribute towards the development of this region. They also claim that a Swiss "No" could threaten the bilateral path. Brussels may not have said how the EU would react to a negative vote in the referendum, but it must be assumed that such an outcome would hamper further negotiations. Ratification of Switzerland's inclusion in the Schengen Agreement also still hangs in the balance. In addition, preparatory talks are underway on an agreement over the electricity market, and Switzerland has indicated it would be interested in negotiating a free trade agreement on agriculture.

At least CHF 200 per child

"One child, one allowance" – this is the principle agreed by parliament in March this year. If Swiss voters now approve the move at the end of November, every child in Switzerland will receive an allowance of at least CHF 200 and every adolescent in vocational training at least CHF 250 per month, no matter how much their parents earn. The only exception is self-employed parents, who will not benefit from the nationwide scheme.

Allowances are currently the responsibility of the cantons, and vary from CHF 154 for a first child in the canton of Jura to CHF 260 in the Valais. Parents in 17 cantons currently receive less than CHF 200 a month for their first child. But these are the minimum rates. Many cantons already grant higher allowances for second and third children as well as young people in vocational training. In addition, employers are free to pay higher allowances. For instance, civil servants receive CHF 330 a month for their first child.

The harmonisation will increase expenditure by about CHF 600 million. Three-quarters of this will be met by the economy, which will finance the allowances through employer's contributions. That is why the Swiss Trade Association and Employers' Association have called for a referendum, supported by the FDP and SVP. By contrast, the bill is backed by trade unions, the SVP, the SP and the Greens, who see the current cantonal differences as objectionable and consider child benefit payments an important element of family policy. The National Council voted 106 to 85 in favour of a universal minimum child benefit, while the Council of States approved the bill by 23 votes to 21. (RL).