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The great pause: a minor theory exploration of COVID-19 response in Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

As Europe and the wider world struggles with the COVID-19 crisis, I unpack the impacts of the pandemic on the small, wealthy, and diverse nation of Switzerland. Though deeply intertwined with capital flows and global scales, I eschew a high-level view and instead present an analysis from the ground, informed by minor theory. This micropolitical view enables a nuanced understanding of how the city and the nation are produced in daily life, while the pandemic allows an exploration of what occurs when these processes are interrupted. This investigation reveals unique, situated cartographies of everyday experience that, under pressure of lockdown, reconfigured according to individual, cantonal, and national circumstances.

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Introduction: Swiss lockdown in a minor key

“Did you put on clothes just for this meeting?” The question was an ice-breaker joke delivered through a computer screen, an attempt to ease the strangeness of working exclusively online. It was three weeks into Switzerland’s national lockdown. Streets were empty, non-essential businesses shut, universities, schools, and kindergartens closed. Online with colleagues and collaborators, we were trying to attend to the mundane details of our academic jobs. We – that is, colleagues, friends, family – were by then accustomed to the so-called “extraordinary situation” that shut down public life throughout Switzerland at midnight between March 16–17th, 2020 (Swiss Federal Council 2020a). We were accustomed but it was impossible to call things normal. Every conversation began with some variant of “I hope you and yours are safe and well during these difficult times.” One night I found myself awake at 3am, so I sent an e-mail to a coauthor at the other end of the country. I signed off by writing that he shouldn’t feel pressure to respond soon. He replied within minutes because he was awake too.

These are rich times for scholars of Foucault and Agamben. Every day we are presented with real-world examples of biopower and discipline (Foucault 2003, 2009, 2019a, 2019b), while wondering whether the current state of exception will result in forever increased surveillance, social restrictions, and expanded executive powers (Agamben 2008). These worries are tempered by the grim parade of COVID-19 statistics trickling through our screens: cases, deaths, recoveries. We check the data compulsively, comparing exponential graphs, sending flurries of text messages to connections next door or around the globe. In the era of lockdown, personal geographies have shrunk. It does not matter if my interlocutor lives around the corner or 10,000 km away; everyone outside my apartment is somehow the same. Relations have flattened. The world is mediated through my devices.

As macabre as it sounds, the pandemic appeals to geographical thinking. It is multiscalar, working through global flows and individual bodies. The spread follows spatiotemporal logics, but it is attenuated by wealth and privilege and brings heavier impacts on the already-marginalized. The pandemic encourages topological thinking and a more-than-human approach that acknowledges the agency of objects and infrastructures, from the provision of clean water, to the supply chains that seem needlessly brittle, to the digital devices that allow some of us to work from the safety of home (Latour 2005; Law 1999; Mol 2010). The pandemic highlights fissures and inequalities already existent in society but also interrupts the status quo and offers the tantalizing potential for emancipatory reconfigurations. And the pandemic provides the possibility to explore and compare the globally, regionally, and municipally variegated forms of political-economic assemblages that constitute contemporary governments worldwide.

From this perspective, we can use COVID-19 as an entry point to make sense of Russia's increasing authoritarianism, illustrated through the national guard beating a pedestrian in Sochi (ChP Sochi 2020), the OMON special forces chasing down a fisherman in Surgut (Kamikadzedead 2020), or the draconian methods of restricting mobility in Moscow (Minkin 2020). Likewise, through the uncoordinated response to COVID-19 in the United States (Ren 2020), we can see the fractures and failures within American democracy (Gessen 2020; Kasparov 2020), as armed radical conservatives protested elementary safety measures in a pandemic that has killed a staggering 100,000 people so far (Graves 2020; Reuters 2020), all with no apparent consequences for the American president or the ruling junta.

But those are large countries with imperial mind-sets. In contrast, here I want to tease out what COVID-19 shows us about a country that is small and famously neutral: Switzerland. And rather than beginning from Agamben or Foucault, I endeavor to make sense of the pandemic from below, engaging a minor theory inspired by Cindy Katz (1996). This resonates with the COVID-19 moment, acknowledging the blurry boundaries between fieldwork and everyday life (Katz 1994). Minor thinking is neither dogmatic nor ideological, but rather

represents a sensitivity and commitment to working in registers that might seem mundane or unfamiliar. A minor approach understands the fluid, embodied, and situated subjectivities within the messiness of everyday life (Katz 2017). This micropolitical view valorizes the immediate and the individual, and acknowledges the interconnections between all scales, from the singular to the cosmic (Guattari 2009, 138). Minor does not mean avoiding larger themes, but rather – paraphrasing Michele Lancione (2019) – to attend to small things, to mundane acts, to particular assemblages and material conditions, and thereby to reach the politics at stake without relying only on representations provided by those in power.

This perspective makes use of contemporary circumscribed geographies, where the threat of illness or death from COVID-19 has reconfigured daily life toward the domestic and the intimate. The lockdown keeps me in a small flat on the third floor of a housing cooperative in a Zurich suburb. My personal geographies have constricted. I no longer travel from suburban Zurich to the University of Lausanne, but rather commute from my bedroom to the living room. I am not forbidden from leaving my flat – the Swiss lockdown is not as strict as in neighboring Italy, where Lombardy saw the highest number of infections in Europe (BBC 2020) – but since I am not an essential worker, there are few places for me to go. So, I work here in a minor register, one attuned to limited local movement paired with almost limitless virtual communication mediated through devices.

This minor mode of exploring pandemic Switzerland is grounded in an intimate geography of restriction. To generate the data I present here, I spoke in person with essential workers (Kinder 2020), those people who provide the labor necessary to reproduce daily life despite the dangers. In my case, these people included grocery workers at two stores in the Swiss town of 8,000 people where I live. I have chatted with some of these workers for years, but over the months of lockdown, the tenor of our interactions changed. We spoke as they restocked shelves, worked cash registers, and regulated entry to the store in compliance with new federal safety regulations. Aside from these workers, every other person I spoke with was mediated through screens. I talked predominantly but not exclusively with people outside of the academy, most of them previous acquaintances since lockdown discourages meeting new people. A man who works in a plastics factory, a woman employed at the Zurich Transport Authority. A farmer, a consultant, a winemaker. A school teacher, a pensioner, a tech employee. First- and second-generation immigrants, and native-born Swiss. Native speakers of Swiss-German, French, Italian, English, Serbian, Portuguese, Russian, Ukrainian. Everyone trying to make sense of the uncertainties roiling through this small and stable European nation. Their stories – presented here with altered names and identifying information in order to maintain anonymity – illustrate human level effects and reactions to a pandemic that is in danger of being abstracted by the inherently global scales involved.

The silent spread

Switzerland is small and wealthy, with just over 8.5 million people and a per capita GNI of 84 USD,450 in 2018 (World Bank 2020). It is multilingual, decentralized, and orderly, with four official languages and a multitude of dialects that embody regional identification and pride. This linguistic and cultural diversity is spread across 26 cantons and connected by a comprehensive public transit system seamlessly integrated from the national to the local. In the before times, when I rode the two hour train between Zurich and Lausanne, the ticket checkers switched fluidly between German and French. The line from Zurich to Lugano is similar, with the conductors floating between German and Italian. This linguistic fluidity complements a set of practically invisible borders: in the German-speaking parts of the country, it is commonplace to cross into Germany or Austria for shopping or leisure. The same holds true for people in the French-speaking part with France, and the Italian-speaking part with Italy.

Combined with its central location, this ease and fluidity of movement is part of the reason why Switzerland has been so affected by COVID-19. Even as the pandemic struck northern Italy starting in February 2020, cross border mobility with Switzerland did not stop. By means of example: Jenny had scheduled four full days off from her high-powered job in corporate Zurich in order to take her daughter to Italy for a holiday in the Italian sun. But since Jenny split custody with her ex-husband, managing their conflicting schedules was not easy. Negotiations had been unpleasant and hard-fought, so, despite daily reports on the worsening situation in Italy, Jenny refused to sacrifice her vacation. As planned, she and her daughter left for Milan in the middle of February. "It was a mistake," she told me after. "My daughter was frightened because everyone was scared there. She's sensitive and didn't like that everyone was in masks. We should have stayed here." In the end, they took an earlier train home. There was no shortage of options: as usual, six scheduled trains ran between Zurich and Milan every day. Switzerland remained connected by rail to all its neighbor nations, even as infection rates rose all around.

By the last week of February 2020, Switzerland announced its first official case of COVID-19, a man from the canton of Ticino who had returned from Milan (TheLocal.ch 2020). It became clear that the virus was spreading around Switzerland, and COVID-19 talk began featuring in both headlines and personal conversations. The highest infections were reported in the southern cantons of Ticino (Italian speaking), Vaud and Geneva (French speaking), and the northern, German speaking cantons of Zurich, Bern, and Basel. In a move that resonates with Agamben, the Federal Council assumed powers reserved for the cantons and took the extraordinary measure of banning large-scale events of more than 1,000 people nationwide (Swiss Federal Council 2020b). Italy had over 2,000 cases, 52 deaths, and an alarming rate of exponential increase – most of it concentrated in the northern regions near Switzerland, but the head of

Communicable Diseases at the Federal Office of Public Health maintained that closing the border with Italy would not slow the virus. He insisted that the border remain open and promised that Swiss schools would not shut either (Lüthi and Bühler. 2020).

The great pause

After the ban, COVID-19 dominated discursive real estate both online and off, and I started noticing small changes around town. To counter flagging sales, the local store ran a 50% off sale on Corona beer. Pedestrians gave each other space when passing. Children adopted the American rapper Cardi B's viral Instagram rant (Know Your Meme 2020), shrieking "Coronavirus!" whenever someone sneezed or coughed. Across the country, university colleagues shared their preferred online tools for monitoring the virus spread. Several cases were announced in the University of Zurich the day before I was due there for a meeting. In early March 2020, the University of Lausanne (located in canton Vaud, one of Switzerland's most infected) sent an e-mail informing all staff about cantonal and national health guidelines. Following these, the university announced no changes to courses or regular university business, but warned that there would be changes soon. The following day, the administration announced that high risk individuals should make special arrangements to avoid contact. And on March 13, the Federal Council held a nationwide broadcast in which they acknowledged . They did not order any closures, but rather "strongly advised" precautionary measures, including schools to find ways to enact distance learning, businesses to encourage working from home, and a general avoidance of public transit insofar as possible (Swiss Federal Council 2020c). They also urged calm and advised that government would adapt to new conditions.

Online, reaction to the Federal Council was swift. "We need a lockdown," said someone from Lucerne. "All restaurants and shops should be shut as of today ... We don't have competent people in charge." Someone from Basel replied: "We have 2000 employees or so. Some can't do home office, and for those that can, we don't have enough remote access keys." A commenter from Geneva discussed the difficulties of avoiding crowds: "So many people rely on public transport to get to work, which they now can't or should not use. What are we supposed to do?" Someone from Lausanne complained: "Here are some consequences of not giving a stronger message today. My boss interprets the things said by the confederation as a recommendation. Some of us can do home office but he's telling our 'in the field' guys that they must keep out working out among people." The general impression was one of confusion and consternation. There was a pronounced – though not universal – desire for stronger messaging and more consistent directions.

Three days later, in a somber broadcast followed around the country, the Federal Council announced an extraordinary situation and national lockdown (Swiss Federal Council 2020a). Externally, Switzerland ceased issuing visas and reinstated border controls with its neighbors, prompting one government worker to text me: “It looks like Schengen is dead,” referring to the 26 European states that had abolished passport controls between them. Internally, some essential facilities were exempted from the lockdown, including grocery stores, banks, and post offices, but most everything else was shut, including bars, restaurants, non-essential stores, schools, and universities. People were requested to stay home and keep a minimum of two meters distance if going out, but this would not be enforced by punitive measures. The announcement launched panic buying across the country, including in the stores in my town. I visited the next day to witness the aftermath. My local store looked looted, or like it was going out of business. “It was madness,” said one of the workers. “There aren’t any food shortages. People just don’t think.”

Over the next days, government representatives reminded people that the nation had emergency stocks on hand. For centuries, Switzerland has maintained stockpiles of emergency supplies in order to guarantee security and independence in the face of shortages or external disruption (Jaberg 2019). This bunker mentality was refined during the 20th century to the point where it is normal to find bomb shelters in ordinary houses and apartment buildings, while the federal government mandates the maintenance of emergency stocks of food, medicines, oil, and other critical supplies (Federal Assembly of the Swiss Confederation 2016). The public supports these stockpiles as a matter of pragmatism and pride. Last year, when the government proposed removing coffee from the list of essential stocks, it provoked such an outcry that the plans were scuttled (Foulkes 2019). There is a strong culture of self-reliance here, matched by a reluctance to cede autonomy at any level, from the municipal to the cantonal, from the cantonal to the federal, and from the federal to the international. This explains Switzerland’s historically ambivalent relationship to the European Union, as well as the slow behavior of the federal authorities in crafting a coordinated national response to COVID-19.

Back in my town, the local grocery store underwent a series of changes to its form and function. Now, a worker stood at the door to keep count of the number of customers inside. If there were too many, new arrivals waited until someone checked out. A small table was installed by the entrance with disposable gloves and disinfectant. Markers were taped on the ground to indicate two meters distance while waiting to pay. A worker shared an alternate view on these improvements as she restocked the cleaning supplies. “You know what’s horrible? They gave us gloves but we can’t wear masks. Do you know how many people I see every day? How many of them are sick?” I asked about hazard pay and she scoffed. Within a few days, however, clear plastic shields were installed at the cash registers between workers and customers, and the employee at the



Figure 1. COVID-19-related changes visible at the entrance to the local grocery store. Free disposable plastic gloves and disinfectant hand wash stand on the table placed by the doorway. An electronic screen reads “Please enter.” Photo: author.

door was replaced by a screen that glowed green or red to indicate when customers were allowed to enter (see [Figure 1](#)). This seemed to mollify the worker I spoke with, who approved of the measures to minimize contact. These infrastructural changes were complemented with nationwide changes to encourage touchless commerce. Previously, a touchless purchase was limited to CHF40, after which the purchaser was required to enter a PIN code. Now, with the register touch pad an obvious danger, the PIN-less limit was doubled.

Meanwhile, educational institutions began the complicated shift to online learning. The University of Lausanne sent out briefings filled with information that, frankly, I found useful and supportive. Instructors filmed their lectures and uploaded them to online platforms, sharing their technology struggles in group chats. We started using new phrases like “send me a Zoom invite.” Conferences were shifted to online formats or canceled outright. And, quietly, we started questioning the viability of various academic endeavors and educational models, acknowledging that the “old normal” was not necessarily sustainable or equitable.

In my town, elementary and middle schools shifted to online mode, though with some hiccups. One of the problems was the assumption that every family would have access to a computer for each child, as lessons required sustained

online presence. The schools had old surplus laptops to distribute to families who needed them, but they did not have enough to cover the shortfall, so some children had to share. This was challenging because the nature of the online plan was to substitute the entire school day, so there would be six hours of work comprised of online meetings, video assignments, and tasks to be uploaded to a class portal. After this, the teachers assigned homework as usual. This caused significant conflict in local families, who wrote complaints to the school authorities. One parent shared her frustrations with me: “How am I supposed to do work from home while also helping my child? I have two 100% jobs and I can’t escape from either of them!” Feminist geographers at the University of Bern argued that COVID-19 hits mothers and families harder, as women scholars juggle competitive academic careers alongside the family duties that too often fall to them (Schurr, Mayer, and Winiger 2020). COVID-19 highlighted and exacerbated these inequalities in the geography of the home, all in the context of increased pressure, uncertainty, and fear.

The slow rebirth

Many people took the lockdown seriously, but it was common to complain about people who seemed to continue life as usual. “The streets are full in Zurich,” said a man originally from Ticino, “and I can’t understand why people are so chill about this! The stores are closed, but do you really think this is enough?” His Ticino background made him sensitive to the dangers of the virus and he was livid that people persisted in their social lives. Similarly, a colleague in Geneva wrote:

I have become the kind of person who spies on the neighbors. I hate doing this, but there are so many people in the park behind my place. They are completely ignoring the social distancing rules! I think it’s clear that the government could have reacted better from the start, but now the government puts too much faith in us. We are a bunch of idiots, it seems.

Over time, and despite some visible holdouts, people grew accustomed to the new routines. On April 27 2020, the Federal Council began the phased reopening of the country, with certain facilities available once more, including dentists, clinics, gardening centers, and hair salons. I checked at four haircutters in my town and found that it was impossible to make an appointment, as haircuts were booked for weeks. The government emphasized that reopening was dependent on the infection numbers continuing to fall, and they encouraged the population to maintain social distancing. Playgrounds, parks, and public spaces remained closed (see [Figure 2](#)).

On May 11 2020, schools reopened with staggered attendance and modifications designed to maintain physical distance. Stores and museums reopened as well, and people were once again permitted to attend restaurants and bars in maximum groups of four. Border crossings with France, Germany, and Austria were relaxed, while three border crossing points between Italy and canton



Figure 2. Community playground closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Photo: author.

Ticino reopened, though under controlled conditions and available only for cross-border workers. After this limited international reopening, I walked to the edge of town, to the industrial section where cargo trucks stop for unloading. There were no trucks there, but an instruction sheet for drivers on how to protect from COVID-19 was posted in German, English, French, Russian, and Italian (see [Figure 3](#)). “Thank God that things get started again,” said a worker in a plastics factory. “Our orders have dropped by at least 50% since this began.” But a winemaker living in the country had different thoughts. “We’re doing fine. No one stopped buying wine, and we have enough stock for months. But I don’t take much of this theater seriously anyway. Maybe it’s different in the city, but for us we have everything we need.” These divergent viewpoints highlight not only the differences between city and country work, but also between international and domestic markets. As a local producer, the winemaker’s customers come from nearby, and they experienced no disruptions. Conversely, the plastics factory largely serviced customers in Germany and Italy, and their business suffered as a result.

As I am writing in late May 2020, Switzerland is on track for the third phase of the reopening. Events of up to 300 people will be permitted, and theaters, spas, hotels, sex worker services, and universities will be reopened (Federal Office of Public Health 2020). Further, the borders with France, Germany, and Austria will be reopened, so long as the infection rates continue dropping. At the same

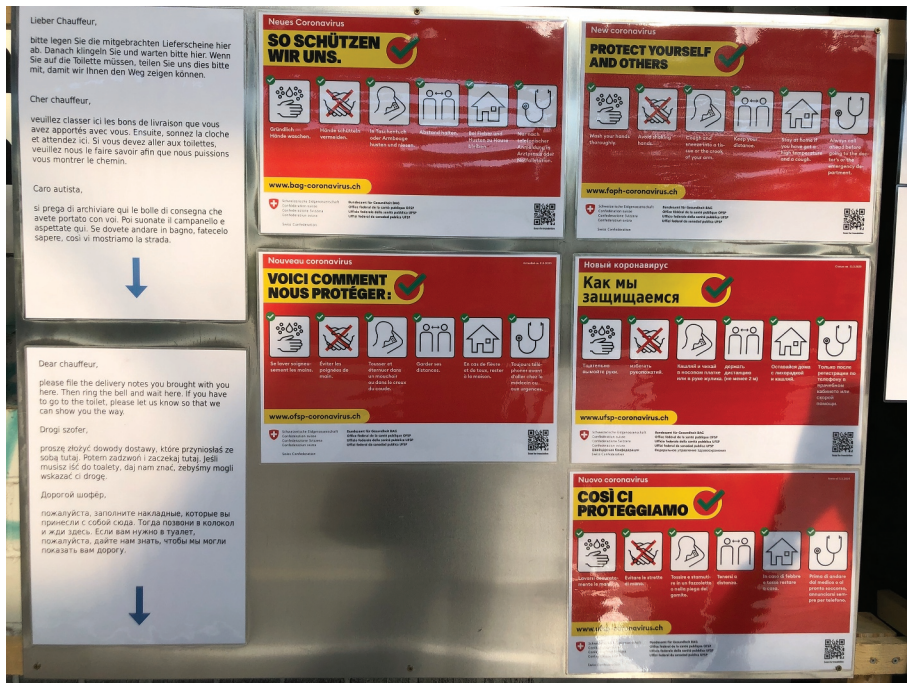


Figure 3. Depot for international cargo trucks. COVID-19 safety instructions are printed in German, English, French, Russian, and Italian. On the left, instructions to delivery drivers are posted in the same languages, with the addition of Polish. Photo: author.

time, despite the falling rates, Switzerland has logged 30,845 cases and 1,919 deaths (Aleph and Beal 2020). Cantons Vaud and Ticino continue to suffer from the highest number of deaths, and many people worry about a second wave.

As the country reopens, I have noticed in the social sphere a division between people who are ready to restart “normal life” and those who are cautious about leaving lockdown. A member of staff at the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology told me that she is required to work from home until August at least, but that she is happy: “I like having the time to care only about my family and myself, currently. It was hard at the beginning but it’s been cozy. It’s only hard because I’m tired of staying within the same 2 km.” And children playing in the field by my flat told me they did not want to return to school. A middle schooler added: “The government abolished grades for the year anyway. What’s the point of going back?” The interruptions engendered by COVID-19 have not been interpreted as universally negative. Instead, they have introduced alternate ways of being with new and unexpected joys.

Conclusion: positionality in the age of COVID-19

Despite its reputation for stability, Switzerland occupies a somewhat precarious position. The country is surrounded by former empires, great powers, and

global hegemony. It is reliant on these neighbor nations (and the wider European Union) but also resolutely independent. The nation is wealthy and orderly but also small and vulnerable, so it cultivates a resolute preparedness. It is multilingual, internationally-minded, and outward facing but simultaneously insular and defensive of its regionalisms and localisms. These national characteristics are produced and reproduced in various degrees by individuals across the country, in ways that are best appreciated by an attention to daily life. And this positionality – in individual, cantonal, and national senses – determined to a large extent the shape of developments when COVID-19 struck.

In Switzerland, cultural affinity and economic ties with neighboring nations have led to fluid, practically non-existent borders. Given the ease of travel, it is unsurprising that COVID-19 spread so rapidly here, and in the context of cantonal independence, the federal government was slow to craft a harmonized national response. On the ground, the crisis and lockdown affected people according to their individual positionalities as well. Working at a university, it was relatively easy for me to switch to a full-time home office schedule, and I am grateful that my group leader established caring infrastructures from the outset that allowed for slower work and more attention to the domestic. At the institutional level, I was privileged to receive no decreases in my salary, and this was coupled with good university support, including the opportunity to apply for an extension of my fixed contract, since I have been unable to undertake fieldwork.

Contrast this with my friend at the plastics factory who usually makes more money than me, but has suffered from pay cuts. Or the workers at the grocery stores that keep us fed, whose workloads increased, who were issued gloves but no masks, and who received no boost in pay for their essential work. In other respects, however, the grocery workers are in less precarious positions than me. In my town, many of these workers are first- or second-generation arrivals from Serbia. Their immigration status is secure, whereas I must apply for a costly and onerous visa renewal every year, a process that has never lasted less than three months, and during which time I am forbidden to travel without purchasing special permission. Yet during this crisis, I am isolated and safer, emerging only to buy the food and cleaning supplies that they keep stocked on the shelves.

I have attempted here to make sense of COVID-19 in Switzerland through a ground-level, minor theory approach because these are not stories that can be captured at higher levels. The minor and the micropolitical highlight privileges and inequalities already existent in society but brought to the fore by the pandemic. This view allows an appreciation of the circumstances experienced by individuals all around the country. Our personal geographies shrank when COVID-19 struck Switzerland, forcing a concern with the immediate, the quotidian, the domestic, and the minor. Tracing individuals in the minor mode provides a unique cartography of how particular experiences of life are assembled in the everyday. The pandemic interrupted the familiar

reproduction of everyday life, sparking an uncertain and unstable reconfiguration of the assemblages through which we produce the home, the city, and the nation. Exploring these interruptions in different registers presents new understandings of how life is reproduced at multiple scales. Notwithstanding the obvious tragedies, once the pandemic interrupted the familiar processes of everyday life, we were afforded the opportunity to explore the underpinnings of stable and independent, but also subtly precarious Switzerland.

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