# Beyond the Alpine Myth, Across the Linguistic Ditch

## Cultural History in Switzerland

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Switzerland knows very well how to sell her clichés. Travellers arriving at Zurich Airport are received by cowbells and pictures of sunny mountain pastures, while being transported with underground shuttle trains to passport control and customs. And the commercial website *swissmade.com* promotes its range of Swiss army knives, watches and wood carvings with the assertion that "following the stereotype, the Swiss all live in the Alps, tend to their cows and yodel when they are happy."[1]

Of course, the well-known image of Switzerland as a mountain state neglects large parts of reality. It does not take into account that over two thirds of the Swiss are not living in alpine villages, but in urban centres far away from the mountains. It also neglects the fact that Switzerland was one of the first countries on the European continent to become industrialised in the early 19th century and that it has today a highly productive machine and chemical industry, not to speak of her notorious banking system, all of them completely oriented to the world market. The image of Switzerland as a rural mountain state, however, became prevalent precisely in the 19th century, when the country underwent dramatic social changes with the advent of industrial production and the foundation of the federal state in 1848. The Alpine myth, on the one hand, naturalised national identity and served as an ideological tool to unify a country that was not only multilingual but also divided in various geographical, religious and

1 www.swissmade.com, 09.03.2010.

political minorities.[2] On the other hand, it was a symbol for pureness and down-to-earthness and hence a unique selling proposition to attract tourists from the European upper class in need of leisure and to promote industrial products such as watches or milk chocolate.[3]

The traditional cliché of Switzerland as a mountain state had its counterpart in a particular view on history. Switzerland was designed as a special case—a nation that had been a democracy for seven hundred years, had not taken part in the killings of the two World Wars and had not been entangled in the crimes of colonialism. Instead, Switzerland was described as a country that had always been neutral and true to its humanitarian mission. For a long time this notion was sustained by historical and cultural historical research, particularly in the late 19th and early 20th century. It has been challenged, however, by cultural historians since the late 1980s.

In the following, I will highlight three aspects. First, the tradition of cultural history in Switzerland after the late 19th century. Second, current research trends and an overview of some important institutions. Third, I will point out some remarkable differences in the impact of cultural historical paradigms in the French- and German-speaking parts of the country.

## Traditions of cultural history in Switzerland since the late 19th century

Cultural history never was a clearly defined issue in Swiss academia. It was never institutionalised and never formed a proper school of thought with a distinct research agenda.[4] However, several scholars were interested in the role of cultural traits for the identity of the Swiss nation and in their significance for historical development in general. This tradition can be found particularly in the German-speaking part of the country since the late 19th century. In 1865/66, Otto Henne, state archivist of St. Gallen published his *Geschichte des Schweizervolkes und seiner Kultur von den ältesten Zeiten bis zur Gegenwart* (History of the Swiss people and its culture from ancient times to the present). Henne's opus aimed at explicitly boosting the identity of the Swiss nation. To this end, he emphasised that the Swiss were a special people due to their alpine provenance and that the Cau-

2 Zimmer, 1998.

3 Rossfeld, 2007.

4 See for an overview on cultural history in Switzerland the excellent review article of Vallotton/Natchkova, 2008.

casian race could ultimately be traced back to the inhabitants of the Alps (which would make the Swiss the ancestors of what Henne called "the European race").[5]

While Henne's work, despite its title, was much more interested in military and political matters than in culture itself, other works of this period explicitly followed a cultural historical research agenda. They can be roughly distinguished into three different approaches.[6] The first embraced scholars such as Karl Dändliker (1849-1910), the founder of the Swiss National Museum in Zurich, or the famous Jakob Burckhardt (1818-1897), who claimed that art and religion represented the mind of a particular historical epoch.[7] The second approach was formed by scholars from Fribourg, a stronghold of Swiss Catholicism, such as Kaspar Decurtins (1855-1916) or Gonzague de Reynold (1880-1970). They were critical of the liberal federal state, founded in 1848 against fierce opposition from the Catholic, and disapproved of democracy. In contrast, they claimed that it was Catholicism that guaranteed the continuity of federalism and the tradition of the *old Confederation* in the modern nation state. A result of their activities was the foundation of the *Zeitschrift für schweizerische Kirchengeschichte* (Journal for Swiss Church History) in 1907; after the 1980s, this journal had been influenced by the emerging histories of mentalities and of everyday life and was renamed into *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Religions- und Kulturgeschichte* (Swiss Journal for the History of Religion and Culture) in 2004.[8] A third tradition came from folklore studies, which were especially influential at the University of Zurich with scholars such as Paul Geiger (1887-1952), Richard Weiss (1907-1962), Arnold Niederer (1914-1998) or Rudolf Schenda (1930-2000). In contrast to the approaches of Dändliker and Burckhardt, they were not interested in the intellectual or material culture of social elites but rather in the everyday culture of common people.[9]

In particular the folklore studies approach had an influence on what later became cultural history through the works of Rudolf Braun. Braun, who had published his studies on the transformations of everyday life of the population in a rural part of the canton of Zurich during industrialisation in the 1960s, had begun his academic career in folklore studies. Later on, he orientated himself more towards social and economic history and began to investigate topics such as the

5 Henne, 1865, p. 3.

6 Vallaton/Natchkova, 2008, p. 95-98.

7 Dändliker, 1884-1900; Burckhardt, 1860; Burckhardt, 1905.

8 Vallaton/Natchkova, 2008, p. 96f.

9 Id., 2008, p. 97-99.

history of the body or the relationship of dancing with political power.[10] Also in Zurich, the economic historian Hansjörg Siegenthaler began to develop a theory of historical change that claimed economic crisis to be not the reason for cultural changes but rather the other way round: he assumed that the shifting of cultural paradigms led to collective uncertainty and as a consequence to economic crisis.[11]

Another important base for cultural history was Basel with scholars such as Markus Mattmüller, who investigated new approaches to the history of religion with a book on Leonhard Ragaz, or Martin Schaffner, who began to engage in the deployment of historical anthropology.[12] The Institute of History of the University of Basel was also one of the first in Switzerland to promote the method of oral history.[13] It was also in Basel, where František Graus (1921-1989) stimulated the use of cultural historical methods such as the history of mentalities for medieval history and influenced scholars such as Guy Marchal or Hans-Jörg Gilomen who later on became professors in Luzern and Zurich respectively.[14]

Whereas in the German-speaking part of Switzerland cultural history developed parallel to social history and actually was from the beginning an integral part of the social historical analysis, the situation was quite different in the French-speaking part of the country. There, the synthesis of cultural and social history was less common and began only in the 1980s. Before that, scholars who aimed to expand historical research beyond the established fields of political history engaged much more in intellectual history or the history of literature. Important historians of this tradition are Chady Guyot (1898-1974) from Neuchâtel or Marcel Raymond (1897-1981), Albert Béguin (1901-1957), Jean Rousset (1910-2002) or Jean Starobinski (1920) from Geneva.[15]

## Current research trends

Since the 1990s, a new wave of cultural history established itself in Swiss academia. Influenced by poststructuralist theory, historians began to test new ap-

10 Braun, 1960; Braun, 1965; Braun, 2000; Braun/Gugerli, 1993. For the academic impact of Braun see Tanner, 2010.

11 Siegenthaler, 1993.

12 Mattmüller, 1957-1968; Schaffner, 1992.

13 See for an overview on earlier works using oral sources for Swiss history Spuhler et al., 1994.

14 Graus, 1974; Marchal, 2006.

15 Vallotton/Natchkova, 2008, p. 104f.

proaches to the past. One of the first topics these new approaches were applied to was national identity. The traditional view of Switzerland as an innocent bystander of history had been challenged by historians since the 1970s. By borrowing particularly from the works of Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson, a younger generation of historians now pointed out that Swiss national identity was not something that was rooted in mediaeval times but was rather an invention of traditions emerging in the late 18th century. Particularly the two jubilees of the 1990s—the 700th anniversary of the Swiss confederation in 1991 and the 150th anniversary of the federal state in 1998—stimulated a multitude of studies on national identity.[16] National identity is of particular interest in Switzerland due to the multilingual nature of the country, its strong federalist structure and its subdivision in various geographical, religious and political minorities. How such a heterogeneous country could establish a stable national identity was a question that seemed worthwhile investigating.[17]

Other researchers tackled the question of citizenship and the exclusion of certain groups from the national community. They studied the rise of anti-Semitism and *xenophobia* in the late 19th century. This topic was not least initiated by the discussions of Switzerland's role in the Second World War and the rejection of Jewish refugees at the Swiss border during the wartime years.[18] Swiss gender history was stimulated by the question why Switzerland did not grant women the right to vote until 1971. How could it be that a country, which in the 19th century was among the avant-garde in republican thought, could become dead last in Europe in terms of progressive gender politics? This was a question several generations of gender historians tackled.[19]

Another field of research is the history of knowledge. In contrast to the approaches presented above, research in this field is less interested in the concept of the nation but rather in how the world view of historical actors came into being and how this constructive act interrelated to social power. Stimulated by the works of Michel Foucault and Bruno Latour, researchers investigated the history of the body, the history of sexuality and the history of science and technology.[20] One important institution in this field of research is the interdisciplinary centre for the history and philosophy of knowledge in Zurich.[21]

16 Kreis, 1991; Marchal/Mattioli, 1992; Altermatt et al., 1998.

17 Zimmer, 2003.

18 Mattioli, 1998; Kury, 2003; Studer et al. 2008.

19 Joris/Witzig, 1986; Blattmann/Meier, 1998; Mesmer, 2007; Dejung, 2010.

20 Gugerli, 1996; Tanner, 1999; Sarasin, 2001; Groebner, 2004.

21 http://www.zgw.ethz.ch, 21.09.2010.

Several researchers have investigated environmental history and the social aspects of handling natural resources.[22] Studies of media and iconography were further fields of research. There are two National Centres of Competence in Research, sponsored by the Swiss National Science Foundation on these topics, one on the history of mediality and another on the power of iconic representation, both of which have a distinct interdisciplinary orientation and include researches from several universities.[23]

A most recent development is the application of postcolonial theories and transnational perspectives on Swiss history. Research in this area is concerned with the role of colonialism for the establishment of scientific disciplines such as physical anthropology or biology and with the significance of the colonial *other* for Swiss identity.[24] This is a field of particular interest, since Switzerland had no colonies of its own but was nevertheless culturally and economically deeply entangled with colonialism. One newly established institution to study these research topics is the interdisciplinary research centre Asia and Europe from the University of Zurich, which includes several historical projects.[25]

These developments of the last two decades were influenced by cultural theory. Discourse analysis, poststructuralist theories and methods of cultural anthropology became quite common in historical research. Although there is no school of cultural history in Switzerland—there is nothing like the *Annales* school or the subaltern study group within the country—, Swiss historians were very swift in the application of these theories as they adopted them from abroad. This process was facilitated by the fact that most Swiss historians are used to speak at least two foreign languages and that the Swiss National Science Foundation urges young scholars to spend some years abroad during their PHD studies or their postdoc years.

With respect to institutionalisation it has to be mentioned that there exists no particular society for cultural history in Switzerland. Yet, there are several informal research bodies and journals in which discussions of matters concerning cultural history take place. The most important medium is the journal *traverse—Zeitschrift für Geschichte* (Journal for History). It was founded in 1994 and has three issues per year. Every issue has a thematic focus, which often has a cultural historical orientation. Recent issues covered topics such as the history of emotions, domestic violence, the relations between humans and animals, the history of masculinity and the role of scientific images. The *traverse* publishes

22 Walter, 1990; Mathieu, 1998; Pfister/Summermatter, 2004; Walter, 2008.

23 http://www.mediality.ch, 21.09.2010; http://www.eikones.ch, 21.09.2010.

24 Brändle, 1995; Wirz, 1998; Harries, 2007; Purtschert, 2008.

25 http://www.asienundeuropa.uzh.ch, 09.03.2010.

papers in German, French, English, and sometimes even in Italian.[26] This multilingualism is characteristic of the Swiss scientific community, which is guided by the principle that all scholars should talk and write in their own language. This means, at least in theory, that every researcher should be able to understand at least two other languages, apart from his own.

As anywhere else, the impact of the linguistic turn and of poststructuralist theories divided scholars during the 1990s. In contrast to other countries, however, these debates were fought out rather behind closed doors and seldom in scientific journals or in the media.[27] Whereas—for instance—in Germany one could witness an enduring bickering between the advocates of the *historische Sozialwissenschaft* (historical social science) on the one hand, which advocated structuralist explanations for historical changes, and the advocates of the history of everyday-life and cultural history on the other hand, no such clash could be witnessed in Switzerland. One important reason for this lies in the size of the country. Switzerland is just not large enough to allow for distinct schools to be formed. Scholars stumble across each other at virtually every conference. Therefore, a strategy of concordance and conflict avoidance is crucial to professional survival. This avoids fruitless feuds between different schools and facilitates academic life. The downside of this scholarly armistice is that theoretical problems sometimes are not discussed with the rigidity they should merit.

## Differences between French- and German-speaking historians

The scientific community of Switzerland can be distinguished in two linguistic sub-communities: the German and the French speaking community. Since the Italian part of Switzerland has only some 300,000 inhabitants and just a small University for architecture and communication studies, it plays no major role in academic life. On first impression, the communication between the French and the German speaking historians seems to work rather well. Several national publications, such as the *Swiss Journal of History*[28], the *traverse* or the Yearbooks

26 http://www.chronos-verlag.ch/php/traverse-new.php?lang=Deutsch, 09.03.2010.

27 One example of such a hidden dispute was an argument between Hansjörg Siegenthaler and Hans-Ulrich Jost about whether the foundation of the federal state in 1848 was caused by economic (Jost) or cultural motives (Siegenthaler).

28 The papers of this journal are online on: http://www.sgg-ssh.ch/de/szg/search.php, 09.03.2010.

of the *Society for Economic and Social History* include articles in French and German. The cooperation between historians from the two parts of the country is further evidenced by the fact that at the 2nd Swiss History Days in February 2010, one third of the 66 panels included presentations in both German and French. Half of the panels were held in German only and one sixth in French only.[29]

What can be said about the awareness of research in the other part of the country when we look at the scientific output of Swiss historians? This question was tackled by examining a sample of 143 articles, published between 1994 and 2006 in the *Swiss Journal of History,* the *traverse* and in the Yearbooks of the Swiss Society for Economic and Social History.[30] It shows that from the 102 articles written in German only 45 cite works published by scholars of the French-speaking part (table 1). Of the 41 articles written in French, 22 cite literature from the German-speaking part of the country. This means that only 26% of Swiss German historians cite works from their French-speaking fellows whereas 54% of francophone Swiss historians cite works from the other side of the linguistic ditch. These results seem to contradict the experience one often has when attending meetings or conferences with researchers from both linguistic areas; scholars from the German-speaking part are commonly much more willing, and also competent, to use the French language, than the other way round. Yet, the fact that historians from francophone Switzerland cite literature from the German speaking part of the country comes not least from the fact that many important studies and written sources on Swiss history are published in German and are therefore indispensable to cover the state of research.

| | Number of Article | Literature of other Swiss linguistic areas cited | Explicit cultural historical orientation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Articles in German | 102 | 25 (52%) | 45 (44%) |
| Articles in French | 41 | 22 (54%) | 14 (34%) |

*Table 1: Analysis of articles published in German and French in three Swiss periodicals between 1994 and 2006*

29 http://www.geschichtstage.ch, 10.03.2010.

30 The following issues were selected for the analysis: Swiss Journal of History: Vols. 44, 46, 48, 50, 52, 54, 56 (always the first issue of the year with the exception Vol. 56, where the second issue was analysed); traverse: Vols. 1, 3, 5, 7, 12, 13 (always the first issue of every year); Yearbooks of the Swiss Society for Economic and Social History those of 1996, 2002 and 2005.

What can the examination of these articles from the last 15 years tell us about the state of cultural history in Switzerland? The fact that historians in the French and German-speaking part of the country take note of each other does not necessarily mean that they have a common understanding of what cultural history is about. In fact, discussions at conferences indicate that scholars from the German- and French-speaking part of Switzerland sometimes follow quite different paradigms and are influenced by research traditions which are quite different. Indeed, the analysis indicates that cultural history has a different standing in the two regions and maybe is even done differently in the German and the French part of the country. Whereas 44% of the articles published in German have a distinct cultural historical orientation—*i.e.* they explicitly refer to the concept of culture and/or cite authorities such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes, Clifford Geertz, Norbert Elias or Joan Scott—this is the case with only 34% of those written in French.

| | Number of articles | Literature of other Swiss linguistic areas cited | Explicit cultural historical orientation |
|---|---|---|---|
| Swiss Journal of History<br>Articles in German<br>Articles in French | 14<br>8 | 8 (57%)<br>7 (88%) | 4 (29%)<br>1 (13%) |
| Traverse<br>Articles in German<br>Articles in French | 35<br>13 | 7 (20%)<br>4 (31%) | 29 (83%)<br>10 (77%) |
| Yearbooks of Economic and Social History<br>Articles in German<br>Articles in French | 43<br>20 | 11 (26%)<br>11 (55%) | 22 (51%)<br>3 (15%) |

*Table 2: Detailed analysis of the three periodicals*

The differences become even more significant when we compare the three periodicals (table 2). This comparison shows on the one hand that cultural history is not prevailing to the same degree in the various publications. Whereas in the journal *traverse* 83% of the German and 77% of the French papers have an explicit cultural historical orientation, only 29% and 13% do so in the *Swiss Journal of History*. This difference is not surprising in so far as the *traverse* was founded with the explicit aim to serve as a publication platform for cultural historians whereas the *Swiss Journal of History* has a much more general historical

orientation. Striking, however, are the differences that become prevalent in the Yearbooks of the Swiss *Society for Economic and Social History*. Over half of the articles written in German commit themselves explicitly to cultural history whereas this is only the case with 15% of those in French. This confirms that cultural history definitely took hold in social history in the German-speaking part of the country, and to some extent also in economic history. In francophone Switzerland, social and economic historians are not—or not yet?—affected by the cultural turn and seem much more influenced by a historical materialist worldview.

Such differences in applying cultural theory for historical analysis might not be restricted to Switzerland. I would expect also some differences between various European countries in the way cultural history is incorporated. So maybe we should not only ask which topics cultural historians are investigating in different countries, but also *how* they are doing this. Such comparisons could give further insight into the significance of cultural history in Europe and could in addition also help to bring together the findings of traditional social, economic and political history with those of cultural history.[31]

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31 Hans-Ulrich Wehler, one of the founding fathers of the influential Bielefeld school of Social history in Germany and a pronounce critic of cultural history is convinced that cultural history is not be able to convey a long-term historical synthesis like the modernisation theory that coined social history was. While one has not to follow Wehler with his condemnation of cultural theory, it is certainly true that a proper synthesis of social and economic history with the findings of cultural history has very seldom been done yet: WEHLER, 2005.

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