Verschweizerung, or: Some Brief Remarks on Sovereignty, Transnationality, and “Sense-Security” in the Middle of Europe

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Even for readers of Central European History, it is easy to forget that there is more than one country in the middle of Europe and that there is more than one solution to the geopolitical problem associated with the perception of being in the “middle.” That problem is so overwhelmingly claimed by Germany and its interpreters, and it is so weighed down by reflections on the (ab)uses of state power, articulated in the long-running debate on the “primacy of foreign policy,” that it is somewhat jarring to encounter a book with the title In the Middle of Europe—André Holenstein’s Mitten in Europa: Verflechtung und Abgrenzung in der Schweizer Geschichte—that is not at all concerned with Germany.1 It has Switzerland as its subject and Verschweizerung as its substance and subtext. I leave the term untranslated because it means nothing to most of the world and an English translation would surely not capture the partly facetious, partly scandalized, partly admiring undertones that the German conveys: “Die Welt wird entweder untergehen oder verschweizern,” in the words of Friedrich Dürenmatt.2 Even if not taken in jest, it still sounds better than: “Am deutschen Wesen soll die Welt genesen.” But if horror in the latter case makes sense when looking back at the twentieth century, why is there so much mockery in response to the former?

The purpose of the following remarks is not to remind readers of the obvious: that Switzerland is in the middle of Europe—a middle, though, with a more southerly and westerly than easterly and northerly disposition. Nor is it to dwell on the sense among Swiss natives of various tongues and ethnicities, as well as among many foreign observers, that Swiss politics today may well be on its way to hell—in fact, that it is well on its way.3 (That would only raise not so amusing questions about who is closer to hell these days.) Rather, my intention is, first and foremost, to praise two recent books on Swiss history that develop compelling narratives of the history of a nation and its peoples—people who could not possibly be more self-centered in their fractious solidarity, yet who are also deeply embedded in and, at the same time, deeply embed Europe and the world.

The literal and metaphorical defensiveness and defense-mindedness of the Swiss are as much subjects of folklore as objects of derision: small people, big mountains. They stand aside, even stand accused as Trittbrettfahrer (freeriders). But this perspective is the result of

the casual or jaundiced observer seeing too many cows in a mountainous landscape (even if the cover of the third edition of the best English history of Switzerland shows cows, now juxtaposed with the graffiti of a woman in hijab). A more informed onlooker would marvel over transnational Swiss cheese production or over its large transnational banks, over its construction firms and civil engineers, as well as over its immensely successful gun manufacturers, among many other successful industrial producers. One might also pick organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) as another type of Swiss organization, even if it is based in Geneva (and was run exclusively by Genevans for a good part of its history), a city that is rather unto itself than part of Swiss history and historiography. All of this makes Switzerland grander and greater, more of a global actor, than its territory or population or its formal political role might suggest. Switzerland is a small country but a very large transnational nation, a term that appears to be a contradiction—that is, until one encounters the Swiss and Swiss history.

Transnational actors and actions are still quite difficult to place. They are often and conveniently removed into the thin air of a borderless world. In actual fact, transnational actors reach across borders on the ground; they are border-jumpers, so to speak, and often do so with enough far-reaching effect that more self-enclosed nations wish to expel them. Transnational actors are not just anywhere above and beyond, but they reach across borders into nations and societies. It is best to think of them both as “trans” and as “nations,” in the medieval or early modern sense, rather than as some ghostly in-betweeners.

This very tangible reality of transnational actors disappears, if one insists, as Ulrich Herbert does, that “our history remains rooted in the national.” One might first want to query the idea of rootedness, even if the notion might be expected from a solid historian. If so, rootedness in “the national” (as opposed to the nation) is an airy disposition. Be this as it may, the altogether bigger problem is that such rootedness will encounter transnationals of many kinds that are grounded and taking root right in the middle of nations and even presumably of the “national.” One thinks of Russian “bots,” for example, or the Coca-Colonization of yore—or even the lipstick and other lifestyle invasions of yet more distant pasts. The transnational can also be a Swiss bank or a refugee from Syria—or even the minor media frenzy over Verschweizerung that ran through the German press in 2011 and 2012. Today, the European Union is obviously the elephant in the room. Nations, much as “the national,” appear as remarkably composite entities, with the seams between the inside and the outside a permeable membrane, and with such membranes pretty much everywhere, as a perplexed Ekkehart Krippendorff noted more than a half-century ago.

There is no need to be defensive about the nation and national history—one just has to “get it right.” In the first place, nations, both large and small, are powerful actors that gain their power by articulating the will of the individuals and societies found within them. There is a strong argument, backed up by a good deal of sentiment, that this articulation of will and the decision-making power of nations have diminished as a result of overriding

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inter- and transnational influences. But as much as nations are objects of such intercessions, they—or, to put it more conventionally, national or nation-based actors—reach often very far across territorial borders themselves. This is true for small and large countries. Nations or nationals reaching across borders are also reached into, even if they undertake a great effort, as China does, to keep trans-nations such as Google from reaching (into) them. This observation suggests that the “nation” in the trans-“nation” may not be the state-actor of yore, but instead comes closer to Hugo Grotius’s early modern sense of individuals and societies as war-making, wealth-making, even welfare-making, and surely identity-making forces.8 The main point here is that trans-nation(al)s, rather than floating in a borderless world, leap across borders and get rooted in nations, whose “nationals” reverse that process by rooting abroad. Gesellschaft, as the site of nations, rather than being national, is a profoundly transnationalizing force.9

The challenge is therefore how to tell the history of a nation—in this case Switzerland—that is embedding the world within its territory, while embedding itself in the world, and that, at the same time, is rooted in an unmistakable sense of the self. Neither of these three elements is disputed, but putting them together is difficult. Two recent histories of Switzerland and the Swiss demonstrate that enmeshment and self-assertion are the twisting strands that constitute the double helix of Switzerland’s existence. These two studies—Holenstein’s Mitten in Europa, and Jakob Tanner’s Geschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert—attempt to write a history that is national and that, at the same time, reflects the paradoxical double existence of the Swiss nation.10 This was, incidentally, the subject of my first and only essay in Central European History, one on “Fictions of Autonomy,” which was written in 1990 but published in a 1989 issue.11 It concerned the fiction that, in (re-)unifying the (German) nation, one could return to the “normality” of the nation as autonomous subject. There was, at the time, little to go on except the exquisite fantasy of a “nomadic history” as escape from the frozen wasteland of the Cold War, and the sober, if difficult, international relations theory of Ernst-Otto Czempiel, which provided an analytical approach to studying enmeshed nations.12 Until Sebastian Conrad and Jürgen Osterhammel’s Das Kaiserreich transnational of 2004, there was not much historiography that took the idea of the transnational nation-state seriously.13 This has changed significantly over the past years.

The Swiss histories by Holenstein and Tanner are nationally-based transnational histories.14 They have as their guiding principle the idea that Switzerland has a deeply entangled national history, and they both explicitly challenge Swiss history as an autonomous

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self-contained, and rooted subject. Yet, at the same time, they insist that there is an unambiguously Swiss history, which—despite internal wars and the deep external entanglements of communities—preceded the foundation of the modern Swiss Confederation by several centuries through both the external act of the Congress of Vienna (1815) and the internal events of 1848. They insist, furthermore, that this history remained and remains Swiss, even as the Swiss nation actively enmeshed itself throughout history beyond the nation state. This enmeshment has made the nation smaller than it actually is because external actors often preempted its “political” decision-making capability by reaching into Switzerland. But it is also greater than the “national” because it benefits from European and worldwide resources, some of which Swiss actors control, and most of which they do not control.

André Holenstein, a professor of older Swiss history and comparative regional history at the University of Bern, captures the entangled experience of the Swiss with a declarative first sentence that puts those of Thomas Nipperdey and Hans-Ulrich Wehler to shame.15 Wehler began his five-volume magnum opus by countering Nipperdey’s assertion that Napoleon, and hence the fallout of the French Revolution, stood at the beginning of German history with the negation: “Am Anfang steht keine Revolution.” This was a programmatic statement that encapsulated the German Sonderweg.16 Holenstein characterizes the state of Switzerland and of the Swiss Sonderfall in a similarly dramatic way, though to very different effect: “Die Schweiz ist fundamental verunsichert.”17 This affective state, he argues, is the result of a national myth-history, the product of a relentlessly self-centered national history that has effaced the challenges of the embedded or transnational reality of Switzerland. He holds out the hope that a more transnationally oriented history may help cope with Swiss disorientation, but his book proceeds to show that the sense of bewilderment and unsettlement—in a word, disorientation or “sense-(in)security” ([Un-]Gewissheit seiner selbst), to paraphrase Hegel’s term—is very much the product of Switzerland’s transnational embeddedness in the first place. Embeddedness, he makes clear, was an existential feature of the Swiss condition long before it became trans-“national.” In fact, the drama of this history is how community actors came together in solidarity despite and often contrary to their trans-communal (proto-national) entanglements. By the same token, he makes clear that mythmaking about separate, independent, freedom-loving Swiss communities and ethnicities (Völkerschaften) had also come about long before they became a Swiss Confederation. Embeddedness and separation are indeed the two strands of a double helix, and, though Holenstein describes this existential condition more thoroughly for the early modern than for the modern period, he rightly insists that it has been the existential condition of Switzerland throughout its history.

One might think, as Napoleon Bonaparte did, that this is because the Swiss are not only poor in natural resources, but also because they have a small population and a harsh environment, and no chance to play a role among the great powers of Europe.18 But is this “poverty” truly a Swiss Sonderfall—or possibly a problem of small nations in general? If it were,

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15Holenstein, Mitten in Europa.
17Holenstein, Mitten in Europa, 9.
18Ibid., 154.
Napoleon would not have had to race all the way to Moscow and to North Africa, using the resources of the entire occupied European continent for France to become a truly self-sustaining nation (in its competition with Great Britain). There was, of course, also the matter of “gloire,” but the bottom line for this calculating imperialist was that, in order to be self-sustaining in a competitive imperial world, even populous, resource-rich, and mighty France needed Europe—and then some.

The felicitous Sonderfall is perhaps that the Swiss failed so early (at Marignano in 1515) in their effort to become a supposedly self-sustaining, imperial republic—but persisted anyway. Some clever historian of the longue durée of the northern middle—one less hung up on Germanness and power, or on the dreamy fear of action as its inverse—will perhaps come to the conclusion that the resilience of communities of all kinds, in the midst of the recurrent, internal, and external breakdowns of states from the Thirty Years’ War to the so-called Age of Extremes (pace Eric Hobsbawm), is the red thread that runs through that middle’s past. The resilience of the Swiss depended, in any case, on the complex and shifting intertwinemement of entanglement and separation. It was neither one nor the other, but the deliberate, if often chaotic, “political” orchestration of both that made Switzerland into a nation and eventually a nation-state. If it does not succumb to its fears, this will also serve it well on the way to finding a political form for its current state as a transnational republic. This seems to be a contradiction, but republics, both small and large, are made from such contradictions.

In their changing political permutations, the Swiss did very well indeed. In the short-lived world of nations, it is an old nation, even one of the older nation-states. But before one begins celebrating the persistence of smallness and the cosmopolitics of interdependence, possibly in contrast to the transience of imperial nations, one should look at the other strand in Holenstein’s history. The first sentence is no joke: insecurity, the fear and rage of powerlessness in the face of an intruding world, the defensive alertness that so easily shades into mindless provincialism and xenophobia is, in fact, the much commented on prevailing sentiment in Switzerland and the very cause for Holenstein’s engaging (and engagé) book—and his deep perspective pays off. Insecurity is not a temporary aberration; it is the experiential condition of the nation as an entangled entity, and one of the possible reactions to this—by no means the first time in Swiss history—is a politics of the reduit.20

Swiss self-identification changed over time in intriguing ways, but it was an intrinsic element in constituting solidarities and con-socialities, long before there was a confederation. This self-identification reached a high point in the nineteenth century and developed in consonance with the formation of a liberal-constitutional polity. But it is older than that and, though it proved to be immensely flexible and nowadays is often interpreted as “Baukasten für imagologische Versatzstücke,” it is that elusive “national” to which Ulrich

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Herbert refers. It is a sense of self as a common past that survived internal tensions and wars between localities, and that gave the Swiss their resilience as a collective actor, initially in lieu of a common polity and nowadays more often (used and abused) in defense against “the world.” This is a narrated self, loaded with images and stories—so much so, in fact, that the self often disappears in a media cloud.

But what are these Swiss Heldengeschichten all about? It is easy enough to see that they are a highly stylized form of history and, as such, figments of a retro-imagination. Contemporary historians, literary scholars, and folklorists rightly emphasize their role in shaping exclusionary definitions of the national, both within the nation and against the world. This is certainly true, but Holenstein moves the discussion in a different direction: he is more interested in the very real disunity of the Swiss throughout much of their history, not their fictions of unity. He gets at this, in part, by deconstruction, noting the very discrepancy between fiction and reality. However, his emphasis on the regenerative power of narratives also suggests that “the national” is a fiction of solidarity, sometimes more and sometimes less exclusive, that provides “sense-security” in a disorienting world.

Holenstein’s argument is in consonance with the recent Swiss historiography which claims that the beginnings of Swiss history should not be sought where historicizing fiction puts it (i.e., the Battle of Morgarten of 1315, or the legend of the Rütlis oath), but some two hundred years later. Like others, Holenberg locates the origin of this retroactive fiction in the late fifteenth century and associates it with the defeat of expansive aspirations at Marignano in 1515, which congealed a Swiss sense of their identity. Figments of autonomy, embodied and engendered in self-defense, are essential for a sense of security and solidarity in a world that manifestly proves beyond control. This fiction becomes the common ground—the airy “root,” as it were, and the regenerative “imagologische Bastelei,” in the words of Guy Marchal—for a solidarity that overrode all reality: one in which the Swiss communities were enmeshed in all kinds of trans-local entanglements that often contravened the sworn but inoperable commonality, and in which their weakness in the face of rising national empires was glaring. It is fiction versus reality, but, as fiction, the Swiss Heldengeschichten were a powerful historical agent of resilient communities that stuck together, often despite themselves. Or is it not, instead (with or without Hegel), that the “Gewissheit seiner selbst” is articulated in these narratives—a precious good to be defended in its own right, especially in republics, where the people emerge as the only authority even in matters of the divine?

The apex of this development—disunity overridden by reunifying narratives—was reached with the French Revolution. The Swiss did have their own revolution, but it tore them apart (i.e., ripped apart their sense of themselves) rather than unifying them. Holenstein argues that revolutionary and counterrevolutionary politics, heightened by religious divisions, effectively destroyed what was left of the frayed solidarity among Swiss confederates. The Swiss corpus survived and was indeed recast and rejuvenated only because that was in the interest of first Napoleon and then the Great Powers to have a re-founded a Confoederatio Helvetica that was neutral and willing to defend itself against all aggressors.

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21The quote is from Balz Wolfensberger and Matthias Scheller, “Identität und Differenz: Eigen- und Fremdsemantiken im rechtsextremen Diskurs am Beispiel der Schweizerzeit” (Lizentiatarbeit, University of Zurich, 1999). The study to consult is Guy P. Marchal, Schweizer Gebrauchsgeschichte: Geschichtsbilder, Mythenbildung und nationale Identität (Basel: Schwabe, 2006).
22Thomas Maissen, Schweizer Heldengeschichten—and was dahintersteckt (Baden: Hier + jetzt, 2015).
Switzerland, in its modern state form, was created through the international consent of the Great Powers, but it only became a nation when appropriating the form of the state (to which it gave a constitutional Gestalt) for its own national ends. The “modern” Swiss imagination of a self-defensive, neutral, humanitarian federation is the fiction that undergirded actual “realpolitical” dependence: its reality is a constitutional republic. It is possible to think of the fiction as the ultimate hypocrisy, but we have come to understand that national sovereignty is always founded on some such hypocrisy. In fact, it is more accurate to say that Switzerland (re-)made itself as a constitutional republic as it was reinvigorating, elaborating, and celebrating its founding story. It thus regained the “Gewissheit seiner selbst” it had lost in the great axial transition of the eighteenth to the nineteenth century.

Holenstein points out with some glee that not even the Swiss sense of self and its fictions of autonomy were a homemade product. The Swiss adapted and inverted what powerful “others” had long been saying about the Swiss. The point worth keeping in mind is that national autonomy and its fictions are themselves products of inter- and transnational legitimation strategies. This does not diminish the national labor toward sense-security, but it puts this national labor in its proper transnational place: it is part of more than just a national circulation of images and narratives. The valence of this labor is established in national and transnational circulation, one of Jakob Tanner’s concluding insights. National narratives can lose their credibility within and beyond the nation, as Germans surely need not be told.

The Swiss fictions of self also shed some doubt on some very well received arguments by the holy trinity of Walter Benjamin, Jacques Derrida, and Giorgio Agamben, who wished to see the founding myths of nations and constitutions as eliding the violence of the beginning. This may happen, but it did not in Switzerland, whose inhabitants gleefully acknowledge bloody sacrifice and glory in the sacred cause of the nation. What the founding myths do hide, though, is the very transnational nature of national existence and the sense of a unique self that paradoxically gains authority only because of its trans-nationality.

What if this exogenous intercession is not personified by a Napoleon, but by some other overwhelming presence the Swiss could not and cannot control? What if their existence—as in the wake of the Vienna Congress of 1815—depended on the mutual envy of powerful neighbors who agreed that none of them should get the Alpine mountain passes and that the Swiss must therefore continue to exist to defend themselves against all comers—a position that made sense to the Great Powers, but that required a suicidal mentality on part of the Swiss? What if this exogenously driven mentality upholds Swiss masculinity? What if the hand that feeds you is also the hand that slaps you? This is Verunsicherung, and the resulting struggle for sense-security is the Swiss predicament. It is the predicament of a nation whose wealth, security, and identity cannot ultimately be reproduced from within. The Swiss managed time and again to turn a disadvantaged situation—being a small, decentralized, and resource-poor country—to their advantage. They did so by embedding the world in Switzerland and by embedding themselves in the world, telling themselves that the bonds of history they have in common are stronger than the ties that make them part of the world. Heimweh is the proverbial Swiss trauma.

This predicament of the nation and its resolution emerges most impressively in Jakob Tanner’s Geschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert, which unfolds a complex and (given

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24 Here I follow Maisen, Geschichte der Schweiz, 177–204.
Switzerland) immensely multifaceted story that is told with admirable knowledge of fact and fiction (and the ability to distinguish between them), as well as with economy and narrative wit. Tanner’s national history is a delight to read and a model for all European (not least German–speaking) historians, who have yet to overcome the paradigm of national histories as very long, preferably multivolume, encyclopedic enterprises.

Tanner’s volume, like the entire series of national histories published by C. H. Beck Verlag under the editorship of Ulrich Herbert, is a transnational history of the nation. He is no less engagé than Holenstein, but, whereas the latter focuses on the seam between inside and outside, Tanner folds the osmotic and mimetic (as well as the foreign political, diplomatic, and military) dimension of Swiss life back into a fully developed interior history of Switzerland. He approaches transnational history as an intersectional history—i.e., there must obviously be a specialized history that has nothing but the trans–nation in sight: its people, institutions, actions and transactions, laws. Migration history, on one end, and monetary history, on the other—and many other histories in–between—lend themselves to such free-standing histories. But Tanner’s history of Switzerland is a standout, and not just in the Beck series, because he situates, occasionally against his social-history proclivities, national and transnational histories at their intersection.

Swiss history is perhaps an ideal case for the intersection of interiority and exteriority. For other nations, the predominant intersectional seam may be gender or race, or the nature of and access to political power, i.e., the question of democracy. But in Swiss history, even with a focus on the interior domestic side, the exterior dimension of the nation is always already there—and it is woven right into the fabric of Swiss society. Social stability and hierarchy, gender-relations as much as issues of taxation have (pun intended) an intrinsic exterior side. Exteriorty can never therefore simply be reduced to “foreign policy” or “diplomacy” (which is a difficult terrain for Switzerland, anyway, given that communes and cantons can conduct their own foreign policy), but it is a persistent presence in the social and political life of the nation.

Tanner does not put the transnational into this or that commodity, group of people, or place, but into the very fabric of society. Thus, he pays due tribute to the remarkably high level of foreign-born residents in Switzerland. He shows the changing conditions for migrants trying to find their place in society, and notes an easing of the level of conformity that is required for accepting migrants within communities. Needless to say, there are significant differences in terms of the openness of local societies and the readiness of migrants to conform. Still, Switzerland is an immigration society to a great extent, and it is—or, rather, has become—far better at accepting foreigners than most other European societies have. In fact, it appears that Swiss society has become better at incorporating immigrants in everyday life, at the same time that they have become the punching bag in national identity politics. The key word here is Überfremdung, which marks migrants as the embodiment of far more general anxieties—anxieties that reflect the overall limited sovereignty of a transnational

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26 Tanner, Geschichte der Schweiz.
nation and the far-reaching rearrangement of the Swiss social compact. Tanner rightly emphasizes the latter.

There is a price to be paid for this approach. Migrants in Tanner’s book are immigrants. By contrast, migrants in a fully developed transnational history depart and arrive; they form their own social networks; they have their own baggage in terms of habits and memories. Swiss local society is remarkably good at recognizing this, notwithstanding all the ambivalences of the humanitarian and/or therapeutic spirit. This entire world is nevertheless necessarily foreshortened even in this most sensitive and sensible history of a transnational nation. There is a difficult choice to be made in every national history. Just as there should be, for obvious reasons, more Belgium, Belarus, Israel, as well as Turkey in German history, there should be more Balkans in a truly transnational Swiss history—because even when migrants become a successful part of Swiss history as immigrants, so, too, do their troubles and their pasts. The latter leads the historian right back to the politics of Überfremdung, but now the question is how much “alien-ness” should be part of the historical narrative.

To include such border-crossing narratives—be it of migrants or of finance—beyond the fact of their arrival in Switzerland would make for an unwieldy national history, which, Tanner feels, is already stretched to the limits. (I do not think so, but my reaction may well be conditioned by German history, in which multiple fractures turn into chasms.\textsuperscript{29}) Tanner has written a “meandering history” (müandrierende Analyse), though surely not with any postmodern intent.\textsuperscript{30} Rather, varying levels of disconnect are the reality of any modern nation—especially a nation like Switzerland, which builds on its localities and in which the seams between inside and outside multiply and permeate all aspects of life. That this disconnect allows for moral ambiguity—as, for example, in the scandal over the “unclaimed assets” of victims of the Holocaust—is but one facet of a history of “real-existing” Swiss society than can be a model for others.

That said, the Swiss and their historians nevertheless have their own ghosts to work around. Tanner thus rejects the idea of Swiss history as a Sonderfall in favor of a common European narrative of ambivalent modernity, which is to say a modernity that unfolds in many, frequently contradictory, social fragments, locations, and times. Tanner’s history is the multifaceted story of how these many elements are shaped—with winners and losers—into a Swiss domestic scene. His main apprehension is that Switzerland—however stable and successful and rich, and therefore un-ruptured and unruffled and also a tad boring—is not a “success story.” Instead, Tanner writes the long history of the enactment and realization of a republican democracy that culminates in the twentieth-century history of a Swiss-style democracy (\textit{Konkordanzdemokratie}), which, in turn, is broken up from within and from without in the late twentieth century. He emphasizes, in this context, the sheer difficulty of bringing about and stabilizing a republican democracy—pointing to the recurrent and extensive resort to nondemocratic (e.g., \textit{Polizeigeneralklausel}) and, indeed, antidemocratic procedures in order to govern. He also discusses the ambivalences of plebiscitary politics and the social costs of a robustly masculine and remarkably stratified fusion of military and society. \textit{Volkssouveränität} is a practiced reality, besides being the


\textsuperscript{30}Tanner, \textit{Geschichte der Schweiz}, 551.
self-understanding of Swiss society. But even in the most stable of times, it remains remarkably incoherent and fraught by contradictions.

The more complicated story to tell is how the intersection of transnational and national politics propels this story of democratic republicanism forward to its current breaking point. A return to Holenstein is useful here in order to make sense of Tanner’s story of the consolidation and unmaking of Konkordanzdemokratie. Holenstein shows that, in the early modern period, Swiss localities were frequently far more tightly linked to some part of the outside world (often France) than to fellow localities. The very social fabric of localities, of social status and social hierarchy, of taxation and non-taxation of citizens, and so on, reproduced and was conditioned by these “trans-national” linkages (e.g., salt as a crucial import for cheese-making, and soldiers as the number one export for moneymaking). Social order depends—returning now to Tanner—on international financial markets, global resource allocation, and international locational competition. It depends on negotiations between the many insides and the many outsides of Swiss society—or, better said, of Swiss societies.

Negotiating this multifaceted society is not, in the first instance, the problem of historians. Rather, this is what politics is all about. What makes Swiss politics both so incomprehensible and fascinating for outside observers is this process’s high level of local social organization and the low level of political centralization. Thomas Maissen calls this Führerlosigkeit and earlier historians have referred to acephalous tribalism; even Tanner’s more social-scientific analysis points to a high level of internal complexity. They nevertheless all agree that this complexity is the source of the Swiss embedding the world in Switzerland and Switzerland in the world. It is Tanner, however, who links Swiss enmeshment to a mode of government. In a narrow sense, this is the rise and fall of the Swiss version of Konkordanzdemokratie (consociational democracy). That is a form of democratic rule in which large and ever larger numbers of actors are integrated in the political process with the goal of achieving consensus; it is the defining force of the short twentieth century in Switzerland. In the long twentieth century, it is the rise of a liberal republicanism in an international order—one ultimately defined by the Vienna Congress—in which Switzerland is disembedded from the European competition of states in order to become a European and global marketplace.

Tanner also analyzes in impressive detail the unmaking of this mode of government and its specific forms of embeddedness in inter- and transnational society, as it has come to an end in the present. This break-up and re-formation did not produce less of a transnational nation, but a different arrangement that Tanner and others describe as more authoritarian and more exclusive. The turn to a Konsolidierungstaat is usually described as a result of a de-territorialization of politics or, in shorthand, “globalization.” But this description misses the fact that Switzerland has always been a transnational nation. What has changed is the sense of being in control, of Switzerland’s “Gewissheit seiner selbst.” The result is governance that denies being political and that talks relentlessly about the basic values of society.

Switzerland as a nation is small, but as a trans-nation—in terms of capital, population, knowledge, even national narratives—it is enormous. The history of Switzerland is therefore the history of a transnational nation on the territory of a small territorial state. Swiss historians will want to argue that Switzerland is not a Sonderfall, but outside observers cannot help but think of it as somehow special. But that is not because of the cows or because of precision manufacturing or banking, or even because of the engineering feat of the new Gotthard Base Tunnel. Instead, it is because Switzerland has long practiced what everybody in Europe, including the country of the northern middle, is discovering: Außenpolitik, rather than being the arcum of the state, comes right out of the midst of society. Even for a cosmopolitan generation of, by now, older German historians, this is a mind-bending observation. More than one German postwar generation has grown up with a social history—Gesellschaftsgeschichte—that was quintessentially national history, and the debate was about which history—Gesellschaftsgeschichte or Politikgeschichte—was the more national one.

It was somewhat of a shock when Eckart Conze set out to argue that the history of society was the quintessential international history of the twentieth century, because society and its actors were persistently enmeshed across borders. He argued that Gesellschaftspolitik is Außenpolitik and that the future of Gesellschaftsgeschichte (or, more modestly, social history) is therefore transnational history. This is not what the German Foreign office has discovered as “Außenpolitik der Gesellschaft[en],” which it understands, in a revival of old statist traditions, as a lame partnership of state and of cultural institutions. It means instead coming to terms with the reality that Außenpolitik is everywhere, and that the seams between inside and outside are not negotiated at the border but within society. Switzerland is likely more open than most other European societies—a Sonderfall after all. But Holenstein and Tanner are correct in claiming that the phenomenon is European. The longue durée of territorilization in European history, even of the most state-centric nations, has been accompanied by processes of de-territorialization. In varying forms and to varying degrees, Gesellschaftspolitik has always been Außenpolitik, which is why there has always been a bit more Switzerland in Europe than might appear at first glance.

But what about Verschweizerung? Its most basic meaning is revealed in Max Weber’s outraged opposition to it in a letter that was published in 1916 in the magazine Die Frau. The letter was not concerned, as subsequent authors have read Verschweizerung, with the “dwarfing” (Verzwergung) of nations, but rather with the fundamental difference between great powers and small nations and their respective “responsibility for History.” Weber granted that small nations surely had inner values, exclaiming that, because of these values, a “true German” like the (Swiss) Gottfried Keller could only flourish in a
Switzerland unburdened by war. The German Germans, however, as a more populous and “power-politically organized people” (machtstatlich organisieres Volk), lived in an altogether different world. They could not stand aside without putting up a fight if “world power—and in the last instance that is: the control over the nature [Eigenart] of the culture of the future—is being divided up between the regulations of the Russian administrative state, on the one hand, and the conventions of Anglo-Saxon ‘society,’ on the other, perhaps with an admixture of Latin raison.” Therefore, he concludes, it is “the damned duty and obligation before history to resist with all our might the flooding of the entire world by those two nations.” As much as Weber wanted to praise the Swiss for their goodness—less so “the pacifism of American ‘ladies’ (of both genders)”—he got carried away:

Anyone who receives even a penny of annuity that others—directly or indirectly—have to pay, anyone who consumes an article for daily use or consumption, to which the sweat of foreign, not his own labor, clings, feeds off the machinations of the harsh and pitiless economic struggle for survival, which bourgeois phraseology calls “the peaceful civilizing mission [Kulturarbeit].” It is in this struggle for economic survival that not millions, but hundreds of millions of people waste away or drown, year-in and year-out, or, in any case, lead a life for which any true “meaning” is infinitely more alien than a life committed to Honor on the part of everyone (including women, because they too “wage” war, if they do their duty), and that means, in short, their commitment to fulfill the fated historical duties of their own people.

One wonders, which side Weber would be on today: that of Martin Heidegger, Vladimir Putin, or Yanis Varoufakis? The point here is Weber’s rage against transnational society. He had it in for the “do-gooders,” of course: the Gutmenschen of his day. But he was truly outraged by Switzerland as an open society, as a transnational nation. His idea was the nation as a self-sustaining and self-enclosed state, and, as much as he acknowledged the “diabolic nature of power,” invoking (the Swiss) Jacob Burckhardt, he insisted that autonomy had to be defended at any price.

Weber’s heroics notwithstanding, European nations—again Switzerland is no Sonderfall—live off each other (and the rest of the world). This is no equal exchange, as has been amply demonstrated. Still, intertwinement, rather than autonomy, is the condition of Europe. European nations, small and large, differ vastly. But their existential condition is their need for the outside world in order to generate their own wealth, security, and even their own identity. European nations have become self-governing in the course of the long twentieth century, but none of them is sovereign in the sense that they can sustain or reproduce themselves from within. While the degree of (inter-)dependence changes from one locality, territory, or nation to the next, this existential condition pertains to all. The very condition of survival in Europe has been the dependence on others. This, as we discover again today, is an unnerving condition, prone to panics and to the recurrent dissolution of the certainty of oneself, of sense-security. But it is the European condition, and the study of this condition is the future of Gesellschaftsgeschichte.