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The acid test? Competing theses on the nationality – democracy nexus and the case of Switzerland*

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ABSTRACT. This article deals with the connection between nationality and democracy and explores the role Switzerland plays in the scholarly debate on this question. It identifies three main theses – liberal-nationalist, liberal-multinationalist and liberal-postnationalist – and shows that each of them uses the Swiss case to claim empirical support. It then analyses the connections between nationality and democracy in Switzerland and demonstrates that the country is neither multinational nor postnational, but is best characterised as a mononational state. These findings expose the fallacy of using Switzerland to claim support for either the multinational or the postnational thesis and call for a reconsideration of them. Additionally, they show that “civic nationalism” and “civic republicanism” can be conflated and that a predominantly civic nation is viable and sustainable and is not necessarily an ethnic nation in disguise. The Swiss case thus provides qualified empirical support for the liberal-nationalist thesis.

KEYWORDS: democracy, multinational states, multilingual societies, national identity, nationalism, post-nationalism, Switzerland.

Introduction

Does liberal democracy presuppose the nation? In other words, should we assert that liberal democratic institutions cannot be, or are unlikely to be, stable or enduring unless citizens share a single national identity? This is a long-standing but still unsettled question at the heart of the academic literature on nationalism (Miller 2006: 537) and is a hotly contested topic

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of political debate in many quarters, notably in the context of political integration in Europe.

We can find three main theses on this question in the literature: (a) the liberal-nationalist thesis, which agrees that this is so; (b) the liberal-multi-nationalist thesis, which holds that while people do indeed need a national identity, democracy itself does not require a single nation hence multiple national identities can be accommodated successfully within a single state; and (c) the liberal-postnationalist thesis, which claims that no national identity is needed in order for there to be a stable democracy in a culturally diverse country.

Switzerland plays a prominent role in the debate between these competing theses. It is in fact interesting – and startling – to note that Switzerland is used as an example by advocates of all three theses. Moreover, in some of the accounts the Swiss case occupies a crucial place: very often it is called to provide decisive empirical support for the respective thesis. How is this possible? What would be the proper place of Switzerland in this debate?

This article addresses this question and offers a theoretically informed empirical investigation of the connections between nationality and democracy in Switzerland with the aim of clarifying the elements the Swiss case can legitimately offer to answer the question. We argue that there is hardly any evidence for characterising Switzerland as either multinational or postnational and that the country is best understood as a mononational state. The Swiss experience thus provides qualified empirical support for the liberal-nationalist thesis.

The article proceeds as follows. In the first section we present the three theses that have shaped the debate on the nationality – democracy nexus and we explore the role that the Swiss case plays in each of them. Our aim is briefly to summarise these theses and to highlight how Switzerland has often been used to provide support for them. In the next section, we present the results of our analysis of the Swiss case and show that Switzerland is best understood as mononational. We then discuss the theoretical implications of these findings and the contributions they can offer to the debate and conclude with some reflections on their generalisability.

Three competing theses and the role of Switzerland

This debate is anything but new. Its roots can be traced back at least to John Stuart Mill and Lord Acton in the 1860s. Mill is commonly cited as the founding father of the liberal-nationalist thesis. He argued that democracy can be achieved only in the presence of a single nation for ‘free institutions are next to impossible in a country made up of different nationalities’ (Mill 1977: 547). In the first half of the twentieth century, Mill’s thesis was widely shared among the European and American intellectual elite and found its most prominent application in Woodrow Wilson’s use of the concept of ‘national

self-determination' at the end of World War I. At that time, Ernest Barker was one of the most prominent advocates of such a thesis. He claimed that it was a lesson of history that 'democratic, multination states could not survive' (quoted in Connor 1994: 12). Accordingly, he held the view that only authoritarian regimes could be multinational.

In recent years, the liberal-nationalist thesis has been advanced by, among others, Barry (1999), Canovan (1996), Miller (1995) and Schnapper (1994). For Barry (1999: 53), for example, (civic) nationalism is essential for the success of a liberal democratic polity, whereas Schnapper (1994: 279) fears that the weakening of the nation-state might weaken democracy. Both Canovan and Miller emphasise nationality as the precondition for social justice. Thus, Miller argues that 'nationality, one might say, is the *appropriate* form of solidarity for societies that are mobile . . . and egalitarian' (Miller 1995: 184, emphasis in original).

To be sure, none of these scholars endorses the 'ethnic' version of nationalism or national identity. (Precisely for this reason we call their thesis liberal-nationalist.) However, their thesis leaves open the question of how a national identity is meant to be forged, especially in relation, for instance, to language. While for some, such as Barry (1999: 56), a 'sense of common nationhood requires . . . that the overwhelming majority of the inhabitants must speak the same language' (see also Schnapper 2004); others, such as Mill (1977: 546–7), Kohn (1956) and Miller (1995: 93, 122, 189), accept that although nations are generally likely to share a common language, a single multilingual nation is possible.

Acton can be considered Mill's liberal-multinationalist counterpart. He claimed that civilisation and liberty prosper better in multinational states for 'liberty provokes diversity, and diversity preserves liberty by supplying the means of organisation', hence 'the combination of different nations in one State is as necessary a condition of civilised life as the combination of men in society' (Dalberg-Acton 1907: 289–90). According to Massey, the strength of Acton's case for the multinational state rests on a threefold argument: 'multinationality upholds liberalism, provides the opportunity for the advancement of backward groups, and makes possible a certain amount of miscegenation which may rejuvenate a race' (Massey 1969: 502). Acton supported the views of the Hungarian writer and politician József von Eötvös, who argued in favour of Hungary's autonomy, not independence, within the Habsburg Empire (Lang 2002: 145). The Austro-Marxists Karl Renner and Otto Bauer, but also British scholars such as Alfred Zimmern or Alfred Cobban, are usually considered as defenders of Acton's thesis shortly before and after World War I (see Schnapper 1994: 110; Kymlicka 1995: 53).

More recently, the liberal-multinationalist thesis has been defended by scholars such as Kymlicka (1995, 2007), Keating (2001), Requejo (2005) and McGarry and O'Leary (2007), who have argued in favour of adopting specific institutional devices to acknowledge the fact that most states are in fact multinational. Four main institutional features have been identified as either descriptive of a state functioning as multinational and/or that should normatively be adopted to accommodate multinationalism. First, assuming

the state is federal, the federated units are 'ethno-cultural' rather than 'historical' or 'functional', i.e. they are designed to coincide as much as possible with ethno-cultural boundaries (e.g. Kymlicka 2001: 101, 2007: 20). Second, on the assumption that one or more of its ethno-cultural units are inhabited by minority nation(s), the system is asymmetrical, i.e. it should grant special powers to the unit(s) in question, in order to accommodate its (or their) national status (e.g. Gagnon 2001; Keating 2001; Kymlicka 2001: 104; Watts 2007: 236). Third, the minority nation(s) has (or have) special representation in the central state institutions, typically through over-representation in the federal parliament and power-sharing in the federal executive (e.g. Kymlicka 1995; Keating 2001: 119–23; McGarry and O'Leary 2007: 198–9; Watts 2007: 240–2). Fourth, such minority nation(s) are or should be officially and explicitly recognised as such in the constitutional practice of the state (e.g. Kymlicka 1998: 132; Keating 2001: 112–3; Tierney 2004: 235).

Finally, the liberal-postnational thesis has been developed only recently, even though it is sometimes claimed that its origins can be traced back to Immanuel Kant's cosmopolitanism. Habermas, Mason and Abizadeh are among its most prominent advocates. Habermas (1996: 500) has done the most to popularise the concept of 'constitutional patriotism', based on the principle that 'democratic citizenship need not be rooted in the national identity of a people'. Mason postulates that stable liberal institutions 'can be secured in the absence of a shared national identity' provided that citizens possess a 'sense of belonging to their polity' (Mason 2000: 115–6) (as opposed to a 'sense of belonging together', which we take to be close to the concept of a shared national identity). He argues that Belgium, Switzerland and the USA are three empirical cases of stable liberal democracies legitimised by a postnational sense of belonging to the polity despite their cultural heterogeneity. Abizadeh follows Mason in arguing that 'identity might center upon a shared set of political institutions' (Abizadeh 2002: 507–8) and rejects the notion that a 'shared national public culture' is necessary to sustain democracy. Moreover, he argues that a civic nation is unsustainable and must inevitably collapse into an ethnic nation because 'it is ethnicity, and not the nation *per se*, that provides motivational power . . . a civic nation as such lacks any affective content at all. It is a body without a soul. A form without content' (Abizadeh 2004: 237–8).

Switzerland in liberal-nationalist accounts

For Mill, Switzerland is an exception to the rule because it has 'a strong sentiment of nationality, though the cantons are of different races, different languages, and different religions' (Mill 1977: 546). Another famous liberal-nationalist of the late nineteenth century, Renan, cited Switzerland as the most powerful example of the fact that nationality is a voluntary 'daily plebiscite' rather than being dictated by ethnicity (Renan 1947: 893). In the post-war period Kohn argued that the Swiss, despite their ethnic and linguistic diversity, developed a liberal nationalism 'made secure and strong by its insistence on

individual liberty and on respect for diversity' (Kohn 1956: 8). For Canovan, Switzerland belongs to contemporary societies that are 'clearly nations', even though 'they have been formed from ethnic groups that are still distinguishable' (Canovan 1996: 57). For her the Swiss 'segments', i.e. ethnic groups, are the German, French, Italian and Romansh speakers. Miller argues that 'the Swiss today share a common national identity *as Swiss* over and above their separate linguistic, religious and cantonal identities' (Miller 1995: 94–5, emphasis in original). However, we shall observe that other liberal-nationalist authors, such as Barry (1999), do not mention the Swiss case at all.

Switzerland in liberal-multinationalist accounts

In Acton's essay *On Nationality*, which is generally considered to be a 'plea for a multinational state . . . based on a recognition of the value of federalism' (Massey 1969: 505), Switzerland has the role of the favourite example of a state that combines an overarching political identity with ethno-cultural diversity: the 'Swiss are ethnologically either French, Italian, or German; but no nationality has the slightest claim upon them, except the purely political nationality of Switzerland (Dalberg-Acton 1907: 294–5). His Hungarian friend József von Eötvös also saw Switzerland, together with the USA and Belgium, as a country in which 'different nationalities live in peace one next to each other' (von Eötvös 1865: 149). In a passage of his book *Nationalitäten-Frage*, he quoted an anonymous author who said that 'in the praxis' we can find no country, 'with the exception of Switzerland', in which 'one nationality has not ruled over the other(s)' ('*wo sich in der Praxis nicht eine gewisse Nationalität zur Herrschaft emporgeschwungen hätte*') (von Eötvös 1865: 99). Almost eighty years later Karl Renner also used Switzerland as a living example of a 'multinational state' ('*Vielvölkerstaat*') that had survived through centuries and in which 'all three nations' ('*alle drei Nationen*') participated on an 'equal footing in the common polity' ('*gleiche Anteilnahme . . . am staatlichen Wesen*') (Renner 1964: 89). And Zimmern, in his *Prospects of Democracy*, defined Switzerland as a 'tri-national' state (Zimmern 1929: 89).

More recently, Switzerland has featured prominently in Kymlicka's work on multiculturalism. Arguably, it is his only example of a successful and stable multinational state. For this author, in fact, Switzerland is 'the most multinational country' (Kymlicka 1995: 18). Echoing the anonymous author quoted by von Eötvös, Kymlicka praises Switzerland for being the 'only exception' to the pattern by which virtually every Western democracy 'has sought to define itself as a mono-national state' (Kymlicka 2007: 18). McGarry and O'Leary (2007) describe Switzerland as the first 'multinational federation' in the world (181) and as an 'ethno-federation' (197). Thus for these authors Switzerland provides empirical support to the multinationalist thesis although others, such as Tierney (2004), make no reference at all to the Swiss case. It is unclear whether this is because Switzerland sits awkwardly with their thesis or because they accept that it is indeed not multinational.

Switzerland in liberal-postnationalist accounts

Both Habermas and Mason use Switzerland as their favourite example of ‘constitutional patriotism’ (Habermas 1996: 507) or sense of ‘belonging to a polity’ (Mason 2000: 130) while Abizadeh is more implicit than explicit in using Switzerland as an example of ‘postnational’ state (Abizadeh 2002: 498). However, both Mason and Abizadeh squarely reject the notion that there exists a Swiss national identity. According to Abizadeh, Switzerland is a democracy ‘lacking a single, overarching national public culture’ and ‘*even if it were true that . . . the Swiss shared some sort of thin national public culture, this “thin” culture could not do the work that civic-territorial nationalists like Miller demand of it . . . Whatever this putatively shared . . . Swiss national public culture is supposed to consist in, it is difficult to see how it could serve to distinguish the . . . Swiss “nation” from a host of other liberal democratic “nations”*’ (Abizadeh 2002: 498).

Let us sum up. There is much confusion concerning the lessons that can be drawn from Switzerland to shed light on the nexus between nationality and democracy.¹ It is obviously problematic that this country is used as one of the main supporting examples by all three, inherently contradictory, theses. While to an extent this may be because of an enduring terminological ambiguity in the literature on nationalism,² we fear that the main reason might simply be the insufficient or superficial knowledge of Swiss institutions, history, society or culture(s).³

Hence, in what follows we try to provide a fuller account of the connections between nationality and democracy in Switzerland in light of the three theses we have identified. The analysis is conducted by testing the multinational and postnational hypotheses against the available empirical evidence and in relation to the ‘null hypothesis’ that Switzerland is a mononational state and that its democracy is underpinned by the existence of such a single Swiss nationality.⁴ Our working definition of nation follows Tully’s: ‘nations are, or aspire to be, recognised as self-governing peoples with the right of self-determination as this is understood in international law and democratic theory’ (Tully 2001: 2). We divide the discussion of the evidence into four parts: historical, institutional, attitudinal and behavioural. Each section shows that Switzerland is neither multinational nor postnational and that it is best characterised as a mononational state.

Nationality and democracy in Switzerland

Historical aspects

Six main aspects of Switzerland’s historical experience are relevant for the purpose of the analysis conducted here.

First, a sense of distinctively Swiss political identity predated the age of nationalism and the unification of the country in 1848. It first emerged in the writings of fifteenth-century humanist chroniclers and during the eighteenth

century it acquired a national character and, indeed, fuelled a nationalist movement among the elites (de Capitani 1983: 153; Zimmer 2003: 19, 55–65).

Second, this emergent nationalism was centred on the historical memory of the foundation and development of the confederation and took for granted the multilingual character of the nation. It stressed the common past of the cantons and the bonds uniting them beyond the diversity of language and religion. In other words, it was already in its early manifestation and somewhat *ante litteram* predominantly “civic” or multicultural rather than “ethnic” or monocultural.⁵ Accordingly, nationalists in this phase came not only from the Protestant and German-speaking hegemonic group but also from the linguistic and religious minorities (Kohn 1956: 26; de Capitani 1983: 153–5; Zimmer 2003: 49). This emergent Swiss nationalism was given its first institutional framework in the Helvetic Republic – the regime imposed by revolutionary France in the period 1798–1803 – which was explicitly based on the idea of a single but multilingual Swiss nation and found its clearest manifestation in the field of education (Bonjour et al. 1952: 226–7; Kohn 1956: 45; de Capitani 1983: 162–3; Lerner 2004: 74). The fact that the Republic failed to survive the retreat of France should not be interpreted as a result of multinational pressures: opposition to it cut across linguistic lines and was rooted primarily in the defence of local and cantonal autonomy rather than ethno-linguistic factors.

Third, the nationalist crescendo of the period 1815–48 and the conflicts it triggered were not a contest between Swiss proto-state nationalism and rival ethno-linguistic nationalisms. French and Italian speakers were fully represented in the Radical movement focused on the creation of a Swiss national state and those who opposed it did so primarily in the name of cantonal sovereignty not of ethno-linguistic nationalism (Bonjour et al. 1952: 260; Kriesi 1999: 14; Zimmer 2003: 149, 152). Nor was the defence of cantonal sovereignty itself, moreover, rooted in a nationalist conception. Although some isolated voices did conceive of their canton in quasi-national terms, most of the conservative voices who rose against the idea of Swiss nationalism subscribed to pre-modern conceptions of political legitimacy and rejected the idea of national sovereignty *tout court*.

Fourth, the 1848 constitutional settlement closely mirrored the nature of the conflict that preceded it. It was the product of a single nationalist movement and it was plainly not informed by ‘ethno-federalism’. In spite of the letter of its first article,⁶ the document was unquestionably the act of a single sovereign people not a compact between states or between twenty-two sovereign peoples (see, among others, Bonjour *et al.* 1952: 269). The anachronistic language of the constitution was part of the strategy of “appeasement” vis-à-vis the losers of the 1847 civil war. The continued use of the term “confederation” in the official designation of the state as well as other elements – such as the national day, which commemorates the founding of the old confederation rather than of the federal state – intended to stress symbolic continuity rather than rupture with the pre-1848 past. A significant

number of cantons voted against the new constitution either in the Diet or/and in the ratification process, yet ultimately accepted it as the expression of the 'national will' (Aubert 1974: 27–8). The cantons were retained as the constitutive units of the new federal state and no attempt to redesign their boundaries to make them coincide with ethno-linguistic patterns took place. Furthermore, no institutional structure of any kind exclusive to a language community was set up.

Fifth, even when ethno-linguistic nationalism in neighbouring countries posed a mounting challenge from the 1870s onwards, the conception of Switzerland as a single multilingual civic nation survived and no significant ethno-linguistic nationalisms emerged. Some German-speaking Swiss rejected the notion of a Swiss nation and subscribed to the idea of a pan-German ethno-linguistic nation (Kohn 1956: 81, 89–95, 121–6), yet this remained a very marginal view in the face of widening and deepening mass collective identification with Switzerland, not least as a result of the state-led nationalism pursued by the federal authorities. The growing appeal of ethno-linguistic nationalism came to a head in World War I and its aftermath when significant tensions emerged between the language communities, notably with regard to relations with the belligerent powers (Bonjour et al. 1952: 344–5; Jost 1983: 94–5, 122–4). The campaign for the ratification of the League of Nations treaty and the subsequent referendum exposed linguistic divisions to the full.⁷ Remarkably, however, even at the highest point in the ascendancy of ethno-linguistic nationalism throughout Europe and in the very difficult circumstances of the war, no ethno-linguistic nationalisms emerged in Switzerland.

Lastly, the rise of the Jurassian movement in the 1960s and 1970s might superficially be interpreted as the late emergence of ethno-linguistic nationalism and the creation of canton Jura in 1979 as the first step in the direction of multinational ethno-federalism. However, a closer examination of the Jura conflict does not lend support to such interpretations. The creation of the new canton was not an instance of ethno-federalism because the southern part of the Jura democratically decided to remain within canton Berne. The conflict was determined by religious and economic factors as much as, if not more than, linguistic ones. The southern Jura, opposed to separation from Berne, shared the French language with the separatist north but was predominantly Protestant, as the rest of canton Berne, and perceived itself to be less economically deprived (McRae 1983: 201–8). Moreover, despite its sometimes ethno-linguistic discourse and confrontational strategy, the Jurassian movement never succeeded in making its cause a wider cause of all *Suisse romands*: the conflict remained localised and no French-speaking nationalism emerged as a result. Likewise, no significant movement in favour of redesigning Swiss federalism along ethno-linguistic lines emerged.

As the historical evidence reviewed in this section shows, there is no empirical support at all for the thesis that Switzerland developed as a federation of language groups nor that the latter conceived of themselves as

ethno-linguistic nations at any point in Swiss history. On the contrary, the evidence points unambiguously to Switzerland's mononational character, to the political nature of its nationality and to the latter's importance in legitimising the creation of a democratic Swiss state and in maintaining such legitimacy in the face of severe challenges.

Institutional aspects

If we move away from history and focus on the contemporary institutional dimension, it is instructive to consider the extent to which Switzerland's institutional architecture conforms to the characteristics of a multinational state, as defined by its advocates.

As already pointed out, the component units of the Swiss federation were never designed according to ethno-linguistic criteria. While most of the cantons are monolingual, three of them are bilingual and one is trilingual. The boundaries of the language communities are not coterminous with cantonal borders, save for the tiny Romansh community who live within the Grisons. Most of the cantons are ancient entities while others were formed in the nineteenth century and one in the twentieth century, but none of them was created by primarily ethno-linguistic factors, including, as seen earlier, canton Jura. The six so-called half cantons, the product of splits in previously 'whole' cantons, also emerged as a result of religious and political, not ethno-linguistic, conflicts. The cantons cannot thus be described as ethnic entities *ergo* nor can the Swiss federation be labelled an ethno-federation.

The cantons all enjoy the same prerogatives under the federal constitution, with the minor exception of the former half cantons.⁸ The cantons inhabited by the language minorities do not have any special rights compared to the German-speaking ones. Switzerland thus falls in the category of the symmetrical federation and therefore does not conform to the prescriptions put forward by advocates of the multinational state. Under the symmetrical federalism model, each canton has two seats in the Council of States (the upper house of the federal parliament), regardless of population. While this constitutional mechanism over-represents the populations of the small cantons, it does not provide over-representation for the minority language communities as most of these cantons are German-speaking. The linguistic composition of the Council of States barely differs from that of the National Council, the proportionately elected lower house: German speakers hold over 70 per cent of seats in both chambers. In other words, and taking into account the equal powers of the two chambers under Switzerland's perfect bicameralism,⁹ the linguistic pattern of representation in the upper house reinforces the dominant (numerically speaking) position of the largest language community. Moreover, the language communities are not granted any form of veto power, even on matters intimately connected to their status such as linguistic legislation. A largely similar pattern applies to the federal executive, where the minority-language communities have no guaranteed representation.

While the institutional practice has been to have at least two non-German-speaking ministers out of seven, this is neither a formal right nor does it extend to the Italian-speaking community, not to mention the Romansh-speaking one.¹⁰ Indeed, there has not been an Italian speaker in the government for almost half of the time since 1848 while on occasion the number of French speakers has been reduced to one. Rather than stipulating formal quotas, the Swiss have thus followed informal, indirect and/or implicit patterns in order to ensure fair representation of the language communities, based on a general commitment to favour minorities (Steiner 2009: 199; Stojanović 2008).

Lastly, the Swiss language communities are not recognised as nations or as the component units of the federation either in the constitution or in ordinary law. The concept of nation and its related terminology is strictly reserved for the country as a whole and has never been applied to other bodies. As article 1 of the current federal constitution makes clear, the component units of the federation are the Swiss people and the cantons, not the language communities. The latter do not even enjoy any recognition as a language-defined corporate entity, and are not entitled to any collective right at such.¹¹ Moreover, they do not possess any political or administrative structure of their own – save for state-funded television and radio channels – and until the 1990s even the terms ‘linguistic minority’ or ‘linguistic community’ were completely absent from the Swiss constitution and other legal documents (Coray 2004: 267–70, 287–90).

It is thus clear that none of the institutional features defining a multinational state can be found in Switzerland. The Swiss federal state was created as a historical-territorial, symmetrical, mononational federation in the nineteenth century and still displays these fundamental characteristics in the twenty-first century. The consensual and ‘proportional’ features of its institutional practice are primarily due to the effects of direct democracy (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008: 66) as well as the linguistic, religious and territorial diversity of the country rather than to multinationalism.

Attitudinal aspects

Given Switzerland’s multilingualism and the federal nature of the country’s political architecture, it should not be surprising that its citizens have complex patterns of collective political identification. In addition to identifying themselves with the country as a whole, the Swiss also typically feel allegiance to their municipality and canton of origin/residence and to one of the language communities. While the coexistence of multiple identities often leads observers to consider the country as multinational, a closer examination of how they relate to each other and of the hierarchy between them shows that only one of these identities has a national character.

Comparing identification with the language communities and the cantons with identification with Switzerland as a whole, the latter clearly takes

precedence. Both German and French speakers identify primarily with the Swiss nation and only secondarily with their language community. Among German speakers, moreover, linguistic identity is even weaker than both communal and cantonal identities. In other words, a German speaker typically feels first and foremost Swiss, secondly a citizen of her/his commune, thirdly a citizen of her/his canton and only lastly a member of the German-speaking community.¹² Even among French speakers, identification with the *Suisse romande* is clearly subordinate to identification with Switzerland and is no stronger than identification with the canton and the commune (Schmid 1981: 96–8; Kriesi et al. 1996: 55–7; also Meune 2008: 8–9). Although in some individual cantons, for a complex set of reasons, identification with the canton appears to be as strong as identification with Switzerland, the former is not in opposition to the latter.¹³ More generally, the relationship between cantonal and ‘federal’ identities should be seen as a case of nested rather than rival identities (Miller 2001: 301–7), as it transpires, for instance, from school textbooks (Schmid 1981: 79–80). Primary allegiance to the country as a whole is further underscored by the fact that a clear majority in all three language communities, with minimum variation between them, feel ‘strongly attached’ or ‘very strongly attached’ to Switzerland and that by and large, cross-language bonds (i.e. between the language communities within Switzerland) are stronger than cross-border bonds (i.e. between the Swiss language communities and their larger ‘sisters’ in Germany, France and Italy) (McRae 1983: 96; Kriesi et al. 1996: 58–62). It is thus not surprising that relations between the language communities are overwhelmingly perceived to be non-problematic (Schmid 1981: 111; Kriesi et al. 1996: 55–7; Meune 2008: 13) and that political culture as well as the interpretation of Swiss history and of its “myths” are highly homogenous across the linguistic divides (Schmid 1981: 71–82; Kriesi et al. 1996: 53, 76, 15–9; Fleiner 2002: 102).

Most Swiss citizens thus identify primarily with a single Swiss nation and conceive only the Swiss community as a whole in national terms. They think of the Swiss nation as being made up of three – or four – cultural-linguistic communities who want to live together and share a “national character” in terms of historical experiences and political culture. In other words, they construe it both as a *Willensnation*, or nation by will, and as a *Wesensnation*, or nation by character. While the official discourse of the Swiss authorities regularly – and proudly – stresses the *Willensnation* aspect of Switzerland and its ‘four languages and cultures’, its alter ego is equally important. This is particularly the case at present when, after two decades of relentless growth of the Swiss People’s Party, one-third of voters seem to subscribe to the ‘organic’ and quasi-ethnic version of nationalism it voices.¹⁴ However, this is directed mainly towards immigrants and external influences in general and does not contest the autochthonous multiplicity of languages and cultures. It is clear that the multilingual and multicultural Swiss nation is thought of as being bound together by much more than just constitutional patriotism. The common political culture and shared historical memories that sustain the

Swiss national identity are reflected in, and give meaning to, Switzerland's constitution and its institutions but are not generated by them.

Behavioural aspects

The picture painted by the attitudinal aspects outlined earlier is confirmed by a range of behavioural indicators. Seven are particularly important for our purposes here. First, the terms nation and national are virtually never used with reference to a language community and are reserved for the country as a whole. Second, no language community has ever demanded either a veto on constitutional change – let alone on ordinary legislation – or greater asymmetry within the federal system. Third, no significant secessionist movement, based on either a language community or a canton, exists. Indeed, taking into account the limited following of a Ticinese movement in the first half of the twentieth century (Kohn 1956: 122; McRae 1983: 214) and even smaller organisations in Geneva in the 1980s (Knüsel and Hottinger 1994: 7, 9), one can say that there have never been secessionist movements in Switzerland. Even the militant wing of the *Mouvement jurassien* in the 1960s and 1970s never seriously contemplated a secession of either the Jura or the *Suisse romande* as a whole to join France or become independent (McRae 1983: 169; Knüsel and Hottinger 1994: 6). Fourth, significant regionalist movements, notably in French-speaking Switzerland, are also absent. Some *Suisse-romande*-wide regionalist parties and pressure groups have been active in the post-World War II period but have received little or no support (Knüsel and Hottinger 1994: 8; Tourret 1999: 408–9). The merger of Vaud and Geneva, the two most populous French-speaking cantons – which could have been a stepping stone towards *Suisse-romande*-wide institutions – was likewise resoundingly rejected in referendums in 2002 (Kriesi and Trechsel 2008: 47). What may superficially appear as indeed a case of linguistic/cantonal regionalism – the *Lega dei Ticinesi* – is actually a phenomenon of cantonal populism with no significant autonomist demands vis-à-vis Berne (Knüsel and Hottinger 1994: 26–31; Albertazzi 2006). This is in spite of the fact, already mentioned, that Italian speakers have not been represented in the federal government for almost half of the time since 1848. On the contrary, fifth, the rise of the new-style Swiss People's Party is a further powerful demonstration of the mononational character of Switzerland. Instead of alienating French and Italian speakers, it has actually brought them closer to German speakers in voting behaviour. Long-term trends confirm that voting patterns in elections and referendums have become more similar across cantonal and linguistic boundaries over time and that, as a result, Swiss politics is now more “national” in character than ever before (Kriesi et al. 1996: 28; Kriesi and Trechsel 2008: 93–7). Even in the area of European policy, which many observers (e.g. Kriesi 1999: 20–1; Steiner 2002: 114–9) feared would produce a growing divide between the language communities after the European Economic Area referendum in 1992, more recent

popular votes have shown that attitudes and voting patterns have converged considerably and that the linguistic cleavage is less salient than other cleavages, *in primis* the urban–rural one. Sixth, it is telling that recent proposals put forward to deal with excessive cantonal fragmentation advocate creating functional regions rather than giving institutional existence and policy-making competences to the language communities (Blöchlinger 2005; Frey et al. 2006). Likewise, the debate on the reform of the Council of States has focused on whether larger cantons should have more seats and on how metropolitan areas could be represented, not on whether language minorities should be over-represented (Vatter 2004: 79–80). This shows that the debate on the reform of Swiss federalism is shaped by issues of efficiency and democracy rather than by accommodation of minority nationalism. Lastly, behavioural data provide additional support for rejecting the characterisation of Swiss national identity as a form of constitutional patriotism. The 1874 constitution had been amended around 140 times when it was replaced in 1999 (Fleiner 2002: 98), and only thirty-six per cent of the electorate bothered to vote in the referendum to approve the current constitution.¹⁵

In sum, historical, institutional, attitudinal and behavioural elements all point unambiguously towards a rejection of the hypotheses that Switzerland is either multinational or postnational. On the contrary, there is overwhelming support for the contention that the country is mononational in spite of its linguistic diversity and that such multilingual mononationalism is the essential underpinning of Swiss democracy.

Discussion

These findings have four main consequences for the debate on the connection between nationality and democracy.

First, the use of the Swiss case to provide empirical support for the advocacy of multinational democracy is exposed as a fallacy. As the preceding sections showed, there is a fundamental inconsistency at the heart of the multinational democracy thesis. On the one hand, some of its most prominent advocates use Switzerland as a crucial case to claim empirical support for the thesis that multinational states can be democratic and successful. On the other hand, they advance a set of institutional recommendations said to be necessary to bring a thriving multinational democracy into being. However, when the architecture of the Swiss state is analysed in the light of these institutional features, it is clear that the country does not match the normative multinational democracy model. Moreover, when one looks at the nature of Swiss society itself in some depth, it is equally clear that Switzerland is a mononational rather than a multinational state. The crucial empirical case invoked by multinationalist theorists is thus neither in accordance with the normative prescriptions of the thesis nor, in fact, multinational. On the contrary, the opposite interpretation to the one advanced by the multi-

nationalists has a great deal of plausibility. Namely that Switzerland has been democratic and successful in spite of its diversity precisely because its citizens stemming from different language communities have never thought of themselves as members of distinct nations nor have ever been recognised as such by the state. The Swiss route to success has been through a rejection rather than an embrace of multinationalism. While this deprives the multinational thesis of its most powerful piece of empirical corroboration, it does not invalidate it altogether: it might well be the case that it is the least problematic model when it comes to governing genuine multinational states. However, what the Swiss experience does show is that it is possible for several language communities to preserve and develop their individuality within a single nation and thus that ethno-linguistic nationalist mobilisation is not inevitable in multilingual societies, even where these language communities are territorially concentrated.¹⁶

Second, they highlight that the use of the Swiss case to claim empirical support for the postnational thesis is equally fallacious. The evidence clearly indicates that Switzerland is not a political system legitimised by constitutional patriotism only. A sense of a Swiss national community in all its manifestations played a crucial part in the creation of the federal state in the nineteenth century and still provides the fundamental underpinning of Swiss democracy and of the legitimacy of the Swiss state today. However “thin” it might be, Swiss political culture has not only been the main element providing the Swiss with a sense of distinctiveness vis-à-vis their neighbours sharing their languages and other cultural traits but it has actually been “thick” enough to sustain a single national identity and provide legitimacy to a single democratic state. While this, again, does not invalidate the postnational model *per se*, it does deprive it of its main piece of empirical support and it forces the model to rest on theoretical plausibility only.

Third, they show that the sharp distinction Abizadeh draws between what he calls ‘civic nationalism’ and ‘civic republicanism’ (Abizadeh 2002: 497) – the latter associated with the work of Viroli (1995) – is a largely spurious one. According to Abizadeh, both appeal to a community living on a given territory and the key distinction between them is that the latter focuses on “history” whereas the former emphasises “shared culture”. However, it is clear that “history” does not generate affective identification with a community or loyalty to a political system by itself – only a particular interpretation of that history does. It is not historical events *per se* that matter but the meaning given to them. It is a largely common interpretation of history and the meaning given to it by a narrative based on that interpretation that provides the basis for a feeling of “belonging together”, which is a common element to both “civic nationalism” and “civic republicanism”. That is why historiography is so important to the emergence of a national identity. A different interpretation of historical experiences, in contrast, is typically one of the seeds from which a different national identity emerges.¹⁷ Dichotomising the contrast between “history” and “culture” is thus flawed. Historical

experiences – through a particular interpretive filter and related narrative – generate a body of beliefs, principles, symbols and values that are essentially cultural and shape the political culture of a community to a large extent. A “shared interpretation of history” is thus an element of common culture possessed by a given community and can only be distinguished from a “thicker” shared culture on the grounds of degree not kind. It follows that both ‘civic republicanism’ and ‘civic nationalism’ are sub-species of the genus ‘cultural nationalism’ and as such, *contra* Abizadeh, are closer to each other than the latter is to ethnic nationalism because both appeal to cultural markers as opposed to ethnic markers.

Fourth, they indicate that a predominantly civic nation is viable and sustainable and does not necessarily collapse into an ethnic nation. Abizadeh’s claim to that effect is based mainly on a particular understanding of “myths of descent” that is unwarranted either theoretically or empirically. Nations perform their legitimising role vis-à-vis political systems because they embody a collective national identity. In turn, a national identity, like all identities, is shaped by experiences that over time coalesce into a memory, what “civic republicans” *à la* Viroli call “history”. If we then understand “myths of descent” to mean a shared narrative of such a memory (i.e. where the political culture binding the nation comes from), such narrative can be civic instead of ethnic. A civic narrative needs a shared interpretation of historical experiences – hence a degree of common culture – but does not need a single ethnic culture and myths of genealogical descent. The fact that the national narrative has often taken the form of ethnic myths of descent reflects the prevailing circumstances in many empirical cases of nationalism but does not imply that the latter is a functional requirement of the former. The Swiss case demonstrates that a civic narrative ‘transcending ethnic particularity’, in Abizadeh’s (2004: 233) words, is possible and is able to generate “affective ties” strong enough to legitimise a sovereign democratic political system. Most Swiss citizens across linguistic boundaries are attached to the Swiss federal state because they see it as giving constitutional form to the single primarily civic Swiss community to which they are all affectively tied, not merely because its institutions conform to ‘rationally defensible principles’ (Abizadeh 2004: 239). The fact that a predominantly civic nationalism can perform its functional role is thus both theoretically plausible and empirically supported by Switzerland’s experience hence we can accept what Abizadeh (2004) calls the ‘functionalist’ argument while rejecting his ‘ethnic core’ argument.

Conclusions

The nexus between nationality and democracy has been debated among scholars and in society at large for a long time, but it is still an unsettled

question. Its relevance to contemporary politics is arguably greater than it has ever been, not least in the context of the debate on regional integration in Europe and beyond. Three main theses can be identified in this debate and Switzerland features prominently in it, because authors belonging to all three schools of thought make use of the Swiss case to try to provide empirical support for their – inherently contradictory – theses. This stands in sharp contrast to the fact that systematic theoretically informed investigations of the connections between nationality and democracy in Switzerland are surprisingly few and far-between. By analysing the Swiss case we have thus sought to identify evidence that could corroborate either one or the other of the competing theoretical theses.

Our analysis shows that the Swiss case supports neither the multinational nor the postnational theses. When looked at “in the Swiss mirror”, both theses lose the key empirical support they claim to have and reveal the depth of the theoretical tensions they harbour. The Swiss experience shows, in contrast, that several linguistic communities can coexist within a single nation based on a degree of shared political culture while preserving and developing their cultural distinctiveness in other spheres. This in turn shows that a predominantly civic nationalism does not have to be a masked version of ethnic nationalism but can, under certain conditions, essentially be conflated with civic republicanism. On the other hand, this form of nationalism clearly needs a thicker form of affective identification with a national community than merely acceptance of “rationally legitimised” institutions. The evidence from the Swiss case thus provides qualified support for the liberal-nationalist model and points to its enduring vitality in the context of increasingly culturally mixed political systems. This seems to provide some hope for the accommodation of “ethnic” conflicts in many countries but it does cast a doubt on the feasibility of democracy in an explicitly multinational setting such as the European Union, let alone on a global scale.

However, while we believe these findings to be of considerable theoretical, as well as normative, importance, one must be cautious in drawing sweeping generalisations from Switzerland’s experience. It almost goes without saying that the Swiss model of nationality is the product of a highly complex and rather unusual set of geographical, linguistic, historical, attitudinal and political factors and its direct applicability to other cases must be assessed carefully rather than simply assumed. Nor should it be overlooked that the internal cohesion of Switzerland has often been maintained through closure towards the rest of the world and that this has, as noted earlier, sometimes led significant portions of the population to conceive the Swiss nation in quasi-ethnic forms, notably in relation to groups and individuals who are perceived as not autochthonous. We would thus like to think of our contribution in this article as a stimulus to other scholars to undertake theoretically informed investigations of the factors highlighted here in other systems. We believe that the study of the nexus between nationality and democracy would benefit greatly from such endeavours.

Notes

1 Switzerland is also central to the wider literature on nationalism *tout court* as is well exemplified by the recent debate between Connor (2005) and Smith (2005).

2 As our review shows, the terms 'nation' and its cognates are used by different authors to refer to a range of very different underlying realities. While at one extreme some use it as a synonym for an ethnic group, others use it to refer to a community bound solely by loyalty to a political system that would be essentially indistinguishable from the form of political community advocated by postnationalists. Exploring this ambiguity is beyond the scope of this article but we think it is important to highlight it here.

3 It is probably more than a simple coincidence that most authors we have mentioned so far – e.g. Miller (1995), Canovan (1996), Mason (2000), Schnapper (1994) – refer to Switzerland by relying only on one, occasionally two, sources. Kymlicka (1995) cites no source at all in reference to Switzerland.

4 Most of those who label Switzerland multinational do so on the understanding that the Swiss language communities are nations and it is this conceptualisation of multinationalism that we use here.

5 We are aware of the contested nature of the terms 'civic nation' and 'ethnic nation' – see for instance the recent discussion in Helbling (2008: 41–5) – but we believe that, employed as points on a continuum rather than discrete categories, they are useful labels to describe different forms of nationality.

6 'The peoples of the twenty-two sovereign cantons of Switzerland, united by the present alliance, i.e. Zurich . . . and Geneva, together form the Swiss Confederation.' (Authors' translation from the French.)

7 This was the first time the Swiss electorate voted on a treaty and the League was endorsed by 85.3 per cent of French speakers but rejected by 54.1 per cent of German speakers (Kriesi et al. 1996: 31).

8 Six cantons – called 'half cantons' until the general revision of the constitution in 1999 – have only one seat in the Council of States (the upper house of the federal parliament), and count for half a vote in the calculation of the cantonal majority in constitutional referendums.

9 The only exceptions are the elections for the Federal Council (the executive) and the Federal Tribunal (the supreme court), when the two chambers sit jointly; hence the forty-six members of the upper house are outweighed by the 200 members of the lower house.

10 True, the current federal constitution (adopted in 1999) states that 'care should be taken that various geographical and language regions be adequately represented in the government' (Art. 175, al. 4 (official translation)). But this provision has no legal force and is largely symbolic. In fact, since 1999 no Italian speaker has been elected to the Federal Council, even though on four occasions (in 1999, 2002, 2003 and 2009) Italian-speaking sections of the major Swiss parties put forward qualified candidates.

11 The fact that the federal constitution recognises four languages and confers certain rights to citizens on that basis should not be taken as indication that it recognises four language communities. Levy (2000: 155), for instance, is wrong in affirming that the federal constitution recognises the Romansh as a *people* when in reality it simply recognises Romansh as a national (and not even fully official!) language of Switzerland.

12 It is important to bear in mind that in most everyday life situations, 'German speakers' do not actually speak standard German, or *Hochdeutsch*, but a variety of dialects.

13 See Kriesi et al. (1996: 55–7) on the case of Ticino, and Meune (2008: 9) on that of Valais.

14 As Wimmer (2002: 238–41) has shown, at other points in time too – notably in the 1930s – an organic, quasi-ethnic conception of the Swiss nation was widespread. The naturalisation laws of certain cantons and municipalities could also be seen as incorporating quasi-ethnic elements (see Helbling 2008).

15 See the online database of the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy (http://www.c2d.ch/detailed_display.php?lname=votes&table=votes&page=1&parent_id=&sublinkname=result-&id=34752) (accessed 27 November 2009).

16 Other well-known cases such as the USA, of course, have long shown that non-territorially concentrated ethnic diversity is not incompatible with mononationality.

17 Contrast, for instance, the significantly different interpretations of Canadian history by English and French speakers in Canada with the largely common interpretations of Swiss history by German and French speakers in Switzerland, as pointed out by Schmid (1981: 79–80).

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