



AN ORGANISATION FOR PROMOTING UNDERSTANDING OF SOCIETY

Switzerland and the World at the Dawn of 2017
Report of a OPUS Listening Post®
held in January 2017

PART 1: THE SHARING OF PREOCCUPATIONS & EXPERIENCES

In this part, the Listening Post participants were invited to identify, contribute, and explore their experiences in their various social roles, be they: in work, unemployed or retired; as members of religious, political, neighbourhood, voluntary or leisure organisations; or as members of families and communities. This part was largely concerned with what might be called, 'the stuff of people's everyday lives': the 'socio' or 'external' world of participants.

PART 2: IDENTIFICATION OF MAJOR THEMES

In Part 2, the aim collectively was to identify the major themes emerging from Part 1.

The multi-lingual, multi-ethnic character of Switzerland is in tact on the surface where religious freedom and civic cohesion coexist in a country with 25% foreigners. The recent ruling of the European Court upholding the right of a Canton to fine a Muslim family who questioned whether their daughters should have been obliged to participate in swimming lessons was cited as a case in point. The European Court over-rode the family's claim to religious freedom by siding with the authorities concern to provide basic education – not only through swimming lessons but through the greater educational principle of learning to live together in society. Viewed as a victory for national governments to have discretion in the balancing of religious freedom and civic cohesion the principle was seen to uphold the Swiss principle of 'le vivre-ensemble' (living together) as a means to deal with diversity. However, underneath the surface questions are raised about fundamental issues of belonging.

Students, local Swiss and international workers all have a version of where do I belong? How do I fit in? Where do I fit in? People often have roots in several places, parents from different cantons, different countries, different linguistic groups, different religions that cause people to question where do I really belong? This is the shadow side of the multi-lingual, multi-ethnic face of Switzerland and can cause sudden aggressive outbursts as people strive to integrate different aspects of their complex background and situation. There is a divide between the local more rural system and the international more urban system with people typically belonging to one group or the other with relatively little cross-over between the two. Evident in schools and in the adult population alike - there are the locals, who sometimes feel

mocked and looked down upon by an elite of international people who act as a privileged population and enjoy the benefits of the country: safe environment, high standards of living and the pleasures of privileged sports like skiing without making an effort to integrate in terms of more traditional customs or even in terms of learning the language. The work of integration is left to a smaller number who make the effort to learn, not only the language, customs and interests of the other group but also their concerns and fears. This split is seen as a microcosm of the split between wealth and poverty, have's and have not's in the world at large.

Brexit and the looming handover of power in the US raised concerns of what this will mean for Swiss trade relations. The UK is a strong trading partner in Europe and the US is the leading foreign investor in Switzerland and a major recipient of exported goods from Switzerland. Trump's rhetoric of protectionism has made the business community nervous but given hope to many who have suffered in a slew of job cuts during 2016 that national rights would be given precedence over international competitors for jobs. Comparisons between Trump and Blocher, a Swiss billionaire and head of the Far right party suggest that Trump represents a warning to European and Swiss governments not to bypass citizens on important issues of self-determination like immigration, dealing with threats to national security and the safeguarding of jobs.

Theme 1: The Light Version – Disdain for the Government's vote to overturn the public referendum to limit quotas from the EU was palpable. In a country that has direct democracy the tension of being responsive to the populace (upholding the referendum) and managing EU relations (not being seen as too isolationist) provokes a split in loyalties. This represents the political split in Switzerland and elsewhere (the UK, the US, Hungary) between putting the needs of the country first before the needs of foreigners. As reported in previous years, there is tension between liberal and conservative opinions.

Theme 2: The World Upside Down – democracy in question? Brexit, Trump and the rise of Far right leaders in Europe are seen as warning signs of discontent with the incumbent power structure. Fears about terrorism, mass immigration, loss of jobs which are intractable problems for which there are no easy answers tend to split opinion starkly into polar opposites. Closer to home, job losses, sickness and struggles to keep up with financial obligations threaten people's way of life. Security is longed for but seems an idealistic dream of a world long ago.

Theme 3: Belonging – is a theme on many levels. Internationally how Switzerland negotiates its trade agreements with Europe, the UK, China and the US are all critical as the world undergoes a seismic shift in power. Individually how people gain a sense of belonging despite the myriad evident differences of people is paramount to creating communities of integration and cohesion rather than of splits and division.

PART 3: ANALYSIS AND HYPOTHESIS FORMATION

In Part 3, the participants were working with the information resulting from Parts 1 & 2,

with a view to collectively identifying the underlying dynamics both conscious and unconscious that may be predominant at the time; and developing hypotheses as to why they might be occurring at that moment. Here, participants were working more with what might be called their 'psycho' or 'internal' world: their collective ideas and ways of thinking that both determine how they perceive the external realities and shape their actions towards them.

Analysis 1: Where Next?

The instability in the world with major shifts in power, an increased splitting of societies into rich and poor, the march of immigration threatening to overwhelm Europe and continued terrorist attacks in Europe create an increasingly frightening world. Against this backdrop responses to domestic issues can be exaggerated. Concerns about what is next and how to respond abound.

Hypothesis 1: Because the world is seen as split between impossible choices – being generous to those in need or looking after oneself, resisting inflammatory rhetoric or resisting the dictates of supra-national governing bodies, being open and receptive to people or feeling fearful about possible terrorist attacks people withdraw from the impossible choice into doing nothing and saying nothing. People retreat from the fear of not knowing what to do or where to go by doing nothing.

Analysis 2: Identity Threat

The tensions inherent in balancing different views in society, different ways of life and differences in how people live can make living a stressful experience. Increased talk about unconscious bias entreats people to look at their shadow side which is helpful intellectually but difficult emotionally. People experience difficulty in holding onto a sense of self in this fragmented world in which they may have sympathies that lie with conflicting groups and this threatens their very sense of identity.

Hypothesis 2: Faced with conflict and intractable issues in the world, tensions in society and an erosion of community people feel that their very identity is threatened. Because of this identity threat, there is a yearning for simpler clearer definitions of identity with less complexity, less tension and more cohesion.

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