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Comment

A drive up the Hoengerberg on the north-western outskirts of Zurich will give a good idea of the extent of Switzerland's efforts in higher education. Among what used to be pastures and woodland 15 years ago there are now a series of expensive modern buildings which house the new laboratories of Zurich's Institute of Technology. This extension of the "Poly", where Einstein graduated, is part of a 500 million franc programme to enlarge and modernise the country's two federal schools of technology (the other one being in Lausanne).

All this effort at giving engineering students first-class equipment is designed to ensure that Switzerland remains in the top league of industrial nations. Our technological society couldn't survive if young people were not trained to build bridges, computers, tram-cars, cranes and electric motors. Spending vast funds on education is, quite generally, providing for the future.

There are two main reasons to the fast growth of the student population over the past 10 to 15 years. The first is that the steady expansion which Europe has known since the war has called for more and more skills and taxed the university's ability to supply such skills to the utmost. This has been particularly true of Switzerland, whose expansion has been almost without parallel. In calling for more highly-educated manpower, Europe's expanding economy has had to draw on working class youths and, in general, on young people from non-educated backgrounds. Expansion has thus favoured a more democratic distribution of knowledge and education. Firms badly in need of executives and engineers have offered new facilities for their skilled employees and trainees, giving them the opportunity to study while remaining in their employ.

The requirements of continued expansion have in fact been matched by campaigns in nearly every country in Europe to give children of lower milieux equal opportunities to those of the professional classes. It was found that only four per cent of university graduates in Switzerland were the sons of working men or farmers.

The result was that efforts at expanding the university were not only tailored to the needs of the economy, but also to those of a more democratic approach to higher education. This is why the Labour governments of Britain have launched a massive university building programme. The grant system was developed everywhere and no efforts were spared to facilitate the endeavours of those who aspired to higher education. While efforts carried out in Switzerland by public authorities towards this end were not as intensive as in Britain, France, Scandinavia and some other countries in which the Welfare State was an important concept, cantonal authorities increased their individual aid and conditions were made generally easier for the children of low-income families. In any case, much of the expenditure now being devoted to higher education can be considered as socially orientated. Universities have to be expanded not only to give industry the skills it requires, but also to give everyone a chance to enjoy a place in the sun.

The time has come, however, for a reassessment of this philosophy. The Dean of the University of Lausanne has recently called for a reappraisal of the ideal of universal higher-education. "If everyone can go to university, then there can be no university any longer", he claimed in a speech to Swiss industrialists. He was speaking from an academic standpoint and expressing concern at the lowering of standards which an opening of the gates of universities had entailed.

As universities are given better facilities, they are in a position to accept more candidates. In Britain, there is no difficulty whatever in finding a place at university and obtaining a grant. Very medium notes at GCE will suffice as long as one doesn't aspire to study at Oxford, Cambridge, Imperial College and the like. This situation also obtains for Switzerland. There is little selection during the course of study (with the exception of the two Institutes of technology) but there is plenty of it after graduation.

A glance at the job opportunities in the papers will show that all vacancies for graduates, if they are not specifically intended for experienced people, call for first degree honours. As only the brainier few can hope to obtain such grades, there

must be a high rate of rejection, and an accumulation of disappointed students unable to fulfil their dreams and who, in a way, have been misguided.

The problem of offering jobs to graduates hasn't been acute so far in Switzerland because the growth of every field of industry and business has made room for most university leavers. Switzerland still needs all the civil and mechanical engineers it can get: there is still a strong need for specialists in banking and insurance, for lawyers and chemists. But aspiring journalists, physicists, sociologists and even doctors are gradually finding it harder to find a niche. So the problem of matching the output of the university to the real growth of the economy will have to be faced. Although the institution of a "numerus clausus" or other devices either limit the intake or, to induce young people to opt for careers badly needed by societies (such as good mechanics, plumbers, decorators, programmers, systems analysts, electricians) is probably too dictatorial in a free society, this is really the optimal solution. It is obvious that Switzerland couldn't absorb five hundred sociology graduates a year, whereas it can still use that number of accountants. A first answer ought to be to prepare detailed public studies which, in this case would give would-be sociology students a clear picture of their career opportunities. If these opportunities turned out to be limited to the academic world of teaching, then these future breadwinners would have to consider related subjects for which there might be a need, such as social welfare officers, personnel managers, and urban planners. But their studies would have to be planned accordingly. With a little wisdom, it should be possible to give young people of proven intellectual ability the opportunity to exercise a career as close as possible to their original aspiration.

Britain and France offer an example of how the ideal of social fairness in education can go wrong. Thanks to the virtual absence of any selection and the grant system, Britain's universities are accepting thousands of young men of all backgrounds who have little inclination for study but who hope to lead better lives with the help of a degree. To some extent, this frame of mind amounts to an escape from the realities of life and a voluntary postponement of facing up to its nasty facts, such as eeking out a living and assuming responsibilities. As so many students come from simple backgrounds, the genuine urge to learn and reflect, which was the original purpose of the university, is not there. On the other hand, many students know that their professional prospects are meagre. The financial rewards of some long studies are dismal. A laboratory technician with a Higher National Certificate earns less than a secretary in London and a physics graduate earns less than a miner. This and the growing success of radical ideas is the

background to the rent strike and the troubles at Essex and other universities. There is an open antagonism between students and the rectorate. Students challenge the right of their elders to run a university and establish a curriculum, rather like the militant trade unionists would challenge the right of management to run a firm in such a way that it can survive.

The May, 1968 troubles in Paris also show how social ideals unmatched by economic opportunity can turn the university into a hotbed of revolution and frustration. There were half a million students in France at the time and nearly half of them in Paris. This practically constituted a separate category – akin to the Algerian workers of France. This mass of young people about to start their lives in a world of uncertainties which they viewed in an increasingly radical light could be considered as a world apart, as a fringe minority. One needn't be too pessimistic, however, because the great majority of those students who were led into having a bash at the French riot police, partly for the fun of it, are probably now settled with jobs, families and responsibilities. It is difficult to assess the reality and extent of the understanding between left-wing students and the militant trade unionists. During the 1968 troubles, there were meetings between student and worker representatives and it is not uncommon to find British students selling copies of the "Workers Press" outside tube stations. These students are nearly always of

working-class background and indicates that the University has exposed itself to the risk of increased dissent by being open to students coming from homes hostile to the establishment. The fact is that in most universities and polytechnics, a great many militant students are more likely to be found politicking and campaigning in the premises of the Students Union than studying in the Library or attending lectures.

Although most Swiss Universities (particularly Geneva and Zurich) went through some troubles in the wake of the Paris student revolt of 1968, the situation is generally quiet and dissent purposeful. The young people who occasionally confront the Zurich Police are rarely university students.

But the problems faced by universities in Britain and France are still basically the same in Switzerland. A reassessment of the social and economic purpose of the university will be necessary because expansion will not continue for long at the rate enjoyed so far and which has made Switzerland's per capita national income the highest in the world. One solution would be to convert the university into something permanent serving everybody for the whole of their lives. It wouldn't necessarily be intended to train people in their careers, but answer to a genuine wish for knowledge. The Open University could be considered as an example of such a scheme. In view of what we have just said, it seems necessary to consider very seriously

whether Switzerland really needs more universities. A new one is being planned at Lucerne. It would be created in addition to the eleven universities and schools of business or technology already in existence in the country. If it can be proved that Lucerne really needs a university when there is one at Zurich, forty miles away, and at Berne, sixty miles away, then all right. But if the promoters are moved by purely cantonal, linguistic or federalistic considerations, then it would be wise to reconsider the

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justification of the considerable expenditure involved. The creation of a new university should be envisaged within a general development plan for the country. On present trends, it appears that expansion and population growth will slow down and more emphasis placed

on the quality of life. This will surely have a bearing on higher education.

In the meanwhile, it can be said that most of the problems of society today are concentrated and amplified in the small world of the university.

P.M.B.

SWISS EVENTS

END OF FIRST SESSION OF DIPLOMATIC CONFERENCE ON HUMANITARIAN LAW IN GENEVA

Mr. Pierre Graber drew very optimistic conclusions at the end of a three-week session by 120 delegations to revise the 1949 Geneva Conventions. Speaking to journalists after the closing meeting in Geneva the Head of Switzerland's diplomacy said that a second and final session of the conference would take place next February. Mr. Graber hoped that it would be sufficient to confirm and expand existing humanitarian laws applicable to war situations. He had presided over the sometime stormy meeting which had been convened by Switzerland. The importance of these negotiations was underlined by the presence of 120 national delegations, plus a great number of delegates from liberation movements, whereas only 50 countries had participated in the elaboration of the 1949 Convention. Mr. Graber stressed that the 1974 session had constituted a first attempt at a universal codification of prisoner-of-war provisions.

The beginning of the Conference was beset by disagreement between Western and Third World and Communist delegations on the status of the Vietcong as a fully-fledged member of the Conference. This was eventually denied to South Vietnam's Revolutionary and Provisional Government, which walked out of the Conference. A consensus was then reached on allowing liberation movements to participate but not to vote. Liberation wars were also accepted as "wars in their own right" so that the norms of humanitarian behaviour considered for other classical wars should also be applicable to them.

This recent session to be considered as a first contact for the 120 participating nations who now have a year during which to define their policies so that the 1975 session can result in decisions and a new body of internationally accepted standards for the treatment of prisoners of war.

The local Press commented that the success of the conference and the fact that so many countries had responded to Switzerland's call to meet in Geneva

enhanced our country's international prestige.

Geneva names street after Ansermet

A street has been renamed in honour of the late Ernest Ansermet, founder and leader of the Swiss Romande Orchestra. The "Quai de l'Ecole de Medecine" bordering the river Arve will henceforth be called "quai Ernest Ansermet". The Geneva authorities had waited a customary period of five years after the conductor's death before making a change which was not only appropriate in view of Ansermet's importance in the history of music, but also because he had directed over 450 concerts in the neighbouring studios of Radio Suisse Romande. The orchestra which he had founded and which was one of the leading symphony orchestras of the world is now conducted by Wolfgang Sawallisch.

Streaking makes a brief appearance

With a time-lag of about a week, streaking spread from the Anglo-Saxon world to Switzerland during the middle of March. The first incident recorded by the Press apparently happened in Zurich, where two youths streaked along the Bahnhofstrasse. A few days later, a group of men ran naked across La Place Neuve in Geneva. There were other examples in most towns, but the sensation was over in about two weeks, as it was elsewhere.

MR. ERNST BRUGGER ATTENDS POMPIDOU'S FUNERAL SERVICE

Mr. Ernst Brugger, Head of the Department of Public Economy and President of the Confederation for 1974, represented Switzerland at President Pompidou's funeral service in Paris. The Federal Council took some time before it decided that Switzerland should be represented at this level and chose at first to see what other countries were doing. When it realised that about sixty heads of State or government were going to Paris it decided to break an old tradition according to which a Federal Councillor does not go abroad while holding the office of President. The fact that Switzerland had been represented by a former President (Max Petitpierre) at General de Gaulle's funeral service had shocked several members of parliament.

Requiem masses were celebrated in Berne and Geneva in memory of the late French President.

NEGLIGENCE CAUSES A TRAIN COLLISION NEAR NEUCHÂTEL

The station master of Boudry and an assistant station master at the neighbouring station of Bevaix were charged with careless manslaughter following a collision between a stationary express train going from Neuchâtel to Lausanne and a slow passenger train. Two people were killed and eight others injured in the accident. An enquiry showed that the station master at Boudry had delivered a written authorisation to the driver of the slow passenger train to start off in the Yverdon direction despite there being red lights. This authorisation had been given following unclear instructions phoned to him from Bevaix, the next stop down the line, by the assistant station master. The omnibus train crashed into a stationary express train opposite Perreux psychiatric hospital. The express had come to a stop because an unknown man had stood on the line in a suicide attempt and been fatally injured.

A Swiss firm will keep time at the 1976 Olympics

The Organising Committee of the 1976 Olympics have signed a contract with Swiss Timing, entrusting the Swiss firm with the time-keeping of both Summer and Winter Olympics. The Swiss watch industry will thus undertake a highly complex task which it has performed with only one or two exceptions since 1932. The two firms that have usually kept time up to now at the Olympic Games were Longines and Omega.

Plea for the right to strike

A federation of civil servants ("Union fédérative du personnel des administrations et des entreprises publiques) has asked the Federal Council to start the necessary procedure to abrogate Constitutional provisions (Article 23) forbidding public employees from going on strike.

The Swiss Navy too small

The proverbial Swiss Navy is now equipped with 28 merchant ships of a total tonnage of 365,000 tons. In addition to this, 125 ships of a total tonnage of 140,000 tons fly the Swiss flag on the Rhine, which is a sharp drop with respect to the Rhine fleet of 1967. It then consisted of 253 boats grossing 230,000 tons.

The Swiss Government considers that the Swiss merchant navy on the high seas should be larger in case there should be a new war or an international emergency.

The port of Basle handled nine million tons of traffic in 1970 but this volume hasn't increased since.