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Switzerland: challenging the big theories of nationalism*

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Traditional accounts of nationalism

In the major theories on European nationalism, Switzerland is typically portrayed as an outlier – a country that does not fit the common categorisations of nations and thus sometimes ends up being ignored – or, alternately, as a prominent example that the advocates of different theories invoke for their own (sometimes divergent) ends. The difficulties of classifying the Swiss case often seem to arise around the subject of its four language regions, and around questions over the extent to which these language regions constitute nations. There is dissent over whether a nation in which different languages are spoken is even possible.

For those who champion subjectivist approaches, Switzerland stands as a nation despite its multilingualism. Hans Kohn (1956) considers Switzerland a case of civic nationalism, where minorities are not excluded and liberal and democratic ideas serve as integrating forces. For Ernest Renan (1947), a common language might facilitate the formation of nations, but it does not guarantee the success of such a project. Indeed, Renan holds that it is the will to live together that is most crucial.

For those who defend objectivist approaches to nationalism, however, multilingualism challenges Switzerland's status as a nation. Some consider a common language to be a sign of a homogeneous culture, and thus place Switzerland in the category of multinational states (Acton 1948; Renner 1964).

For Ernest Gellner (1983), a common language, a standardised education and, more generally, a homogeneous culture are crucial for the functioning of

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industrialised societies. To what extent Switzerland contradicts his theory is not completely clear, though: he barely discusses this case in his work. Similarly, Karl Deutsch (1966) treats the Swiss case only marginally in his *œuvre*, most likely because it would contradict his argument that nationalist movements are linked to the emergence of a space of communication and standardised cultural codes.

Recent debates about Switzerland

Since the early 1990s, there has been a pronounced increase in the number of studies on nations and nationalism. Here, again, Switzerland has been invoked as a key case in works by advocates of different and often opposing views. Those who defend the liberal conception of a (single) nation-state are very keen on citing Switzerland (Canovan 1996; Miller 1995; Schnapper 2004). David Miller (1995: 94–5), for instance, suggests that ‘the Swiss today share a common national identity *as Swiss* over and above their separate linguistic, religious, and cantonal identities’.

On the other side of the table, one finds prominent advocates for multinational states; these thinkers do not hesitate to claim Switzerland for this category (Kellas 1998: 3; Pinder 2007; Requejo 1999: 283, note 31). For Will Kymlicka, Switzerland is ‘the most multinational country’ (Kymlicka 1995: 18); meanwhile, McGarry and O’Leary assert that it is the first ‘multinational federation’ (McGarry and O’Leary 2007: 181).

Finally, Switzerland is also a prominent topic in the recent literature on postnationalism (Abizadeh 2002; Habermas 1991; Mason 2000). Authors working in this field often use the Swiss case to prove that a state does not need citizens who share a single national identity in order to become a stable and functioning democracy of free and equal citizens. For Jürgen Habermas (1991: 15–16), Switzerland thus represents an exemplary case of ‘constitutional patriotism’.

Given the confusion and ambiguity surrounding the Swiss case, it is perhaps no coincidence that some authors prefer simply to ignore it. For example, Walker Connor – an advocate of the multinational state – proposes that one ‘pass over Switzerland as a rule-proving exception attributable to the peculiarities of its size, location, topography, and specific historical circumstances’ (Connor 1994: 12). Jeff Spinner-Halev (2008: 625, note 10), a postnationalist, has deliberately and tacitly decided to disregard Switzerland by simply erasing any reference to this country when quoting Kymlicka (2007: 18).

Inside Switzerland, new studies were undertaken partly in the context of the celebrations of the 700th anniversary of the first core of the Swiss confederacy (in 1991) and of the 150th anniversary of the modern Swiss federation (in 1998) (Altermatt et al. 1998; Kreis 1993; Marchal and Mattioli 1992). These largely historical works investigated the origins and the development of Swiss nationalism, and consider the extent to which Switzerland constitutes an exceptional case.

The contributions in Guy Marchal and Aram Mattioli (1992) come to the conclusion that Switzerland does not constitute a special case, but is instead a regular imagined nation that has been shaped by the emergence of nation-states in Europe. Urs Altermatt *et al.* (1998: 11, 13) claim, in particular, that in Switzerland – as in other European countries – some segments of the population developed a national consciousness well before the nineteenth century, but that the main impulse for nation-building came from the founding fathers of the 1848 federal constitution, whose explicit goal was to consolidate the Swiss national unity and national sentiment through policy centralisation. Oliver Zimmer (2003) shows how the symbolic representation of the Swiss nation was the result of ongoing political struggles between the nation-state and the civil society. He argues that there were indeed different opinions on how to define the Swiss nation in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. All of them, however, accepted the idea of a nation as a central point of reference.

There is disagreement, to a certain extent, over the interpretation of historic developments. Some historians (see Guzzi-Heeb 1998: 132) claim that the creation of a common Swiss national identity can be traced back to the Helvetic Republic (1798–1803), or even earlier (see Zimmer 2003: 55–65). Others, however, believe that the Helvetic Republic also triggered the process of creation and/or consolidation of the cantonal (proto-national) identities (Kreis 1993).

After the historical debates of the 1990s, the 2000s saw political scientists reacting to the treatment of the Swiss example in the contemporary international academic literature on nationhood. Nenad Stojanovic (2000), Francois Grin (2002) and Paolo Dardanelli (2008) have contested the ideas advanced by multinationalist authors like Kymlicka (1995), Michèle Seymour (1999) and Donald Ipperciel (2007) (all working in Canada, interestingly), who suggest that Switzerland is a multinational country. For Dardanelli and Stojanovic (2011: 372), the Swiss experience ‘supports neither the multinational nor the postnational theses’, but rather the idea ‘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’.

Nevertheless, Dardanelli and Stojanovic argue that some portions of the population do possess a ‘quasi-ethnic’ understanding of the Swiss nationhood. This becomes particularly evident, as they point out, in the naturalisation laws and practices at the level of municipalities, where political struggles ‘turn around the questions of how to define the Swiss nation’ (Helbling 2008: 173). While a very liberal conception of nationhood prevails in some municipalities, in others an ethnic understanding of citizenship has emerged. This further emphasises that there is no real consensus on the nature of Swiss nationhood – even among political actors within Switzerland.

New directions to the study of Switzerland and nationalism

The sheer malleability of the Swiss example reveals the degree to which experts have had difficulty identifying the ‘true’ nature of nationhood in this

multilingual country. This lack of consensus not only challenges the big theories of nationalism: it induces researchers to think more thoroughly about what nationalism and nations are, and to consider more carefully the role that the Swiss example can and shall play in these theories. Because of this, the aim of this special section is not only to find an answer to the question of whether Switzerland is a nation-state or a multinational state. More generally, by challenging dominant conceptions of what a nation is, the Swiss case helps us to exceed the limitations imposed by existing definitions, and to open new directions for studying nations.

This notion appears, among others, in Andreas Wimmer's opening contribution: He shows how the reach of networks of political alliances and power structures has made the formation of nationalist movements across language regions possible. In the light of his approach the Swiss puzzle disappears, and more general processes and mechanisms at work in the rise of nationalism and the nation-state come to the fore.

In a similar vein, Antoine Chollet analyses the Swiss case to come to some more general conclusions about nations and nationalism. The fact that Switzerland cannot accurately be described as either a nation or a non-nation reveals, to his mind, some basic characteristics of all nations: their artificiality and the tremendous efforts undertaken to hide this.

By highlighting how Swiss nationalism has been both voluntaristic and organic in nature, Zimmer challenges yet another common categorisation. He argues that organic perceptions in a seemingly diverse country have been made possible through the communal embeddedness of the national(ist) imagination. Because citizenship has been granted mainly at the local level, the municipalities have provided the institutional and cognitive frame through which nationhood has been imagined and defined.

How difficult it is to distinguish mono- and multinationality becomes clear in Karin Reinhardt's contribution, which presents a critique of Kymlicka's theory of multiculturalism. Using a content analysis of the state and sub-state constitutions of Kymlicka's paradigmatic cases - Switzerland and Germany - she demonstrates how such a distinction is difficult to maintain, and how it must thus be approached anew, theoretically as well as empirically.

In contrast to these first four contributions, Ipperciel sees some traces of multinationalism in Switzerland. Proposing a normative definition of nationhood, he characterises a nation as a political entity having the largest possible group of individuals inhabiting a space of public discussion within a state. Such spaces for public discussion are predicated upon the existence of a common public language used by its citizens. On the basis of these assumptions, cantons may be considered small nations - although certain pressures on the boundaries of cantonal public spaces tend to expand these cantonal boundaries to encompass the whole of their related linguistic regions.

In his concluding contribution, Eric Kaufmann summarises where these five contributions concur and disagree and discusses how they provide new perspectives on the nature of nations and nationalism. Discussing

explanations of the ‘Swiss success story’, he concludes that the Swiss case prompts us to question commonly held typologies, concepts and policy solutions.

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