

Benefits, freedom, self-government

Peter Blickle analyses communalism in Switzerland and Europe

by Beat Kappeler*



Beat Kappeler. (Picture beatkappeler.info)

(CH-S) Renowned journalist Beat Kappeler draws on the research of historian Peter Blickle to explore what makes Switzerland so unique. How did the Swiss manage to preserve so many rights and avoid organising their state in a hierarchical manner, unlike France, Germany or Italy? How did the independent and wealthy cities and municipalities of Europe come to submit to centralised power?

The best contribution to the Swiss perspective was made 40 years ago by *Peter Blickle* and his circle, who took an outside view without the blind enthusiasm of people who know only Switzerland and nothing else. Instead, Blickle, a native of southern Germany who was a professor in Bern for a quarter of a century, found the DNA of Switzerland in “communalism”, which he found everywhere in old Europe – the community, the city as a self-governing haven of freedom.

After the year 1000, free cities, imperial cities and regions sprang up everywhere. But only in Switzerland has freedom been preserved to this day, or at least to a greater extent than elsewhere.

In this respect, Switzerland has preserved the good fabric of a free society, while the many areas that have lost it are the exception.

In 1356, the constitution of the Old German Empire suddenly banned free associations of towns and regions in the “Golden Bull”. Several wars were waged by the nobility and the emperor extin-



Isny in the Allgäu – Localism inscribed in the landscape. (Picture ma)

guished them by 1388, but a year later, the Confederates extinguished the entire nobility of southern Germany and the Habsburg Duke who had flocked there – in Sempach. Their alliance prevailed.

Benefit what else

In 1555, *Emperor Ferdinand* forbade communities and towns from freely choosing their religion, because “equals cannot make laws among themselves” – it must come from above, from the nobility.

But *Zwingli* and the cantons did not care, they allowed each parish to vote, and that was that.

Blickle showed that the communalism that prevailed in Switzerland – in the original Swiss cantons, in the city cantons, as a confederation of cantons – was based on the old principle that they were allowed to administer justice themselves “pro communi utilitate”, for the common good and benefit, without further derivation from the emperor or the nobility. Blickle describes this as the very essence of the Swiss Confederation.

In contrast, the imperial cities of Germany and southern Germany always sought the protection

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ator, first at “Weltwoche” and then at “NZZ am Sonntag” from 2018 to 2022. He received an honorary doctorate from the University of Basel in 1999. He has received numerous awards, including the Zurich Journalism Prize, the Liberal Award, the Röpke Prize, the Bonny Prize for Freedom and prizes for financial and economic journalism.

of the emperor, and his officials set the conditions. The cities were prohibited from levying actual taxes; the territorial prince collected them and delivered them to the empire. The Swiss Confederates successfully contested this in the Swabian War of 1499. By describing themselves from the outset as “communitates” or “universitates”, i.e. entire associations of cantons and cities, the Swiss rounded off the territory for themselves and between themselves.

The imperial cities, on the other hand, formed alliances but did not constitute a closed unit. The emperor or territorial princes often pledged them individually and behind their backs to other princes. Even the Hanseatic League and the Lombard and Tuscan cities, powerful individual examples of communalism, did not achieve this territorial cohesion, but the United Provinces of Holland did.

Switzerland “was able to transform a large area from the Gotthard to the Upper Rhine into a unified zone of peace.” That was a long time ago, but once it was established, even the Napoleonic interlude could not wipe it out. Switzerland endures, and so do its mentalities.

Higher purposes, not benefits for the people

This explains why the population today is still headstrong, self-governing and highly values autonomy. Popular rights have even exacerbated these attitudes since the end of the 19th century – the people make the laws, not just the delegated parliament, as is the case in the rest of Europe. Or, as is increasingly the case in the EU, for everyone, and from above.

In the EU, the supposed higher purpose of an “ever-closer union” has taken over the derivation of laws from the nobility and emperors of the time: in the event of resistance, member states – even Germany – are always reminded of the higher goals and outvoted because they are not allowed to oppose them.

This is currently playing out with the huge debt incurred for the “New Generation EU” package of 800 billion, the 100 billion arms package and the latest Ukraine package of 90 billion euros – debts always at the expense of the member states, but for the “good cause” of a strong Union.

This principle has also been at play for ten years in the wave of ever-new bureaucracy arising from the directives. In Switzerland, on the other hand, the debate on the new frame-

work agreement only ever raises considerations regarding its benefits, whether it could be “pro communi utilitate”. And ultimately, the people will decide whether to accept or reject such a law.

The “common man”, without nobility, without civil servants

In the tension between higher-level, at that time aristocratic, purposes and everyday utility as a guiding principle of society, Peter Blickle credibly added his interpretation of the Peasants' War of 1525 as a “revolution of the common man”. It was not only peasants who sought a liberal order committed to utility, but also townspeople and miners, i.e. workers. They all revolted against feudalism, as in the “12 Articles” of the Declaration of Human Rights of the wealthy city of Memmingen, the first in the world.

But in the same year, 1525, princes and emperors crushed the peasant and city armies one after the other. The active, working classes of Europe had risen up against top-down rule, en-

Further reading by Peter Blickle:

Peter Blickle (1938–2017) was a German historian specialising in the early modern period. He held professorships in modern history at the universities of Saarbrücken (1972–1980) and Bern (1980–2004). Blickle coined the term “communalism”: Between around 1300 and 1800, the vertical power structure in urban and rural areas was countered by a communal structure characterised by functional freedom, independent work and political rights. Its values – peace, common good, equality before the law – were an important component of the modern state that developed in the following centuries. This refers to an independent set of values and constitutional principles held by citizens and farmers, which Peter Blickle contrasts with feudalism and absolutism as models.

Beat Kappeler, author of this article, recommends the following publications by Peter Blickle:

“Das Gesetz der Eidgenossen. Überlegungen zur Entstehung der Schweiz 1200–1400” [The Law of the Confederates. Reflections on the Emergence of Switzerland 1200–1400], in *Historische Zeitschrift* 255 (1982), pp. 561–586

Das Alte Europa. Vom Hochmittelalter bis zur Moderne [Old Europe: From the High Middle Ages to Modern Times], C.H. Beck, 2008

Der Bauernkrieg. Die Revolution des Gemeinen Mannes [The Peasants' War: The Revolution of the Common Man], C.H. Beck, 1998/2006

forced by unelected officials acting as transmission belts, but they were quickly defeated. This mentality is therefore still more prevalent in Switzerland than elsewhere. At least “professionals”, classes with creative power and competence, could eventually rebel against the state and European bureaucracies that had emerged. The new “common man”? On verra.

The large, all-powerful nation states of the 19th century, such as France, the German Empire and Italy, put an end to communalism, i.e. extensive self-government. They were brought about with tens of thousands of deaths in the revolution and in the “wars of unification”.

Travellers can see evidence of failed communalism outside Switzerland in the stately town halls and almost doll’s house-like imperial cities such as Memmingen, Biberach, Isny (see picture), Lindau, Rottweil, Wangen, in Lombardy, in Tuscany, in the Hanseatic League.

Or the triumph of communalism in Bern, Lucerne, Solothurn, Geneva and the cities of Holland.

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