

Re-Designing Switzerland

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I hope you do not know the Computer game-series „Call of Duty“. As a historian of technology, I have the dubious task to be familiar with this kind of trash or what you might want to call the digital culture’s view on politics and society. What is interesting about this game is neither its turnover of more than 55 billion dollars nor its shooting orgies, but rather its pretext. The pretext consists in the necessity of a democratic nation building process in a failed state.

Switzerland is not really a failed state and we have no dictators to be overthrown. Basically it is a wealthy urban sprawl with a huge alpine recreation area, an economically successful reminiscence of an outdated political model that is playing the game of national independence in the middle of global distortions and dynamics. No wonder the actual political situation is devastating. Just think of the clear-cut partisanship in this country: One side would rather have Switzerland be conserved under a cheese dome and run it the “Ballenberg”-way – a currently disputed open air Swiss folk museum. The other side is mistaking the country for an easy money producing business model with some annoying but rather weak political strings attached. Neither of these camps will yield a sustainable political future. But if the future is supposed to count on Switzerland beyond the domes of cheese and profit, then Switzerland must become a politically interesting project again. So there is, in fact, an urgent call of duty.

What should we do in order to “rebuild” or “redesign” Switzerland, to found it once more? That is one of the many questions the organizers of this salon are confronting us with in their red booklet. Of course, the question is deeply rooted in the culture of architectural practice. If a design, a building, or a plan isn’t working anymore, just take another sheet of paper. Or call the demolition squad.

Let me try to answer this difficult question without going back to ground zero. Instead I first want to claim that such an endeavor can only be successful if there was a good political reason to rebuild Switzerland. And second, it can only be achieved if we take the risks of unconventional thinking. For both conditions, we have to cope with a dynamic interaction and entanglement of both challenges and opportunities. I strongly believe that challenges are not a simple disturbance, if you regard them as a wake-up call to creativity and turn them into opportunities. Because things can always get worse, unless you try to make them better.

Here are five suggestions for a future nation building process, without shooting the enemy, without a *tabula rasa* movement, and without calling the demolition squad:

1. Globalization and diversity

The ongoing process we call „globalization“ is a fact. Switzerland should seize this economic and cultural opportunity by investing in one of its most important resources: diversity. We have so many

people living, studying and working in Switzerland who are fluent in Croatian, Portuguese, Russian, Hindi, Chinese or in African languages and at the same time speak German, French or English. This is an immense source of “wealth” and opportunity. For languages are not only instrumental for communication. They also allow for alternative ways of thinking, evaluating and eventually taking action. There is culture attached to language, and globalization is a challenge not so much in terms of its imperial homogeneity but rather as a trial of difference.

2. Regulation and subsidiarity

Regulations should apply to real problems and to the very conditions where they arise and where they have to be settled. The redesigning challenge for subsidiarity principles will consist in finding the right balance between too much difference and harmful competition between communities, cantons, and regions on the one side and central, bilateral, and supranational regulations on the other.

3. Lay politics and politics as a profession

The good message first: Switzerland has an excellent administrative staff on all levels. The challenge: The civil servants are often far more qualified than the personnel of our political systems, the MPs or city councilors who are, in their majority, proud to be political laymen and –women. Even if they already make most of their living with their political office, they still pretend it to do a mere side-job. How to deal with this? We can either hire intellectually limited civil servants who can put up with our lay politicians. Or we can try to professionalize Swiss politics. Yes, that would probably be the end of our much-appraised “political lay system” for which we have coined an astonishingly martial expression: the Milizsystem. And yes, the challenge would consist of combining the lay systems “esprit civil” with more professional expertise. But that is feasible, provided that politicians stop fobbing their public with (farmer-)bread and circuses and selling it for silly.

4. Global changes and local stability

Stability used to be one of the typical Swiss brands. Lately, it has been mistaken for stasis and immobility. Unfortunately, we have not become more dynamic, but rather more erratic and unpredictable. An ever-growing ballot hustle and bustle lacking real thoughtfulness is undermining predictability and stability. Populist politics follows Facebook logics: like or unlike, without any plan and concept. What needs to be done, instead, is building up stable “horizons of expectation”. Of course, there will be likes and unlikes, there will be debate, struggle and hard negotiation. But introducing the proportional representation system one century ago, the step by step establishment of a now comprehensive social security system or the fiscal redistribution among the cantons – these were fiercely disputed decisions in the past. Nevertheless, they turned out to be as basic an “infrastructure” as a city’s water supply system or the country’s electric power grid. Yes, there were some populist moves also in the past, such as the ban on absinthe in 1908. But this does not justify narrow-minded unnecessary votes like the ban on Minarets over a hundred years later.

Sustainable procedures are the contrary to easy-money dynamics and populist politics. The idea to sell the Swiss National bank’s gold reserves in order to pay for the old age insurance was neither wise nor sustainable. The debt cap, on the contrary, is sustainable in the long run, although it might be annoying from time to time.

5. Ideas and procedures which account for their future

In the 1950s and early 60s, writers, architects, and legal experts – people like Max Frisch, Lucius Burkhardt, and Max Imboden – warned against what they perceived as tame politics and unplanned growth. *Attention – Switzerland! Or: The Helvetic Malaise!* Such were the titles of their pamphlets.

Let's add the well justified critique of Iris von Roten about "*Women in the playpen*" – way ahead of what the Swiss could swallow on deconstructing gender roles in her time.

Even these times began to change. And yes, system builders also played a role in it. In the early 1970s, for instance, a bunch of youngsters founded their so called "Spinnerclub" within the Swiss Federal Railways: a forum where transport economists met engineers to fundamentally debate about how to shape the future mobility in Switzerland. "What if we changed the entire train time schedule at a stroke?" What if we do not start by counting the tracks and locomotives, but instead by designing *ideal connections* between major cities and small towns? That's how the rhythmic time table – *Taktfahrplan, horaire cadence, orario cadenzato* – was, against many bureaucratic odds, developed and became the core of "Rail 2000".

Do we need this sort of "spinner's clubs" again? I think that such a forum, building on a given resources of cultural diversity, abstaining from easy-money dynamism and from fuzzy Facebook-populism, could reflect on a sustainable future for the economic development.

Here is a draft: If the banking sector will focus on reputable and reliable financial services, it certainly will continue to be competitive. There are highly specialized industrial producers in this country who are world leaders thanks to their stable quality standards and their flexibility in adapting to changing demands. Above all, Switzerland combines a well-functioning dual education system with high performance in research and teaching. Ten universities, about half of them even world class.

"Call of duty" for the redesign of Switzerland means: to count on diversity, to review the rules of accountability, to upgrade the professional expertise of the political system, to create stable expectations and invent, by ways of experimental thinking, sustainable processes and institutions.