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PORTRAIT

Hansruedi Müller: a passionate leisure and tourism researcher in the worlds of theory and practice

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Introduction

For more than 30 years, Hansruedi Müller has greatly influenced Swiss and European tourism research. His contribution to the scientific discussion is unique, and his work reflects a variety of tourism topics. With his critical view and well-founded reflections, he has contributed to several research areas, such as the interaction between tourism and the environment, the origins of wellness tourism, leisure, and the measurement of the effects and impacts of tourism in a regional context. Furthermore, he launched the discussion of quality and experience quality in tourism research and practice.

The future tourism researcher was born on 31 March 1947 in Buchs, which is located in the eastern part of Switzerland. Together with his parents and siblings, Hansruedi Müller grew up in the Rhine Valley, close to Liechtenstein. At an early stage, his professional life was influenced by the work of his father, who worked for the Swiss Federal Railways (SBB) as a stationmaster. After compulsory schooling, it was clear that he would start an apprenticeship as a polyvalent operations manager at this same company. He stayed with the SBB for 10 years. In the second educational channel, he obtained a Swiss baccalaureate and studied economics at the University of Bern. As an economist and tourism researcher at this same university, it is an honour for me to outline and acknowledge the career and work of such an outstanding tourism researcher, who is also my doctoral supervisor, an important leading scientific figure and a good friend of mine. Through our close, long-term collaboration, I had the opportunity to get to know him and his way of thinking very well, which enables me to discuss his career and work over more than 30 years of tourism research and teaching in this article.

His academic life

Hansruedi Müller's academic life was marked with an outstanding will and great effort from the beginning. Even during his economics studies at the University of Bern from 1977 to 1981, the father of then two children did not quit his job at the SBB. His wife, Dora, gave him great support and the necessary freedom to concentrate on his work during these intense years. While studying, he held another position at the SBB and worked at the General-Directorate in Bern, where he was responsible for advertisement in the area of freight traffic. After the successful completion of his economics studies, he was hired as an assistant and doctoral student at the Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism (FIF), which was headed by Jost Krippendorf at the time. In 1985, after three years of doctoral studies, he was granted his PhD in economics (Dr. rer. pol.) under the national research programme "Man and Biosphere" with his dissertation under the heading "Tourismus in Berggemeinden: Nutzen und Schaden" [Tourism in Mountain Municipalities: Benefits and Harms]. Subsequently, he maintained a position as a research associate at the FIF.

By the beginning of 1989, Müller was appointed director of the Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism (FIF) by the governing council of the canton of Bern. By 1 April 1993, the Faculty of Law and Economics of Bern University gave him the adjunct professorship for “Theorie und Politik von Freizeit und Tourismus” [Theory and Politics of Leisure and Tourism]. From then until his retirement in February 2012, he focused on leisure and tourism in teaching, research and consultancy as a tireless and charismatic pioneer and man of action.

In Switzerland, Müller’s academic path was accompanied by well-known researchers, such as Jost Krippendorf (University of Bern); Claude Kaspar, Thomas Bieger and Christian Laesser (University of St. Gallen); Peter Keller (University of Lausanne); and later, Jürg Stettler (University of Applied Sciences in Lucerne). On an international basis, Müller collaborated with many researchers, such as Norbert Vanhove (Belgium); Klaus Weiermair and Egon Smeral (Austria); Martin Lohmann (Germany); and Rick Medlik and Richard Butler (UK).

In addition to his inimitable and often also feared critical view on topics, his claim and will to transfer scientific findings to the tourism industry made him an influential personality in the industry. Müller has always promoted a pragmatic and future-oriented view of tourism research that also had practical relevance as an important goal. It is thus not surprising that many Swiss tourism managers considered him as being “their tourism professor”. An important companion – Peter Keller, the long-time president of Aiest (International Association of Scientific Experts in Tourism) – once formulated these circumstances in a striking way:

The great importance of tourism justifies the scientific reflection about the complex tourist phenomenon. If the tourist phenomenon is to be analysed in a practice- and problem-oriented way, an interdisciplinary and holistic tourism science to which enough leeway is granted for an independent scientific development is necessary in addition. Above all it also needs scientists who are determined to commit themselves for the confrontation with these concerns. And Professor Müller belongs to these. He has become known based on a variety of publications at home and abroad. He has further contributed to the development of the Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism (FIF) at University of Bern. He is recognised in the area of tourism at home and abroad like no other, is respected and even sometimes feared. He has, like his professional colleagues, had a hard time to step out of the shadow of the established scientific basic conditions of the young discipline. However, he contributes to the discipline with his comprehensive and inventive way of thinking with all strength for the fact that the good becomes even better in the area of the tourism science. (Keller in Bandi et al. 2007, p. 100, free translation)

I had the pleasure to get to know Hansruedi Müller and his teaching style as a tourism professor during my economics studies. My first personal contact with Müller took place in spring 2003. Some of my fellow students in economics at the University of Bern told me about his great lectures in the field of tourism. Based on this recommendation and the excellent reputation Müller had as a tourism professor, I enrolled in the lecture “Political aspects of leisure and tourism” and was very enthusiastic about it from the very beginning – enthusiastic about the fascinating and multifaceted subject of “tourism” as well as the opportunity to discuss various aspects of it, but even more so about the commitment and passion Müller showed during all of his classes. This passion and the topic of tourism motivated me to apply for a position as a Junior Assistant at his well-recognized FIF – Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism – at the University of Bern. From then on, I was able to work with Müller on many tourism projects and to discuss and think about touristic phenomena for countless hours at the FIF.

Müller’s work at the FIF

If one wants to understand and honour the academic career of Müller, the Bernese tourism research and especially the Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism play a crucial role. Thus, it makes sense to take a closer look at the development of this university institution and Müller’s commitment to the FIF. Müller and the FIF were described by Wolf Linder, a long-term president of the FIF advisory committee as an “atypical, particular and remarkable phenomenon” (Linder in Bandi et al. 2007, p. 7, free translation). The Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism (FIF) was founded in 1941 to support the war-torn tourism industry. During the history of the FIF, there have been far-reaching changes as well as constants.

The mission of the institute to provide research and advice on questions in the area of tourism has lasted. During the last decades, it has thus rendered especially practice-oriented services and maintained a lasting and fruitful relationship with the tourism industry. Another element of permanence can be seen in the academic teaching at the University of Bern, which complemented the offer of the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences and has always been well appreciated by the students. More of a long-term nature is finally the effect of the education, when you consider that many alumni of the FIF hold important positions in the Swiss tourism industry. (Linder in Bandi et al. 2007, p. 7, free translation)

An element of change is that the heads and directors of the institute have put the emphasis in research and consultancy on other key topics. By means of this prioritization, the current tendencies of economic development in tourism were easily detectable. The first three directors of the FIF, Alfred Walther (1941–1943), Kurt Krapf (1943–1963) and Paul Risch (1963–1971) focused much on problem areas in business and regional economics. Important outcomes were *inter alia* the development of a modern accounting system for the hotel industry and later on projects in the realms of infrastructure and health resort planning. With Jost Krippendorf (1971–1988) a pioneer took over the responsibility for the institute and strived for a coherent research activity. He connected questions in the area of tourism with the research topic of the leisure society, anticipated globalisation trends in tourism and was, not least because of his ecological commitment, sometimes described as “the inconvenient”. (Linder in Bandi et al. 2007, p. 7ff, free translation)

From 1989 to 2012, the FIF was headed by Hansruedi Müller. His crucial achievements for the institute included promoting a holistic approach and thus a broad understanding of questions in the realms of tourism and leisure. This approach was not only meant in the sense of academic research but also aligned with his strong practical orientation (c.f. Linder in Bandi et al., 2007, p. 7). Müller’s strong ties to tourism practice are very visible in the guiding principles of the institute, to which his director and employees have always been committed. The four basic principles of the FIF until the day the institute was integrated into the Center for Regional Economic Development (CRED) in 2012 were as follows:

Holistic nature: Based on our economic core competence, we cultivate a comprehensive and thus interdisciplinary view of tourism and leisure and do not hinder ourselves from using, in addition to intellect, our senses, heart, and intuition.

Practical orientation: We take up current problem definitions and search for responses and solutions for political and entrepreneurial practice.

Forward-looking: We are oriented towards future challenges and understand teaching, research, and consultancy as being a practice that requires forethought.

Commitment: We are constructively critical, and we secure knowledge transfer, support the realization of findings and are committed to the sustainable development of leisure and tourism.

The essential features of these guiding principles already existed in 1991, when the FIF celebrated its 50th anniversary. This shows the great visionary force that has always accompanied Müller in his work. The guiding principles of the FIF perfectly describe Müller and his way of working. They have also aided him and the institute over the past 30 years to address challenges in a professional and appropriate manner. In an environment of method-driven research competition, the examination and discussion of questions with practical relevance have taken on dwindling significance. This strongly influenced the questions concerning the status of the FIF in the disciplinary structure of the Faculty of Economics and Social Sciences at the University of Bern. The integration of the institute into the Department of Economics towards the end of the 1990s helped as a form of clarification, and at the same time, it led to recognition. This also demonstrates that one who dares to strive for a balance concerning the distance between academic research and practice also has to accomplish more. The guiding principles have provided stability, especially regarding the combination of research and practice. With considerable commitment, self-confidence, enthusiasm and empathy, Müller was able to make his voice heard (c.f. Linder in Bandi et al., 2007, p. 8).

The guiding principles of the FIF were also convincing to those outside the institute. Especially concerning scientific consultancy, stability and integrity are attributes that are demanded by clients. Müller was able to uphold these values for decades. The president of the FIF advisory board, Wolf Linder, stressed the high demand of Müller as follows, “Who reminds others critically and does not

only perform advisory tasks, often has to face opposition. Criticism is often seen as an affront instead of food for thought regarding more innovation.” Despite everything, Müller’s commitment to tourism practice was always very noticeable and greatly appreciated (Linder in Bandi et al., 2007, p. 8).

Müller as a leader

The FIF did not simply subsist on expertise and material resources. Much more crucial were its spirit and the enthusiasm of its director and employees. The awareness of employee satisfaction was central for Müller, even if in his opinion, it was not the only key parameter to be maximized at the FIF. The vision of the FIF being “open in thinking, ambitious for the cause, human in the action” was a day-to-day principle for all employees, including the director, and was the basis of the spirit of the FIF.

Jürg Stettler, a former doctoral student and later a research assistant, came up with the following title for an anniversary publication on the occasion of Müller’s 60th birthday: “Holistic–Responsible–Credible”. The holistic nature was to be understood as a mix of theoretical foundation and practical experience. Müller’s high level of self-responsibility was *inter alia* visible through his cutting funds for his own employment credit points to hire an additional employee. This, as well as his commitment – in the framework of the discussion on the increasing CO₂ emissions – to taking only two flights per year, led to Müller’s high credibility, which is still remarkable (c.f. Stettler in Bandi et al., 2007, p. 145).

Beyond the university context, Müller was also involved in various commissions or committees as a member or president. From 2006 to 2015, he was the president of the Swiss Athletics Federation and was also active as the president of the European Championships in Athletics of 2014 in Zürich. This attachment to sports and especially to athletics accompanied Müller throughout his scientific career and always helped him to unwind from his commitment to tourism research. Daniel Voegeli, a former student of Mueller who also worked under his presidency on the central board of the Swiss Association of Athletics Federations, expressed Mueller’s commitment in the following way:

Enthusiasm and passion – I already was impressed when I first met Müller as a young student. Impressed by the enthusiasm I experienced in the interaction with Müller as a professor and Head of the Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism at the University of Bern. Impressed by the passion that I felt a few years later when I experienced him as the president of the central board of the Swiss Athletics Federation. No matter in which role Müller was, the enthusiasm and passion were there. That was formative for all people who had the possibility to work in one or the other way with him. Or in sports jargon: a role model.

On his way to become a leading figure of Swiss tourism research and practice, Hansruedi Müller was accompanied by various academic fellow researchers. His most important mentor can be seen in Jost Krippendorf, who greatly affected Müller’s thinking and understanding.

Müller’s mentor: Jost Krippendorf

Prof. Jost Krippendorf was Hansruedi Müller’s immediate predecessor as director of the FIF and greatly influenced him during the first few years at the institution. Jost Krippendorf gained a reputation as an “inconvenient and unpleasant” tourism professor with his work on the negative effects and undesirable developments in tourism. Already in 1975, he noted that tourism development was a difficult balancing act by means of the publications “Die Landschaftsfresser. Tourismus und Erholungslandschaft – Verderben oder Segen?” [The Landscape Consumers: Tourism and Recreational Areas – A Blessing or a Curse?]. Together with Peter Keller, he also had a mandate from the Advisory Commission of the Swiss Government for tourism and elaborated “Das Schweizerische Tourismuskonzept – Grundlagen für die Tourismuspolitik” [The Swiss Tourism Concept – Foundations for Tourism Policy], in 1979. In this concept of tourism, the Swiss pioneers outlined the basic pillars of sustainable development, which entered the debate 10–15 years later. They could thus be seen as the fathers of the globalized movement striving for sustainable development in tourism. In 1982, Jost Krippendorf insisted again on these aspects at the 50th anniversary of the Swiss Tourism Federation with his publication “Fehlentwicklungen im Schweizer Tourismus – vom immer grösser werdenden Graben zwischen

Zielen und Wirklichkeit und von den Möglichkeiten, ihn zu beheben” [Undesirable Developments in Swiss Tourism – of the Increasingly Sharp Divide Between Aims and Reality and of Possibilities to Overcome it]. In this publication, 20 deadly sins of Swiss Tourism were discussed. During Müller’s doctoral studies, his doctoral supervisor published another renowned piece of work in 1984, with the title, “Die Ferienmenschen – Für ein neues Verständnis von Freizeit und Reisen - Eine nachfrage-seitige Betrachtung” [The Holiday People – For a New Understanding of Leisure and Travels – A Demand-Side Approach]. In 1986, Jost Krippendorf and Müller wrote “Alpsegen Alptraum – Für eine Tourismus-Entwicklung im Einklang mit Mensch und Natur” [Alpine Blessing, Alpine Nightmare – For a Tourism Development in Accordance With Nature and Human Beings] as a popular version of the final paper in the framework of the six-year UNESCO research programme “Man & Biosphere”. In this paper, they discussed the origins of the “7 Chancen und 7 Gefahren” [7 Chances and 7 Dangers] of tourism development as well as the renowned “Tourismuswachstumsmaschine” [Tourism Growth Machine], which proved to be a cornerstone of Müller’s scientific work.

Müller’s scientific work and publications

In his choice of research topics, Müller was always committed to practical relevance. Together with Jost Krippendorf and their above-mentioned publication “Alpsegen, Alptraum” [Alpine Blessing, Alpine Nightmare], he had his fingers on the pulse of the time. This led to Müller’s reputation as a tourism critic. His later work underlined his constructive criticism paired with a pinch of self-criticism. In his publication “Tourismus und Ökologie” [Tourism and Ecology], he further examined the interactions between tourism and the environment in the 1990s. Additionally, he has always been concerned with the relationship between climate change and tourism, as for example in his 2008 publication “Climate change and tourism – scenario analysis for the Bernese Oberland in 2030”. From an economics perspective, he intensively worked on the measurement of value added in tourism and applied his methodological approach to the Canton of Bern in the publication “Touristische Wertschöpfung – Das Beispiel Bern” [Tourism value-added – the example of Bern]. He was also concerned with tourism phenomena such as wellness tourism, where he contributed to the debate with his 2001 publication “Wellness Tourism: Market analysis of a special health tourism segment and implications for the hotel industry”.

Another important contribution to tourism research and practice was the launch of the discussion on quality with the development of the Quality Programme for Swiss Tourism by the end of the 1990s. He contributed to the establishment of the whole programme and the two practical manuals “Qualitäts-Gütesiegel für den Schweizer Tourismus – Leitfaden Stufen I und II” [Quality Label for Swiss Tourism – Practical Manual Levels I and II]. In 2001, he also published an influential book on the subject with the title “Qualitätsorientiertes Tourismus-Management” [Quality-oriented Tourism Management]. In the follow up, he broadened the quality discussion to incorporate also experience quality with experience staging. The joint publication with his doctoral student Roland Scheurer on experience staging in destinations, “Tourismusdestination als Erlebniswelt – Ein Leitfaden zur Angebotsgestaltung” [Tourism Destinations as a World of Experience – A Practical Guidance on the Development of Services], has pushed ahead the discussion of the experience economy in Swiss tourism.

The supervision of dissertations was one of Müller’s passions. His doctoral students worked on several topics, such as the foundations of lobbying in tourism, research questions in sports economics and the historico-cultural field. This extensive work is visible in the form of Issues Nos. 30–58 and 60, respectively, which were published in the book series “Bernese Studien zu Freizeit und Tourismus” [Bernese Studies on Leisure and Tourism] under his leadership. If one were to mention a piece of work with a great effect, it would certainly be the legendary Issue No. 41 “Freizeit und Tourismus–Eine Einführung in Theorie und Politik” [Leisure and Tourism–An Introduction to Theory and Politics]. Eleven editions of this issue were published, the last in 2008, and it has become a standard tourism textbook in German-speaking countries for different levels. It has its roots in the joint publication of

Bernhard Kramer, Jost Krippendorf and Hansruedi Müller with the title “Freizeit–Politik–Perspektiven” [Leisure–Politics–Perspectives].

The reference list shows how remarkably comprehensive Müller’s interest in various tourism research questions was. It also underlines his great effort in making scientific findings available to the broad public. His work was certainly focused on the Alpine tourism, mainly in European countries. An important opportunity for him to be inspired by and discuss with fellow researchers was the Tourist Research Center (TRC), which can be seen as the “twin sister” of Aiest. Between 1991 and 2012, he joined all meetings of the TRC and found the discussions in the small circles to be enlightening, profound, and fruitful. He greatly supported them because they were an opportunity for him to intensively discuss with other European researchers within the framework of an Amicale. This was also his primary motivation to organize TRC conferences in Bern (1992), Interlaken (2001) and again in Bern (2012) during his 21 years of being an active member. The long-term president of the TRC and close friend of Müller, Nobert Vanhove, summarizes Müller’s importance in the TRC circle as follows:

He was active in many respects. Firstly, the annual activity report of “Research Institute for Leisure and Tourism, University of Bern” caught the attention of all members. Secondly, his presentations at the annual meetings were always high-level and much respected by his colleagues. That was the reason why I often decided to have Müller on the conference programme as the first speaker. A good start is part of a successful meeting. Thirdly, he organized three TRC meetings: Bern 1992, Interlaken 2001 and Bern 2012. He always brought a special touch to the gatherings. We will never forget our accommodation in the famous Victoria Jungfrau Grand Hotel & Spa in Interlaken. This was a tourism experience by itself which would never have been possible without his connections in the Swiss tourism world. Personally, I have a deep respect for the homage he paid to me on the occasion of my departure as the Secretary General of TRC in 2012. Very soon he became the scientific conscience of TRC for me. When Müller was satisfied we all left with a good feeling. For many years, Müller and the Secretary General prepared the scientific programme. In 2011, TRC’s General Assembly accepted his proposal to update the statutes. TRC members respected his sense for methodology, quality, discipline and efficiency.

Additionally, Müller attended most of the Aiest conferences, and this exchange platform completed his scientific work and thinking. This relationship motivated him to organize an Aiest conference in Pontresina in 2006. The current president of Aiest, Harald Pechlaner, sketches Müller’s role in the organization as follows:

I got to know Müller in 1996 during the Aiest conference in Rotorua, New Zealand. Müller was not a stranger to me, even though as a tourism director of South Tyrol, I only knew a few tourism researches of the time. This fact already points to his most important strength, namely that with his research projects and topics he was always very close to tourism practice. I thus fast understood that tourism science can only work under the precondition that it develops topics together with practice. Müller has invaluablely contributed to the Aiest, on the one hand because he regularly joined the conferences and on the other hand because he stood out particularly through his friendliness. Every time it was Müller, who, – after having been very busy during the conference days – organised us a table after returning to the hotel in order to be together in a convivial gathering. Unforgettable is the Aiest conference 2006 in Pontresina: Müller had assumed this responsible task spontaneously, after the planned conference in Russia could not take place. It was one of the most beautiful conferences I’ve ever experienced. Müller managed, through his warmth on the one hand, and the strict time management with the notable bell on the other, to make unforgettable moments possible – and this actually exactly is what tourism strives for.

The overview on Hansruedi Müller’s scientific work, his great commitment as the FIF director and the various forms of engagement in the Swiss tourism industry has shed light on his impressive personality as well as the great contribution he has made to Swiss and European tourism research and practice.

Conclusion

The words of Klaus Weiermair in a commemorative publication for Müller’s 60th birthday (Bandi et al., 2007), “Müller’s holistic approach with scientific conscience”, get to the heart of Müller’s work. His TRC colleague and friend Martin Lohmann described his career and work in tourism science very well in this same publication (Bandi et al., 2007):

The part of Müller's work I got to know from the distance up in Northern Germany were some of his contributions as a tourism researcher. This work can be characterised – besides the strict adherence to methodological and content-related foundations – by means of the following terms: Consequence, honesty, relevance (not to be confused with flattering so-called practical orientation) and a “broad view” that unifies different academic disciplines as well as various practical perspectives when dealing with a concrete problem under consideration. I imagine Müller to be a person “caring for the social welfare” in the sense of being obliged to the whole society rather than particular interests of a few. In doing so he is self-reflexive in a critical way. Self-confident scepticism reduces the probability of fallacy.

The combination of various academic disciplines and the connection of different perspectives under consideration of scientific criteria are perhaps the quintessence of Müller's academic contribution. This, however, also meant that he accepted the boundaries of scientific methods as well as their contents and was truly guided by his motto “better roughly right than exactly wrong” and by the approach of “Simplicity” in general (Weibel, 2014). His self-confident scepticism combined with a high level of goal orientation and remarkable efficiency, a nearly unbeatable endurance, and pronounced humanity, and his ability as a listener round off his work. These attributes are all facets of the charismatic personality of this admirable tourism researcher.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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