Geogr. Helv., 81, 767–779, 2026
https://doi.org/10.5194/gh-81-767-2026
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+ GEOGRAPHICA HELVETICA +

Postcolonial urbanism without colonies? Rethinking critical urban studies in and from Switzerland

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Received: 23 September 2025 – Revised: 3 August 2026 – Accepted: 8 October 2026 – Published: 12 November 2026

Abstract. Amid an ongoing public reassessment of the historical legacy of Switzerland's colonial entanglements, this article examines the contested production of knowledge in Swiss geography and urban studies, focusing on the policing of the academy and the epistemic ruptures it has provoked. Tracing historical continuities from radical student movements of the 1980s to recent mobilisations with Black Lives Matter and solidarity with Palestine, we show how moments of dissent have opened spaces for challenging Switzerland's colonial amnesia and racial denial. At the same time, we argue that the political–economic orientation of Swiss critical urban studies, despite its powerful critiques of capitalist urbanisation, has often left the colonial and racial conditions of urbanisation insufficiently examined. Drawing upon historical concepts such as "colonialism without colonies" and "raceless racism", we conceptualise two mutually reinforcing structures of disavowal: the separation of Swiss modernity and prosperity from colonial histories and the denial of race as an operative social relation despite the persistence of racialised inequalities. This conceptual synthesis enables Swiss urbanisation to be understood relationally through its connections to colonial extraction, racialised mobility, labour segmentation, and global regimes of accumulation. We use postcolonial urban studies not to designate a bounded subfield or category of cities but as a critical practice for reworking the histories, concepts, and methods through which urbanisation is understood. We conclude by advancing an agenda for postcolonial urban studies in and from Switzerland organised around three orientations, namely unmasking space, unearthing extractive geohistories, and unsilencing the everyday, which make racialised spatial relations perceptible, reconstruct the extractive geohistories of urbanisation, and recognise everyday struggles as sites of theorisation.

1 Introduction

We write this paper from two differing positionalities as early-career researchers working at the margins of Swiss academia in the fields of critical urban studies, geohistory, and art. One of us is a white, middle-class Swiss woman; the other is a male BIPOC scholar and long-term resident of Switzerland with a weak passport. Both of us face challenges and policing in our critical decolonial and postcolonial research, albeit in different ways, and are subjected to academic precarity for the work we do both within and beyond the academy. One is a renowned visual artist and architectural historian of Swiss coloniality and Swiss extractivism with a long record of critical art and academic projects that have exposed and further pushed the Swiss state's complicity in what has been termed "colonialism without colonies" (Purtschert et al., 2016). The other is a critical urban theorist and educator who has worked extensively on the entanglements between capitalist urbanisation and colonial land settlement and has taught courses on postcolonial and Southern theory. As scholars often targeted for our attempts to unsilence geohistories, racialised, and othered within Swiss academia and society, we write from a position of precarity subject to ongoing policing.

Engaging with the policing of the academy, particularly postcolonial and decolonial thought in disciplines related to geohistories and the built environment, our paper locates

how recent policing efforts seek to discipline and contain the "epistemic ruptures" that have emerged in engagement with urban space both within and beyond academia (Lewis and Hendricks, 2016, see also Hammer, 2017). We use policing in an expanded sense to refer not only to formal prohibition or disciplinary action but also to the institutional, discursive, and affective practices through which legitimate knowledge, acceptable political expression, and academic belonging are delimited. These practices range from the cancellation of events and disciplinary proceedings to informal warnings; differential scrutiny; precarising employment practices; and the routine devaluation of particular concepts, methods, and embodied experiences. In everyday academic life, policing may take less visible forms: researchers may be advised to avoid particular concepts because they are considered to be too "political"; courses, events, or public statements addressing colonialism and Palestine may be subjected to exceptional levels of administrative scrutiny; and racialised or precariously employed scholars may be expected to repeatedly demonstrate the scholarly legitimacy of questions that remain unmarked when approached through established Eurocentric frameworks. Such policing efforts uphold Eurocentric ideals of neutrality, claims to colonial innocence, and the practice of colonial amnesia (Hilbrandt and Ren, 2022; Jain, 2023). After reconstructing what has been policed, we examine historical parallels with earlier moments of policing epistemic ruptures in the Swiss academy and outline an agenda for postcolonial urban studies in and from Switzerland that deploys the current epistemic rupture as a portal for an academy that is more attuned to social and urban challenges at the current authoritarian conjuncture (see Wolfe, 2023; Bathla, 2025).

The eruption of student actions and anti-war and decolonial demonstrations in response to the war in Gaza, whereby all educational institutions have been destroyed, most homes and buildings reduced to rubble, and thousands of civilians maimed or killed in the neo-colonial invasion of the Gaza Strip, intensified the policing of critical scholarship in Switzerland. Practitioners in critical urban studies and geohistories faced not only brutal attacks from sections of the Swiss press but also heightened policing within our institutions. The rector of the University of Basel, for example, denounced postcolonialism as an "ideology" and called for a review of subjects informed by it. According to her, postcolonialism – already a problem in US universities – "divides the world into perpetrators (white people and Western institutions) and victims (people of colour and the Global South)" (Bandle, 2024; see also Nkula-Wenz and Larsen, 2024). She added that, unlike in the US, postcolonialism was not yet widespread at Basel but needed to be kept in check (Bandle, 2024). In response, students from the Faculty of Philosophy and History issued an open letter clarifying postcolonialism's history as a scholarly field that examines how colonial logics continue to shape the present and the importance of it as a scientific epistemology to understand and engage with socio-ecological challenges. The open letter from the students clarifies how, contrary to the rector's claim, postcolonial theory foregrounds continuums and grey zones and not rigid binaries.[1] Academics such as Georg Kreis supported this response, pointing out that dismissing postcolonialism as "ideology" was itself an ideologically motivated move (SRF, 2024).[2]

As the characterisation of postcolonialism as an "ideology" illustrates, such policing does not always take the form of explicit prohibition or public condemnation. It also operates through routine distinctions between supposedly objective scholarship and work dismissed as activist, ideological, or imported from elsewhere. Postcolonial and decolonial scholarship may consequently be required to demonstrate its scientific legitimacy repeatedly, while the Eurocentric assumptions structuring established fields remain unmarked. This unequal burden of justification shapes curricula, research assessment, and perceptions of who belongs within the academy. It is reinforced through informal advice to early-career researchers to avoid concepts such as "decoloniality," "apartheid", or "settler colonialism" or to separate their political commitments from their scholarly work. Presented as professional guidance rather than censorship, such warnings encourage anticipatory self-policing while leaving little documentary trace. Differential administrative scrutiny constitutes another everyday modality: events addressing colonialism, racism, or Palestine may be required to provide extensive information about speakers, terminology, security arrangements, or institutional responsibility. Even when framed as routine and politically neutral, such bureaucratic procedures can delay, discourage, or reshape critical discussion. These pressures are unevenly distributed. Academics in permanent positions may be better placed – although by no means immune – to withstand public controversy or institutional disapproval, whereas doctoral researchers, temporary staff, migrant scholars, and scholars with precarious residence status face greater risks when taking public positions. Policing consequently operates not only by prohibiting speech but also by organising the differential costs of speaking.

As philosopher Patricia Purtschert (2011:121) highlights, there is a longer trajectory to the aversion to postcolonial theory due to colonial amnesia. "The critical challenge therefore is to integrate critical analysis of local politics with a critical analysis of modern practices of government

[1] A link to the open letter from the students against the rector's statements can be found here: https://dg.philhist.unibas.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/dg/Studium/Dokumente_Studium/Offener_Brief_an_die_Rektorin.pdf (last access: 30 June 2026).

[2] Over 500 academics from Switzerland and an equal number of academics from abroad issued and signed an open letter in 2024 in defence of academic freedom in Switzerland. The letter can be accessed at the following link: https://www.academicfreedom.ch/ (last access: 20 March 2025).

that categorise and divide people" (see Dace Deznovska in Purtschert, 2011).

The academic policing of postcolonial theory at the University of Basel was far from isolated. Postcolonial and decolonial thought was similarly policed at ETH Zurich and the University of Bern, among other academic institutions in Switzerland. At ETH Zurich, the staff and student groups critical of colonial continuities and expressing anti-war views were described as "a few loud voices" dominating discussions[3]. These attacks targeted not only student activism but also the scientific study and teaching that dealt with colonialism, its afterlives, and ongoing legacies. While we are familiar with such assaults on academic freedom from our work in contexts more readily characterised as authoritarian, their appearance in Switzerland exposes the fragility of any categorical distinction between authoritarianism and Western liberal democracy (Koch, 2022). This has become even clearer since the violent crackdowns on critical and postcolonial academia at US universities following the regime change in early 2025. At the current authoritarian conjuncture, the policing of academia has become a global trope that transcends geographic binaries, a marker of the ongoing descent towards an economy of space-making that has been described as "authoritarian urbanism", one which is premised on racism (Bathla, 2025).

Ironically, these attacks came at the very moment when Switzerland was, for the first time after 2 decades of research into its colonial entanglements, beginning to publicly acknowledge and address its role in colonialism. At the opening of the exhibition *Colonial. Switzerland's Global Entanglements* at the Swiss National Museum in September 2024, a Swiss Federal Councilor remarked that "the time has come for a more honest look at our history. Swiss history cannot be neatly separated from the history of colonialism. … Swiss history does not need to be rewritten – but it must be supplemented with an important dimension: that of our country's colonial legacy".[4] The summer of 2024 saw the opening of several exhibitions on the colonial entanglements of Switzerland and on the restitution of Benin Bronzes at the Rietberg Museum and the Zurich Ethnographic Museum, as well as one tracing the connections between natural science and colonialism at the ETH Zurich[5] and in the Natural History Museum of Neuchâtel.[6] Moreover, addressing the interconnection of relational geographies, plantation architectures, and colonial wealth accumulation visibly forming the Swiss built environment was examined in the exhibition *Spatial Converter* at the Centre d'Art in Neuchâtel.[7]

These developments raise questions not only about the policing of academic debate but also about the geographical and epistemological premises of critical urban scholarship itself (e.g. Blatman and Sabbagh-Khoury, 2023; Guma, 2025). Drawing on the special issue's concern with the longer history and wider context of the current anti-scientific climate, we approach critical urban studies as an interdisciplinary tradition that understands urbanisation as a contested social process shaped by capitalist accumulation, state power, and social difference while also interrogating the categories through which urban knowledge is produced (Roy, 2016). We understand postcolonial critique not as the study of a period "after" colonialism but as a relational method for examining how colonial histories continue to structure contemporary institutions, spaces, and epistemologies (Bhambra, 2007). The formulation "in and from Switzerland" therefore does not establish Switzerland as a self-contained national container. Rather, it identifies both an institutional location whose exclusions require scrutiny and a situated point of departure from which Switzerland's transnational colonial and urban relations can be reconstructed (Palat Narayanan, 2025). Against this background, we ask the following question: why has policing the academy become such a defining feature of the current authoritarian conjuncture (Wolfe, 2023; Bathla, 2025)? What is the longer history of this policing and what can be learned from historical parallels? And, more importantly, what agenda for postcolonial urban studies in and from Switzerland can move us beyond the present impasse?

In addressing these questions, the article makes three interconnected contributions. First, it reconstructs the development of critical urban studies in Switzerland while identifying the colonial and racial limits of its dominant political–economic orientation. Second, it brings the concepts of "colonialism without colonies" and "raceless racism" into conversation to explain how coloniality and racialisation operate in a state that disavows both colonial implication and

[3] "Antisemitism is not tolerated" – statement by Dean of Department of Architecture, ETH Zurich to newspaper articles accusing it of fomenting antisemitism, https://arch.ethz.ch/en/news-und-veranstaltungen/news-kanal/2024/03/antisemitismus-wird-nicht-toleriert.html (last access: 15 March 2025).

[4] A link to the full speech of Elisabeth Baume-Schneider's opening speech at the Kolonial exhibition (Zurich, 12 September 2024) can be found here: https://www.news.admin.ch/de/nsb?id=102436 (last access: 30 June 2026).

[5] Link to the exhibition titled "In Dialogue with Benin. Art, Colonialism, and Restitution" at Museum Rietberg (https://rietberg.ch/en/exhibitions/indialoguewithbenin, last access: 6 November 2026). Link to "Benin Dues" exhibition at the Zurich Ethnographic Museum: https://www.musethno.uzh.ch/en/Exhibitions/archiv/benin-dues.html (last access: 6 November 2026). Link to "Colonial Traces – Collections in Context" exhibition at ETH Zurich curated by Monique Ligtenberg – https://library.ethz.ch/en/news-and-courses/news/news-articles/2024/07/new-extract-exhibition-colonial-traces-collections-in-context.html (last access: 20 March 2025).

[6] "Naming Natures. Natural history and Colonial Legacy", SNSF Agora exhibition at the Musée d'Histoire Naturelle de Neuchâtel (December 2024–August 2025).

[7] The exhibition "SPATIAL CONVERS(I)OR", https://actu.epfl.ch/news/a-study-of-art-and-architecture-revisits-swiss-col/ (last access: 1 September 2025).

race. Third, it develops a postcolonial urban critique that expands the archive of urban theory beyond canonical academic texts to encompass student activism, artistic practices, public controversies, and everyday struggles over memory and belonging. We argue that postcolonial thought in geography and urban studies is targeted precisely because these disciplines directly confront how state and bourgeois–capitalist interests reproduce their power. Such policing is not unique to the present. We draw parallels between the current conjuncture of economic and democratic upheaval and the policing of the Swiss academy during the 1980s. We first reconstruct this longer history before tracing the epistemic ruptures through which critical, feminist, and postcolonial scholarship has challenged established understandings of space and urbanisation. We then examine how the current wave of policing seeks to contain scholarship that breaks with dominant epistemologies. We conclude by approaching the present conjuncture as a threshold for imagining an academy otherwise and outline an agenda for postcolonial urban studies in and from Switzerland centred on unmasking space, unearthing extractive geohistories, and unsilencing the everyday.

2 Geographers, stop sleeping!

The title of this section refers to the rallying cry "*Geografe nüme schlafe!*" ("Geographers, stop sleeping!") of the radical student movement in Zurich in the 1980s. Amidst the social upheavals of that period, radical geography students joined the protests against the city's funding priorities in the summer of 1980. The movement opposed the city administration's refusal to support non-commercial and alternative youth spaces while aligning itself instead with global capitalist interests in urban development (Schmid, 2017:237). Alienated by the epistemic disjunction between academic curricula and everyday social struggles, the students not only called on fellow geographers to join the radical youth movement but also demanded a reform of the geography curriculum at the University of Zurich. They sought space for social critique and theory that could help make sense of the world around them (Korf et al., 2021:178). Their demands included the integration of critical urban research, Marxist geography, and gender studies, approaches that later came to be recognised under the banner of "New Cultural Geography". They also pushed for a critical examination of militaristic and fascist remnants in the curriculum that were pseudo-scientific (Korf et al., 2021). A parallel example from the 1980s are the anti-apartheid protests in public spaces of Zurich mostly led by students, which were documented by photographer Gertrud Vogler (1936–2018). The spatial relations between anti-apartheid solidarities in Zurich's student movements on one side and the Swiss government not signing the international embargo against Apartheid South Africa led to the protection of Swiss–South African business relations in the gold trade and more, allowing for business to continue as usual, well documented by the activities in the Swiss Club of Cape Town, spatially and racially segregated from the Black majority (Bertschi, 2018, 2024a).

Like today's student protests coalescing around anti-war and anti-apartheid solidarities, these movements were internationalist in orientation and mirrored epistemic shifts across global academia. They challenged outdated curricula and opened up new spaces to engage critically with how neoliberal capitalism was producing a global geography in which cities such as Zug, Geneva, and Zurich emerged as privileged nodes for locating headquarters of global capitalist firms (Ginsburg et al., 1986) and the Zurich Gold Pool established by the major Swiss Banks (Bertschi, 2024b), emerging into what Rita Kesselring (2025:6) has recently described as the world's "golf course." This moment marked an epistemic rupture: students began experimenting with creative research methods such as documentary photography or ethnographic film to understand the transformation of urban geographies while organising reading groups, forming think tanks such as the *Ssenter for Applied Urbanism (SAU)*, and translating critical urban studies scholarship from English into German (Schmid, 2017:237; Korf et al., 2021:181). As today, however, these breaks with conventional scholarship and student initiatives were policed and disciplined by the university administration, as well as by the state. Contracts of lecturers were terminated, students were suspended, and courses were removed.

However, these events of policing also provided a portal that marked a radical shift in geography and helped catalyse the nascent field of urban studies in Switzerland. Through student-organised lectures and co-taught seminars, the city and processes of urbanisation came to be recognised as crucial sites for analysing and critiquing neoliberal capitalism, sharpening geography's role as a discipline capable of illuminating processes of social change (Korf et al., 2021:184–85, 188). This epistemic rupture enabled urban geographers of the period to examine how capitalist interests were driving city extensions and commodifying urban spaces, commons, and social infrastructures and to formulate planning and architectural responses against such dynamics. In Zurich, geographers increasingly situated local processes of urbanisation in comparison with those in other European headquarter cities such as Frankfurt, London, and Amsterdam (Hitz et al., 1994). They also sought to understand Switzerland's urbanisation critically, beyond a narrow association with the city (Diener et al., 2006) and in relation to national and global urbanisation processes (Diener et al., 2015). They also prompted reforms in Zurich's famous housing cooperative sector, catalysing the so-called "young cooperative movement" that formulated architectural and planning responses to the Right to the City (Koch, 2021:25). This included new models for living together, inclusivity for non-Swiss residents and migrants, and non-heteronormative communities. The emergence of radical geography thus consti-

tuted a profound epistemic rupture within Swiss academia. Nevertheless, its powerful critique of capital, class, and urban restructuring remained largely organised through a European political–economic frame. Swiss urbanisation was commonly approached as an internal history of industrialisation and capitalist development rather than as a process relationally connected to plantation economies, colonial extraction, racial science, and differentiated regimes of mobility. The question is therefore not whether this scholarship was sufficiently critical but which relations and subjects remained outside its field of critique. This question leads us to scholarship in global history, which has more directly addressed Switzerland's colonial histories and their contemporary effects.

3 Decrypting colonialism without colonies

Epistemic strands emerging in the field of global history since around 2005 have, as Thomas David et al. (2005) and Patricia Purtschert (2011) highlighted, challenged Switzerland's claim that it had "nothing to do" with slavery, the slave trade, and colonialism and that it neither participated in nor was affected by colonialism. This body of scholarship has interrogated how assertions of neutrality and colonial innocence concealed Switzerland's participation in and benefit from colonialism both historically and in its collaboration with persistent colonial systems such as Apartheid South Africa. In doing so, the heuristic of "colonialism without colonies" (Purtschert et al., 2016) seeks to decode the specific postcolonial constellation of places like Switzerland which, although lacking official overseas colonies, were deeply involved in and shaped by colonialism without ever developing a corresponding self-conceptualisation, continuing instead to see themselves as outsiders to colonialism (Purtschert et al., 2015:287; Bertschi, 2024a).[8] In this way, such scholarship challenges Switzerland's self-identification and its claim to colonial innocence (e.g. Purtschert et al., 2016; Purtschert and Fischer-Tiné, 2015; Zangger, 2014) and neutrality (Bertschi, 2021a).

By detaching colonialism from direct territorial conquest, this epistemic shift destabilised the foundations of Swiss historiography. It prompted inquiries into, for example, the colonial origins of Swiss natural history and science (e.g. Schär, 2015; Bartoletti, 2024; Bertschi, 2025); racial profiling and eugenics (e.g. Germann, 2015); Swiss trading houses and commodity trading (e.g. Dejung, 2013; Haller, 2019; Kesselring, 2025); complicity and active participation in the slave trade (Haenger, 2016); identity formation and settler colonialism abroad (e.g. Sanders, 2015); the omnipresence of objects of colonial provenance in museums and architectural heritage (e.g. Kuprecht, 2022; Brengard et al., 2020; Hertzog and Uzebu-Imarhiagbe, 2023; Davis, 2024); colonial remnants in public space (Wilopo and Dijkema, 2024); and the ways Swiss trading houses continue to capture value through underdevelopment and resource plundering in the "Global South", built on older colonial relations of dependency (e.g. Bertschi, 2023; Kesselring, 2025). Simultaneously, Switzerland's long-cherished notion of neutrality, historically shaped in relation to surrounding expansionist, militarised nation states (Sciarini et al., 1997), has been called into question for its redeployment as a tool of political and economic complicity in racist and colonial atrocities and in policing dissenting voices (Bertschi, 2021b, 2024a; Jain and Msallam, 2025).

Contemporaneously, critical scholarship has also contested Switzerland's self-identification as a "raceless" society and its pervasive racial denial (anti-racialism), which prevents it from naming and contesting racism productively (Michel, 2015, 2020; Boulila, 2019). Noemi Michel (2020) describes this condition as "raceless racism." Despite repeated concerns raised by international observers such as the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, racism in political discourse and state practices is frequently downplayed in Switzerland. While overt forms of exclusion and the policing of racialised bodies are evident in public space and housing access, denial persists over the existence of racial discrimination, the collection of race-based data, and thus the practice of race-neutral science. Categories such as race are further policed epistemically through the absence of data, ensuring their diminished significance. This ignorance persists despite the normative dominance of whiteness (Cretton, 2019). For example, the 2009 minaret ban policed the visibility of Muslim residents in public space, casting them as backward, barbaric, and dangerous. Similar racialised imagery circulated in the Swiss People's Party (SVP) campaign that depicted a black sheep being kicked out of Swiss territory by white sheep, reproducing a spatial logic of exclusion and belonging within the Swiss flag. Such narratives, Noémi Michel (2015) argues, refract the spatio-discursive distinctions associated with the Swiss nation and recall colonial spectacles such as the fetishised "Negro Village" installed alongside the "Swiss Village" at the 1896 Swiss National Exhibition in Geneva.

The prophetic reflections of the American writer and civil rights activist James Baldwin (1955) on his 1951 visit to Leukerbad echo these dynamics, showing how racism operates in "raceless" Switzerland similarly to colonialism without colonies. In *Stranger in the Village*,[9] Baldwin recounts his experience of racism in what, on the surface, appears to

[8] The claim of not having external colonies has, however, in the recent years, been challenged by scholarly work on the Swiss plantation conclomerate around Helvecia in Brazil, where the Swiss government had an active vice-consulate on Colonia Leopoldina (see Bertschi, 2023).

[9] Borrowing the title from James Baldwin, the Aargauer Kunsthaus curated the exhibition "Stranger in the Village", a group show that featured many Swiss and international artists dealing with (Swiss)coloniality through the arts (https://aargauerkunsthaus.

be the relatively isolated alpine village of Leukerbad, with no cinemas or other cultural infrastructures. He wonders how villagers came to understand him as a Black man despite their isolation. He discusses blackfacing traditions and describes how the church solicited funds to convert Africans to Christianity, illustrating the persistence of colonial imaginaries and how colonial social relations continue to shape spaces that may at first be considered to be outside of colonialism and racism.

"Colonialism without colonies" and "raceless racism" describe two mutually reinforcing structures of disavowal. The former separates Swiss modernity and prosperity from colonial histories in which Swiss actors participated; the latter denies the social efficacy of race while allowing racialised distinctions to organise institutions and everyday life. For urban studies, these concepts make it possible to read apparently internal processes of housing, migration governance, labour segmentation, infrastructure investment, and heritage-making as outcomes of relations extending beyond the national territory (Baile et al., 2019). They thereby unsettle interpretations of Swiss urbanisation as an exclusively European history of industrialisation, metropolitan growth, and capitalist restructuring.

In the absence of race-based data, social inequities such as spatial and housing segregation have largely been studied through the lens of skill-based or region-based migration, grounded in outdated "global-city" discourses that emerged after IMF-mandated globalisation in the long 1980s. While this scholarship acknowledges the uneven incorporation of Third World migrants into the globalised economy, the field of Swiss urban studies has largely remained silent on colonial legacies and their role in peripheralising and racialising people and geographies. Within Swiss urban studies, racism is often seen as an issue pertinent to Anglo-Saxon countries such as the US and UK but not to Switzerland, reflecting a commonsense assumption that racism no longer exercises power in socio-political relations (Boulila, 2019:1401). Such Eurocentric assertions, as Hilbrandt and Ren (2022:590) note, have allowed academics in Swiss urban studies to uphold the exceptionalism of Switzerland as a *Sonderfall*, thereby reinforcing the maxim of neutrality, colonial innocence, and amnesia.

Applying this conceptual framework to urbanisation, we argue that the production of urban space in Switzerland has not stood outside colonial social relations. We therefore propose the conceptualisation of a "*postcolonial urbanism without colonies*" to interrogate the trajectory of places like Switzerland, which, despite lacking formal colonies, have cultivated a self-image of standing outside colonial systems. Following Ananya Roy (2011:312; see also Ren, 2020a, b), postcolonial urbanism is understood here not only as heterogeneous forms of subalternity through which colonial cities are lived, negotiated, and shaped but also as the *worlding* of global regimes of value: how they are harnessed and generated; the uncertainty and instability of their speculative formations; and the contestation of truth-producing regimes, such as cartographic practices that delineate cores and peripheries. The urban, borrowing, here, from Henri Lefebvre, can be understood as an intermediate level that mediates between the "far order" of the state, knowledge, institutions, and ideologies (the global level) and the "near order" of everyday life (the private level) (Schmid, 2022:195). Understood in this way, just as Switzerland's history must be read through the lens of colonialism without colonies, so too must its cities and processes of urbanisation be interpreted through the lens of postcolonial urbanism without colonies.

While global history has interrogated Switzerland's historical role and its ongoing ramifications, with few exceptions like Unearthing Traces[10], urban studies on and from Switzerland have remained largely silent on postcolonial questions, on race, and on geographic inequities shaped by colonial social relations. Thus, while Swiss urban studies scholars have examined themes such as gentrification and displacement, financialisation, and labour precarity, as per our reading, the uneven racialised and ethnicised dimensions of these processes have rarely been addressed. As in the radical student movements of the 1980s, it is often student groups who have filled this lacuna in postcolonial critique, attempting to make sense of political currents in Swiss society since the turn of the decade that have attempted to question the persistence of racism, coloniality, and dominance.

4 Epistemic ruptures in raceless Switzerland

The 2020s have seen a public revisiting of Switzerland's colonial legacy and systemic racism, countering decades of collective amnesia that continues to affect its BIPOC citizens and residents (Nelson, 2024). The Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests, sparked by the brutal police killing of African American man George Floyd in Minnesota, were a seismic event in the United States and also resonated with anti-racist and decolonial struggles worldwide. In Switzerland, which is itself no stranger to racialised police violence, the protests ignited a powerful wave of solidarity and large-scale mobilisations across its cities to address forms of overt and systematic racism that its non-white residents face everyday. In Zurich alone, more than 10 000 people gathered in support despite strict COVID-19 regulations that suspended public life and banned large gatherings (https://www.srf.ch/news/schweiz/black-lives-matter-

ch/de/ausstellung/stranger-in-the-village/, last access: 1 September 2025).

[10] Unearthing Traces was a doctoral school, initiated at the Architecture Department of EPFL in Lausanne, to challenge the complete absence of postcolonial discourse in the curriculum of architecture and urban studies at EPFL. It resulted in the publication "Unearthing Traces. Dismantling imperialist entanglements of archives, landscapes, and the built environment" (Bertschi et al., 2023).

grosser-aufmarsch-an-demonstrationen-in-der-schweiz, last access: 30 June 2026). As Claudia Wilopo and Claske Dijkema (2024:1) argue, these protests created a rare opening for the long-marginalised demands and voices of racialised communities to be heard in mainstream media and institutions, prompting new debates within city governments about racism, colonialism, and the material legacies of these histories in urban space.

Wilopo and Dijkema (2024) show how this moment amplified the demands of groups such as Kollektiv Vo Da,[11], which has long advocated not only for a reckoning with the city's colonial past but also for the removal of colonial remnants in urban space, such as racist street names and colonially connotated statues. Similar struggles have emerged in other Swiss cities. In Neuchâtel, for example, activists have contested monuments to figures like David de Pury, whose wealth was derived from the slave trade and the plantation economy, calling instead for "monuments to those who resisted colonialism, not the slavers" (see Bastashevski, 2023); these calls, by now, have been met with a commemorative plaque and a counter-artwork depicting David de Pury head-down in the ground.[12] Also in Neuchâtel, after decades of activism, the Louis Agassiz Plaza at the city's university was renamed by the first Black member of the Swiss National Council, Tilo Frey (Dos Santos Pinto, 2022). These exemplary actions and movements, internationalist in orientation, draw inspiration from the "Rhodes Must Fall" campaign against colonial heritage in South Africa. Parallel protests have also targeted policing and racial profiling of BIPOC communities, exemplified by the justice movement that followed the killing of 37-year-old Roger "Nzoy" Wilhelm by police at the Morges train station in August 2021 (Wilopo and Plümecke, 2024), which, only 4 years after the fatal violence, has seen four police officers suspended for racial biases.[13]

A comparable controversy emerged at the University of Geneva around the naming of its new building as "Uni Carl Vogt". Vogt, the university's first rector and an influential figure in its institutional modernisation, had also advanced explicitly racist and sexist theories of human hierarchy. When the name was approved in 2013, these aspects of his scholarship were acknowledged during the University Assembly's deliberations, but the institution nevertheless retained the designation, partly on the grounds that its buildings conventionally adopted the names of their locations. The decision was challenged again amid the Black Lives Matter mobilisations of 2020 through a public intervention by geographer Juliet Fall and a petition initiated by members of the university community. Following an institutional review and consultation, the university reversed its earlier decision: in January 2023, "Uni Carl Vogt" was replaced by "Université de Genève", and an explanatory plaque was installed at the building's entrance (Université de Genève, unpublished data). The case demonstrates both how racist scientific inheritances can be normalised through apparently pragmatic toponymic practices and how sustained mobilisation can compel institutions to reconsider their presence in urban space (https://www.unige.ch/en/university/historical-figures/carl-vogt/histoire-dun-nom/, last access: 28 July 2026; Appiah and Mireku, 2020).

These epistemic ruptures have deeper roots than the past decade, but their intensification has compelled public institutions in Switzerland to confront colonial entanglements more directly. State initiatives such as the Swiss Benin Initiative (2021) have sought redress through restitution and critical engagement with collections, while counter-spaces outside the academy, such as the student-led groups Decolonize Zurich and Unmasking Space[14], have exposed and unsettled problematic colonial histories embedded in the city, as well as their global entanglements (Chaudhry et al., 2025), through actions such as "decolonial" city tours, now offered in almost in all major cities in Switzerland. As a result, institutions including ETH Zurich have begun to publicly address their colonial histories (https://ethz.ch/en/campus/getting-to-know/learning-and-working/collections-and-archives/dekolonialisierung.html, last access: 30 June 2026), and cities such as Zurich and Geneva have initiated processes of reckoning with their colonial pasts.[15] Just like the 1980s student movement discussed earlier in this paper, these initiatives within and beyond the academy have brought about innovation in urban pedagogy through experimentation.

[11] Kollektive Vo Da is an advocacy group against discrimination and racism in Switzerland that was formed through the involvement of those who have themselves been faced with racism and discrimination. See https://mirsindvoda.ch/ueber-uns/ (last access: 30 June 2026).

[12] The artist Mathias C. Pfund, who won a competition by the City of Neuchâtel to create a public artwork to commemorate David de Pury's role in colonialism, proposed the small statue "Great in the Concrete", depicting David de Pury's head-down in the concrete, leaning on a statue of Louis Agassiz that fell head-down from its "sockel" at Stanford University in the early 20th century. In early August 2025, Pfund's protest sculpture got vandalised again and was stolen by unknown persons (https://www.swissinfo.ch/ger/kleinere-skulptur-von-david-de-pury-in-neuenburg-gestohlen/89791528, last access: 1 September 2025).

[13] See also the full coverage of the Roger Nzoy case at the website of Allianz Gegen Racial Profiling (https://www.stop-racial-profiling.ch/en, last access: 30 June 2026).

[14] Unmasking Space is a student-led course at the Department of Architectue, ETH Zurich, which offers a critical lens on current pedagogie: https://unmasking.space/ (last access: 30 June 2026).

[15] The exhibition "Blinde Flecken. Zürich und der Kolonialismus", organised by the city of Zurich in 2023, aimed to raise public awareness regarding Zurich's colonial ties. Read more here: https://www.stadt-zuerich.ch/de/aktuell/publikationen/2023/blinde-flecken-zuerich-und-kolonialismus.html (last access: 30 June 2026).

The recent wave of anti-war student protests represents a continuation of this epistemic rupture, questioning Switzerland's colonial complicities in the present. Student groups, for instance, have highlighted the double standards by which academic "neutrality" is deployed, used to police solidarity with Palestinians and justify institutional inaction while simultaneously offering unambiguous support to students and citizens affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine. We argue that the current moment of policing in Swiss academia seeks precisely to curtail these epistemic ruptures, which challenge race denialism and expose the persistence of colonial inequities and power asymmetries.

Rather than silencing students and dismissing critical voices, what is needed at this authoritarian conjuncture is an academic reform that more accurately reflects social realities in Switzerland and beyond. Just as the student protests of the 1980s gave rise to new directions in Swiss urban studies and geography, as well as to alternative models of planning and cohabitation, so too do today's epistemic ruptures hold the promise of an urbanism and academia yet to come. Building on these recent developments in Swiss urban studies, the final section of this paper outlines an agenda for postcolonial urbanism in Switzerland.

5 An agenda for postcolonial urban studies in and from Switzerland

Building on the epistemic ruptures catalysed by the recent policing of the academy in Switzerland, we propose an agenda for postcolonial urban studies capable of confronting race denialism, colonial continuities, and the relational entanglements that shape urban life in and beyond Switzerland. We use postcolonial urban studies here not to designate a bounded subfield or a distinct category of cities but to name a critical practice for reworking the histories, concepts, and methods through which urbanisation is understood. Rather than treating Switzerland as an exception, neutral, insulated, or "without a colonial past", this agenda takes seriously its implication in global histories of empire, capitalism, and racialisation while attending to the situated struggles and forms of knowledge that emerge within Swiss cities. We organise this agenda around three interconnected tasks: making racialised spatial relations perceptible, reconstructing the extractive geohistories of urbanisation, and recognising everyday practices as sites of theorisation. These tasks correspond, respectively, to the three orientations developed below: unmasking space, unearthing extractive geohistories, and unsilencing the everyday.

5.1 Unmasking Space

Recent critical urban research in Switzerland has generated important insights into displacement, densification, urban citizenship, and financialisation (e.g. Debrunner, 2024; Kaufmann, 2019; Wicki and Kaufmann, 2022; Hilbrandt et al., 2023). Yet these analyses often remain silent on how race and colonial continuities are inscribed in the built fabric and lived spaces of Swiss cities. These omissions are often unintended and conditioned by the absence of race-based data collection in Switzerland, as we explained earlier in the paper. A postcolonial urban agenda calls for unmasking the racialised spatial orders that structure housing, labour, and policing (see also Chaudhry et al., 2025). This means interrogating not only how cities manage diversity and difference but also how infrastructures, monuments, and everyday spaces reproduce colonial hierarchies. To unmask space is thus to reveal how urban planning and design carry forward historical exclusions while also opening pathways for more equitable futures. We call upon our fellow urban studies scholars to adopt creative practices and embrace ethnography in order to patch the absence of data on racial inequities.

5.2 Unearthing Extractive Geohistories

The "urban question" in Switzerland has long been reduced to the "city question", framed around the European metropolis as an object of analysis. Even landmark interventions, such as ETH Studio Basel's provocations to expand urban studies beyond the city, that have yielded frameworks such as "extended urbanisation" (Schmid and Topalović, 2023) have seldom engaged with colonial or racial entanglements. Unearthing extractive geohistories means situating Swiss urbanisation within longer histories of empire, migration, and racial capitalism. It demands tracing the material and epistemic links between the Swiss city and its "elsewheres", from plantation economies to contemporary migration corridors. Such an approach provincialises the Swiss urban, showing how its apparent "order" is co-produced with processes of dispossession and disorder elsewhere (Bertschi, 2024b; Kesselring, 2025).

As shown in an oral history and urban study about the violent memories of 19th-century plantation slavery in Swiss coffee plantations in the south of Bahia, Brazil, its long-term inscriptions unfold not only in the territorial transformation from biodiverse ecospheres into toxified productive landscapes in Brazil but also in the Swiss built environment (Bertschi, 2023). Through "spatial conversion" (Bertschi, 2024a), many parts of Swiss cityscapes, including modernisation of its infrastructure formed in the 19th century, can be traced to colonial capital, accumulated through enforced labour in plantation economies or trade with colonial commodities. Switzerland's pioneering role in establishing globalised trade from and through Switzerland and relational colonial spaces through soft commodities such as agricultural goods, like coffee, cocoa, cotton, or grains is mirrored by hard commodities trade such as minerals, ore, or precious metals. As Rita Kesselring (2025) demonstrates in her ethnography of copper mining in Zambia, Swiss trading houses capture immense value from extractive economies abroad. She shows that the ostensibly "chaotic" urbanisa-

tion of Zambia's mining regions and the seemingly "orderly" urbanisation of Swiss cities are relationally co-produced through extractive commodity chains and the uneven distribution of their costs and benefits.[16] A postcolonial urban agenda must therefore attend to the longue durée of commodity racism, confronting how Swiss prosperity is built on distant dispossessions and how these global chains reshape urbanisation both "here" and "there". There is thus a need to address the longue durée of commodity racism through exercising the postcolonial comparative method (e.g. Robinson, 2016; Ren, 2020b), especially "relational comparison" (Hart, 2018), that is weaved into places such as Switzerland, South Africa, Brazil, or Zambia that are epistemically kept apart. The task of postcolonial urbanism here is not only to weave the "orderly" urban with the "chaotic" urban there but also to also identify how these relations of centre and periphery are negotiated. The task at hand for researchers is thus to engage not only in major research practices but also in minor methods for "researching otherwise" (Bathla, 2024).

If the afterlives of slavery and colonial extraction are materially inscribed in Swiss urbanisation then unearthing these geohistories is not only an epistemic task but also a reparative one. It raises questions about how cities, institutions, and beneficiaries of colonial accumulation might acknowledge, redress, and materially respond to harms whose effects continue to shape racialised inequalities in the present.

5.3 Unsilencing the everyday

Finally, postcolonial urban studies must attend to the everyday spaces where colonial histories remain silenced but persist materially and symbolically. Public places of memory, from statues to street names, offer key sites of contestation. At ETH Zurich alone, two-thirds of the university's 100 commemorative busts have been shown to be sexist or racially or colonially connotated (https://ethz.ch/en/campus/getting-to-know/learning-and-working/collections-and-archives/dekolonialisierung.html, last access: 30 June 2026). Urban landscapes of Swiss cities are covered with such colonial remnants, which, in celebrating colonial histories, deny inclusive futures otherwise. Such symbolic landscapes shape everyday encounters with history, often reinforcing colonial erasures. Furthermore, we would like to propose redirecting the gaze and public attention from visually obvious symbolic places like monuments to "invisible" material witnesses (Schuppli, 2020) of Swiss coloniality in calling for a new architectural history of Switzerland that includes colonial capital materialised in urban forms, even if not directly readable as such (Bertschi, 2024b). Not only the built but the institutional landscapes – often directly intertwined in reutilising architectures like prestigious villas, linked to colonial wealth into cultural institutions – must be mapped in such an inclusive overview (Bertschi, 2023). Unsilencing the everyday means creating spaces of countermemory, amplifying minoritised voices, and recognising the epistemic practices that emerge from BIPOC communities, activist groups, and student movements. It entails treating everyday urban struggles not as peripheral but as central to rethinking urbanism in Switzerland. Such practices can also be understood as forms of urban repair while raising the further question of when symbolic acknowledgement must be accompanied by more material forms of reparation.

Collectively, these orientations push towards a postcolonial urbanism that neither exceptionalises Switzerland nor reproduces narrow Eurocentric frames of analysis. They recognise that the Swiss urban is deeply entangled with global colonial histories, extractive economies, and racialised spatial orders. A genuinely socio-environmental justice-oriented scholarship must therefore understand racial injustice not as an adjacent concern but as being constitutive of the colonial and extractive relations through which Swiss urbanisation has been produced. Recognising these relations also requires moving beyond acknowledgement towards questions of repair: how inherited racialised inequalities, colonial materialities, and unequal distributions of wealth and vulnerability might be confronted and redressed. They also affirm that the knowledge needed to rethink urbanism emerges not only from academic scholarship but also from protests, counterspaces, and everyday practices of resistance. Just as the student protests of the 1980s transformed Swiss geography and urban studies, the current moment of epistemic rupture offers the chance to imagine and build new forms of urban knowledge and practice rooted in justice, accountability, and solidarity.

6 Conclusion

This article has approached epistemic ruptures as openings through which the boundaries of legitimate academic knowledge can be contested and reworked. We have traced how Swiss geography and urban studies have been policed during moments of wider political and economic upheaval, from the radical student movements of the 1980s to the ruptures catalysed by Black Lives Matter and recent student mobilisations in solidarity with Palestine. These struggles have exposed both the fragility of academic freedom and the unequal costs borne by those who challenge institutionally sanctioned understandings of political neutrality, scholarly objectivity, and academic belonging.

At the same time, our analysis has identified a significant limit within the development of critical urban studies in Switzerland. Although its political–economic traditions have

[16] The full report and its summary can be accessed at the website of Public Eye: https://www.publiceye.ch/en/topics/commodities-trading/100-times-more-emissions-than-switzerland-unadulterated-truth-about-swiss-commodity-traders-carbon-footprint#:%7E:text=It%20is%20well%20known%20by,have%20contributed%20to:%20carbon%20offsets (last access: 30 June 2026).

generated powerful critiques of capitalist urbanisation, financialisation, gentrification, and housing injustice, they have often left the colonial and racial conditions of these processes insufficiently examined. Bringing "colonialism without colonies" into dialogue with "raceless racism" makes these conditions more perceptible. Together, the concepts reveal how Swiss modernity and prosperity are separated from the colonial relations through which they were produced, while race is denied as a socially operative category despite the persistence of racialised inequalities. Swiss urbanisation can consequently no longer be understood as an exclusively internal or European history of industrialisation and capitalist restructuring. It must instead be reconstructed relationally through histories of colonial extraction, racialised labour and mobility, commodity circulation, and the uneven geographies of accumulation.

Against attempts to curtail critical inquiry and silence dissenting voices, we therefore understand the current conjuncture as an opportunity to rework the histories, concepts, and methods of urban research. The agenda proposed here – Unmasking Space, Unearthing Extractive Geohistories, and Unsilencing the Everyday – does not establish postcolonial urban studies as a bounded subfield or designate a separate category of cities. Rather, it advances a critical practice for making racialised spatial relations perceptible, reconstructing the extractive geohistories of urbanisation, and recognising everyday struggles as sites of knowledge and theorisation. Such an agenda refuses Swiss exceptionalism and insists that the seemingly "orderly" urbanisation of Switzerland cannot be disentangled from dispossession and uneven development elsewhere. Taking contemporary epistemic ruptures seriously therefore means not only provincialising Switzerland but also recognising racial justice, repair, and accountability as integral to more just urban futures. This entails confronting both the contemporary racialised inequalities of Swiss urban life and the material afterlives of slavery and colonial extraction through which parts of Swiss prosperity and urbanisation were produced.

Data availability. No data sets were used in this article.

Author contributions. NB contributed to the conceptualisation, investigation, resources, writing of the original draft, and review and editing of the paper.

DB contributed to the conceptualisation, investigation, resources, writing of the original draft, and review and editing of the paper.

Competing interests. The contact author has declared that neither of the authors has any competing interests.

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Review statement. This paper was edited by Nadine Marquardt and reviewed by two anonymous referees.

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