

Abstract „Governing by Values? On the history of medical and bioethics in Switzerland“

In the last third of the 20th century, questions and interventions around the borders of life have increasingly been addressed with the label ‘ethics’. This development has condensed in Western societies and manifests itself today in many forms, be it as medical, bio- or clinical ethics or more recently as neuro- or eco-ethics, so that an ‘ethical turn’ has already been pronounced.

However, modern medical and bioethics are inherently ambivalent: on the one hand, they question issues, technologies and interventions in medicine and biotechnology; on the other hand, they also provide procedures that legitimize them and build trust. This brings into focus the modes of operating of ethics: The proposed research project examines the hypothesis of a shift from a statistics-based “governing by numbers” towards a normative “governing by values”. In a historical perspective it becomes clear that the shift towards modern bioethics cannot sufficiently be described with a linear narrative, which simply states that new technologies raised new questions. Rather, since the late 1960s, various previously social, political or scientific questions have come under the reference of ethics – a process that has been described as a ‘moralization’ of Western societies. Drawing on key developments in contemporary history, such as the rise of expert culture, the loss of confidence in established medical and scientific institutions by social movements, especially the women’s movement, and new modes of regulation, the proposed research project examines Swiss medical and bioethics in a decidedly historical perspective.

The previously unexamined, comprehensive archive of the Swiss Academy of Medical Sciences (SAMS) forms a rich archival base for the research project. Since the 1960s, this organization has become the central hub for medical and bioethical issues in Switzerland. It issued normative guidelines and negotiated ethics first within the medical profession and later interdisciplinary, with growing outreach in politics, legislation and the media. The research project is divided into three subprojects: A PhD project in history investigates ethical negotiations in clinical research between experiment and therapy and the status of the subject. A second historical project explores human material and translating processes between economic value and normative values. A PhD project in history of law examines the genesis of norms between state and non-state actors, methods of standardization and their democratic legitimacy. This research project thus examines a hitherto largely unexplored history that goes beyond national borders: Switzerland is an example of a high-tech-site with an important pharmaceutical and biotech sector and a liberal tradition of low-threshold negotiations and regulations with effects on a local, national but also global scale.