

**Zeitschrift:** Traverse : Zeitschrift für Geschichte = Revue d'histoire  
**Herausgeber:** [s.n.]  
**Band:** 24 (2017)  
**Heft:** 1: Verfassung, Bürgerschaft und Schule = Constitution, citoyenneté et école

**Artikel:** Beyond Switzerland : reframing the Swiss historical narrative in light of transnational history  
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**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-685865>

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# Beyond Switzerland

## Reframing the Swiss Historical Narrative in Light of Transnational History

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This contribution serves to launch a discussion among historians interested in a transnational history of Switzerland. With the purpose of sharing information and fostering research in the field, we initiated an informal network ([www.transnationalhistory.ch](http://www.transnationalhistory.ch)) and organized two workshops – one held in Zurich (March 2016) and one in Lausanne (October 2016). The upcoming annual meeting (in September 2017) of the *Société suisse d'histoire économique et sociale / Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Wirtschafts- und Sozialgeschichte* ([www.histecosoc.ch](http://www.histecosoc.ch)) will also be dedicated to a transnational history of Switzerland. Our goals are to resume and revive older endeavors in the field and to complement the discussions about different perceptions of Swiss history engendered by the anniversary year 2015 (Falk 2015; Holenstein 2015; Guzzi-Heeb 2016; Matter 2016) with empirical research. Historians interested in this ongoing debate are most welcome to join the network.

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“National history is a trap”, wrote historian Hans Ulrich Jost a generation ago. “The nation as a reference for historical writing leads to such a narrow focus that historical understanding collapses. Historical myths were created to fill in the gaps created by this lack of historical understanding” (1994: 19). If one were to understand the history of Swiss society, he concluded, a “European history of Switzerland” would be needed (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).

Swiss historiography does not radically differ from its counterparts in other countries, as national historical narratives have long constituted a key tenet of nation building (Thiesse 1999; Berger/Lorenz 2010) 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 research questions, fields of investigation, the fitting of the mental horizon

into a national framework (Amelina et al. 2012; Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2003). Furthermore, the most important institutions contributing to the everyday practice of historians, such as public archives, professional associations, and historical journals, are nationally organized and have helped develop the national framework within which historical research evolved. To describe this framing of historical research, geographers and historians have coined the expression “container history” (Taylor 1995; Wimmer/Glick Schiller 2002).

For historians specializing in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 early modern period – identifying transregional patterns of kin connections (Teuscher 2011; Sabeau/Teuscher 2011) – and those specializing in research on extra-European regions have long acknowledged the limitations of the “national container” in 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 late modern and contemporary history. In that sense, the nationalized vision of history has tended to offer a somewhat “partial view of reality” (Conrad 2016: 15). Building on the pioneering work of key figures in the field of social and economic history – i. e., Fernand Braudel and his wide-sweeping studies of the Mediterranean space and of expanding global capitalism – and influenced by debates on the process of globalization during the 1990s and 2000s, historians have attempted to find ways out of the national 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 that were developed in different contexts and must not be confused, they all have in common the questioning of the national framework in historical writing. Following a seminal definition of transnationalism by Akira Iriye, such approaches do engage in “the study of movements and forces that have cut across national boundaries” (2004: 213). They have shed new light on many topics. Within the history of science, the idea of the diffusion of Western knowledge to the rest of the world has been replaced with an understanding of the circulation of ideas, people, and technology within networks and among several sites (Secord 2004; Raj 2007; Roberts 2009; Fischer-Tiné 2013). Within migration history, the paradigm shift to transnational migration finds its expression in the illumination of multidirectional flows of migrants instead of the unidirectional concept of immigration, 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 the same 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 particular, researchers are engaged with the transnational reframing of the national narrative in two different ways. Some historians have situated the role of Switzerland within a global context. Pioneering research addressed the interdependencies of domestic and international relations as early as 1980, and the field has developed further ever since (Altermatt/Garamvölgyi 1980; Mesmer 1980; Garamvölgyi 1982; Herren 1999; see also Speich Chassé 2013). Addressing the role of Switzerland in colonialism is also a good example of the trend toward examining Switzerland within the world. Research in this direction has examined the role of Swiss actors – companies, scientists, or individual migrants – in the colonial contexts of the 18<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. A particularly lively field has developed around this topic (Menrath 2010; Purtschert et al. 2012; Brändle 2013; Etemad/Humbert 2014; Purtschert/Fischer-Tiné 2015; Lucas 2016).

Other researchers have addressed historical objects – otherwise framed as national objects – in their broader contexts. These studies tend to focus on “connections” or “entanglements”, and underline how far the 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; Veyrasat 1993; Guex 1999b; Franc 2008; Müller 2012; Brändle 2013).

## **Beyond Switzerland – Questions and Definitions**

Why is it still necessary to emphasize and develop a “transnational history of Switzerland”? Historians working on transnational issues engage in the debate on two levels: They are both addressing the role of Switzerland in a global context and putting classic Swiss characteristics under a fresh – transnational – light, starting with nationalism itself. We think that a transnational history of Switzerland should not lead to further specialization within the historical profession. Transnational history is not an exclusive area of research and can constitute an important dimension of any historical object, just as the analytical category of gender can be applied to any kind of historical inquiry. The challenge for historians is to highlight the added value of the transnational dimension in historical writing and to expand the perspective to shed light on old and new topics.

For this endeavor, we can build on the increasing amount of research in transnational history on the international stage. Historians in different parts of the

world have challenged methodological nationalism and reframed questions from a transnational perspective (Bender 2002b; Conrad/Osterhammel 2004; Tyrell 2009; Laqua et al. 2012). In his introduction to *Rethinking American History in a Global Age*, 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 15<sup>th</sup> century, when the world for the first time became self-consciously singular” (2002a: 6).

This does not mean trying to write a history of everything, but it should encourage historians to consider the countless entanglements that connect elements outside and inside the “container”. All in all, this should help lessen the influence of national framing somewhat and produce a more nuanced historical understanding. It is worth making explicit that such a transnational reframing of national history possesses a “polemical dimension”, as Sebastian Conrad (2016: 4) put it. Transnational or global history “means to change the terrain on which historians think”, and therefore “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 seek to produce a *counternational* narrative. Our objective is rather to develop case studies that integrate “Swiss” institutions, practices, and discourses into their broader historical contexts.

Conrad 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” (11). 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 a third as uncovering global structures that integrate seemingly isolated events into a global story (6). Favoring the third option, he proposed a somewhat limited and carefully defined practice of global history in which historians “explicitly situate [...] particular cases in their global contexts” (10).

So defined, global history may also make productive use of Jacques Revel’s (1996) *jeux d’échelles* – nested scales – along with methods of comparison (Comstock 2012; Pomeranz/McNeill 2015: 2). 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: 26; see also Saunier 2008). This may lead to a re-evaluation of our spatial categories altogether. Pierre-Yves Saunier mentions the work of the sociologist Saskia Sassen as an example of such a shift in spatial imagination: “She started from the idea of studying the interaction of ‘the global’ and ‘the local’ as discrete entities, and later moved

to a position where she questioned the idea of nested scales and concentrated instead on the way that scales are made and unmade, stressing that what we call the ‘local’ is replete with elements of ‘global’ origins and vice versa” (Saunier 2013: 123; see Sassen 1999).

Against this background we would like to 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 Switzerland has played outside its territory and the influence of these global links on its domestic context. Second, we would like to call for a reappraisal of the *Sonderfall Schweiz*. Third, some characteristics of the Swiss nation-state – both at the intra-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 up promising avenues for the study of the interplay of different nested scales. These characteristics challenge heuristic concepts like the alleged “small open economy” or the “global city”. We see strong potential in studies focusing on the interplay of different geographical scales, incorporating specific cities or regions of Switzerland into broader contexts. Although we will explore these approaches in three different sections, we see the following research avenues as interrelated.

## **A Global Switzerland**

In comparison to other nations, 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 in Switzerland, and tourism (in both directions). Although Switzerland never had any actual colonial possessions, the role of Switzerland in the context of colonialism has been viewed as significant. 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 transnational business networks of multinational firms (Veyrassat 1993; Dejung 2013; Haller 2016), investigations into the role of Switzerland in specific colonial enterprises (Lützel Schwab 2006), the role of Switzerland as a hub for global and “colonial science” (Meier 2014; Kupper/Schär 2015; Schär 2015b; Germann 2016), the role of Swiss missionary societies in colonial Africa and in postcolonial “development aid” schemes (Elmer et al. 2014; Harries 2007; Kuhn 2011; Zürcher 2014), and the reappraisal of the role of Swiss nationals in global events such as the slave trade (Stettler et al. 2004; Etemad et al. 2005; Fässler 2005).

The role of Switzerland as a hub for international socialist movements from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until World War I is well known (Degen/Richers 2015; Kühnis 2015; Vuilleumier 2012; Dullin/Studer 2016). The history of transnational feminism has also received attention (Delaloye et al. 2016). Switzerland as a space where Asian anti-imperialist activists resided and organized themselves in cosmopolitan yet local Swiss networks in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century has been discussed, yet calls for further exploration. For example, how did international actors deploy rhetorical devices of neutrality and humanitarianism to serve their anti-colonial struggle? (Fischer-Tiné 2015; see also Stutje 2016). In recent years, researchers have shown the fruitfulness of transnational approaches applied to circulations of ideas and cultural practices and objects (Darnton 1995; Hauser et al. 2011; van Dongen et al. 2014; Debluë 2015; Ruppen Coutaz 2016, see also [www.miroirdumonde.ch](http://www.miroirdumonde.ch)). The public foundation Pro Helvetia and Swiss diplomats disseminated a specific image of Switzerland in the post-war period in order to influence the perception of Switzerland abroad (Milani 2013). Transnational movements of populations are, of course, a fundamental aspect of connections and entanglements. The question of Swiss emigration – from mercenaries leaving the Swiss Confederation 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 have been emphasized (Schelbert 1976; Ziegler 1985; Büsser 2012; Koller 2013; Rogger/Hitz 2014; Studer 2015: 20–21; Huber 2016; Menrath 2016).

The concept of a global Switzerland, which exists outside its own frontiers, should be investigated further, possibly through exchanges between historians specializing in other regions of the globe (Zangger 2011; Dejung 2014). Other specific questions deserve a prominent place in historians’ research agendas. The understanding of the distinctive economic successes of Switzerland – the precocity of the Swiss industrial revolution and the strength of its industrial and financial centers – would strongly benefit from a transnational reappraisal, 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 extra-European countries (Bott 2013) and the question of Swiss imperialism – which is an important aspect of domination of the Global South that does not necessarily depend on the actual possession of colonies (Behrendt 1932; Witschi 1987; David/Etemad 1998; Lucas 2016) – should be re-investigated.

In a complementary way, historians should investigate the economic, social, political, and cultural impact of other regions on Switzerland. The influence of colonial contexts on domestic societies – a major theme of postcolonial literature –

deserves more attention. Recasting research questions in this sense is essential in shedding new light on power relationships regarding misogyny 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 events originating from outside of the national “container” have gone unnoticed and could be investigated.

An important area of research in this regard is the history of migrant labor in Switzerland (Skenderovic 2015). The way in which Italian workers were publicly perceived as a cultural threat proves a striking example of xenophobia in the post-war period. In this respect, Italian food habits were considered a particular barrier towards integration into Swiss society (Bellofatto forthcoming). Moreover, the presence of foreign companies in Switzerland – and the rise of Switzerland as a financial and industrial hub – and communities of highly skilled expatriates working in these firms have received little attention until now, in spite of these issues’ global importance (see, however, Leimgruber 2015; Müller 2012). Considering the enormous amount of foreign private wealth managed by Swiss banks (Mazbouri et al. 2012), a transnational history of this field is crucial for understanding finance and wealth in a global context (Perrenoud 2011; Farquet 2013, 2014; Derix 2014). A better understanding of global Switzerland would in turn contribute to the understanding of global capitalism, which forms the context of Switzerland’s specific role. As Sven Beckert wrote, “capitalism has been globe-spanning since its inception”, but “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” (2014: xxi). In other words, writing a transnational history does not at all mean to neglect the nation-state. It is indeed time to consider 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: 540. Original French expression: Pfister 1971: 88).

## The “Sonderfall Schweiz” Reconsidered

The self-representation and self-understanding of Switzerland as a special case in Swiss historiography cannot be ignored, either. Building on recent studies on this exceptionalist narrative (Kreis 2014; Tanner 2015), it seems to us that a reappraisal of this characteristic may be fruitful for future research. The way historians have addressed Switzerland’s self-stylization as a peaceful society marked by political consensus is a case in point (Guex et al. 2001; Jost 2001). Additional narrative layers of Swiss exceptionalism encompassing political institutions,



Republicanism, and neutrality, should be reassessed. Thereby, comparison could be a powerful tool; for instance, one could compare countries that share specific characteristics like being “alpine” or being termed “small open economies” (Katzenstein 1985; they might actually turn out to be “big open economies, see Guex 1999a; Tanner 2015: 27). Belgium or the Netherlands would be particularly suited for such a comparison (see for example Herren 2000; Holenstein et al. 2008; Straumann 2010).

Comparison alone cannot, however, conclusively assess national characteristics, because the comparative approach tends to consider national unities again as “containers” (Werner/Zimmermann 2006; Verbruggen et al. 2012: 1213) and underestimates the historical evolution and the interconnectivity of characteristics like neutrality, openness, et cetera 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, structures, and discourses 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 regard 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” of the nation. Both the meaning and the strategic use of the *Sonderfall* image should be questioned. Swiss neutrality – during both world wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – has attracted much attention and can serve as a pertinent case. 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 best be addressed as a communicative strategy developed in specific geopolitical situations (Moos 2001; 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 the Swiss National Bank and future Director of the Credit Suisse, stated in *The Economy of Switzerland in Case of War* (*Die Volkswirtschaft der Schweiz im Kriegsfall*) “that if Switzerland remained neutral [in a future war], it could expect the influx of a considerable amount of money from neighboring countries into Swiss banks, which would produce handsome revenues” (1912: 194). The further exploration of Switzerland as a nation-state that propagates neutrality, pursues its economic interests, and has lived through two world wars without foreign occupation seems promising.

## **Nested Scales – The Global, the Local, and in Between**

It is now widely acknowledged that historical writing should handle the different scales of reality in some complex *jeux d'échelles* (Revel 1996), from the very local to the very global (see also Middell/Naumann 2010; Epple 2012: 167–170). “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: 663). We have also already mentioned Conrad’s idea of writing global history in a way to “explicitly situate [...] particular cases in their global contexts” (2016: 10). This is not only a question of scale. Primarily, it means to acknowledge that historical events or shifts, which may at first glance be of local importance only, are actually embedded in larger transregional frames of reference. Swiss society has some particularities that make it especially interesting as an object of investigation for such a research program. The Swiss nation-state emerged from a process that unified a “multiheaded” federation and stood out in the 19<sup>th</sup> century as a particularly loose form of federal construction that gave important autonomy to the cantons (Osterhammel 2014: 409–410). Historians would benefit from addressing such questions as: What implications did Swiss internal heterogeneity have for the transnational connections made by Switzerland? What if much of what has been said about Switzerland would in fact be better applied to specific cantons or cities (Schär 2015b: 38–125)? In a similar vein: What if, although official diplomacy became the exclusive premise of the Confederation in 1848, most of what left and entered 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 (Farquet 2014; Meyer 2013, see also the History of International Organizations Network [HION], [www.hion.ch](http://www.hion.ch), and the tools developed by the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland, [www.dodis.ch](http://www.dodis.ch)).

## **Conclusion: An Empirical Approach to Transnational Issues**

We hope this brief outline will contribute to promoting transnational history as a specific way of looking at history – in the sense of *Problemdefinition mit globalem Anspruch* (Osterhammel 2001: 469).<sup>2</sup> Transnational or global history is obviously important in some areas 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 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* (Garufio 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. The project should include case studies from the medieval and early modern periods. This project can be nothing less than a collective venture, and the relevant research questions can only be shaped by an empirical approach to the investigated topic.

### Notes

- 1 A first version of this article was discussed at the workshop “Transnational Histories of Switzerland”, University of Zurich, 24<sup>th</sup> March 2016. The authors are grateful to participants for their comments. We would also like to thank Claude Hauser and François Vallotton for their helpful comments.
- 2 Osterhammel gives credit to Jürgen Kocka for this wording.

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# WIDERSPRUCH

Beiträge zu  
sozialistischer Politik

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### Konzerne Stadt Demokratie

Bezahlbare Wohnen, Genossenschaften, Gemeinwohl, Urban Citizenship, Unternehmerische Städte, Stadtmarketing, Immobilien- und Baulobby, Rohstoff-Rhizom, Big Pharma Basel, TISA, Unternehmenssteuerreform III, neoliberale Modellstädte

U. Anderegg, M. Heuwleser, K. Jenni, O. Jost, S. Lieberherr, P. Lochte, A. Sancar, I. Balmer, T. Bernet, M. Flück, S. Giger, M. Rodatz, H. Schächli, N. Scherr, K. Unger, Hp. Uster

### Diskussion

D. Z. Bertschinger: Für eine feministische Öffentlichkeit  
F. Cavalli: Irrsinnige Medikamentenpreise  
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B. Ringger / P. Zwicky: Reclaim Democracy

### Marginalien / Rezensionen

35. Jg. / 2. Halbjahr 2016

Der globale Standortwettbewerb hat einschneidende Konsequenzen für Kommunen und Regionen. Die Macht von Konzernen, die Abhängigkeit von ihren Investitionsentscheiden materialisiert sich in städtischen wie ländlichen Räumen, in der Kommunalentwicklung, in der Politik der städtischen Zentren. Diese reagieren auf die multinationalisierte Wirtschaft häufig mit dem Umbau ihrer Verwaltungen nach unternehmerischen Prinzipien, was die Bedingungen der politischen Mitbestimmung grundlegend verändert.

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