

Comment

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COMMENT

WHY THE SWISS UNION OF STUDENTS WOULD NOT TALK WITH THE NSH

As reported in our Colony Page, the London group of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique heard a remarkable exposé by its central President, Mr. Jean Claude Nicole, in April. At the end of his talk, he came to speak about the Society's efforts to enrol more young people. In a conversation at the end of the meeting, he told me that it was very difficult to get young people below a certain age group, situated in their late twenties, to be interested in the work of the Society. This in fact means that the generation of young Swiss that have grown up in the Pop era do not vibrate with the ideals of the NSH any more, and in particular, do not have the patriotic feelings which inspired the promoters of the movement. In this essay we try to find out how this came about.

La Nouvelle Société Helvétique is a patriotic society, and it is therefore necessary to consider first the evolution of patriotic feeling in Switzerland. Like everywhere else, patriotism, which can be understood as the love of one's country and its institutions, is on the decline. Two main factors have determined this trend, they have been the absence of crisis at home and the increasing unicity of the world.

Patriotic fervour must be given food. Wars and national danger are an ideal provender, and the Swiss, like the British, were more patriotic during the war than they ever were since. When there is no danger to one's life or cherished style of living, then there is no need to give any particular concern to the dispenser of these things—one's own country. Secondly, owing to the invading information media, one is becoming increasingly aware of the outside world. Wars and famines many thousands of miles away will be reported with a wealth of detail which will make the cosy reader feel that these disasters are of greater importance than the local issues for which he is called upon to vote. In fact, the amount of news coming from abroad tends to make the Swiss reader forget that his own country actually exists; it will at any rate tend to make him take it for granted.

Patriotism is not only declining, it is becoming increasingly the apanage of what one may call the ruling classes. In America the most patriotic people are the businessmen and the rich. The same is true in Britain and there will be more patriotism among professional men than among the working classes. This is due to a logical chain of causes and effects which also apply to Switzerland, although the problem is tempered by strong democratic traditions and

more social equality than in most other countries.

Those who have the greatest attachment for their country are understandably those who get the most out of it. It is at the same time those who have the greatest say in its destiny. A successful lawyer enjoying Switzerland's liberal atmosphere and its booming economy, with an influence in the *Freisinnige Partei*, has got everything the country could possibly offer and will be arguably more patriotic than a road sweeper—especially as the latter is not very likely to be Swiss anymore.

But successful people will usually breed successful children, having the means to give them higher education. They will also tend to instil in them the love and respect of the country and a taste for order, hard work and prosperity, so that the mentality of the *establishment* will be perpetuated. Perhaps the most important factor besides education and background in maintaining patriotism alive is the Army. Everybody has to go in the Army, but it does not necessarily increase patriotic sentiment. It is none the less very important in maintaining the strength of the *establishment* because all successful men in Switzerland have a rank in the Army and every young man who wishes to succeed knows that it helps to become an officer.

The Officers Association is better than the Rotary or any old boy network to meet the people that count and who can be professionally useful. It also goes without saying that the Association is "right thinking" and that it would be unwise to express any undue left-wing ideas at their regular dinners. Therefore a young man may choose to grade in the Army because it is the "done thing" in his particular milieu, because nothing else would give more pride to his father and mother. He will also willingly do so because of the patriotic traditions of his family, and express them in his readiness to sacrifice 18 months for the service of his country. Finally, he will accept responsibilities in the Army because it is in his professional interest to do so. Either way, the ruling establishment is regenerated with the result that Switzerland is governed by a kind of patriotic militaryocracy.

If patriotism has tended to be linked with class and establishment, it is also linked with age. Not only because the responsible citizens of any society have to be above a minimum age, but also because it is only by having lived sufficiently long and by having had experience of life that one can understand the meaning of belonging to a country.

Seventy years of life in Switzerland, bridging two world wars and the crisis in between, bring more with them than 20 years in the unsettled post-war era. This explains why an old man will be necessarily more patriotic than a youth. Switzerland will have meant

more to him, not only because of the different times in which he will have lived, but also because of the sheer number of his years. This is also tied up with personal development. An older person has more maturity and more ability to love his country than a youth whose first impulse is to knock down everything that has been established.

Whatever patriotism the politically vocal Swiss youth may possess, it is carefully hidden beneath an outpour of criticism against many things Swiss and a display of primary concern for the world at large. The militant student is against national complacency, the Army, the failure of Swiss justice, insufficient Federal aid to developing countries, neutrality and Swiss political outsidersness, the "exploitation" by Swiss capital of poorer countries, its "ideological support" of the Vietnam war, pollution and destruction of the environment, big profits and oligarchy, the management of higher educational establishments and old fashioned taboos.

He is for the wide world and finds that his bourgeois compatriots should stop being concerned with their petty problems and rather be involved with the plight of the world. Many young people refuse to accomplish military service because they feel that their time could be better spent than in learning to kill, and would readily serve in some form of international welfare service. A majority of the young are in fact not actively interested in the defence of their country. This is not only because they have never experienced the reality of war, but also because they have Communist sympathies (since the enemy is tacitly assumed to come from behind the Iron Curtain) and because they see clearly that the world could be a big Brotherhood if only nations stopped preparing for war.

Objectively speaking, many of these ideas are valid. However, they are often expressed in a way which shows that they do not only reflect a concern for reality as it stands, but also the innate drives and hang-ups of youth. These drives are basically the need for self-assertion and idealism. There were times when youth could assert itself by identifying with the establishment. For example, the Fascist youth of Germany and Italy asserted themselves by supporting Hitler and Mussolini, whose regimes furthermore offered them the dreams of grandeur to satisfy their youthful romanticism.

Even not so long ago, the majority of Swiss youth were prepared to grow up and work for the system left for them by their elders without asking themselves too many questions. Nowadays it seems that the need for self-assertion of a growing minority of youths can only be expressed in *opposing* a system which they consider as stifling and unromantic. Somehow, and

only the psychologists could explain this, the youth of today have become more aware and sensitive, they have much higher claims on life than before and they just won't be taken for granted. Their rejection of authority is really a rejection of the establishment and its constraints. All this means that, although they may have genuine interest for the community of which they are a part, this interest is overridden by their need for self-assertion and their generous but untried feelings for the sufferings of the world at large. If this were not the case, youth would express its dissent differently.

One lives both individually and collectively. Individual life is work, family and personal ambitions. Collective life is the active participation and concern for the community of which one is a part. It is a truism to point out that most people live exclusively individual lives. There are nonetheless citizens of good will, represented in the Churches and the political parties, who have a genuine concern for the fate of their fellow citizens.

The Nouvelle Société Helvétique is the prime example of an association of such responsible citizens and it gathers people from the churches and the parties alike. Its only creed is patriotism—not the belief in national superiority—but the patriotism which is a willingness to serve the country. This implies a belief in the country as an end in itself. The main aim of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique now is to try to master, and not to suffer the future. However patriotism is related to

a certain background, a certain status in society and a certain age and it is not erroneous to say that most members of the Nouvelle Société Helvétique are middle-aged and in positions of responsibility. They are part of the establishment, support it and think in terms of its ideas.

The Society is concerned with the future and calls on specialists to probe into the world of tomorrow and to plan it. This is certainly in keeping with the times, but although the Society is ready to apply the most modern methods of science for the welfare of the country, its conceptions have not evolved since the Second World War and it remains a basically conservative movement. "Why change what is good?"

For the Nouvelle Société Helvétique, an encounter with the student union meant no more than an exchange of views, an exercise in intellectual openness and the hope of enlisting student co-operation. For the students it meant more. By dialoguing with the NSH they were speaking with representatives from the establishment and political power (as many influential politicians belong to the Society) and were therefore being forced to make friends with those very forces against which they had to militate if only to have a political action of their own. On the other hand, they couldn't just begin a dialogue with the NSH and then break it, because they obviously recognised the validity of the aims of the Society and risked bringing discredit upon themselves by not joining forces.

To come back to psychology, we should note that the NSH is interested in practical issues whereas the students are interested in self-assertion. This is reflected in their concern for principles rather than facts—principles which have been formed in their reaction to the establishment and its lack of idealistic appeal. Secondly, the middle-aged leaders of the NSH identify with the motherland and want to work for something which is part of themselves. The students only belong marginally to Switzerland, they belong just as much to the world and their sense of belonging is nowhere as firmly grounded. The NSH is interested in reality. The students are a little afraid of it because it is a zone where they can no longer play freely with generous ideals and look down upon the failures of their elders.

Any brass-tack discussion would mean an interruption from the more exhilarating problems of the world at large and a disagreeable switch from the luxury of dissent to the real difficulties of actual problems. Then there is an element of insecurity rather comparable to what the black militant feels towards the white liberal. The white liberal is open to the problems of black people yet will act from a standpoint where he can come to their help according to his own light. He would be much grieved if the blacks began to assert themselves as different from what he wants them to be.

However well intentioned white liberals may be, a black militant will always see them as members of an



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entirely other world. The difference is unbridgeable and therefore the society which will respect black dignity will not be created with liberal charity, but with a Revolution. This is how the extremist sees things.

This also explains why black militants and radicals like Jerry Rubin hate to be interviewed: They know that they are being put on show before the eyes of a society which doesn't speak the same language. In a similar, but fortunately far milder way, the Swiss students feared that they would be patronised by the NSH and saw no point in it. They felt, like the black militant, that they wouldn't be understood anyway and that it was better to keep apart what couldn't be reconciled.

This of course doesn't mean that the NSH isn't for young people, it just happens that in 1971 the majority of them do not share its beliefs and that many others see it as irredeemably committed to sustaining an establishment which they are trying to break away from. There is no reason why the NSH should change its views to please the young. Two parties with different ideologies can co-exist and respect each other, in fact, this mutual respect is a necessary condition for a dialogue. But in order for a constructive dialogue between the NSH and the students to take place, the NSH will have to acknowledge the students as adult people with genuine beliefs. The students, on their part, will have to make sure that what they believe in is genuine. When this happens, they won't have any more qualms about not being respected.

(PMB)

SWISS NEWS IN BRIEF

The Federal Council answered a petition sent in last December by 527 Jurassian soldiers from the 9th Infantry Regiment. The note proclaimed the right of conscientious objection and the necessity for instituting a non-military welfare service. The Federal Council replied that the National Council had decided back in 1967 that the creation of such a civil service would not conform to the Federal Constitution. On the issue of conscientious objectors, it said that the harshness of their fate had been considerably mitigated in the recent past. The Federal Council referred the young petitioners to the private initiative launched last year in Basle in favour of an International Civil Service. If this initiative gathered enough signatures, said the Federal Council, then it would be for the Swiss people to give their suffrage on this issue in a democratic way.

A Press conference given by the President of the Confederation on the question of armaments gave the opportunity to Mr. Heiner P. Schulthess, Head of the Armaments Services, to inform the Press that the "Corsair" was still the favourite aircraft among the five short-listed types retained in the past two years. The evaluation now appears to be nearing conclusion. The "Corsair" is in fact the most costly of the ground-assault fighters under review. With the 1.3 billion francs allotted for the replacement of the Air

Force "Venoms" it would be possible to acquire 60 "Corsairs", 70 Dassault "Milans", 75 "Skyhawks", 80 "Hunters", 90 "Fiats" or 120 "Saabs".

The Federal Council made a most solemn appeal to the cantons and the communes to show more thrift in their spending, more particularly in their building projects. In a letter to the Council of States it underlined that "it was absolutely necessary to put a clamp on inflation to maintain the stability of the franc, to ensure peace of labour and to promote social justice". It furthermore hinted that new anti-inflationary measures were in the offing. Inflation also had its part to play in the very small profit of the Swiss GPO. The last postal increases were made in 1967, when local charges were increased from 10 cents to 20 cents and charges for the rest of the country increased from 20 to 30 cents. These measures had immediately brought in 128 million francs of new revenue to the Post Office, which had however been eroded to 15.8 million francs last year. There is therefore a serious possibility of a future increase in postal charges.

Processions were organised in the major towns of the country on 1st May. They were generally well ordered and peaceful, except in Zurich. Youth and foreign worker organisations ended their traditional march with brushes against the police, which had to make use of tear gas and made several arrests. On the streamers carried by the marchers one could read demands for 13-month wages, for popular retire-

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