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What side are you on? Questions, answers and collective identities in a TV debate

I will deal with some sequences of a Swiss TV debate about a referendum on genetic engineering. I will focus on the first round of the debate, where the host tries to achieve a kind of first approach to the configuration of the debate (i.e. what is at stake, who's on which side, etc.). I will try to show that 1) this configuration is strongly bipolar and asymmetrical, in that one camp is categorised as moderate and the other as radical. 2) This configuration determines the development of the speech exchange, through the differential designs of the questions that are asked to panellists of both camps. 3) The configuration is not only oriented to by the respondents but it is also actively worked upon in order to modify it. Through that complex interactive process, political affiliations and collective identities are elaborated.

I will focus on the long turn taken by a panellist categorised as a member of the Swiss government. More specifically I will describe how he redefines the bipolar and asymmetrical configuration set up by the host. His concern is to make the debate accountable as opposing the national collectivity to a bunch of activists who support the referendum. He specifically discards an account of the debate as a classical left wing vs. right wing struggle. The configuration thus achieved is more than frequent in the Swiss so-called semi-direct democracy, where only one out of ten referendums is accepted. The proposed analysis provides then with an opportunity for a praxiological respecification of classical political topics. In this case, it invites us to respecify the so-called Swiss culture of consensus and its assumed relationship to semi-direct democracy.