Desirable and/or desired? Student mobility and multilingualism negotiated in the Higher Education System of Switzerland

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This colloquium stimulates a debate on the creation and promotion of the desire for multilingualism and mobility within a given political economy and a defined spatial entity. Opening this colloquium, my contribution offers an example of how in capitalist societies the dogma of the multilingual citizen leads to people becoming mobile whereas, in other cases, language itself is the condition of possibility for mobility. In the context of the higher education system in Switzerland, consisting of largely monolingual regions, I investigate which power relations and ideologies are involved in the process of creating the desire for student mobility and for the acquisition of language competences. I also analyze how these desires are dealt with by different actors and examine the benefits/disadvantages sustained from the desire for mobility and multilingualism.

For this analysis I draw on a case study of students from the Italian-speaking region in Southern Switzerland, who chose to study in a German-speaking city in the north. While since the 1990ies, the opportunity has existed to study in one’s home language region, many Italian-speaking students still choose to go to a different region. Based on a critical analysis of ethnographic data (participant observation at university information days, interview data with students and university managers), I argue that the expression of the desire for multilingualism and mobility serve the self-promotional discourse by universities as well as by students following a market logic. Yet, whereas universities profit, the benefits for these students remain uncertain. Coping with linguistic, social and economic insecurities has led to the foundation of student associations, whose members share not only the language but also experiences resulting from a similar desire. It thus becomes clear how desire, its creation and consequences can be considered as regimenting individual practices related to access to resources and positions in society.

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