

# UC Berkeley

## TRANSIT

### Title

Switzerland, a Country of Paradoxes: An Interview about Swiss Identity, Politics and Culture with Hugo Loetscher, Roger de Weck and Iso Camartin

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*Switzerland's political system is considered slow and fragmented. Swiss Direct Democracy exists within a federal structure of 26 cantons, each with veto power, in which a simple majority is needed to pass legislation. Does such a political system have a future?*

**Roger de Weck (RdW):** Direct Democracy is a mechanism with great future, but federalism is a system that must be modernized in a radical way and simplified, including the composition of the Federal Council. I believe that there will be a merger between Swiss cantons in the next 20 years. In terms of sovereignty, it is the people, not Parliament, who have the last word. Placing great value on the ability to compromise, the Swiss people are not interested in electing a strong government. As a result, there is very little room for maneuver, from a relatively weak central government and strong local cantons.

**Iso Camartin (IC):** In a direct democracy, you have to go to vote on issues, perpetually, every two months at least there's national voting on something, and usually you could see differences between French-speaking Switzerland and German-speaking Switzerland in their attitudes, either a more liberal, or more conservative standpoint.

Now, what we are seeing in the last five or six, maybe ten years, is that the differences go not so much along the language border, but they go along the differences between rural parts of Switzerland and urban areas of Switzerland. So I think the urbanization of life—also in Switzerland, the concentration of people, not in big cities as you have here, but in cities with a lot of villages around the city, practically, people concentrate in a certain area of a city, as you have here, too, in the Bay Area, so we speak of these greater areas.

It is clear that the real provincial and rural traditions are a little bit more conservative, more suspicious of heterogeneous elements. A city has more possibilities to be tolerant, to accept differences than within a small village where you know everyone, and you know the family history of each house in the village—this happens in America also, the social control in small villages, in small groups, is enormous.

*How does Switzerland today function as a multicultural nation?*

**RdW:** With a twenty percent foreigner population, Switzerland is a festival of minorities and a community of communities. These concepts have served as the country's foundation to stability since 1848, the time of the drafting of its first modern Constitution. Swiss identity has to be defined within the notion of a *Willensnation*, that is, a nation founded and held together by a shared history, civic virtues, geography, and the will to remain united.

Despite linguistic differences, Swiss unity and a common identity is maintained through citizens who share the same conception of citizenship and compromise, political culture and economic success, common ideals, and *die Macht der Gewohnheit* (the power of habit, custom). The rise of English has been a symbol of globalization... the increased use of dialect in German-speaking Switzerland can be viewed as an answer to this globalization. These recent phenomena are not threatening Swiss unity, but rather demonstrate Switzerland's ability to deal with other cultures while rediscovering its own roots. Switzerland is not a nation but a project, whose national identity is always questioned and debated. This is at the root of Swiss radicalism.

*Romansh is the smallest of the four official languages in Switzerland. It has only recently been standardized. How do people in Graubünden feel about the attempts in Switzerland to standardize Romansh?*

**IC:** We have, practically, two reactions to standardization: those who are against it for one reason, that the distance between the spoken language and the written language is increasing—so they say, if you are in an endangered situation, you should not make experiments: let's stick with what we have until now, and not try to enter a new field, because if our children have to learn a written form, which we ourselves do not practice, it's going to be very complicated. So this is what I would say is the conservative reaction to it.

Then there is a second reaction, of people who are more dynamic and who say, it is important that we move towards a standard version because today, it is impossible to continue to publish Romansh books, school books, in five different variants. So there is an economic and modern reason for the standard version of Romansh, [which is called] *Rumantsch Grischun*. I think it's a question also of generation: the younger generation has few problems with the standard version. The older generation suffers more, seeing that the new version, the standard version is not as developed as the others are, of course because the richness of vocabulary, the richness of literary documents, in the traditional versions, is enormous compared to when you start a new written form of a language—it has to build up.

Now we have poets who write poems also in *Rumantsch Grischun*, who write novels in *Rumantsch Grischun*. A big effort is made, especially also the whole advertising business is concentrated on one variant, because then you can publish it also in all parts of the canton of Graubünden. And important is also that the new [daily] newspaper, which is called *La Quotidiana*, this has a variant of written forms, the international and national parts are written in the new form of *Rumantsch Grischun*. The local parts are still in the local variants. So at the moment, we are in a transitional situation. Can you believe that Google made a special program, without our paying for it, in Romansh? You can have Google in Romansh, and they paid for everything. Now we also have Radio-Romansh: if you go on RTR.ch, you can listen everywhere in the world!

*How does the country handle its immigration policy?*

**RdW:** In the years since 1950, when Italian and Spanish immigrants entered Switzerland because of the nation's need for a work force, xenophobia has grown. However, Swiss immigration policies with the European Union are no longer tightly controlled. We have treaties with the EU to allow all Europeans to work in Switzerland. Switzerland's success as an economic giant with its raw materials and self-initiative, the influx of immigrants, of whom some founded famous Swiss companies such as Nestle, and a university system that is accessible by all citizens, even the poorest.

**Hugo Loetscher (HL):** I have always been outspoken about the need for Switzerland to join as part of the European Union, otherwise there is a risk of falling by the wayside in terms of global importance, integration, and unity. I rank it as the most important issue for the country at the present time, but this step will come over time, hopefully while I am still alive to see it. A variety of causes have kept the country from becoming a member, including a fear of losing "Swiss culture," a nebulous idea that is inadequate given the multitude of languages and cultures that

make up Switzerland. Another force of this anti-membership nationalism is the Swiss People's Party which perpetuates xenophobic views that spurred the Swiss-centric sentiment. This party had numerous questionable advertising and campaigns tactics including the "Sicherheit Schaffen" (achieve safety) poster that featured three white sheep kicking a black sheep off of the Swiss flag. These views are dangerous, and prey upon the fears of many Swiss.

**IC:** The Swiss are in their mentality people who are extreme individualists: the state should not be too strong, not interfere too much. The state should not be here to give privileges to certain groups of society. Switzerland has been very open toward immigrants who are rich, and has been very critical toward the immigrants who are poor, who are looking for jobs or for opportunities, for money, who need help because they come out of the poorest countries of this world. Switzerland is going through the same process as other European countries.

Even today the questions about granting asylum to people who are persecuted—this is one of the human rights that has a high importance in the legal discourse. If you are a decent society you should respect human rights. And human rights means also you have to protect those persons, and if their lives are in danger, you have to do something. You have to let them in, and feed them, and give them health care and everything they need, until they can make a living out of their own possibilities again. It is [a] kind of balance you have to find between the daily political discussions about "do we have to be more open or do we have to close our borders more strictly?" If you see who is knocking at your door, you have to find out if it is real misery or if it is easier to make a living in Switzerland than in Nigeria—then you have to say, now, what we have to do today is not simply say to all people from Nigeria, "Please come to our country," but help develop programs of development in their own countries.

I am very much in favor of huge investments by Switzerland in, for instance, water supply, planting, agricultural development, where Swiss have a lot of experience and technology to add. This has to be one of the priorities of living together today, that you do not simply open up the door and say at a certain moment, "Now we are full, finished." That's what happened during the catastrophe of the Second World War, when we had this ideology of *Das Boot ist voll* ("the boat is full"), which was a tremendous thing, especially after '42, when the alternative was the concentration camp and death. Those Jews who were stopped at the borders of Switzerland and sent back to Germany, they went directly into Auschwitz and Birkenau. That is one of the historical shocks for Switzerland, that you have to look very precisely and practice human rights, daily, in a way not to go into a trap as we did in Switzerland during the Second World War, with fugitives at the border, and we would say, *Das Boot ist voll*, and they would end in the gas chambers.

**HL:** When I was in Latin America, a schoolgirl once asked me: "Who discovered Switzerland?" Instead of laughing at question, I decided to take a unique perspective by writing "Die Entdeckung der Schweiz" ("The discovery of Switzerland"). The piece is an insightful and humorous depiction of a group's first encounter with the Swiss. A band of explorers seek eternal life and an El Dorado of riches, but instead encounter watch-toting, regulation-enforcing, and prescription drug-peddling Swiss. The story pokes fun at some of the classic stereotypes of the Swiss, and gives an interesting view of how odd the culture might look like to an outsider. My traveling is not a way to escape Switzerland, or to lose its problems, but an opportunity to perceive my homeland differently, which allowed me realize that Switzerland as a country was not special. People everywhere have unique cultures, multitudes of geographies and languages,

and the small country of Switzerland was not a culturally unique oasis as many of its inhabitants would like to think. I once wrote a story about a Swiss man who never left his Zurich apartment and wanted to embrace the world but found that his arms were too short.

*What is the future of Switzerland's policy of neutrality?*

**RdW:** Switzerland's neutrality policy, instead of simply being a mentality and tradition, should become a policy matter again. Emphasizing that Switzerland learn from and admit its past mistakes, Switzerland should join the European Union. Through this, the country may expand its Direct Democracy mechanism on how to best implement initiatives at the cantonal levels and increase flexibility in reaching policy decisions. Switzerland cannot return to isolationist policies because of its central location, and must maintain good foreign relations to safeguard its continued economic prosperity. As countries like Sweden (which also has a neutrality policy) demonstrate, being a member of the EU yields no adverse effect and still allows for countries to pursue their individual foreign policies. All in all, Switzerland should no longer dwell in its schizophrenia of seeking beneficial relations with the EU and Germany yet at the same time not wanting to get too close for fear of losing itself.

**HL:** You know, had we expanded the military after the Second World War, we probably could have taken over Europe and all this fuss about joining the European Union would never have been an issue... Joking aside, the army was something I and others went through as young men. It had a long history in Switzerland, with heavy nationalistic undertones during and after the Second World War when it was seen as a source of Swiss prowess and pride. However, the army's importance and budget have waned in subsequent years. To me, this seems only logical. In fact, what need is there for a neutral and small country to retain a large military base?