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Buchbesprechung: Vier Sprachen, ein Zerfall : wie die Schweiz ihren wichtigsten Vorteil verspielt [José Ribeaud]
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SWITZERLAND IS OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE COUNTRY OF FOUR LANGUAGES. We like being referred to in this way – it speaks of cosmopolitanism, cultural diversity, peaceful coexistence and tolerance. And this picture is not inaccurate. Switzerland is indeed a nation forged by the will of the people; it developed against the general European trend of forming a nation around a single dominant language. But, like freedom itself, this nation forged by the will of the people and this linguistic diversity are in danger of being lost if we do not make a continual effort to keep them alive.

These are the thoughts prompted by reading a book by José Ribeaud, a journalist from western Switzerland. The title, “Vier Sprachen, ein Zerfall” (Four Languages, One Decline), says it all: this is a polemic, but an informed and well-argued one, as the author can draw on years of professional experience in both French and German-speaking parts of the country. His diagnosis is as sobering as it is relevant: Switzerland is gambling away one of its most valuable assets. Multilingualism is at risk of becoming an empty myth, an attractive illusion.

His insights are not all new, but the situation has become much more marked in recent years. The ‘dialect wave’ in German-speaking Switzerland is stronger than it has been at any time since the Second World War. According to Ribeaud, the problem is not local dialects themselves, but their exclusive use at the cost of High German. He laments the lack of respect and vanishing consideration for French and Italian-speaking Swiss, not only in personal interactions but also at official events and particularly on radio and television.

Ribeaud reserves his most caustic attack for the invasion of English. The canton of Zurich comes in for particular criticism: he accuses the canton, which cut back on French teaching in schools under pressure from employers, of actively undermining linguistic harmony. In his view, the advance of “Anglomania” into all areas of society is fatal and in “quadrilingual” Switzerland can only be to the detriment of the national languages – even more so than in other countries.

His book is a justified appeal to protect the thing that makes Switzerland what it is: multilingualism. A worrying example of what could happen if nothing is done is Belgium, which is continually threatened with collapse – the direct consequence of a general lack of knowledge among citizens of the country’s other national language and a lack of dialogue between Flemings and Walloons. This dangerous mixture of prejudice, lack of understanding and mutual contempt could also threaten Switzerland’s very existence as a nation.

JÜRGEN MÜLLER



JOSÉ RIBEAUD, “Vier Sprachen, ein Zerfall: Wie die Schweiz ihren wichtigsten Vorteil verspielt”. Nagel & Kimche, Munich 2013.
The book was originally published in French: «La Suisse plurilingue se déglingue. Plaidoyer pour les quatre langues nationales suisses». Editions Delibreo/Alphil, Neuchâtel 2010