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Autor: Crivelli, Pablo

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The power of statistics

Over the past 30 years Switzerland has experienced sweeping changes of a social, economic, political and cultural nature. This is documented by a recently-published report. The detailed study, which far from presents the image of a country where everything runs like clockwork, forces us to take a closer look at social phenomena to which, either through ignorance or political intent, we would rather turn a blind eye: increasing poverty, unemployment among the young, the difficulties of integration experienced by foreigners – realities with which we must come to terms over the next decade.

If only we could do away with surveys and statistics! Nowadays nothing escapes the logic of numbers and measurements. How infinitely distant now seems the era of Stefano



Pablo Crivelli

"Statistics are now an integral part of our daily lives"

Franscini, the father of Swiss statistics, who in the mid-19th century complained of his compatriots' lack of interest in his discipline. The Swiss Confederation was one of the last nations in Europe to set up a statistics office. The cantons, on

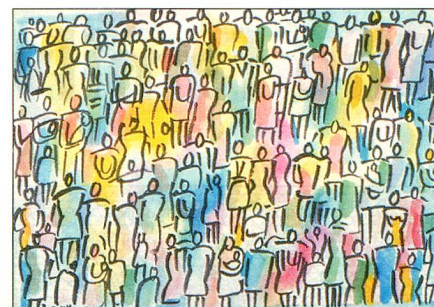
the other hand, knew better. As early as the 16th century various cantonal councils collected a variety of data, ranging from births and deaths to agrarian production. This information was used to accurately monitor the population, identify the number of men available for active service, and determine the volume of grain reserves in the event of famine or war.

Statistics, recognised in the 19th century as a scientific instrument for social and economic state planning, boast a long tradition in the services of government. As a lynchpin, statistics also play an important role in political debate. Stalin, for instance, knew this all too well and ruthlessly manipulated statistics to rid himself of political opponents.

Even in democratic societies, where confidential data is increasingly accessible to the public, statistics cannot escape this logic. Interest groups fight their battles with statistical ammunition, and politicians nowadays also need to be able to argue knowledgeably for or against tables and graphs.

Whether they add fuel to the fire of social conflict or pour oil on troubled party political waters, surveys and statistics are now an integral part of our daily lives. The issues these serried ranks of numbers document reflect the concerns and interests of the population, including those who compile them. Looked at in this light, the analysed statistical material is never "innocent". For example, until the 1920s the Federal Office of Statistics avoided delicate issues of a social nature as far as possible. Nowadays, as the "Social Report 2000" proves, these are the very issues on which political debate focuses.

Pablo Crivelli



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Since its inception in 1850, the national census conducted every ten years has evolved into a multifaceted structural survey that comprehensively throws light on change and constants in Switzerland. The next census is to be held on 5 December.

(Cover: GEORG GERSTER)

SWISS REVIEW

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Editors: Lukas M. Schneider (LS), Secretariat for the Swiss Abroad (Chairman); Alice Baumann (AB), Press Bureau Alice Baumann Conception, Berne; Pierre-André Tschanz (PAT); Pablo Crivelli (PC), Swiss News Agency; Editor of Official News: Patricia Messerli (MPC), Service for the Swiss Abroad, Federal Department of Foreign Affairs, CH-3003 Berne. Translator: Nicolette Chisholm.

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