

Digitalizing the Swiss Alps: A New Romanticism?

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“What’s new in the Swiss mountains? From territorialized communities to delocalized economy”

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Something strange is happening in the Swiss mountains. Two century long enemies are shaking hands and it is largely left unnoticed. When the advertisements of coworking spaces in the swiss alps start with "work where your heart takes you" (alpinecoworking) or "imagine living with people that inspire you every day and waking up to the panoramic view of the Alps" (swissescape) then we find that the romantic longing for mountains is no longer in opposition to the capitalist driven demands to digitalize our world. But how can this unlikely alliance between romantic and modern narratives come into being such a seemingly effortless way?

Can the call (longing) for digitalization in the rural, non-urban spaces of the Swiss mountains be read as a new form of romanticism? Romantic, because in the non-urban space it evokes the aspects of the natural, sensual, emotional and subjective so characteristic of the romantic epoque and new because it also essentializes the (assumed) advantages of the (supposedly) creative, free-spirited (individual?), nomadic (wanderlust?) labor in the digitalized world. And if the answer to these questions is yes, what does that leave us with as anthropologists interested in understanding current developments in the Swiss mountain area (and beyond)?

Whereas in earlier days the harshness of the environment of the natural represented the biggest challenge of survival in the swiss alps, today it might be the nature of the environment that is its biggest challenge: with climate change winter is expected to lose most of its snow needed for ski-tourism, landslides and crushed stone will increase in numbers and severity, hence rendering the natural alpine space even more precarious (Rat für Raumordnung 2019: 39). And with the exodus of young people towards the city an intellectual drainage fosters ongoing inequalities in performativity between the rural and the urban spaces (2019: 17). But not all hope is lost, in light of these challenges some feel called to face this new harshness and endeavor to bring 'salvation' of different forms to their communities, like Jon Erni and Not Carl with the Mia Engiadina initiative.

While this description might be exaggerated, I will argue that it does capture a "new romanticism" that is projected onto the mountain areas of Switzerland as places and spaces of 'everything': In marrying the digital and natural worlds a new ecological and sustainable way of living without any sacrifice in comfort is imagined - culminating in simultaneously '*going back*' to the romantic ideals of the original, the traditional and

the 'untouched' natural as well as '*going forth*' into a progressive, modernist future utopia where a digitalized world sets us free from many of our everyday worries and efforts. The picture drawn is one without dilemmas, conflicts and compromises and therefore in need of an anthropological discussion of how such a portrayal is even possible, given the antithetical nature of the conceptions of modernity and romanticism. Therefore, I will first frame the concepts of romanticism and modernism. Drawing on Appadurai (2010) and Berthoud (2001) and based on anecdotal references drawn from an Article in a liberal Swiss newspaper I will discuss three points: first, the consistency the anecdotal references hold with the romantic conceptualization of a longing nourished by a felt absence. Second, the normative power of modernity and third the intertwining of the local and global, the traditional and the progressive in people like Jon Erni and Isabelle Behrens in places like the Unterengadin and Mia Engiadina. Finally I will argue that the suggested symbiosis between the narratives of modernism and romanticism is based on the simple yet powerful reason "because it has to". In their century long dance as opposing macro-narratives they both have shaped a world in which more people, spaces and places find themselves wound up in both, therefore integrating either into a worldview different to the usual lenses of social sciences.

First, let's turn towards the notions of modernity and romanticism, starting with the latter. Mountains have been an object of romantic expression and affect since a long time, but it is only since recently that they are now also imagined as 'mountain hubs' for innovation and as a home for digital labor. But whereas we might be more familiar with the digital narrative I first want to elaborate on what is meant with romanticism? The term has now been used for over two centuries leading some to say that it has lost its meaning and we should therefore cease to speak about it. Others, however, argue that "there is no smoke without fire", turning our attention towards what might be the underlying source common to all its different meanings. Often, that common source is taken to be a counter-enlightenment reaction, where the core values and principles of the enlightenment philosophy are rejected. Another, likely more unfamiliar approach to conceptualize romanticism is to study the link between the social and economic realities and romanticism. Hence rendering romanticism into a form of social critique. (Löwy and Sayre 2001: 8-11). From this perspective, Rousseau's skeptical view on big cities, the upper class and the 'progress' of civilization isn't only to be understood as a

philosophical opposition to the enlightenment paradigm of rationality, progress and modernity nor as a mere essentialization of nature and tradition – rather it is to be understood as a worldview where the 'souls perception of an enchanted world' isn't inferior to the minds rational appropriation of the world. Hence, romanticisms counter-position to modernity doesn't root in 'being against' but in manifesting what's missing: the inexplicable sense that "there is more to life". The Romantic vision is therefore characterized by "the painful and melancholic conviction that in modern reality something precious has been lost, at the level of both individuals and humanity at large; certain essential human values have been alienated" (Löwy and Sayre 2001:20).

For the purposes of this essay I therefore want to conceptualize romanticism as the imaginative and affective work done when dwelling on an absence that is felt. This (sometimes nostalgic) longing, once present in people's imagination, has powerful means (both affective and rational) to mobilize people and resources.

Similarly, when it comes to modernity much has already been said through the prism of romanticism. But what is left to note is that modernity holds unlike romanticism a normative power that renders the rural as something backwards that is in need of help to be developed (Berthoud 88).

As my ambition is similar to Berthouds in terms of investigating the relationship between the local and the global (Berthoud 2001: 83), I intend to regard romanticism and modernity as narratives that metaphorically speaking can be thought of as the undercurrents on which more present discussions and phenomena take place. In order to situate this approach anthropologically, I want to draw on Appadurais concept of ethnoscaapes (Appadurai 2010).

Essentially, I see the concept of ethnoscaapes as an incitement to unwind the different threads composed in artefacts such as the Mia Engiadina project, asking the question "where does it come from?". This is important to better understand the linkages between the local and the global, the micro and the macro and have been well contemplated by Appadurais concept of ethnoscaapes. Drawing on his work I consider it to be impossible to study these new cosmopolitanisms taking place in the Swiss mountains without, as Appadurai puts it, "analyzing the transnational cultural flows within which they thrive, compete, and feed off one another in ways that defeat and confound many varieties of the human sciences today" (Appadurai 2010: 49). In a

deterritorialized, globalized world we cannot longer assume that it is in the localized and particular that we can find 'something more elementary, more contingent, and thus more 'real' than what we find when looking at the perspective of large-scale master-narratives (2010: 54). Therefore, Imaginations regarding the Swiss mountains emerge in dialogue between the increasing deterritorialization of people, images and ideas and the localized, particular realities in the Swiss Alps. Consequently, this is not an essay rooted in facts itself, but one that dwells, meditates, expands and reflects upon the imaginations produced by different actors in light of present facts.

Having set the stage, I now want to begin juxtaposing these conceptual thoughts with anecdotal references that are not itself the whole story but serve as fractals of the whole. My goal is too examine what I at the beginning of this essay referred to as 'something strange': How do a variety of coworking spaces or initiatives like the Mia Engiadina project succeed in evoking both romantic and modernist elements at once, seemingly without any conflicts?

For instance, it is no surprise that the liberal and in a modernist thought grounded NZZ conveys a cynical touch when writing about the 'spirit' felt by people in regard to the Mia Engiadina project. There are a number of moments that in the eyes of the reporter Anna Miller stand out as a constructed scenery 'out of place' and that she writes about extensively:

«Deshalb wird hier nichts dem Zufall überlassen. Für die Journalisten gibt es zum Pressetermin Kaffee aus der Silberkanne und Gourmet-Dinner, tags darauf sitzen 150 geladene Gäste in Krawatte und Bleistiftrock im Theatersaal des Hochalpinen Instituts Ftan vor einer akkurat aufgezogenen Präsentierbühne und lauschen Moderationssätzen wie «Herzlichen Glückwunsch den digitalen Pionieren» oder «Das war jetzt fast ein bisschen Hollywood-Feeling». Vor dem Eingang warten Hostessen mit engelsblonden Haaren in Einheitsuniform auf die Gäste, um sie um ihre Unterschrift für das Projekt zu bitten, natürlich alles digital, auf einem Tablet von Microsoft. Gebäck liegt auf Schieferplatten, rote und weisse Zierkissen liegen in den Fensternischen. In den Vortragspausen Händeschütteln, Jubelrufe, «Wow, super, so guet», die Gäste strahlen, die Organisatoren sprechen von spirit.» (Miller 2016)

However, she also doesn't fail to note that the lack of dissenting voices might be due to the fact that people would reach for any possibility that would promise a solution in the current misery and that the imminent closing of the local school functioned like a wake-up call for many. Further, more problematizing voices are not completely omitted when Stefan Prebil is presented contemplating whether this "melting of all worlds" and the "constant connectivity" can really be considered "the solution". However, he is also quick to note that "progress can't be halted" and that the real question is "how we want to deal with it".

Already in sketching out this one article we can find plenty of material to discuss in the light of the aforementioned deliberations. There are three main points I want to raise: First, the consistency with conceptualizing romanticism as a longing nourished by a felt absence. Second, the normative power of modernity and third the intertwining of the local and global, the traditional and the progressive in people like Not Carl and Jon Erni and places like the Unterengadin and Mia Engiadina.

"The greatest fear is that of isolation. That people emigrate because it takes ages to call America via Skype, that the lower Engadin becomes a dead place, a museum, a kind of zoo." (Miller 2016, translation mine). Starting the article with the fear of what might become an even greater absence already points us towards what Löwy and Sayre refer to as the romantic attitude: That what is lacking in the present existed once upon a time, in a more or less distant past, even if such past is entirely mythical and/or idealized (Löwy and Sayre 2001: 22). Even though the differences from Rousseau's journey through the rural spaces and the present constellation in lower Engadin are manifold I argue that on some level (that can be characterized as the level in which romanticism does its affective work) a similar 'soil' is produced. One where the perceived emptiness produces an anxiety, longing or yearning similar to the artist standing in front of a blank canvas. In that peculiar inner space there is an almost irresistible urge to fill that emptiness with something. I argue that this is the underlying romantic quality or undercurrent that is addressed by visions such as Mia Engiadina. It incites people to feel an optimism that often relies on non-rational cues (as for example with the quoted landlady in the article) and to deal with one's own dissenting voices internally.

As soon as this is said I have to be quick to address the next point, the normative power of modernity. Because the empty canvas isn't really empty. There are normative forces, some of which conscious while many other rest unconscious, that frame how one (normatively) is to perceive the world, what one has to worry about and hope for and what is valuable, right and just. Here we can state that almost the entirety of the article is embedded in a modernist worldview. The greatest thread is economic and not social, or political in nature and the only solution available is to 'move forward' in the race for progress, otherwise one will be 'left behind' to 'die'. This modern tale of progress is the water in which the fish lives in. It is so all-encompassing that most of the people living in the western world don't even know how an alternative might look or feel like. Just like the fish who doesn't know what water is unless it gets to experience a non-water state. This is the oppressive power of modernity that Berthoud talks about that "[forces] people to enter the modernist movement of radical transformation" (Berthoud 2001: 88). However, unlike Berthoud the perception given in this article seems to be one where there is no "[imposing of] a destructive and transformative process in the name of modernity, but rather a conceived symbiosis: there is no oppressor or oppressed to be found.

Which leads us to the third point: How can such antagonistic movements become to be carried by a variety of people as a viable way forward?

To approximate this question it will require a certain intellectual flexibility to connect and bring into conversation different threads that don't necessarily 'like' to talk with each other. First of all, in this specific artefact of the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung am Sonntag* (NZZaS) we have a liberal newspaper in general representing a modernist voice. However, bringing a modernist development to the swiss mountain is portrait by themselves in a sort of cynical way. Why might it be, that even for such a clearly positioned newspaper there is something 'fishy' going on when "blonde hostesses waiting in uniform for the attendees to ask for their signature" in an alpine village? It seems that even for the NZZaS this constructed performance is too much. Now, this could lead into a well-founded critique of the reasons why the organizers might think it is the right approach to bridge locality and the micronarrative of digitalization. But much more interestingly is it to look at the forces underlying and contradicting the primary identity of such a newspaper as a representative of modernism. Although this could be

much further elaborated in light that there are many more anecdotal references to cover it makes sense to leave it at that.

A next nexus point of how it might work to bridge the unbridgeable might be found in the person of Jon Erni. Given the fact that he became an executive board member of Microsoft Switzerland makes it very likely that he spent most of his adult life within modernist frameworks. However, being a child of lower Engadin himself some members of the local community embrace him as “someone who made it” and “can be trusted to know what he’s doing” (Miller 2016). Why is that? What are the bonds between the local and global, the modern and the traditional, the urban and rural solely in his person? Would a person without local roots ever be embraced in such way? Or in contrary, would a person without roots of the like ever leap into an endeavor such as the Mia Engiadina initiative? From the perspective of this essays evoked conceptual views it seems likely that what we see manifested in the person of Jon Erni might be more about the ‘makings of his person’ than about ‘himself’. What I mean by that is that the micronarrative of modernity has now had sufficient time to establish itself as the “waterlike all-encompassing narrative”, even in the rural spaces of the swiss mountains. This embeddedness has, in a way, “produced” people like Jon Erni; locals for which the global world is equally their home like the romanticisms of their locality. Hence, one could argue that if it wasn’t Jon Erni it would have been someone like him and similarly, if it wasn’t Mia Engiadina, there would be something like it – simply because of the force of the “cultural flows” that render certain developments more likely than others and which Appadurai talks about (Appadurai 2000). This is by no means standing for a deterministic worldview, rather it sees the world as inherently unpredictable as there is never just one “cultural flow” but a multitude which simultaneously compete and feed of each other (2000: 49). In that way Mia Engiadina is clearly also such a product of cultural flows that have been competing and feeding of each other, and so are the narratives produces around it which directly feed from the modernist epicenter Silicon Valley. But coming back to the person of Jon Erni what stands out is how his biography is also a “geography of global ethnoscaapes” and hence the supposedly personal is rendered inherently systemic.

Further, it is also of interest to examine Isabelle Behrens remarks that this region is not built up and destroyed, which is a great luxury that has to be preserved. At the same time, “when farms close down here, when people move away, we’ll have more nature

that we'd like to have", which can't be the goal either (Miller 2016). These remarks are interesting in a number of ways. For our purposes what is interesting is the threads that can be followed in asking "how come that an environmental scientist turned yogi turned nomad and adventurer comes to think of dying villages as a danger for having "too much nature"? This thinking is interesting in opposition to the romantic idea of 'going back' – as it refuses to locate 'back' in the idealized natural environment. At the same time the modernist urban environment characterized by cement is equally rejected. The "luxury" of the place lies therefore in the availability of the natural (without needing to have too much of it). Therefore, a space is framed that is neither modernist nor romantic in essence, rather it is characterized by a well-established mixture within a designated range between the two. Again, in both her biography and in her remarks we find a plentitude of evidence pointing towards blending of perspectives that are not mutually without conflict. The way this conflict is addressed is far from clear but it seems that it has a strong link to the macrorealities in which particular lives unfold.

The last anecdotal evidence worth looking at is that of the local landlady: What is of interest is to ask into what might lie behind the comments of the landlady when she says: "Jon Erni, yes, you could say he made it, right?" and her husband nods in agreement: "One of us, in the whole wide world, has achieved something. He knows what he's doing." (Miller XX). Again, we can see the internalized modernist worldview and distinction between the progressive and the 'fallen-behind', the urban (as the whole wide world) and the local and how easily this leads people to give their trust away. But is it right to deny the truthfulness of such a view simply on the grounds that it is a modernist perspective? Wouldn't it be fair to say that given the time modernism had to shape the reality in which social life (even non-urban) takes place, this is an objectively true assessment? What might be the totality of concrete experiences and observations the landlady collected over the course of her life to render such a statement into simple 'truth telling' rather than into 'holding an internalist modernist perspective'? These remarks are filled with untested assumptions which cannot be verified here. However, the idea of this essay is to turn our attention to the ways in which the macro-narratives of our time have come to recreate the worlds in which people have come to live in. In this case, the "narrative" of modernism isn't a philosophical or anthropological point of view, it's present 'reality'. To uncover such

reality as creation of modernist thought is not doing justice to the assessments given by the landlady, independently of any naivete that may lie behind.

Finally, whereas there would be many more threads left to unwind the general picture is starting to become clearer: locality is, at least in the context of the Swiss Alps, no more to be found. The makings of locality are produced within a wide range of macro-narratives that find entry into the micro-realities in a myriad of different ways.

When we now go back to the question how it happens that century long enemies succeed in shaking hands in such seemingly effortless way the answer might simply be "because they have to". The analytical lenses through which social scientists view the world are corroding as concepts that once designated clear differences find themselves in a global "soup" of everything. In my view, it is because the soup has been stirred for long enough that romantic and modernist views are no longer in such opposition. Today, what's been lost is the more integral perspective where the fact that romantic states of being don't pay bills is equally relevant as the fact that there *is* more to life than what the modernist worldview has to offer. As more and more people grow up with one foot in either logic there is indeed something third possible. It is this longing for this unrealized potential that I call the new romanticism. If such a marriage between worlds is indeed possible is left to be seen. There is both grounds for skepticism and for optimism. In a world that has so greatly valued reason it might be of great value to evoke the qualities of romanticism to move towards actions that, reasonably seen, are not making much sense. So maybe, despite all well-founded critique of projects like Mia Engiadina, such efforts are to be seen with a more understanding eye after these discussions and seen from a larger perspective.

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