

Approaching Political Anthropology of Switzerland

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Recent social anthropological studies dealing with Swiss society focussed mainly on the topic of migration. While important work has been done in this area, it still seems that the focus on migration and ethnicity reproduced a predicament inscribed in the history of the discipline. Yet, anthropology's expertise on the non-European, "non-modern" Other, legitimized it as key-discipline for studying migration, integration and multiculturalism. Hence, it can be argued, that social anthropological work on migration reinforced the "savage slot", the discipline was assigned to in the division of labour of the modern sciences (Trouillot).

However, from a critical anthropological perspective it is not migration itself, which is at stake, but the problematization of migration in the wider political and historical setting of Switzerland. The public debates on the plebiscite for the ban of future minarets (2009) and on the plebiscite concerning the deportation of criminal foreigners (2010) suggest, that migration is an area of contestation, which allows various political actors to talk about the uneasy re-positioning of the Swiss nation/state and the re-constitution of social hierarchy at the conjuncture of new geopolitical power relations after Cold War, accelerating globalization and neoliberal capitalism. Hence, while migration is certainly a strategic field of anthropological interest, it is embedded in the wider context of the "political anthropology of Switzerland".

We suggest to foster a general anthropological perspective on political discourses, institutions and practices in Switzerland. Anthropological research and debates on the intimate politics of globalization (i.e. Cole and Durham, Appadurai), the state (i.e. Blom Hansen), neoliberalism (i.e. Ong), media (i.e. Abu-Lughod), and others – mostly dealing with non-European countries – could be fruitful to gain new insights into the political life of Switzerland. Moreover, ethnographic fieldwork with its potential of exploration, thick description, estrangement of doxa and multi-sitedness could enable anthropologists to contribute new perspectives on Swiss political culture and institutions.

Following fields of research might be starting points for the project of a "political anthropology of Switzerland":

Perception, construction and practice of the state in general and the welfare state in specific have been considerably altered by neoliberal reforms and discourses since the 1990s. While the redistributive state has been drawn back in favour of market forces, it intensified the construction and surveillance of various deviant populations. What are new models of governmentality concerning its different welfare, migrant or elite populations in this context? How did the reforms affect different agents and clients of the state and their imaginations of the state? What are spaces and discourses of critique and political subversion?

In the conjuncture of new geopolitical power relations after Cold War, accelerating globalization and neoliberal capitalism we can observe different attempts to re-articulate the national project of Switzerland. While on the public political level national-conservative isolationism tries to restore the Cold War model of Switzerland, a “light patriotism” under the brand of “Swissness” seems to be a pragmatic way for the political mainstream to engage neoliberal globalization. Although latter remained quite undefined on the level of party politics, it has become a dominant feature in the popular culture and public spaces: Celebrating “Swissness” at the World Soccer championship; the focus of the Swiss arts council Pro Helvetia and Swiss television on traditional folk culture; efforts for branding goods (i.e. cheese, chocolate) and heritage sites as Swiss through international agreements like WTO, UNESCO, etc. How are these and other narratives and visualizations of the Swiss nation entangled in the dynamics of the nation state, popular culture and neoliberal globalization? How are boundaries of Swissness constructed in accordance to the normativities of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity and religion? In which settings and milieus are these cultural politics of Switzerland negotiated and cultivated? And how do political ennui, subversion and utopias simmer beside the dominant political discourses and produce alternative ways to the official politics?

The SEG-SSE-working group on “Political Anthropology of Switzerland” was established in the context of plebiscite for the deportation of criminal foreigners in 2010. The working group wants to promote social anthropological research on political life in Switzerland. Moreover, it fosters an active position of the Swiss community of social anthropologists towards Swiss politics.