

Beyond Switzerland

Reframing the Swiss Historical Narrative in the Light of Transnational History

Discussion paper prepared by Pierre Eichenberger¹ in collaboration with Lea Haller, Christa Wirth, Thomas David, Matthieu Leimgruber and Bernhard Schär

“National history is a trap,” wrote a generation ago historian Hans-Ulrich Jost. “The Nation as a reference for historical writing leads to such a narrow focus that historical understanding collapses. Historical myths,” he added, “were created to fill in the gaps created by this lack of historical understanding” (1994, p. 19). If one were to understand the history of society, he concluded, what was needed was a “European history of Switzerland” (p. 35). This intellectual project was formulated against the bulk of Swiss historiography, which was, and still is, characterized by a sense of national specificity—the *Sonderfall Schweiz* (Holenstein, 2014; Tanner, 2015). In that sense, Swiss historiography does not radically differ from its counterparts in other countries, as national historical narratives have long constituted a key tenets of nation building (Berger & Lorenz, 2010; Thiesse, 1999) and have decisively shaped the “imagined communities” that nations are (Anderson, 1983). National historiographies do have in common the fact that they are—by definition—framed by some “methodological nationalism,” which translates into an *a priori* framing of the research questions, fields of investigation and the fact that the mental horizon is fit into a national framework (Amelina, Nergiz, Faist, & Schiller, 2012; Wimmer & Schiller, 2003). Furthermore, the most important institutions contributing to the everyday practice of historians, such as public archives, professional associations and historical journals, were also nationally organized and contributed to give a national frame to the development of historical research. Geographers and historians have coined the expression “container history” to describe this framing of historical research (Taylor, 1995; Wimmer & Schiller, 2002).

For historians specializing in the 19th and 20th centuries, the national framing of research questions is all too obvious since nation-states have shaped this period so deeply. Although researchers working on either the Middle Ages or the modern period—identifying trans-regional patterns of kin connections (Teuscher, 2011; Warren & Teuscher, 2011)—and those specializing in research on extra-European regions have long acknowledged the limitations of the “national container” for giving a full account of their objects of study, the national framing of historical questions is a characteristic of most historical writing, most obviously in contemporary history. In that sense, this nationalized vision of history has tended to offer a somewhat “partial view of reality” (Conrad, 2016, p. 15). Building on the pioneering work of key figures in the study of history—i.e., Fernand Braudel’s focus on Mediterranean space—and influenced by debates on the process of globalization during the 1990s and 2000s, historians have attempted to find ways out of the nationalist trap and have used concepts such as “circulations” to question the primacy of national realities, using “transnational,” “global,” “connected,” “crossed,” “compared,” “entangled,” “shared” or “(post)colonial” approaches. Although these approaches have specificities, which are developed in different contexts and which cannot be confused, they all have in common the questioning of the national framework in historical writing. Following a seminal definition of transnationalism by Akira

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Iriye (2004, p. 213), such studies do engage in “the study of movements and forces that have cut across national boundaries.” Such studies have shed a new light on many topics. Within the history of science, the idea of diffusion of Western knowledge to the rest of the world has become uprooted and replaced with the circulation of ideas, people, and technology within networks and among several sites (Raj, 2007; Roberts, 2009; Secord, 2004). Within migration history the paradigm shift to transnational migration finds its expression in the illumination of the often multidirectional flows of migrants instead of immigrants, which connotes a single entry into a nation-state (Gabaccia, 1999). Influenced by this powerful move toward transnationalism in historical scholarship—a transnational phenomenon in its own right—Swiss historians have been following this road for quite some time. Different venues in which to engage in transnational reframing of Swiss history have developed, and the growing literature addressing Swiss history in this manner has explored a multiplicity of research avenues.

In a schematic way, researchers are engaged with the transnational reframing of the national narrative in two complementary ways. Some historians have tried to situate the Swiss role in phenomenon with global dimension. Pioneering research—called “*interdependenzorientierte Berner Schule*” by historian Madeleine Herren (2006, p. 545)—has addressed the interdependencies of domestic and international relations as early as 1980 and has developed further ever since (Altermatt, 1980; Herren, 1999; see also Speich Chassé, 2013). Addressing the role of Switzerland in colonialism is also a good example of this. This research has shown the role of Swiss actors—companies, scientists or individual immigrants—in the colonial contexts of the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. This thematic has inspired a significant amount of research, and a particularly lively field has developed around this question (Etemad & Humbert, 2014; Purtschert & Fischer-Tiné, 2015; Purtschert, Lüthi, & Falk, 2012).

Other researchers have addressed historical objects—otherwise framed as national objects—in their broader context. These studies tend to focus on “connections” or “entanglements,” and underline how far roots and consequences of so-called “national” events were situated outside the container. Among such studies, economic history has been a precursor in that it has shown that Swiss economic history was deeply embedded in world markets (Bairoch & Körner, 1990; Guex, 1999b; Müller, 2012; Veyrassat, 1993). However, economic historians have not been the only ones to investigate this topic. Explaining “how Switzerland came to chocolate?” can serve as a case in point to show how the history of typical symbols of Switzerland cannot be told adequately without situating that history in a broader context (Franc, 2008).

Beyond Switzerland—questions and definitions

The ambition of the project *Transnational Histories of Switzerland*² is to engage the debate on both levels: addressing the role of the Swiss space in global issues, but also putting classic Swiss historical characteristics under a fresh—transnational—light, starting with nationalism itself. We think that a transnational history of Switzerland should not constitute a further specialization within the historical profession. Furthermore, we consider that transnational history has no exclusive or forbidden area of research and can constitute an important dimension of any historical object. The ambition of the project is rather to highlight the added value of the transnational dimension in historical writing and to support further projects conceived from this perspective.

In order to do this, we build on the increasing amount of research in transnational history on

² <http://www.transnationalhistory.ch/>

the international stage. Historians in different parts of the world have gathered to challenge the methodological nationalism and to reframe questions from a transnational perspective (Bender, 2002b; Conrad & Osterhammel, 2004; Laqua, Verbruggen, & Deneckere, 2012; Tyrell, 2009). In his introduction to *Rethinking American History in a Global Age* (2002a, p. 6), Thomas Bender wrote: “My argument and that of this book is not for increasing the study of American foreign relations, although that is important. The point is that we must understand every dimension of American life as entangled in other histories. Other histories are implicated in American history, and the United States is implicated in other histories. This is not only true of this present age of globalization; it has been since the 15th century, when the world for the first time became self-consciously singular.” This does not mean trying to write a history of everything, but it should encourage historians to take into account the countless entanglements that connect elements outside and inside the container—just as gender can be a dimension of any kind of historical inquiry. All in all, this should contribute to lessening the influence of nationalism somewhat and producing a more nuanced historical understanding.

Returning to Jost’s citation who identifies national history as a trap, it is worth making explicit that such a transnational reframing of national history does possess a polemical dimension. As Jost underlined, the national framing of historical writing too often disguised the role of economic and social structures, put power struggles or international domination to the back of the story and gave greater importance to such things as tales of origins or national myths (1994). Sebastian Conrad (2016, p. 4) also argued that global history “means to change the terrain on which historians think,” and that therefore, it “has a polemical dimension. It constitutes an assault on many forms of container-based paradigms, chief among them national history.” To underline this polemical dimension does not imply, however, that we aspire to produce a *counternational* narrative. Our objective is rather to develop case studies of events that integrate the Swiss space in its historical contexts.

Conrad (2016, p. 11) defined global history as “both an object of study and a particular way of looking at history: it is both a process and a perspective, subject matter and methodology.” He identified three varieties of global history: one considering global history as the history of everything, a second seeing it as the history of connections and, third, a vision of global history as the understanding of situated events in a global context—“history based on the concept of integration” (2016, p. 6). Favoring the third option, he proposed a somehow limited and carefully defined way of practicing a global history in which historians would “explicitly situate[...] particular cases in their global contexts” (2016, p. 10). So defined, global history may as well make a productive use of Jacques Revel’s *jeux d’échelles* (Revel, 1996)—nested scales—along with methods of comparison (Comstock, 2012; Pomeranz & McNeill, 2015, p. 2). Just as Revel wrote, integrating a “multiple contextualization” into the analysis acknowledges the fact that historical actors and events are embedded in contexts at different scales, “from the most local to the most global” (1996, p. 26; see also Saunier, 2008).

We would like to associate with these definitions and underline three particularly promising avenues for the writing of Switzerland’s transnational history. First, what we call “a global Switzerland,” which identifies the significant role of Switzerland outside of its territory and the influence of these global links on the domestic context as a particularly promising area of research. Second, we would like to insist on the potential for a reappraisal of the *Sonderfall Schweiz*. Third, some characteristics of the Swiss nation-state—both at the infra-national level (federalism or the existence of several linguistic communities) and at the supra-national level (regarding the role of the Swiss space as an international hub in different domains, from

finance to international organizations such as the League of Nations and the United Nations)—open promising avenues for studies of the interplay of different “nested scales”. We see strong potential in studies focusing on the interplay of different geographical scales, incorporating specific cities or regions of Switzerland into a broader context. Although we will expose them in three different sections, we see the following research avenues as inextricably interrelated.

A Global Switzerland

When different countries are compared, Switzerland stands out as one of the most extraverted countries in the world—with respect to immigration and emigration, foreign direct investments both from and to Switzerland or tourism (in and out). Although Switzerland never actually had any colonial possessions, the role of Switzerland in the context of colonialism has been viewed as significant; on the other hand, the influence of the colonial past on the present state of Swiss society has been acknowledged by postcolonial studies (Purtschert et al., 2012). Investigations into the global expansion of Switzerland have taken different shapes: the study of global firms (Dejung, 2013; Veyrassat, 1993), localized investigations into the role of Switzerland in specific colonial enterprises (Lützel Schwab, 2006), the role of Switzerland as hub for global and “colonial science” (Kupper & Schär, 2015; Meier, 2014; Schär, 2015b), the role of Swiss missionary societies in colonial Africa and in postcolonial “development aid” schemes (Harries, 2007; Zürcher, 2014) or the reappraisal of the role of Swiss nationals in global events such as the slave trade (Etemad, David, & Schaufelbuehl, 2005; Fässler, 2005; Stettler, Haenger, & Labhardt, 2004). Transnational movements of populations are, of course, a fundamental aspect of connections and entanglements. The question of Swiss emigration—from mercenaries leaving the Swiss space for the battlefields of Europe and the colonies to impoverished rural people looking for a better life in the Americas, Russia and other parts of the world—and the importance of “Switzerland elsewhere” for a transnational questioning of Swiss history has been underlined (Schelbert, 1976; Studer, 2015, pp. 20-21; Ziegler, 1985).

The investigation of a global Switzerland, which exists outside its own frontiers, should be developed further, possibly through exchanges between historians specialized in other regions of the globe (Dejung, 2014). Some other specific questions deserve to figure high in historians’ research agenda. The understanding of the distinctive economic successes of Switzerland—the precocity of the industrial revolution and the strength of its industrial and financial places—would strongly benefit from a transnational reappraisal of these histories, which would offer a way to reconsider the Swiss “*Wirtschaftswunder*” (Breiding & Schwarz, 2011) in light of its embeddedness in the global history of capitalism. In this context, the Swiss economic relations with some extra-European countries (Bott, 2013) and the question of Swiss imperialism—which is an important aspect of domination on the Global South that does not depend on the actual possession of colonies (Behrendt, 1932; David & Etemad, 1998; Witschi, 1987)—should be investigated.

In a complementary way, the question of the economic, social, political and cultural influences of other regions on Switzerland should be investigated. The influence of colonial contexts on Swiss society—a major theme of the postcolonial literature—deserves more attention. Recasting research questions in this sense is essential to set a new light on power relationships regarding gender or xenophobia. Its potential for questioning traditional issues of Swiss history should also be developed further, beginning with nation-building itself (Harries, 1998, 2007; Purtschert et al., 2012). Countless types of events originating from outside of the container have been let unnoticed and could be investigated. A strongly neglected area of research in this regard is the history of migrant labor in Switzerland (Falk,

2015; Skenderovic, 2015). Moreover, the presence of foreign firms in Switzerland—and the rise of the Swiss financial and industrial hub—and communities of highly skilled expatriates working in these firms have received little attention until now, in spite of its global importance (see, however, Leimgruber, 2015). In this context, considering the enormous amounts of worldwide private fortunes deposited in the coffers of Swiss banks (Mazbouri, Guex, & Lopez, 2012), a transnational history of this field of Swiss history is actually crucial for understanding finance on a global stage and would contribute to a better understanding of worldwide monied classes' behavior (Derix, 2014; Farquet, 2014; Perrenoud, 2011). In the end, a better understanding of global Switzerland would, in return, contribute to the understanding of global capitalism, which forms the context of Switzerland's specific role. As Sven Beckert (2014, p. xxi) wrote, “capitalism has been globe-spanning since its inception [...]” But, Beckert continues: “for most of capitalism's history the process of globalization and the needs of nation-states were not conflicting, as is often believed, but instead mutually reinforced one another.” In other words, writing a transnational history does not at all mean to neglect the nation-state. It is indeed time to address conclusions such as the one formulated by political economist Peter Katzenstein in 1980: “in finding ‘*indépendance dans l'interdépendance*,’ the Swiss continue to nurture capitalism in one country” (1980, p. 540. The sentence in French comes from Pfister, 1971, p. 88).

The *Sonderfall Schweiz* reconsidered—comparison and connections

The self-representation and self-understanding of Switzerland as a special case cannot be ignored in Swiss historiography. Building on recent studies on this issue (Tanner, 2015), it seems to us that a reappraisal of this specificity may be fruitful for future research. This has been the case for other issues, and one should question the Swiss exceptionalist narrative. The way Switzerland's image of a peaceful society marked by political consensus has been addressed by historians—with the help of comparisons—is a good example of that (Guex & Schnyder Burghartz, 2001; Jost, 2001). The exceptionalism of Swiss political institutions—from its establishment of a Republic to its neutrality—and Swiss historical myths should be assessed. Comparison could be a powerful tool—for example, comparison with countries that share specificities, such as so-called “small open economies” (P. Katzenstein, 1985), which may actually turn out to be “big open economies” (Guex, 1999a; Tanner, 2015, p. 27). Belgium or the Netherlands would be particularly suited for such a comparison (see for example Herren, 2000; Holenstein, Maissen, & Prak, 2008; Straumann, 2010). Comparison alone cannot, however, assess these specificities, because the comparative approach tends to consider national unities as containers (Verbruggen, Laqua, & Deneckere, 2012, p. 1213; Werner & Zimmermann, 2006) and underestimates the common causes behind these specificities and the mutual influences or connections between them. The study of transnational connections would open the door for a carefully integrated and contextualized reappraisal of events that are supposed to be specific or unique. The concept of “invented traditions” for the purpose of nation building (Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983) could be useful in this sense, as has been shown with regards to how global discourses on “noble savages” in the Americas and the Pacific framed Swiss national identities revolving around alpine peasant societies (Schär, 2012, 2015a).

The reappraisal of the *Sonderfall Schweiz* should not, however, be limited to examining Swiss exceptionalism through comparison and through a contextualized study of connections outside the container. One should question the meaning and the strategic use of the *Sonderfall* image. Swiss neutrality—during both World Wars of the 20th century—has attracted much attention and can serve as a case in point. Neutrality has been idealized in such a way that its origins have been situated in a remote past; its history has been told in a teleological way until

now. Neutrality can be addressed as a communicative strategy developed in specific geopolitical situations (Speich Chassé, 2012). One could also wonder about how neutrality has been used in both political and economic spheres. In 1912, Adolf Jöhr (1878-1953), the secretary of Swiss National Bank and future Director of the Credit Suisse, wrote *The Economy of Switzerland in the Case of a War* (Die Volkswirtschaft der Schweiz im Kriegsfall), in which he famously stated that in the event of European war, “If Switzerland could remain neutral, one could expect that an important amount of monies would flee from the neighboring regions to seek refuge into Swiss banks, which would end up producing handsome revenues” (cited in Jost, 2013, p. 204). To understand neutrality, holding political independence and the pursuit of economic interests—inside and outside the container—has great potential.

Nested scales—the global, the local and in between

It is now relatively accepted that historical writing should hold together the different scales of reality in some complex *jeux d'échelles* (Revel, 1996), from the very local to the very global (see also Epple, 2012, pp. 167-170; Middel & Naumann, 2010). “In the end,” wrote Jan Rüger, “European history writing will have to move between several levels of analysis and narrative, shifting between comparative and transnational as well as between micro and macro perspectives, linking the many ‘very small places’ that make up Europe with regional, national and global history” (2010, p. 663 see also the inspiring remarks made by Duindam, 2010). We have also already mentioned Conrad’s idea to write global history in a way to “explicitly situate[...] particular cases in their global contexts” (2016, p. 10). This is not only a question of scale. It primarily means to acknowledge that historic events or shifts, which may at first glance be of only local importance, are actually embedded into larger trans-regional frames of reference.

Swiss society has some particularities that make it especially interesting as an object of investigation for such a research program. Set in a comparative light, the Swiss nation-state emerged after a process that unified a “multiheaded” federation, and it stood out in the 19th century as a particularly loose form of federal construction that gave important autonomy to the cantons (Osterhammel, 2014, pp. 409-410). Historians would benefit from addressing such questions as: What implications did Swiss internal heterogeneity have for the transnational connections made from Switzerland? What if much of what has been said about Switzerland would in fact be better applied to specific cantons or cities (Schär, 2015b, pp. 38-125)? What if, although official diplomacy became the exclusive premise of the Confederation in 1848, most of what went out and came from outside the container should be studied not at the national but the regional or local level? One such inquiry could start with the City of Geneva—the seat of the League of Nations and the United Nations—which is positioned as an international hub but cannot avoid local, national and global contextualization (Meyer, 2013).

Conclusion: An empirical approach to transnational issues

We hope our initiative will contribute to promoting research of transnational history as a specific way of looking at history—a “*Problemdefinition mit globalen Anspruch*,” (Osterhammel, 2001, p. 469).³ Transnational or global history is obviously important in some eras and for some subjects such as neutrality, banking secrecy or racial stereotypes, which are deeply entangled in multiple contexts on a global stage. Transnational or global historians

³ Osterhammel gives credit to Jürgen Kocka for this wording.

should not, however, limit themselves to such subjects. Other subjects, less obviously entangled, should be addressed based on careful empirical studies tracing “Le Global au Village” (Garufo, 2015), as well as specific domains or professions—technology, scientific knowledge, medical practices, architecture, sports and many others. Finally, a transnational approach should not be restricted to contemporary history and such a project should include case studies from the medieval and modern periods. Doing so can be nothing other than a collective venture, and the relevant research questions can only be shaped by an empirical approach to the investigated topic.

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