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Displaying Tolerance: A Swiss Exhibit

Individuals have to learn how to display tolerance, though just how they learn remains unclear. Societies also have to learn how to display tolerance. They can be encouraged to do so by governments that pass and enforce laws which guarantee rights or lift restrictions. Or that establish new and more inclusive rules of the game for public life.

Learning tolerance takes time, for it often begins with a display of intolerance. In 1998, a mobile exhibit in Switzerland toured four cities from April to November: it was called "Tolerance: A Game with Limits." It tried to address both how visitors might reflect on their own attitudes and displayed some of the history of tolerance in the country. The exhibit included student projects, and may as a result be of interest for those concerned about how to communicate tolerance messages.

The exhibit was organized by the Pestalozzianum in Zürich, an institution devoted to educational reform. As the exhibit took place in the context of the 150th anniversary of the Swiss Constitution, it was supported by public funding, but it was also inspired by the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles. The exhibit itself was housed in five large, connected, tents, the first an entranceway, the fourth a podium discussion space, and the fifth a café. The second tent was devoted to "Tolerance Yesterday," the third tent to "Tolerance Today." While a few texts were in English or Romansch, the exhibit languages were German, French and Italian.

Before you enter this "Game with Limits," you fill out a brief questionnaire to determine which of six keys with colored tags you are given. Those under 18 receive a yellow key, women receive a purple key, those without a Swiss passport receive a red key, those who are well situated in life receive a green key, Protestants receive a grey key, and those of other faiths receive a blue key. These colors are arbitrary, though the categories themselves reflect conflicts that have riven Swiss society in the past and the present: age, gender, nationality, wealth, and faith. The multilingual displays reflect Switzerland's four national languages, and while Swiss are quite conscious that their language areas differ socially, economically, or politically, the exhibit clearly does not regard language differences themselves as a basis for intolerance – or at least not at the level of those other categories. Those who run the exhibit on a daily basis are unemployed men and women who participate in a public employment program, so one might think of this as a degree of economic tolerance visitors are perforce confronted with.

To get to the "Tolerance Yesterday" tent, you must first go through one of two doorways labelled "I am tolerated" or "I am not tolerated." This you stand on a semicircular wooden platform, its curved edge decorated with poles adorned with the flags of all the cantons. This platform faces open displays, in this case a subject and a year in which an important political right was granted.

According to the project director, Claudia Cattaneo, the major questions in the second tent are political. They ask: "who belongs?" Or: "who can be elected?" Or: "who can have a voice in government?" The history presented is meant, in part, as a lesson about the extension of rights. It is not an attempt to depict marginal groups in the society, the decision to do so reached after considerable debate among the organizers. Instead, legal and constitutional turning points are displayed in small rooms. One shows 1848, when all Swiss were declared equal before the law. Another shows 1874, when popular referenda were introduced. The 1918 display highlights the political participation of minorities, the 1971 the year in which full suffrage was finally granted to women. One date is still under construction: granting voting rights to foreigners.

A table can be seen in each display room, literalizing the idea of asking those previously excluded to sit at that respective table. Yet while you can see in, a locked red bar – symbolising the Swiss flag – prevents access. You can try to open the bar with your key, but access is often impossible. You may simply carry the wrong key, belong to the 'wrong' group whose access is still denied. It is a conscious goal of the exhibit to give visitors the experience of intolerance, of being excluded. Or rather, to emphasize how selective much access is. Regardless of nationality, for example, all women can get into the 1971 room, as it addresses women's rights; the under 18s can enter every display room. In another literalizing of a metaphor, a small entranceway without a bar can be found at the side or back of each display room; the perceptive or enterprising can gain access through "back channels."

There are also free-standing columns which display or illustrate other aspects of exclusion - gustatory, concerned with national 'purity,' or related to refugees at the border. This tent is devoted to serious reflection about, and critique of, political history. It's meant to inform and meant to appeal to an intellectual, reflective understanding, one suited to older students or adults. The absurdity of past attempts to measure and calculate the size of the "typical Swiss nose" provides a least a little comic relief.

The "Tolerance Today" tent, the third one, is again reached though doorways giving a choice between "I am tolerant" or "I am not tolerant." This tent means to address psychological

preferences, social discrimination, and interpersonal relations, again in the sense of reflection rather than teaching lessons about how to behave.

As before, the point is less to display marginalized groups which are treated intolerantly than it is to organize topics thematically. Physically, these topics are displayed using large crates, some you can enter or walk through, some of them have recordings you can listen to both inside and outside the crate, and some have texts to read, fixed on retractable boards. All keys can be used to record your opinion, on vertical red boards. Do you favor homosexual marriage or not? Should this issue be publicly discussed or not. Registering your opinion produces a display that indicates what percentage of other visitors share your own views.

The display here is culturally specific. Foreigners, and even those who move inside the country, have to deal with authorities who register your residence, and you might see them, depending on your own experience, as hostile or friendly, or be "typical" bureaucrats in some manner. If you are not Swiss, or a resident in the country, some of what is regarded as calling for tolerance may seem a little peculiar.

Thus, Swiss may get quite exercised about the need to build more roads, or the noise and expense that involves. The largest display is devoted to a particularly sensitive topic in a country where most people live in apartments and thus be confronted with the behavior of their neighbors. Outward appearances matter, so the exhibit show the contrast between a "proper," clean entranceway, including a list of the rules of the house tacked to the wall, and the alternative, an "unclean," colorful, and object-laden hallway. The subtext? You should not tolerate the public behavior of those improperly socialized, meaning the young, the foreigner, the anarchist or social 'misfit.' Even the display labelled "which drug should it be?" may seem a little mysterious. While it does include some familiar categories, such as alcohol, cigarettes, or narcotics, it also includes categories of 'addiction' that in other countries might more likely be categorized as psychological disorders (cleaning, sex, time obsessions) rather than as issues calling for tolerance.

Some topics displayed seems to call for a more critical reflection, or a call to bring them into a discourse about tolerance. The display about body weight, for example, raises well-discussed issues about gender-idealized portrayals, discrimination against the overweight, and political correctness. Yet to display it quite near to drug use addiction and verbal violence displays is unusual.

The same can be said of a largely taboo discourse about wealth distribution in the country. There are vast inequities, many aspects of which evoke little comment in the country; the overall theme of this entire exhibit does not make it clear here whether it is poverty or

wealth that is being tolerated. Some of what is displayed is meant to evoke a more amused response, such as the collection of stereotypes in jokes, or the incongruity of creating photomontages that place major symbols of world religions within Swiss landscapes.

Student contributions also play a part. On top of many crates lie blank commentary books in which all visitors can record their impressions – and that includes writing intolerant responses to the display itself. Student comments are reproduced on one of the pillars, and the podium discussion space includes student-crafted pillars relevant to classrooms or adolescence (e.g., understanding the background of a classmate who is a refugee, rethinking attitudes you might have about certain minority groups, etc.). If you attend one or another of the discussions, workshops, or shows in the theater tent, you are brought face-to-face with these reflections.

The most poignant part of the exhibit is not the texts in the historical displays or the crates which make reference to current intolerances. Both of these ask for considerable intellectual understanding, if not the realization that intolerance may well lurk in your own heart, one you thought was most surely tolerant. Instead, what is most striking are the full-length portraits that ring the third tent, making a visual case for the diversity of humanity, and reminding all who visit that for all the outward differences, there is much that is common, much that is similar, in all human beings.