Public Lecture Series Spring 2016
Transnational Perspectives and Future Prospects of Migration and Mobility

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Friday, 26 February 2016
Contemporary History from a Transnational Perspective: The Case of Switzerland
Prof. Jakob Tanner
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10:00 – 11:45 h, University of Neuchatel, Espace Louis-Agassiz 1, Room RE.42
Organized together with the Institute of History, University of Neuchatel

Abstract
In this lecture, the renowned historian Jakob Tanner presents the main arguments of his new, and widely praised book on the transnational history of Switzerland in the 20th century. The lecture discusses, how during the “long twentieth century”, Switzerland as a small, neutral state with an open economy of global scope, has produced a significant tension between national sovereignty and economic (inter-)dependence. Compared to the great powers of Europe, the Swiss Confederation was often imagined as a peaceful, blessed country, exempted from the wars and catastrophes of the 20th century, enjoying prosperity and a substantial quality of life. Yet, historical analysis easily shows that instead of being a one-dimensional and intrinsic “success-story”, Switzerland was deeply enmeshed in the trends and catastrophes of the European 20th century.

In this context, the Swiss nation itself cultivated a collective feeling of being endangered by outer enemies. This fortified state of mind became more and more fictional during the Cold War, but was
again and again deployed to fend off external and internal political pressures, for example concerning criticism against Swiss tax haven and the banking secrecy. In the long run, Switzerland was able to realize a competitive advantage through a contradictory combination of a “Sonderfall”- (“Special Case”-) ideology with flexible integration into global markets.

It is shown, how the Swiss “national business model” – whether appreciated or despised – produced structural and ideological synergies and contradictions between historical myths (i.e. “Arcadia of free and pious peasants”), landscapes (i.e. yearning for the alps), the political system (i.e. social piece in a republican democracy) as well as a coordinated capitalism.

The lecture challenges the conventional historiography in Switzerland by proposing a new historical interpretation of Switzerland’s path and transnational history throughout the 20th century. Doing so, it opens up the opportunity for re-considering migration: not as an anomaly to the ethnicized nation but as a constituting part of the transnational history of Switzerland and Europe.

Curriculum Vitae


Selected Publications

– (with Brigitta Bernet, eds.): Ausser Betrieb. Metamorphosen der Arbeit in der Schweiz, Zürich (Limmat Verlag) 2015.
– (with Harold James, eds): Enterprise in the Period of Fascism in Europe, Aldershot (Ashgate) 2002.