

# From mosaic to network: social and cultural geography in Switzerland

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## Introduction: does Swiss geography exist?

It is already a tradition: most country reports in this journal start with questions and doubts concerning the relevance of thinking about the production of geographical knowledge in national terms. I cannot avoid feeding this tradition as Switzerland is a particularly uncertain and fragmented nation. It is often maintained that it certainly is a State but much more dubious whether it really is a nation, because it has no single language, but four national ones, no single religion and more than twenty different educational systems. In other words, Switzerland lacks some of the crucial elements of the nation-building toolbox. It is moreover territorially very fragmented: it continues to have a huge number of communes (2,900) and the Swiss remain extremely keen on maintaining local identity and cantonal autonomy.

Geography as an academic discipline and the daily work of geographers are embedded within this political culture and territorial

system. Universities are mainly funded by the cantons and receive only part (around 25 per cent) of their financial support from the State. There is therefore very little national steering of education and research.<sup>1</sup> The appointment of professors and researchers in geography departments, for instance, is, unlike France, made with no connection to national institutions. Unlike Italy, the national association of geographers is not a strong and important forum of decision making and unlike the UK or the USA this association does not organize an important annual conference and come-together of the discipline.

The consequence of these national specificities has for long been a situation with rather autonomous, non-specialized departments working like small cantonal baronies, governed by a feudal logic and maintaining connections mostly with foreign colleagues and departments. There has been a series of negative outcomes to such a situation (which are rather obvious and need not be commented upon here), but also some positive ones.

Autonomy and self-containment gave the possibility for a series of figures to become original voices in continental European geography. The French part of Switzerland, in particular, was in the 1970s and 1980s rightly considered by our French colleagues as an area where one could escape from the poor alternative between Vidalian orthodoxy, on the one hand, and spatial analysis, on the other. Secondly, linguistic fragmentation, which can be seen as a handicap, is also an important asset and resource for Swiss geography. Swiss libraries are not ‘mono-traditional’: they contain remarkable collections of monographs and journals in German, French, English, Italian and other languages. As a consequence there is a truly cosmopolitan intellectual culture and tradition in Switzerland which manifests itself in its social and cultural geography.

Recently things have been changing though. First, the so-called Bologna agreement signed by Switzerland in 1999, leading to the creation of standardized curricula for the sake of intra- and inter-national mobility, and, second, the federal politics of education asking for increased co-ordination between universities, have triggered the replacement of the old (feudal) governance model by a managerial one. The Swiss being disciplined and serious, the pace of change has been spectacular in recent years. Most geography departments have now developed clear profiles and are increasingly co-ordinating their teaching and research activities.<sup>2</sup> The department of geography in Neuchâtel launched, for instance, in 2005 the first Swiss doctoral school in geography with the collaboration of four other universities from the French part of the country—an initiative which would have been close to impossible ten years ago. So, if ‘Swiss geography’ was for a long time a rather elusive entity, something like it is quickly emerging.

Geography is to be found in eight out of the ten universities in the country. Recently it has been established also as a laboratory at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne.<sup>3</sup> Though there has been some recent changes, geography departments are located within natural science faculties in the German part and in the Humanities (or the faculties of social and economic sciences) in the French part of the country, reflecting German and French traditions within the discipline.

Geography holds a reasonably strong institutional position in Switzerland, due to four main factors. The first is that the discipline has always attracted large numbers of students. The second, that geographers have often held important institutional positions within universities and on the boards of the Swiss National Fund of Research, the main research-funding organization in the country. The third reason is a significant media presence (national media are relatively open to the social sciences). And the fourth, the perception within the population that geography is an empirically oriented and socially useful discipline.<sup>4</sup>

The situation described above—absence of co-ordination, non-specialized departments, etc.—means that only recently have departments and geographers in Switzerland begun to identify with subfields such as social and cultural geography and to label their research and teaching activities accordingly. The subfield is today clearly identified as such in four departments: Basel, Bern, Geneva and Neuchâtel. Zurich is also productive in the field, but practises it under the banner of economic or gender geography, as is Lausanne, under the banner of sustainable urban development.

The research activities in these departments can be distributed across five major themes: social and cultural theory, society/culture and environment, gender/labour and space,

migrations/interculturality, urban cultures and societies.

### Social and cultural theory

Switzerland has been a rather fertile soil for theoretical musings and it continues to be one. I would like to mention here, in what is inevitably a partial vision, four theoretical ‘incubators’: two are related to the work of individual geographers, two others to research networks.

Claude Raffestin’s theory of territoriality is one of the major contributions of Swiss geography to the rethinking of human geography in the twentieth century and, more specifically, to the development of a theoretically informed social and cultural geography (Philo and Söderström 2005). For a long time a professor in Geneva, and now recently retired, his work is an original attempt to build a general framework for the comprehension of human beings’ geographic condition (Raffestin 1980, 1984, 1986). This theory builds creatively on references that very few geographers were using at the time it was elaborated (in the 1970s and 1980s): from French philosophy and social theory to human ecology, Russian semiotics or German political philosophy. It exerted however for years a weaker influence than it deserved (and was probably more influential in Italy than in Switzerland or France), partly because Raffestin’s work is scattered in a great number of often short papers, which are sometimes difficult to access. Though general in its scope, his theory, insisting on logics of appropriation, spatial demarcation and symbolic mediation (in one word: territoriality), gave predominant weight to the social and cultural dimensions of human geography. This body of work has recently been the subject of a renewed interest

within Swiss geography: since 2004, a group of young researchers in Geneva is, for instance, working on Raffestin’s legacy in order to make it more easily accessible.<sup>5</sup>

His territoriality theory has certainly been an important means through which human geography came to consider itself as part of the social sciences, which is historically, in Switzerland, quite a recent event. There is however something paradoxical—and Raffestin is himself well aware of it—in the present interest for a theory which tries to subsume all human spatiality under the concepts of territoriality and territory, while the rise of the network society continuously shows that this is no longer possible (if it ever was).

In German-speaking Switzerland, the same move of geography from a discipline often still conceived as having its root in the natural sciences to a discipline connected to contemporary social and cultural theory was facilitated by Benno Werlen’s work on an action theory-oriented human geography (Werlen 1993, 2000, 2004). Building on the phenomenological tradition, especially in its Schutzian version, but also on the work of the German geographer Wolfgang Hartke (Hartke 1959), Werlen has developed a critique of ‘spatialism’ (the idea that spatial entities are as such the objects of geographic enquiry). The focus, he maintains, should instead be on processes of regionalization and geography-making through which human action constructs more or less stabilized forms of places, territories or landscapes. Though Werlen is now working in Jena, Germany, his coherent theoretical work continues to exert a significant influence on Swiss-German geographers. Among them, Joris van Wezemaal, who has been working recently on the conceptualization of an action-oriented economic geography (Wezemaal 2005) with case studies regarding the Swiss housing market (Wezemaal 2004).

The two other 'theoretical incubators' are different in nature. They have not sought to build a Grand Theory, they have been collective endeavours and they have the form of informal networks of collaboration. The first is a group of researchers interested since the early 1980s in questions of geographic representations and practices (and in the nexus representation/practice). Meeting every second year, this international network, including mainly Swiss, French and Italian geographers, was active during the 1980s and 1990s. It was important for the discussion and importation in Switzerland of debates around the semiotics of space, and the relevance for geography of ethnomethodology and social studies of science. The group included French-speaking geographers active in Switzerland such as Antoine Bailly, Jean-Bernard Racine, Bernard Debarbieux, Charles Hussy, Jean-Luc Piveteau and Ola Söderström (Mondada, Panese and Söderström 1991).

The second forum of theoretical debate in social and cultural geography has been an informal and variable group of geographers in large part animated by the geographer of Zurich (of Austrian origin) Dagmar Reichert.<sup>6</sup> In this network, issues around the epistemology of geography, the critique of cartographic reason, art, performativity and emotionality have been explored over the years (Farinelli, Olsson and Reichart 1994). Thanks to these four 'places of elaboration', Switzerland has been a region where theory has not only been imported in what would be a periphery of geographic thought, but also one where a series of interesting discussions and developments have been (and are) taking place.

The theoretical discussions, often connected to these four sources, continue in the publications of, among others, Bernard Debarbieux, around the transformation of

mountain identities and visualizations of space (Debarbieux 2004; Debarbieux and Vanier 2002); Jacques Lévy on the variable dimensions and ontologies of space and place (Allemand, Ascher and Lévy 2004; Lévy 1998); Mathis Stock on the conceptualization of mobility and dwelling (Stock forthcoming; Stock and Duhamel 2005); Christian Schmid on a study of urban space around Lefebvrian categories (Schmid 2005); Dagmar Reichert on space as a category of thought (Reichert 1996) or my own work on visibility, urbanism and spatial artefacts (Söderström 2000, 2005).

### Society/culture/environment

If Switzerland is, surprisingly perhaps, a land of theory, it is also (less surprisingly) very sensitive to issues regarding natural environments. Swiss national identity has been shaped, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through a discourse on the natural environment of the country and the values associated with alpine rural life. Today still, the beauty of the landscape is a constant source of pride as well as a crucial touristic asset. There is, for the above-mentioned reasons,<sup>7</sup> in Swiss social and cultural geography an abundant recent body of work concerning environmental issues in the South or in Switzerland, the social consequences of climate change, urban sustainability, mountain regions and risk management.

The Development Study Group at the University of Zurich is the largest group dealing with social and cultural aspects of environmental change. Its goal is 'to investigate the core problems of unsustainable development in developing and transition countries and to make a contribution towards the mitigation of the syndromes of global change, especially in those regions, which are

cut off from the mainstream of economic development' (Müller-Böker *et al.* 2003: 192). The work of these geographers focuses on questions such as livelihood strategies in South and Southeast Asia (Müller-Böker and Kollmair 2000); the impact of globalization processes on marine resource uses in Bali (Backhaus 1998), local resource–use conflicts regarding forests in Nepal (Kollmair and Müller-Böker 2002), Pakistan (Geiser 2005; Geiser and Steimann 2004) or Kerala (Geiser 2001); labour migration patterns (Thieme *et al.* 2005; Thieme and Wyss 2005); nature conservation in Asia (Kollmair, Müller-Böker and Soliva 2003) or Switzerland (Müller-Böker and Kollmair 2004); and participatory environmental planning processes (Ejderyan 2004; Geiser 2003). The group uses theory-based fieldworks inspired by structuration theory, new institutionalism or actor-network theory.

The work of this group of geographers is a contribution to our understanding of 'naturcultures' in the globalized South. Müller-Böker and Kollmair have, for instance, analysed how nature conservation strategies conceived by international non-governmental organizations coexist with the livelihood strategies of local communities in Eastern Nepal. Monitoring the 'reception' of a World-Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) project through fieldwork, they emphasize the discrepancies between (and/or controversies arising from) the different perspectives (those of the project promoters, tourists and the local population) on the environmental problems of the area, and the difficulties of a participatory process in a context of strong gender and social differences.

Other members of the department are active on questions regarding climate change and mountain regions, especially the threat of global warming on a crucial resource for Swiss economy: snow (Elsasser and Messerli 2001).

Tourism is of course a vulnerable sector of activity in times of climate change, as Elsasser and Bürki have shown in a series of recent papers (Bürki, Elsasser, Abegg and Koenig 2005; Elsasser and Bürki 2002).

The University of Geneva hosts another group, 'Montagnes: connaissances et politiques',<sup>8</sup> which is active in mountain research from a social science perspective. The work of Bernard Debarbieux, in particular, deals with the discursive and iconographic construction of the mountain as a category of thought and action. Rather than simply being an element of the natural world, the mountain is also, Debarbieux argues, 'a mediation of the continuous institution of geographic reality' (2004: 404). Together with Martin Price, he has recently analysed how mountains tend today to become a 'global common good', as different international and national agencies, groups of academics and networks of local communities shape mountain regions as a common object of analysis and action. This phenomenon is studied as a 'rhetorical process which fits the vision and the needs of some stakeholders who rely on it to support their own legitimacy' (Debarbieux and Price forthcoming). A particularly interesting aspect of this research is the analysis of the formation of trans-national politics of nature through the study of a series of symbolic and material means: discourses on a common mountain identity, but also footpaths traversing the alps, or built forms (bridges, architecture) symbolizing relations between geographically distant mountain communities.

Such environmental concerns within social and cultural geography are not confined to mountain areas, but are also applied to urban areas. The reverse would be worrying, considering that Switzerland is heavily urbanized (73.3 per cent of the total population lives in urban areas according to the 2000

census). The question of urban sustainability is, in particular, the focal point of recent research at the Department of Geography in Lausanne. Edited by Antonio Da Cunha, the recently created journal *Urbia*<sup>9</sup> addresses themes such as urban sprawl and its alternatives, the reuse of derelict spaces in urban areas, urban governance and the evaluation of contemporary urban policies in Switzerland. The research of Patrick R erat at the University of Neuch atel touches on similar issues (R erat 2005, 2006). Studying urban sprawl versus compact city models in Switzerland, he questions in an ongoing research project the (in)compatibility between social and environmental sustainability, with the assumption that there is a potential tension between policies favouring the densification of core cities and environmental sustainability, on the one hand, and poorly socially sustainable processes of gentrification, related to such policies, on the other.

Finally, research on risks have recently been re-problematized within Swiss human geography. The work of Val erie November (2002, 2004) and her team ESPrI at the Swiss Institute of Technology in Lausanne, in particular, drawing on actor-network theory, considers risk assessment and management as constituting an assemblage of social and technological factors which defines a series of different risk territories and which transforms the spaces under surveillance. One example is the transformation of public spaces through CCTV equipment (November, Klauser and Ruegg 2002). Her study shows, in other words, not only how natural hazards but also how risk management transform different types of environments. Studying ‘natural’ (floods), ‘technological’ (electricity black outs) and ‘social’ (sport events) risks, the work of ESPrI also analyses the often non-congruent spatial patterns defined and

produced by different forms of risk management strategies.

### Gender/labour/space

When accounting for the development of gender studies within Swiss geography, Elisabeth Buehler recently pointed to the importance of Swiss women’s movements in the 1980s and 1990s. She mentions two political events: “‘the nation-wide women’s strike day’ in 1991 with half a million women on the streets demanding equal opportunities and the social upheaval in March 1993, when the designated woman for the Swiss national government was not elected by the national parliament’ (Buehler forthcoming). These events certainly helped to put questions of gender on the agenda of Swiss geographers, but it did not happen everywhere in the same way. Gender studies are particularly well represented at the universities of Bern and Zurich and are, generally speaking, much more present in the German part of the country. Three geography departments in that region ‘are offering, or have offered institutionalized opportunities to study and graduate in feminist geography, while in Germany and Austria this has not been the case’ (Buehler forthcoming). A significant number of journal papers, MAs and PhDs have been published since 1978 on gender issues, due especially to the work of two pioneers of feminist geography in Switzerland: Verena Meier Kruker and Elisabeth B aschlin (B aschlin 2002a; Meier 1994). Their work helped to institutionalize gender studies in Switzerland, where Doris Wastl-Walter now holds the only chair including gender studies in its definition.

The gender studies group at the University of Bern, led by Doris Wastl-Walter, has been

very active in recent years. Its work, building on postcolonial studies and queer theory, focuses on discursive and subjective constructions of gender identities. Using biographical material, texts and visual methodologies they investigate themes such as women in the economy of mountain regions (Bäschlin 2002b), women in resistance and peace movements, and the integration/exclusion of migrant women in Swiss society (Riaño 2003; Wastl-Walter and Staeheli 2004).

In Zurich, through the work of Verena Meier Kruker, who also worked for years in Munich, and Elisabeth Buehler, gender studies have been focusing on issues of labour and inequalities. In a paper where they investigate different gendered labour arrangements, Buehler and Meier Kruker look, for instance, at the role of local and regional working cultures in the explanation of regional differences (Buehler and Meier Kruker 2002). They show that mothers with small children are more likely to work in the French-speaking part than in the German-speaking part of the country and that gender equality issues are more often raised in public discourses in the French- and Italian-speaking parts than in the German one (see also Buehler 1998). Using both statistical data and ethnographic material from fieldwork in the Calanca valley (in the canton of Graubünden), they argue that 'a complex set of economic opportunity structures, economic cycles, welfare state regulations and cultural values, ideals and norms are shaping gendered labour arrangements in a specific place' (Buehler and Meier Kruker 2002: 312). In other words, and this is also an expression of its federalism, Switzerland is characterized by at least two distinct general gender cultures, as different national votes regarding the role and rights of women (to have maternity leave for instance) have shown in recent years.

## Migrations/interculturality

The politics of migration and multiculturalism is a central issue in Swiss public space for two reasons at least. First, because Switzerland is much more than other European countries a land of immigration. One-third of the population is (partly at least) of foreign origin, one-quarter is born outside of the country (Piguet 2004). Secondly, Switzerland is in itself culturally heterogeneous. As a consequence, questions of multiculturalism predate, and add a layer of complexity to, the question of immigrant integration and/or exclusion. Leimgruber insists for that reason on the existence of two forms of multiculturalism: a 'native' and an 'imported' one (Leimgruber 2002). The first is constitutionally legitimated and publicly recognized, the second, unlike Canada for instance, is not inscribed in the constitution and subject to much political controversy.

A wide range of scholars are therefore working on different aspects of the question, such as the study of migratory flows; social, cultural and political integration; identity politics; issues around citizenship and cosmopolitanism; State regulations and the economic activities of immigrants. An important part of the research in the field is accomplished by the Swiss Forum for Migration and Population Studies at the University of Neuchâtel, where a series of geographers are, or have been, active.<sup>10</sup> Etienne Piguet in particular, now at the Institute of Geography in Neuchâtel, has published extensively on the situation of refugees in Switzerland, on migratory politics of the government or on the discriminatory practices of the employers on the Swiss labour market. In his analysis of the migratory politics in Switzerland during the second half of the twentieth century, he maintains that (material) national boundaries have acquired an increasing importance

in recent years. Through the integration of values pertaining to the Human Rights discourse, nation states have in their majority renounced to massively expulse immigrants present on their soil and become on the contrary more restrictive in terms of controls at their borders (Piguet 2004: 138). Switzerland is, he shows, but one example of the fact that the globalization of population flows and political values is, when you consider international migrations, seriously counterbalanced by national, territorial strategies and logics, related in particular to the maintenance of specific forms of the welfare state.

Being a federal state, Switzerland is also geographically diverse in terms of migration policies as it hosts different politics of integration and forms of access to citizenship (voting rights in particular), according to cantonal legislations (Wanner and Piguet 2002).

Numerous other studies within Swiss geography touch on specific aspects of immigration. As already mentioned, the identity strategies of women migrants is a theme in Swiss gender studies. The economic strategies of migrants in Southern Asia is part of the analysis conducted at the University of Zurich on livelihood strategies in those areas (Thieme *et al.* 2005; Thieme and Müller-Böker 2004). Thieme and Wyss have, for instance, recently shown how, because of remittance transfer, each migration decision in Western Nepal stimulates subsequent migration (Thieme and Wyss 2005).

In Switzerland itself, several studies have investigated the places created by or related to immigrant communities (clubs, associations, restaurants, shops) as sites of intercultural exchange (Racine 2002a; Racine and Marengo 1998) or as expressions of economic activities dependent on social networks which connect Swiss cities to the countries of origin of migrant communities (Piguet 1999).

The specific migration trajectories, projects and patterns of certain trans-national social groups is a recent and developing field of research. African football players or cabaret dancers are some of the groups accomplishing circulatory migrations between different cities in Switzerland (according to job contracts with sports clubs or cabarets) as well as circulating to and fro between their country of origin and where they earn their salary (Poli 2006). Apart from the analysis of the spatial patterns corresponding to these contemporary forms of 'migrations', those studies, focusing on the organization of long-distance social networks, allow us to have concrete examples and figures regarding remittance or knowledge transfers and thus of those trans-national flows that tend often to be described in abstract terms.

### Urban cultures and societies

The urban translation of Swiss federalism is a system of medium-sized and small cities, where only one agglomeration exceeds one million inhabitants (Zurich) and where none of the other urban areas count more than half a million inhabitants. The scale of urban 'problems' is related to such sizes. Only exceptionally are Swiss geographers witnessing sweeping and spectacular processes of urban change in the immediate vicinity of their office. The apparent tranquillity of urbanism can, however, be deceiving for an external observer. Zurich, Geneva and Lugano concentrate a number of financial headquarters which is not at all proportional to their size. The strength of multinational corporations and the power of attraction of its universities and institutes of technology, among other things, imply that these cities are related in many different ways to a vast array of places by the social networks

and the mobility of its elite. Due to the wealth of the country, but also to the curiosity of its inhabitants, the art scene and the cultural offer of cities in Switzerland also exceed by far what could be expected when considering their sheer size. Through these different threads, Swiss urban communities are densely interconnected to the rest of the world, and in that sense thoroughly globalized.

These elements are worth mentioning at least for two reasons. First, because they are in stark contrast with the political isolation of the country<sup>11</sup> emblemized by the maps of the European Union with the Swiss blank hole in the middle. Second, because they show that Swiss cities are very interesting research objects. This potential of Swiss cities as interesting instances of ‘globalized localities’ remained for long somewhat unexploited, however (perhaps because Swiss geographers were also deceived by the apparent banality of their urban spaces). Recently though, interesting work has been published in this perspective. Some of it has already been mentioned in this report regarding sustainability or social risks, but there is an intense research activity on other themes as well.

There is still a strong and often creative tradition of spatial and quantitative analysis of the social geography of cities in Switzerland. At the University of Basel, the focus is on the study of social change in terms of demographic evolutions, employment structure, quality of life and residential segregation in the city of Basel (Kampschulte and Schneider-Sliwa 2003; Sandtner 2001). The same questions are also analysed in international metropolises, with research conducted on the restructuring of cities like Berlin, Hong Kong or Sarajevo (Schneider-Sliwa 2002). The elaboration of planning design guidelines for specific social groups with specific needs, such as the disabled (Schneider-Sliwa 2003) and

elderly people (Schneider-Sliwa 2004), on the basis of large sample surveys is another important focus in this department, which is strongly oriented towards problem-solving and thus applied urban social research.

Geographers at the Department of Geography in Zurich have developed innovative tools for what they call ‘sociotopological modelling’ (hence ‘sotomo’ for the name of this research group), in other words the measurement and graphic representation of social distances and spaces as well as of political topologies based on voting behaviour.<sup>12</sup> The results, concerning phenomena such as residential segregation in Zurich (Heye and Leuthold 2006) or voting behaviour in Switzerland since 1945 (Hermann and Leuthold 2003), are visualized using non-Euclidean representations of these social and cultural spaces. The aim of these models is to understand, describe and quantify ‘large and small-scale regionalization and segregation processes and their consequences’ (Müller-Böker *et al.* 2003: 194) in Swiss cities. In their study of residential segregation in Zurich, Heye and Leuthold (2006) thus show that there is no ‘ethnic effect’ in that city, in the sense that segregation patterns follow the socio-economic characters of the population and that there is therefore no specific pattern related to variables such as the country of origin of the residents. A finding which mirrors studies done at the national level (Huissoud, Stofer, Cunha and Schuler 2003).

Zurich is also where the International Network for Urban Research and Action (INURA), a network of critical urban researchers counting many geographers, originated in 1991. Connecting academics, planners, activists, mainly in Europe, but with members also in Asia, North America and Latin America, the network engages in analyses of contemporary urban change, on forms of resistance and on the search for

alternative development and planning strategies (INURA 1999; INURA and Paloscia 2004). Richard Wolff and Christian Schmid, two founding members of INURA, have, over the past fifteen years, contributed to the theoretical debate on urban transformations in Switzerland. They have used Zurich as their main research laboratory, studying for instance the emergence of Zurich as a world financial centre (Hitz, Keil and Lehrer 1995), or the models that have governed its urban development in the past decades (Schmid 2004).

Bridging the gap between geographic and architectural approaches of the urban phenomenon, Schmid is also one of the authors of a recent and widely discussed 'portrait of urban Switzerland' (Diener *et al.* 2006). The book aims at convincing decision-makers that Switzerland is thoroughly urbanized, in the sense that ways of life are urban throughout the country's territory, which is a strong claim in a country with a long-standing anti-urban political and cultural tradition (Salomon 2005). It is at once an interpretation of Swiss urban development, organized according to three categories (networks, borders, differences) defined in Lefebvrian terms, a plea for the elaboration of consistent urban policies (breaking with this anti-urban tradition) and a planning proposal at the national level.

Gentrification is a classical theme in urban social and cultural geography. It has been a background theme, but not a central issue, both in the work of 'sotomo' and INURA and it has, generally speaking, not received real attention in Switzerland, like in most non-anglophone European countries, until quite recently. The first assessment of the process in Switzerland, at the level of the urban network as a whole, is one of the goals of ongoing research at the Institute of Geography in Neuchâtel.<sup>13</sup> Its first results show that we witness the first signs of such a process in a series of cities (Zurich, Thun,

Zug and a few others) since 2000, after decades of urban sprawl during which the centres generally lost their attractiveness as a space of residence for the most advantaged categories of the population (Rérat, Söderström, Besson and Piguet 2008).

Finally, other classical 'urban problems', such as poverty, segregation and violence, have been well documented over the past few years in Swiss cities. Until the late 1980s, Switzerland had known a continuous process of growth since World War II. The rise of unemployment rates in the 1990s and of financial precariousness for important sectors of the population was experienced therefore as a dramatic change. Cunha showed in the late 1990s that 10 per cent of the Swiss population lived under the poverty threshold and that these figures were higher in urban centres (Cunha 1999).<sup>14</sup> Developing a combination of different approaches to the phenomenon, he studied, using in-depth interviews, the processes leading to deprivation, showing that deskilling and the disintegration of social bonds were common denominators of the trajectories narrated by his interviewees (Cunha, Leresche and Vez 1998).

Violence in urban centres is related by different authors to the same process of social disintegration (Noseda 2006; Racine 2002b). Different from the much mediated confrontations of young inhabitants of the French 'banlieues' and the police in autumn 2005, it takes in Switzerland the form of incivilities and an increasing number of crimes in specific places such as stations, night clubs, etc.

## Conclusion

The fact that I have tended to organize this, fatally incomplete, report in terms of university departments in different cities shows that research is increasingly produced within

thematically defined groups of researchers in these departments, while it was a much more individual matter in Switzerland only ten years ago. In that sense the situation has become less idiosyncratic and closer to what most geographers experience in their respective countries. From being very fragmented, the landscape of Swiss social and cultural geography has thus become more structured, with a series of identifiable and different microclimates. As a 'national system of knowledge production' it remains poorly networked though: research tends to be realized by groups having more links with geographers outside the borders of the country than within them.

The policy of the Swiss government in recent years has been to foster the development of a limited number of poles of research, endowed with important long-term (twelve years) funding and steering national and international thematic research networks. This policy has had little impact on social and cultural geography in Switzerland so far, as no existing pole relates to these sub-disciplines. But the trend goes clearly in the direction of enhanced collaboration between research teams in the different departments. In the years to come, Swiss social and cultural geography is therefore likely, on the one hand, to be more present than it has been in the past in the main peer-reviewed journal and catalogues of international publishers<sup>15</sup> and, on the other, to create more visible networks and poles of research in the domain. Let us hope that this will not happen at the cost of the capacity for innovation and creativity that Swiss social and cultural geography has, on different occasions, demonstrated in the past.

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## Notes

- 1 This is about to change though with a federal law in preparation aimed at implementing a more centralized educational system.
- 2 A list of the websites of Swiss geography departments is to be found at <<http://www.swissgeography.ch/fr/about/index.php>> .
- 3 The *Laboratoire Chôros*, founded by the French geographer Jacques Lévy.
- 4 This is a personal impression, which does not build on surveys but on numerous informal conversations over the years. This popular perception is important in a country where theory and abstraction is regarded with suspicion.
- 5 See <[http://www.geo.unige.ch/Recherche/collecter/news\\_old.php](http://www.geo.unige.ch/Recherche/collecter/news_old.php)> .
- 6 It has counted as regular members: Gunnar Olsson, Allan Pred, Franco Farinelli, Ole Michael Jensen, Enzo Guarrasi, Dagmar Reichert and Ola Söderström.
- 7 But also because nature preservation movements and the natural sciences in the universities have always been strong in Switzerland.
- 8 See <<http://www.unige.ch/ses/geo/Recherches/EquipeMontagnes.html>> .
- 9 The first issue came out in 2005.
- 10 See <[www.migration-population.ch](http://www.migration-population.ch)> .
- 11 Its *Alleingang* (solitary path) as a *Sonderfall* (exception), to use German words very commonly used in the public debate to qualify the country's political singularity.
- 12 See <<http://sotomo.geo.unizh.ch/research/>> .
- 13 See <<http://www2.unine.ch/geographie/page9971.html>> .
- 14 For instance, 13 per cent in Lausanne.
- 15 More and more young postdoctoral students are now spending a few years in British and North American departments where there is a strong tradition in social and cultural geography.

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