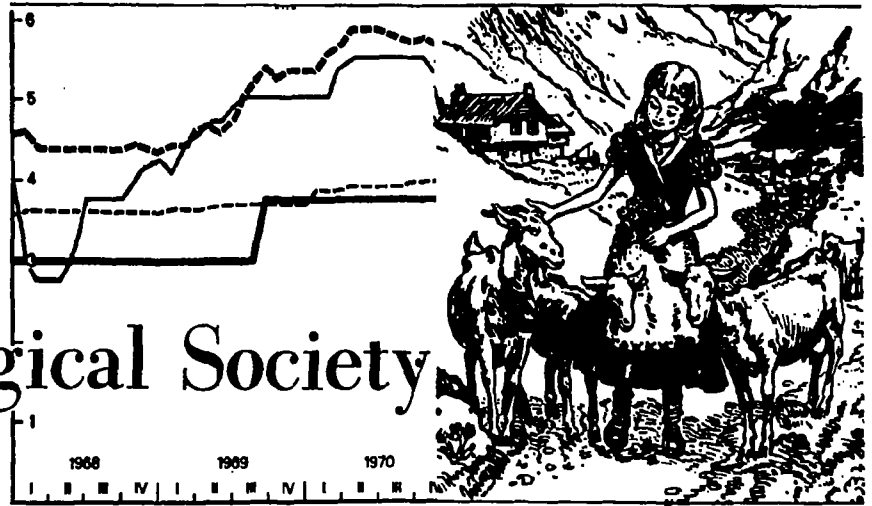


# Heidi in Technological Society

The death of direct democracy in Switzerland

Benjamin R. Barber



A small Alpine village in the shadow of mountains that have watched impassively the coming of industrial society. A remarkable study in contrasts. A massive peasant house built in the sixteenth century across the street from a completely automated milk-processing center. Smooth machines now handle a host of functions that were once the work of the peasant family across the way. A swaying cable car carries foreign tourists up over common land that the village is no longer populous enough to cultivate. A young girl can be seen haying on the side of an Alpine meadow worked by her ancestors, but she is wearing a miniskirt and rib sweater, and she is soon on her way to a big-city salesgirl apprenticeship. Schnapps-drinking grandfathers play whist at the Post-Hotel pub, but their nostalgic stories must be shouted across a blaring jukebox installed for the benefit of their grandchildren, who are wiling away their adolescence waiting for the army to liberate them from the confines of the village.

Even the village profile has taken on a startling new aspect. Not the stolid communal church, built four hundred years ago and embodying the integral unity of the village, but a recently thrown up high-rise apartment dominates the skyline. The high-rise is as detached from the community in its colorless heterogeneity as the church was integral to it. The very mountains seem diminished by the cable cars and power lines that everywhere mark their face, gloating tributes to the emancipation of Alpine man from Alpine terrors. Villages become towns, towns burgeon into cities.

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The transformation can be seen almost anywhere in Switzerland—a nation which, having avoided the ravages of war and poverty, can only be remodeled by planned demolition or relocation. The change is especially obvious in autonomous villages that sit fortuitously on the doorstep of cities. Adliswil, a small village outside of Zurich, has tripled in size in the last twenty years—adding ten thousand rootless commuters, emigrés from Zurich, most of whom live in vertical clusters of several hundred in high-rise apartments that float above rather than inhabit the community. The little commune of Veyrier is now a bedroom town for the city of Geneva. Frauenkappeln, an ancient cloister and relatively prosperous farm community near the Swiss capital of Bern, recently formed a citizen's association to resist encroachments from the spreading federal metropolis. But Bern grows and grows, its need for more suburbs intensifies; if not this year, then next, if not next, then the year after. Throughout Switzerland, village life is dying.

Few young people in Alpine villages anticipate spending their lives in the communes of their birth. Not only are economic prospects in the village limited, but the jobs for which people are most critically needed (in the pastoral economy, for example) appear least attractive. Why should a young man spend solitary summers with herds high in the mountains when he can clerk in a city bank, leaving half his day for leisure activities? His forebears had little choice; then too they had found rewards in the autonomy and partial autarky their labor brought them. But he does have a choice. The bonds that once drew men together into a loyal collectivity are seen by him as pointless chains. The Beatles or the Stones are voices he can understand; the echo of communal patriots pleading over the centuries for communal vigilance against feudal, imperial or other conspiratorial foes glance off him unheard. What is the ghost of William Tell compared to an interna-

tional counterculture of the young, promoted and funded by international capitalism? Who is to remind the young of the sacrosanct character of the village assembly when the important decisions have been taken out of its hands and its traditions degenerated into tourist attractions?

Today's Switzerland is the product of a century-long collision between vital communal norms and the apparent requirements of national survival in an industrialized, urbanizing world. Progress seems to require the surrender of meaningful personal autonomy, of real self-government—the death of direct democracy.

It is useful to put into perspective the motives of those who oppose modernization in Switzerland. In societies which have reaped the ambivalent fruits of full abundance and maximum productivity those who plead for conservation and the restoration of community are radicals and not reactionaries. In such societies the modernizers—enamored still of rational models of economic progress, spiraling GNPs and inordinate exploitation of resources—may turn out to be a good deal more pigheaded than the skeptical traditionalists.

Strange, then, to see so many Swiss "radicals" assailing their own nation's reluctance to settle into the facile cosmopolitanism of a liberal Europe bound together by common devotion to outproducing and outmarketing the other world monoliths. We need not be new Malthusians nor swallow uncritically the bleak projections of the now notorious MIT-Club of Rome study of the "limits to growth" to know that the Western growth mania has exacted a severe price. It is clear that the crisis of Swiss democracy and Swiss communalism is a part of the larger crisis in Western modernization.

The opposition to modernization began in Switzerland long ago. The Alpine cantons have never been very hospitable to the innovations fostered by their urban counterparts. A striking example of rural Switzerland's early antipathy to economic modernization is the canton of Graubunden. In 1911 it passed a bluntly worded law: "The driving of automobiles of any type, passenger cars, trucks or motorcycles, is forbidden on all roadways in the canton of Graubunden." This remarkable ban was retained for twenty-one years, finally revoked in 1932 only as a result of intense pressure from the Swiss Federal Government. There was, to be sure, a certain irrationality in Graubunden's stance, and skeptics are quick to note the hand of the railroad lobby in the affair; but there also seems to have been a prudent caution about the vulnerability of Alpine communalism to outside forces. The potency of the village community derived from its rusticity, its limited and stable population and the refreshingly parochial nature of its common interests. Opening it up to progressive interdependence and the mod-

ernizing influence of the outside world might enhance public affluence, but it might also jeopardize the public weal—as measured by these critical standards.

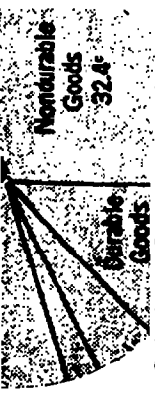
Urban critics naturally spoke derisively of the ban as a comic idiosyncrasy of a bullheaded people incapable of recognizing the requirements of their own economic welfare. Yet today, when most of the social and political damage has already been done (not to speak of environmental costs), villages and towns throughout Switzerland—along with cities throughout the world—are reconsidering the place of the automobile within their environs. Wengen, Murren, Braunwald and Zermatt are only a few of the fifty-three Alpine communities that have recently barred passenger cars. Inner-city areas of larger towns have also been closed to traffic.

It is tempting to view such cases as the Graubunden ban as examples of lethargic Alpine Ludditism—a kind of romantic pastorate to the virtues of simplicity against the depersonalizing improvements of technology. Yet there is no particular animus here against the machine, no self-conscious advocacy of Arcadian alternatives. The issue was and remains the political autonomy and economic autarky of the village community, the preservation of traditional rights against the claims, not of the machine per se, but of the kind of society the machine seems destined to create.

The automobile was excluded from Graubunden's roads for twenty years because it threatened to infect stable communities with that automobilized individualism that—as America has so poignantly demonstrated—small-town life cannot survive. The automobile turns citizens into mere individuals; it takes children with family roots and ties to a common past and turns them into orphaned vagabonds; it takes communards and sets them loose in a homeless society where independence means loneliness and liberation conveys only the sad sense of solitude.

The resistance has obviously not succeeded. Rusticity cannot by its very nature long impede the inroads of cosmopolitanism; any more than silence can impede noise, or placidity, ambition. Moreover, almost from the beginning cantonal governments and the Swiss Federal Government have been allies of economic progress, whatever the costs to the communes. To these centralizing bureaucracies, Switzerland's radically decentralized confederal system is an extravagance; traditionalist attitudes still lingering in the public mind are anachronistic. To "reform" the small nation, to bring it into the twentieth century, means to extend central control and central planning, to nourish a national economy and to rationalize a sprawling confederal apparatus. The pace of reform must, of course, be prudent; an overly ambitious program produced runaway inflation, labor shortages, senseless demolition of landmark buildings and an egregious sellout of land and corporate interests to foreign investors (primarily German) in





the 1960's. Steps have now been taken to freeze demolition, slow construction, outlaw foreign real-estate speculation and otherwise modify the pace of change. But tactical concessions to moderation do not stem the urbanizing tide that is transforming the face of Swiss life; they only guarantee that it will be complete and successful.

The futility of trying to resist nearly irresistible forces has led many Swiss into expressions of frustration and cantankerousness that verge on the pathological. The conservative impulse, too often thwarted, becomes reactionary; the healthy instinct to protect a valued past turns into perverse intransigence. The Separatist Movement (*Rassemblement Jurassien*) in the Jura mountain region of the canton of Bern has, for example, become increasingly violent and extremist as its once modest aims seem less and less likely to succeed. Beginning as a movement representing the typically Swiss impulse to decentralization and regional autonomy (in this case for the French-speaking Jurassien inhabitants of predominantly German-speaking Bern), it has ended as a frustrated vehicle of wholly untypical and mostly futile passion. In 1968 it created a violent disturbance at a joint session of the national parliament, the likes of which have not been seen in Swiss politics since the civil war of 1847.

An even more revealing example of the increasingly desperate character of the Swiss resistance to modernity is the so-called "Schwarzenbach case." During the booming 1960's the Swiss economy came more and more to depend upon imported foreign workers, primarily from the Mediterranean countries of Italy, Spain and Greece. By the end of the decade the foreign labor force was almost a million of Switzerland's six million population. The Swiss government had lent its full support to an international labor traffic that had become indispensable to the national economy. But the Swiss public was far less tolerant. Propelled by fear, by national chauvinism and by latent racism, but also by a realistic concern for the precarious equilibrium of the multiethnic Swiss nation, people complained about the perils of what was openly called "overforeignization." (*Ueberfremdung*).

In 1970, under the leadership of James Schwarzenbach, a Zurich publisher, a constitutional amendment was introduced by petition, which would limit the number of foreigners in any given canton (save Geneva, which has a special status as an international community) to 10 per cent of the Swiss population. In effect this would mean the expulsion of more than 300,000 men. On June 7, 1970, the amendment came to a national vote by referendum and was narrowly defeated, to the immense relief of the federal government.

The significance of the Schwarzenbach proposal lies, however, not in its ultimate defeat but in the

extraordinary vitality of its popular backing and in the nature of the controversy that surrounded it. The forces arrayed against it were formidable: the Federal Executive Council (*Bundesrat*) was implacably opposed, the Lower House of Parliament (*Nationalrat*), supposedly representative of popular sentiment, rejected it 136 to 1, the Council of State (*Ständerat*) voted no 39 to 0. Manufacturing, trade and industrial interests were unanimously critical and funded a record-breaking publicity campaign urging defeat of the proposal and defaming its supporters. Schwarzenbach backers were portrayed as Nazis bent on turning the Swiss white cross into a black swastika. Not one major political party, not one significant pressure group or voluntary association favored the amendment. An outside observer would have had to conclude that a handful of maniacs under the demented leadership of an hysterical neo-Nazi were about to be given the soundest electoral thrashing of Swiss history. Yet on June 7 no less than 46 per cent of a record turnout voted yes on the referendum, while in seven of twenty-two cantons the proposal actually carried. Four out of nine voters had gone against their government, against their party, against the unions, against the media and against all the smart money in the land. Though the amendment was defeated, the electoral results were a scandal.

Opponents of the proposal suggested that it was the repressed voice of racism that had spoken, too self-conscious to make itself heard openly, but unleashed in the privacy of the ballot booth. Certainly both antiforeign and specifically anti-Latin sentiments were involved. For over a decade Swiss newspapers had carried discreet housing advertisements letting rooms to "working gentlemen—must be Swiss" or "Swiss citizens only please," while Swiss businessmen spoke about their non-Swiss employees as "Alpine coolies" or worse.

Yet the largest majorities against the amendment were put together in the large cities, where the presence of foreign workers was most acutely felt and where racist sentiments were likely to be most pronounced. It was in the rural, Catholic inner-Swiss cantons of Luzern, Uri, Schwyz and Obwalden and Nidwalden that the largest pro-Schwarzenbach majorities were found, although few foreign workers lived in these regions and Catholicism represented a common link that should have ameliorated anti-Latin antipathies. Moreover, in the "progressive" French-speaking cantons of Vaud and Geneva, and even in the Italian-speaking Ticino, better than one in three supported Schwarzenbach.

The opponents of Schwarzenbach were not merely liberals defending the international civil rights of hardworking foreigners; they were the combined forces of efficiency, national planning, centralization and economic progress representing the political and industrial élite of the Swiss nation. Nor were his

supporters simply bigoted reactionaries, but advocates of an integral communal past founded on autonomous self-government. "They would pave over our farms with concrete," warns a Schwarzenbach pamphlet. Schwarzenbach himself, suggests an observer, wanted "to save simple human labor from mass industrial labor, wanted to restore rusticity, wanted to rescue humility from big-city materialism with its arrogance . . ." "*Man kann den Wohlstand nicht in seinen Sarg mitnehmen.*" he liked to say. "You can't take prosperity with you into the coffin."

So those who lived in the cities were, it appeared, pledged to make Switzerland a European power, a modern, economically competitive nation, however little they cared for Italians. Their vote against Schwarzenbach was not a vote for justice but for prosperity and progress on the terms outlined by the government. Those in the mountains, who saw little of the cities and knew still less of the Italians and their Latin kinsmen around the Mediterranean, voted for a stasis which their countrymen had abjured. To them Switzerland was no American melting pot, no marvel of cultural assimilation that mixed peoples the way Americans mix drinks. Its precarious equilibrium rested on keeping peoples judiciously apart, on maintaining delicate balances that made possible long-term accommodation. For them, to vote with Schwarzenbach was to protest against the suborning of their towns and villages to a mindless prosperity, against a pretended integration that destroyed the tolerant regionalism upon which Switzerland's heterogeneity depended, against a cosmopolitan way of life that surrendered active citizenship for the rewards of a benevolent bureaucracy, against a remunerative internationalism that meant the death of democratic self-government.

These are, of course, idealizations. We are putting words into the mouths of men who may have merely been venting their obstinacy, or their small-mindedness or their racism. We should not make of them simpleminded Heidis strewing rhetorical garlands over Switzerland's bucolic past. On the other hand, those devoted to modernizing Switzerland and selling it on the world market seem to think that the storybook spirit of Heidi is very much at stake. A recent *New York Times* full-page advertisement for Swissair illustrates the point:

Heidi lied. Switzerland is not a curly-haired-little-girl-with-dimples kind of place. To be sure there are still the cunning little chalets. And the sweet goats. And the smiling benevolent grandfathers. But now, the cunning little chalet belongs to a famous French actress . . . complete with 40-foot bar and velvet-walled bowling alley in the basements where goats once slept. And the goats are giving up their skins for some of the wildest après-ski outfits ever concocted by exhilarated mountain minds. And the smiling grandfather? He's still

smiling and benevolent. He just made 1,000,000 Swiss Francs selling his sloping meadow to a resort syndicate.

The smiling grandfather's 1,000,000 Franc sale is in reality the sellout of the village community, the trade-off of the village common and the way of life it made possible, all for stock certificates in Switzerland's future affluence.


It was no accident that the final redoubt of public distrust of government and its vision of the Swiss future was the referendum, for in this century direct democracy has become the common man's only weapon against the forces of modernity. As a result, it too has come under a vituperative assault from future-minded reformers. It has long been thought that Switzerland's direct democracy was a peculiar and unnaturally conservative system. One commentator remarks that "in no other democracy in the world is it so difficult to trigger new political movements with new ideas."

The charge is easily documented. At the national level the referendum has vetoed public laws introduced by the government almost twice as often as it has confirmed them. In 1959 the referendum was used to deny women the vote, in 1962 it rejected a proposed ban on atomic armaments, in the same year it vetoed a modest raise for National Council deputies who were (and remain) the lowest paid parliamentarians in the Western world; in 1969 a referendum defeated a university reform bill sponsored by the government and opposed by vociferous students whose opposition might normally have been expected to guarantee the proposal's passage. In sum, where the referendum was once a creative if occasionally inefficient instrument of constructive public participation, it seems in recent history to have degenerated into a reactionary tool of wanton obstructionism, a development which appears to vindicate the harsh judgments passed on Swiss direct democracy.

Yet neither the economic nor the institutional analyses adequately account for the conservative bias of Swiss democratic processes. The neo-Marxist economic argument, along with its Jungian psychological variation, links conservatism to the "earth-chained" life-style of the peasantry. Marx, like Edward Banfield in his *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, perceives in their bondage to the land the peasants' irremediable subjugation to superstition, conservatism and torpor. In Switzerland, this reasoning suggests, the conservative-democratic peasant is backward-looking, not because he is a democrat, but because he is a peasant, because Swiss democracy is a peasant democracy.

The flaw in this argument, whatever its intrinsic merits, is that Switzerland is not a peasant democracy. Its rural economy is more pastoral than agri-





cultural, its rural character dominated more by rocks and mountains than by furrows and earth. If we are to take seriously the kinds of psychic metaphors employed by Jung when he identifies "immobility, parochialism, unspirituality, miserliness, stolidity, willfulness, unfriendliness and mistrustfulness" with what he calls the peasant's "bondage to the earth," then it is not to the moist, root-nourishing earth that we must look but to impenetrable granite and un-giving stone. The mountains have never supported the Swiss, let alone tied them down. No earthbound peasant nation could have produced twenty generations of mercenary soldiers; nor could it have supported a democracy that demanded not merely the people's occasional judgment but their uninterrupted time and service. The Swiss have been able to become democrats, in short, precisely because they were *not* peasants.

A second and common critical approach assumes that the conservation of direct democracy lies in its institutional forms, that the referendum is by definition an instrument of obstructionism, an institutional check on the government's legislative authority. This interpretation is credible, however, only if direct democracy is viewed as a variation of representative democracy, a device through which the public can guarantee that their representatives will not usurp the public's legislative sovereignty. Yet in truth direct democracy has, at least in Switzerland, been an instrument for public participation in government, not a substitute for it; it has been a tribute to the integration of citizens and their government rather than to a polarization of rulers and ruled. The institutions of direct democracy are inherently neither conservative nor progressive. Under conditions of consensus they can foster radical and rapid change. Where factionalism prevails they may obstruct or even paralyze effective government altogether.

Democracy in Switzerland appears reactionary because the conditions that justify it have simply ceased to obtain. Direct democracy requires a community small enough to make possible a face-to-face political life; a simplicity of life austere enough to guarantee natural consensus; an insularity that protects simplicity and facilitates self-sufficiency; an economic equality pervasive enough to make authentic political equality feasible; and a devotion to citizenship that immunizes the community to materialism, private greed and wayward mobility. Traditional Swiss democracy has been in its ideal form intimate, consensual, self-sufficient, egalitarian and antiprivatistic. Even its perversions and corruptions were collective travesties rather than private sins. For the individual, community life defined private goals, citizenship gave meaning to personal aims, work done together and interests held in common took precedence over ambitions nourished in

solitude and self-images rendered in privacy. The freedom made possible by the rigid boundaries of the community seemed worth forswearing a cosmopolitan but lonely prosperity and the anomic emancipation offered by the world beyond.

It is not then democracy but these conditions that have changed, transforming Switzerland's tradition of political participation into an uncertain bastion of reaction. Villages have not grown larger, but they have ceased to be the focus of community life. Men work elsewhere, send their children to regional schools, depend on nearby towns for social life and entertainment. The village remains as a collective bedroom, but the community is the larger region. In addition, issues have become diversified and much more complicated. In 1760 an Alpine villager had only to decide whether to maintain a winter road, how much to charge on the sale of common land or whether to grant Johannes Tobler citizenship. In the 1960's the same villager was being asked whether to purchase the problem-ridden, scandal-plagued French Mirage fighter-bombers for the Swiss air force, or whether Switzerland ought to become an atomic power, or how to remedy the nation's runaway inflation, or what to do about the foreign-worker problem. Even in those areas where technological interdependence had not as yet robbed him of some autonomous choices he was being asked to surrender his own community judgment to the requisites of regional planning and national expertise. "Twentieth century technological society," warns Max Imboden, Switzerland's surrogate J.-J. Servan-Schreiber, "demands a political approach different than that of our traditional communal democracy . . . . The profound interdependence of all issues of substance . . . now presupposes a deeper kind of expert knowledge [in policy-making] and a broader consciousness of subtle, difficult to perceive, interconnections."

Economic doctrines in an international market society must be geared to regional, national and even international conditions. The insular village bent on going its own economic way is a reckless maverick, fated to early extinction outside the herd. Since 1959 Switzerland has been a member of the European Free Trade Association, improving its economic posture accordingly, but removing still another set of issues from local purview. Full integration into the Common Market will only compound the impact of this spreading interdependence.

Nor is that simplistic equality founded on a common pastoral austerity likely to survive economic interdependence in an integrated, capitalist Europe. Privilege in its traditional aristocratic forms is gone, but inequalities in income and in economic opportunity multiply with the ongoing concentration of economic power in the hands of international corporate giants. The village assembly is hardly a match

for industrial monoliths like Brown-Boveri (electrical generators), Nestlé (far more than just chocolate) or Hoffman-La Roche, Geigy and Ciba (superpowers among Basel's chemical/pharmaceutical firms). Moreover, public opinion can only become that agent of convenient conformity dreaded by Rousseau when it is dominated by money and directed by monopolistic private interests (as in the Schwarzenbach affair).

Yet the spirit of communalism might have survived these blows to simplicity, autarky and equality had the sense of integral citizenship that is the most precious and most precarious condition of democracy remained inviolate. It was the quality of village life, the villager's experience of a rewarding communality, that lent to politics an aura of meaning and virtue crude self-interest never could give. In previous centuries it was easier for the citizen to regard himself as the soldier, the worker and the ruler, without recourse to specialized roles. The citizen was, quite literally, the citizen-soldier, the citizen-worker and the citizen-ruler. The community, likewise, existed as the armed village (the so-called *Fähnlein*), the working village (so-called *Gemeinarbeit*) and the self-governing village (the village assembly or regional *Landsgemeinde*). Vestiges of each survive, but where they have not altogether lost their meaning they are under attack as inefficient and obsolescent.

The citizen-soldier ideal is most firmly rooted in Swiss soil. Every citizen over twenty still must serve in the military and retains an obligation to militia duty until he is sixty. The population is armed in a fashion scarcely imaginable in any other country in the world, dictatorship or democracy. Every male owns a rifle—more recently a heavy automatic rifle like the American M-16—and fifty rounds of ammunition. He is required to practice his marksmanship at regular intervals and keep his weapon readily available at home. Citizens who did not regard themselves as soldiers, or soldiers who did not regard themselves as citizens, would quickly turn such trust into tyranny or anarchy.

The federal government appreciates the military significance of the citizen-soldier tradition enough to encourage its maintenance. But many experts argue that a national militia with small arms is obsolete in an era of atomic weapons, technological *Blitzkrieg* and economic interdependence. They prefer a small, specialized, technically trained professional military corps, offering the same appeals to efficiency and expertise used by progressive economists and planning experts. Furthermore, the enfranchisement of women in 1971 has rendered the traditional equation of citizenship and military duty invalid. The tribal belief in the unity of the sword and the vote is now part of a dead past.

Much the same is true of Common Work (*Ge-*

*meinarbeit*). A vote for a new common building meant building it, just as a vote for war meant waging it. Some thoughtful reformers have suggested the reintroduction of Common Work in economically underdeveloped communes, but electrical generators and reinforced concrete schools and cantilevered bridges cannot be thrown up by gangs of well-meaning citizens; nor would Switzerland's placid but pervasive unions permit such a thing.

Thus, from traditional communal man comes modern economic man: uprooted from his village community, alienated from his labor. Materialism in Switzerland seems at least in part to act as a consolation to men who have lost their citizenship. The noisy city crowds in to fill the larger silence left by the dying rustic village. Self-interest tries to imitate the virtue of public participation. And the cry for rights, for a vigorous opposition, for singleminded parties and aggressive pressure groups, for a caustic counterculture and a forced pluralism, all these desperate cries of modernity seem colored by inflections of loneliness, the desolate voice of men seeking to compensate a loss that could not be avoided and cannot be tolerated.

The sense of loss is everywhere, even in progress that is universally applauded. In 1971, after a twenty-year legislative struggle, women in Switzerland finally achieved suffrage in federal elections. Half of Switzerland's population is finally recognized as having rudimentary human rights, but as a result the expanded electorate participates far less. Village halls become too small, village assemblies grow unwieldy, and twice as many voters are given the privilege of turning over to elected representatives what half as many once did for themselves. And so equality and justice seem to come only at the price of participation and community.

We have then an explanation of sorts for the peculiar conservatism of direct democracy in modern Switzerland, some indication of why direct democracy itself is dying. It has become an institutional anachronism living on into an era that cannot maintain it. Yet the effort to sustain direct democracy is not quite in vain; it illuminates a set of values too rare in our modern world. It suggests that freedom need not be incompatible with communal collectivism, that autonomy for the individual can be won through political participation in self-governing communities, that politics need not always be defined by self-interest, that citizenship can help give meaning and purpose to human life. And finally it hints that if the world produced for us by modernization—an affluent world of privatistic materialism secured by power, guided by competitive self-interest and protected by law—is inhospitable to such values, it may be a world which even at its very best requires radical remaking.