A Swiss anomaly? A relational account of national boundary-making

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ABSTRACT. This article reviews how major theorists of nationalism – from Ernest Renan to Benedict Anderson – have tried to come to grips with the puzzle that Swiss nationalism and the Swiss state present in view of the monoethnic states that surround it. I will argue that this puzzle disappears when assuming a political sociology perspective that highlights the networks of political alliances underlying nationalist movements and the power structure of recently formed nation-states. Studying an 'outlier' case such as Switzerland helps us to gain insight into the general processes and mechanisms at work in the rise of nationalism and the nation-state.

KEYWORDS: associations, civic nationalism, multiethnic nationalism, networks, patriotism, power configuration, Switzerland.

A multiethnic nation and state

The multilinguistic state of Switzerland has puzzled scholars since the beginning of the nineteenth century. Some of the most eminent observers of modern society have found themselves musing over why Switzerland should have survived in the heart of a Europe increasingly composed of homogenous nation-states. For those who saw linguistic and cultural uniformity as a necessary ingredient of nationalism and the nation-state, most prominently Ernest Gellner, Switzerland represents a major nuisance – and they therefore treated it as from the normal course of history. For those such as Max Weber who emphasised shared political history as the fundament of national sentiment, Switzerland was welcomed as crown witness before the tribunal of comparative scholarship.

Before I review how major scholars of nationalism dealt with the Swiss case, some definitional issues need to be addressed. What is Switzerland a case of? Does it represent a multinational state, similar to Belgium or Canada? Or is it best described as a multiethnic nation and state? If we define nationalism as a political project – an attempt to achieve political independence or at least autonomy – then nations are best conceived as (imagined) communities of individuals within which this political project is widely shared. Correspondingly, nation-states can be defined as politically sovereign entities governed in the name of such a nation, rather than God's grace, dynastic succession, or one

kind of imperial universalism or another. If we accept these definitions, it is evident that Switzerland knows only one nation: the Swiss. None of the four language (or ethnic) groups in Switzerland has ever strived for political independence,[1] reunification with a neighbouring state in which their language community represent the dominant majority, or political autonomy within Switzerland (as with French speakers in Quebec). Cantonal borders are not based on language: the French–German language border runs across cantons during most of its course from north to south, and such is also the case for Italian. Berne, Fribourg, the Grisons and the Valais are multilingual cantons.

Never did a single language-based political party of any significance emerge – the attempt to found a *parti romand* was a rather spectacular failure – and no major association seeks to represent the interests of only one of the language groups. Switzerland is therefore best understood as a case of multiethnic nationhood, where the nation is defined as comprising several sub-national, ethnic (or, more precisely, ethno-linguistic) communities (see also Dardanelli and Stojanovic 2011.) Multiethnicity represents a crucial element of Swiss national identity: the fact that different language groups have lived peacefully together under one political roof is a matter of considerable pride for ordinary Swiss, and has also formed the core of official nationalism since its inception in the late nineteenth century.

Switzerland in the light of major theories of nationalism

For Ernest Renan – widely regarded as the first theorist of nationalism – Switzerland offered a welcome example to underwrite his theory of the nation. A shared political history and the will to live together in an independent state, he argued, represented the fundament of nationhood and the nation-state, rather than the common language and descent emphasised by German romanticism and German empire-builders who had just annexed German-speaking Alsace to the Reich. In 1882, he wrote:

Language invites people to unite, but it does not force them to do so. The United States and England, Latin America and Spain, speak the same languages yet do not form single nations. Conversely, Switzerland, so well made, since she was made with the consent of her different parts, numbers three or four languages. There is something in man which is superior to language, namely, the will. The will of Switzerland to be united, in spite of the diversity of her dialects, is a fact of far greater importance than a similitude often obtained by various vexatious measures (Renan 1947: 893).

The multiethnic nationalism of Switzerland also fits into Max Weber's short analysis of nationalism and the nation-state. Similar to his writings about ethnicity and broadly in line with Ernest Renan, Weber relies on the subjective perceptions of individuals to define which communities should count as a nation. In addition to Renan's political will, he pointed at the cultural markers that define the boundaries of the nation. Giving his approach a constructivist bent, he remarked that while these cultural markers are meaningful from the

subjective point of view of members of a nation, they might be quite irrelevant when seen from the outside. Forty years after Renan, he noted:

The Swiss are not a nation if we take as criteria common language or common literature and art. Yet they have a strong sense of community . . . This sense of identity is not only sustained by loyalty toward the body politic but also by what are perceived to be common customs (irrespective of actual differences) . . . The pride of the Swiss in their own distinctiveness, and their willingness to defend it vigorously, is neither qualitatively different nor less widespread than the same attitudes in any 'great' and powerful 'nation' (Weber 1968: 397).

Neither Max Weber nor Ernest Renan went beyond this largely taxonomic exercise of identifying Switzerland as a case of multiethnic nationalism and nation-statehood. They were content with showing that this small and somewhat bizarre country, surrounded by powerful states each ruling in the name of a single, distinct language community, was in fact revealing what these other states were hiding: the true nature of the national bond, made out of political spirit rather than cultural essence; out of the perception of commonality rather than objective distinctiveness.[2]

Hans Kohn invites Switzerland to be the crown witness for yet another argument. His concern with nationalism is mainly political and normative: to show that nationalism, when combined with ethnic chauvinism and bureaucratic authoritarianism, brings about the nationalist oppression and irredentist wars that devastated Europe in the twentieth century. However, when married with liberalism and democracy, nationalism can be a benevolent, integrative force, as demonstrated by the histories of the United States, England and . . . Switzerland. In a well-researched book on Swiss history from the late middle ages to the Second World War, Kohn showed how democratic and liberal traditions, modernised by the Napoleonic interlude and reinforced by the republican movements of the first half of the nineteenth century, gained a firm footing on Swiss soil and thus shaped the nationalism that was to emerge later on. He addressed the multiethnic nature of the Swiss polity here and there, until finally dedicating one chapter at the end of the book to the question of its origins. Somewhat helplessly, he attributed it 'not only to the federal structure of Switzerland, but above all to the spirit of tolerance, restraint and good will towards minorities' (Kohn 1956: 115). But where would this spirit come from, we might ask, and why did it not develop elsewhere?

For Karl Deutsch, Switzerland represents not so much a crown witness but a crucial test case for his theory of nationalism. According to this theory, nations and nationalism emerged when a population was socially mobilised and entered a shared communicative space, enhanced by similar cultural codes and the uprooting and mobility that urbanisation and modernisation had brought about (Deutsch 1953). Switzerland presents some difficulties for this Deutschean theory, given that he sees shared cultural codes as an important ingredient of nation-building. In a small, rarely cited book with the title *Switzerland as a Paradigmatic Case of Political Integration*, Deutsch chose not to pay much attention to the multilingual character of the state, but instead

focused on the slow but steady process of political integration enhanced by the lack of a feudal tradition, the relative equality between town and country, and a culture of pragmatic accommodation. Only on the second-last page of this essay did he face the puzzle of integration despite linguistic difference:

In Switzerland *decisions* have achieved something remarkable, through a history, made by humans, which shows that it is possible, through a long shared time of great achievements to integrate very different regions and linguistic communities and to create over the course of time a common national character, a common political culture, a coherent nation that speaks four languages (Deutsch 1976: 63, my translation).

Only a retreat to a voluntarist, Renan-style argument saves Deutsch from the embarrassment that Switzerland represents for his theory of communicative integration. While an embarrassment for Deutsch, the Swiss case represents a major nuisance for other theories of nationalism and the nation-state, especially for the most prominent approaches in the post-war literature – those of Ernest Gellner and Benedict Anderson. According to Gellner (1983), the epochal shift from an agricultural to an industrial society brought about nationalism and eventually the nation-state. In the agricultural empires of old, the economic system contained many highly specialised niches reproduced through on-the-job training in the specific skills they demanded. The industrial mode of production, by contrast, needed a mobile and flexible labour force. A rationalised, standardised education in a common language provided workers with the generic skills to shift from job to job and communicate effectively with strangers. The standardised, rational, homogenised culture that industrial societies needed was eventually provided by the educational apparatus of a nation-state (Gellner 1983: 37 f.).

How does Switzerland square with this equation? She started her rural, decentralised form of industrialisation long before France, Italy and most parts of Germany entered the industrial age (Senghaas 1982). Switzerland became a fully industrialised society by the middle of twentieth century. And yet the need for an integrated labour force composed of mobile, generically educated workers has not produced a uniform language and culture, nor did the country fall apart along its linguistic dividing lines. Ernest Gellner pursued two argumentative strategies to account for the Swiss problem. In his first essay on nationalism, published as a chapter in *Thought and Change*, he argued that 'once a high level of education is general, the argument that citizenship requires a shared language, in the literal sense, loses its force. There is a sense in which various kinds of Swiss "speak the same language" even if they do not do so in a literal sense' (Gellner 1964: 174). Indeed a rather 'curious argument', as O'Leary (1997) has remarked.

In his book-length treatise of nationalism, Gellner tried a different argumentative move: he chose to ignore linguistic pluralism at the national level altogether, and instead focused on Cantons as if these were the relevant units for the proper working of his argument. He mentions the Grisons, where 'linguistic plurality . . . does not seem to have put the political unity of that

canton under stress' (Gellner 1983: 119), and contrasts this situation with the case of Jura. The Jurassian separatism then offers the springboard to jump to the general conclusion that 'it would seem overwhelmingly likely that differences between cultural styles of life and communication, despite a similar economic base, will remain large enough to require separate servicing, and hence distinct cultural-political units, whether or not they will be wholly sovereign' (*ibid.*). If that were the case, only a Switzerland divided into four linguistically defined and largely autonomous provinces would survive the industrial age; or, at least, the multilingual cantons of the Valais, Fribourg and the Grisons should have experienced separatist movements as well.

While Gellner's treatment of the Swiss case does not cover more than a paragraph, Benedict Anderson devotes several pages of his classic book to its discussion. His theory of nationalism has a more complex causal structure than Gellner's: he distinguishes between the different dynamics underlying four waves of nation-state creation in the past two centuries. Three mechanisms combine in different ways in each of these waves. First, the rise of mass literacy in vernacular languages produced a reading public that shared a narrative cosmos and soon imagined itself as a national community of shared historical origin and future political destiny (Anderson 1991: ch. 3). This mechanism is especially important for the second wave of linguistic popular nationalism that transformed Europe in the nineteenth century. Such popular nationalism then produced a third wave of 'official nationalism', which emerged as 'responses by power groups – primarily, but not exclusively, dynastic and aristocratic – threatened with exclusion from, or marginalisation in, popular imagined communities' (*ibid.*: 109 f.).

A second factor explains why in the first wave in Latin America and the fourth in the colonial world nationalists imagined their communities on the basis of imperial provinces, rather than language. Lower-level colonial administrators, Anderson explained, remained confined to the bureaucratic space and geographic territory of their province and thus imagined the nation along provincial lines (*ibid.*: ch. 7). The third mechanism relates to global diffusion processes. Later-wave nationalists build upon and adopt the ideological and institutional templates of previous nation-states, and are increasingly likely to do so given that the nation-state model is increasingly seen as the sole legitimate form of government (*ibid.*: 80–2, 113 f., 116 f.).

Switzerland does not fit too well into the geometry of this argument. Obviously, it cannot be subsumed under second-wave language nationalism; nor does it represent a case of third-wave, official nationalism developed by dynastic states to stem the tide of popular nationalism. Furthermore, Swiss nationalism did not emerge within the provincial boundaries of a linguistically uniform empire, as in the first and fourth waves of nationalism. Anderson commented:

All . . . evidence indicates that Swiss nationalism is best understood as part of the 'last wave'. If [we are right] in dating its birth to 1891, it is not much more than a decade older than Burmese or Indonesian nationalism. In other words, it arose in that period of world history in which the nation was becoming an international norm, and in

which it was possible to 'model' nationness in much more complex ways than hitherto. If the conservative political, and backward socio-economic, structure of Switzerland 'delayed' the rise of nationalism, the fact that its pre-modern political institutions were non-dynastic and non-monarchical helped to prevent . . . [the emergence] of official nationalism. Finally, as in the case of the Southeast Asian examples, the appearance of Swiss nationalism on the eve of the communications revolution of the twentieth century made it possible and practical to 'represent' the imagined community in ways that did not require linguistic uniformity (Anderson 1991: 139).

Unfortunately, most of this analysis does not square well with the historical record. Anderson seems to overlook that the bourgeois revolution of 1848 was successful in Switzerland, while it failed everywhere else in Europe. During the second half of the nineteenth century, Switzerland represented the most politically advanced, rather than most backward, state on the Continent – as Deutsch (1976: 48) correctly noted. Similarly, the Swiss population displayed very high rates of literacy throughout the nineteenth century; comparable with Germany and much higher than all of Eastern Europe.[3] Why did mass literacy in French, German and Italian not lead the Swiss population to imagine their community as pan-German, pan-French and pan-Italian?

Towards a political sociology of multiethnic nationalism

The Swiss case thus highlights potential weaknesses in some of the most prominent theories of nationalism developed in historical sociology. In the following sections, I would like to introduce a different approach less focused on the grand processes of economic or cultural modernisation at the core of Deutsch's, Gellner's and Anderson's approaches. Rather, it introduces a more modest political sociology perspective that tries to identify the precise conditions under which different forms of national identity develop. In other words, it shifts the focus onto those political factors – the configurations of actors, the networks of alliances between them, the power relations that link them to state authority – that are largely absent from the classical approaches discussed above.

Such a political sociology approach allows us to explain where in a social landscape the boundaries of the nation are drawn; or, to put it differently, which ethnic communities are included in a national project and which ones remain outside of its imaginations. In this article, I will concentrate on one aspect of the overall question and try to explain not so much why Swiss nationalism developed or why it was later embraced by the population at large, but why it developed in a multiethnic form. To answer this specific question, a relational argument proves to be the most effective. It assumes that networks of political alliances and the power relations between them determine which existing categorical cleavages – nations, ethnic groups, social classes, regions, religions, provinces or tribes – will become politically salient and the focus of popular identification. This assumption is shared by a recent strain of comparative historical work, including that of Roger Gould, Charles Tilly, Eiko Ikegami, Karin Barkey and others. It has shown that such cross-class networks of

alliances, rather than social classes and their factions (as assumed in older Marxist or Weberian approaches) represent the building blocks of political life and the basis on which politically relevant collective identities are formed.

With regard to the specific issue of nationalism and nation-state formation, I suggest focussing on the structure of political alliances and associated power configurations during crucial turning points in the history of nation-building: firstly, before the very moment when the shift from empire, theocracy, city-states or tribal confederacy to the modern nation-state is achieved; and secondly, during major political crisis when the institutional set-up of a society changes and new alliance structures might become politically relevant. The argument will be of a sequential nature: the networks of alliances developed prior to these turning points and the power configuration during and after the transition will determine – in a probabilistic way, to be sure – which categorical cleavages will become politically salient and where in the landscape of cultural difference the boundaries of the nation will be drawn.

In the Swiss case, it is appropriate to identify 1848 as the crucial transition to nation-statehood. After a short civil war, the loose alliance of cantons became a federal state, the last medieval privileges were abolished and equality of all citizens was introduced. The second historical moment that our analysis should focus upon is the First World War, during which – for the first and only time in the Confederation's history – the different language groups drifted politically apart, pulled by conflicting loyalties towards either Germany or France. This represents, in other words, a crucial turning point, during which history could have taken another path towards the development of ethnic nationalism, a language-based reorganisation of the state into a tri-national entity, or perhaps even its eventual break-up along linguistic boundaries.

Following the sequential nature of the argument, we need first to analyse the structure of political networks in Switzerland that had developed before 1848 because these provided not only the new political elite, but also the infrastructure of relationships through which the political mobilisation of the population proceeded in the age of mass politics after 1848. Of crucial importance were the networks of civil society organisations that spread all over the country during the *ancien régime,* propelled by increased literacy and the rise of commerce and manufacturing. Rather than leading directly to the imagining of nations, as in Anderson's or Gellner's account, I argue that the uniform spread of literacy and economic modernisation across the entire territory of the Confederacy produced an integrated, cross-cutting network structure that provided the political basis for the development of a multiethnic nationalism during the second half of the nineteenth century.

Associational networks: reading and shooting in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Switzerland

As elsewhere in Europe during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, an independent press and the rapidly increasing publication of philosophical and

scientific books broke the monopoly that theology had long held on the print media. Literary societies and reading circles were spreading all over the territory of the Confederation: the competition between Catholic and Protestant cantons had propelled the clergy on both sides to invest in the reading skills of their flocks in order to vaccinate them against the virus of the aberrant faith. Thanks to the decentralised nature of the political system, central control of these associations and the intellectual ferment that they produced was more difficult. The reading circles and societies that flourished included men from all estates, even peasants and artisans; they provoked lively discussions about whether reading novels and works of adult education represented a danger to public order and the Christian faith (de Capitani 1986: 502). More importantly for the present topic, these associations could be encountered in almost all cantons of the Confederacy.

This development was aided by the decentralised, rural character of industrialisation (Senghaas 1982), which combined with the city-state nature of the old Confederation to produce a social structure that did not sharply differentiate between more or less developed regions, let alone between language regions. Therefore, bourgeois associations flourished in many parts of the country. These associations were often devoted to a specific cause: the betterment of agricultural techniques, the advancement of science, the knowledge of history, the reinforcement of the various cantonal armies or the library of a literary circle.

In the eighteenth century there were over 100 such societies, many with a distinctively local focus – corresponding to the fragmented nature of the political system. Gradually, however, many of these societies linked up with each other to form transregional associations, and new transregional associations were founded. The *Dictionnaire Géographique-statistique de la Suisse*, of 1836, listed fourteen societies that were active on the entire territory of the federation (de Capitani 1986: 604 f.). The most important of these early cross-regional organisations was the Helvetic Society, founded in 1761 with the aim of uniting all progressive spirits determined to fight against the old order. It also explicitly sought to reinforce bonds across cantonal, religious, regional, and linguistic barriers – to link the different pieces of the premodern mosaic society more firmly together and to fight against cantonal egoism. Their patriotic unions comprised around 200 people at the end of the eighteenth century (Im Hof and Bernard 1983: 504 f.; Im Hof and de Capitani 1983). Another early cross-regional society was the Swiss Society for Natural Research, founded in 1797 by scientists from German-speaking Berne and French-speaking Geneva.

After the Napoleonic storm had blown over the federation, new societies inspired by the French revolution sprang into existence. Older societies now started to reconstitute themselves as cross-regional societies and included German-, French- and later Italian-speaking members and sections. In 1806 the Swiss Society of Artists was born; in 1807 the Helvetic Society reconstituted itself; in 1808 the Swiss Association and in 1810 the Swiss Society for

the Public Good (Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft) were founded; they were followed by the Swiss Society for Historical Research (1811), the Swiss Society for Natural Research (1815), the Society of Zofingen (a student association) (1819), the Grand Loge Alpina of the Free Masons (1822), the Swiss Society of Officers (1833) (although there was still no national army) and the Grütli-Association (1838) (Im Hof and Bernard 1983: 10; Andrey 1986: 576 ff., 585 *and passim*).

While most of these associations were elite clubs, there were others with a much wider membership. The Federal Association of Riflemen was founded in 1824, and 7 years later it comprised 2000 members (Im Hof and Bernard 1983: 20) – a considerable number compared with an overall population of less than 2 million (McRae 1983: 50). Other popular associations included the Swiss Association of Athletics (Schweizerischer Turnverein), founded in 1832 and inspired by the German gymnasts' movement, and the singers' movement, which was initiated 2 years later under the name of Le Chant National and transformed into the Federal Singers' Association in 1842. Athletes and singers praised brotherliness among free and enlightened men and enjoyed the liberated spirit of revolutionary times. Their bodily exercises were meant to overcome the restrictions of the dress codes and behavioural rules of the old regime. Singing together demonstrated every man's ability to raise his voice and to contribute to the concert of freedom and unity.

Transethnic patriotism

All these associations were operating on a transcantonal basis and all held their annual meetings in different parts of the country every year, mostly in places not known to ordinary citizens. In this way, every member of an association became familiar with large parts of what was later to become the national territory. Most associations carefully ensured that every canton was included in this system of rotating meeting places and the large majority of them – but with important exceptions, such as the Society for the Public Good – applied the principle of rotation to the presidency as well. Note that this system of rotating meeting places and presidencies was bounded by the confines of the Confederation and did not include associations from or meetings in Germany, France or Italy. The associational networks thus remained confined to the territory of Switzerland, even if exchanges and occasional contact with German, French and Italian organisations of a similar nature existed.

How far did these organisations integrate the different language groups into their organisational framework? The Helvetic Society can be taken as a paradigmatic case (the following draws on Im Hof and Bernard 1983:15 ff.). Before the French revolution, there was considerable resistance to the use of French at the society's meetings, because it symbolised the French court and therefore the absolutist order against which the Society was determined to fight. Resistance was fading away slowly, and after the French revolution

French-speaking members were allowed. The first paper given in French before the assembly was applauded enthusiastically in 1790. Unfortunately, not much is known about the ethnic composition of the society's membership. However, records for the Society of Riflemen indicate that 1200 of the 2000 members in 1829 were Germanophone; meanwhile, the Society for the Public Good counted 127 Francophones out of a total of 631 members (Im Hof and Bernard 1983: 20).

What vision of society was developed in the bosom of these transregional movements? The so-called Helvetism was nourished by the discovery that the ideals of the Enlightenment might flourish best on the territory of the old federation. The lack of absolutist and grand feudal states and, the mini-laboratory of freedom within the limits of urban citizenry seemed to predispose the confederation to realise the ideals of the bourgeois revolution. The main impulse for such an interpretation of the Swiss situation came from outside. Rousseau's portrait of the Swiss herders' and peasants' natural democracy, protected by a heroic Alpine landscape, was equally influential as was Schiller's *Wilhelm Tell* of 1804, which became a classic of patriotic playwriting.

The patriotic movement of this period had a distinctively republican touch. The borders of the community were never defined in ethnic or linguistic terms, but rather according to the logic of historic discourse: all those who had fought and continued to fight against the feudal empires and the patrician elites of the city-states were thought of as belonging to the community of progress that was to bring about a new social order. This typically modern notion of history as progress found expression in legends and tales that were canonised and taught by professors of Swiss history in the newly established academies. The *Histories of the Swiss* by Johannes von Müller became the standard patriotic and progressive work for about a century. Again, associations played a crucial role in the dissemination of this new view on history. The Society for Historical Research was founded in 1811, and the General Society for Historical Research of Switzerland in 1841.

It is important to note that these civil society associations did not develop because a pre-existing national sentiment now found its organisational expression – as Anthony Smith would have it (see the brief discussion of the Swiss case in Smith 1996). The idea of Switzerland as a fatherland, the place where progress and modernity would find its privileged seat, was a new concept that bore little continuity with the cantonal identities (the result of long centuries of intercantonal feuding) or religious frameworks within which individuals had thought and felt before the eighteenth century. While some early patriots were addressing humanity as a whole as the bearers of the revolution they saw coming, most originally restricted their vision of a new society to their canton (Kohn 1956: 24–5). Certainly some other associations, especially the Helvetic Society, spread across the entire territory of the country because they were motivated by the goal of political integration and of overcoming cantonal localism. However, many of its members were also (and perhaps primarily) members of cantonal governments, associations

and progressive clubs. Even the Helvetic Society was proto-nationalist, at best: it served the aim of uniting the forces of progress against the old oligarchic regime in order to create a new society, rather than to forge the various disjointed limbs into a national body. To understand the spread of associational networks across the territory, similarity in social conditions is perhaps more important than nationalist intent. High levels of literacy, urban bourgeoisies or educated rural elites and early industrialisation could be encountered throughout the territory of the old Confederation.

While stretching across the language border, as shown earlier, these associations were distinctively different and disconnected from the networks of conservative, anti-Enlightenment alliances centred on the Catholic Church and the Alpine heartland of the country. These conservative circles stood in opposition to the bourgeois Enlightenment movement and their political ideals; they put faith, the observance of the traditional order and ultramontane solidarity with other Catholic states and statelets in Europe above patriotism, rationality and equality.

Transethnic state elite and republican patriotism

The short war of 1847 brought a victory of the liberal, reformed cantons over the Catholic Special League. The reasons behind this turn of events are quite obviously beyond the scope of the argument pursued here; suffice to note that the victorious factions reformed the confederate nature of the Swiss state and founded a new, national state with a central government, a constitution, a federal administration and an army. The constitution abolished all internal customs and road taxes, established the principle of national citizenship – introducing full right of residence for all Christian citizens on the entire national territory (from 1866 onwards also for Jews) – declared freedom of profession and trade, equality before the law, freedom of the press and opinion, and universal male suffrage.

Most of the political elite of this newly founded nation-state was recruited from the liberal, bourgeois networks that had emerged previously. The crucial fact to highlight is that this new elite, with deep roots in the Swiss associational movement, had from the beginning a transethnic character. An inclusive, transethnic power structure developed – largely Protestant and German-speaking, to be sure, but including French and Italian speakers (many of them secular Catholics) in parliament, in the central administration and in the federal council of ministers. This transethnic power structure did not emerge at the end of a long struggle by linguistic 'minorities' to achieve balanced representation vis-à-vis a 'majority', nor was it the result of a pact between French-, German- and Italian-speaking elites, as prominent theorists of consociational democracy interpret the Swiss case (see the critique of this interpretation by Rothchild and Roeder 2005).

Rather, it was because the liberal movement that rose to power was already based on a transethnic network of alliances that had developed previously.

There were no explicit rules with regard to the linguistic composition of the federal council, the parliament, the administration, the army or the juridical institutions. It was only 100 years after the nation-state had been founded that the federal council officially stated the goal of ensuring the linguistic representativeness of the different branches of administration (McRae 1983: 136), and it took 150 years for the Constitution to include a recommendation that all regions and linguistic groups should be represented adequately in the federal council. But there was, from the very beginning, an informal and shared understanding that a balanced representation of the different language groups within the state apparatus was to be maintained. Reaching into the pool of liberal leaders filled by the previous development of civil society organisations made this possible. The result was a remarkably equitable distribution of power at different hierarchical levels of the new state. According to Rae, non-German speakers were over-represented on the council (37 per cent of councillors and 33 per cent of years served between 1848 and 1981, against 27 per cent of the population)[4] and French and Italian speakers were only slightly under-represented in the central administration (22 per cent; data from the 1930s onward only), while French speakers were over-represented in the most highly paid civil service jobs (McRae 1983: 131–5).

Ethnicity was never problematised or politicised and the state was never captured or 'owned' by an elite with clear ethnic connotations, as in early Canada or Belgium. It is telling that the first parliament almost forgot to add a constitutional article that declared all three languages national and official. The delegate of the canton of Vaud presented a corresponding postulate, and a proposal from German-speaking Zurich was then adopted unanimously without further discussions or debates (Weilenmann 1925: 215–24).

The associational networks not only provided a transethnic elite for the new state, but also allowed this elite to mobilise political support when it came to winning the newly introduced national elections or the referendum. Because political parties did not form until the 1870s (Meuwly 2010), the political movements, one 'radical' and one 'liberal', relied on these associational networks as their organisational backbones. For example, the radicals were supported by the National Association (founded in 1835), by the cantonal Peoples Associations and (from the 1850s onwards) by the veterans of a students' association (Ruffieux 1986: 682). Therefore, the appeal to regional or ethno-linguistic solidarity was never an option or a necessity when raising a following. The organisational backbone of political mobilisation in the age of mass politics was provided by the church on the one hand and these transethnic associations and societies on the other. Political conflict thus pitted a premodern, hierarchical and sacralised vision of society against the modern, secularised and egalitarian model; Catholic against Protestant, and not French-speaking against German-speaking.[5]

Consequently, the republican patriotism that motivated the new state elite defined the Swiss nation in distinctively non-ethnic terms. It would never have occurred to the spokesmen of the Helvetic Society or the Riflemen's Associa-

tion to declare German the only official language when they rose to power and national hegemony in 1848. These men would never have thought to portray the Italian-speaking part of the population as backward and to propose a politics of assimilation, or to exclude German speakers from the seats of power because they were less civilised (from the French-speaking point of view at the time – as in Belgium).

Accordingly, the educational policies of the new state avoided even the slightest appearance of ethnic chauvinism or hegemonic aspirations by making the dominant language of the canton (and, within multilingual cantons, of the municipality) the schooling language of the now fast-expanding public school system. This so-called principle of linguistic territoriality represents an obvious contrast to the policies adopted by many modernising states of the same period, which attempted to 'make Italians', for example, by elevating Tuscanese to the national language to be taught in all schools; or to create a modern Ottoman citizenry by declaring Turkish the language of the state and its nascent system of public education.

During these early decades after 1848, Swiss nationalism still formed only a minor part of the ideological programme of the new elite. They still saw liberalism and republicanism as the ideological fundament of the state they had just created. They were certainly patriots: Switzerland was seen as an example to the world – the avant-garde in terms of political freedom and equality that other states in Europe were supposed to follow, once their liberal movements had recovered from the setbacks suffered in 1848. They governed in the name of these universal principles, rather than in the name of the Swiss nation. Patriotism was a major motivation and cultural force, but it remained subordinated to the liberal and republican ideals that these men had fought for against urban patriciates, the Catholic Church and its allies, and other 'unenlightened' political and intellectual forces.

While the early associations and later the patriotic leadership of the new state were transethnic in composition and outlook, as shown earlier, this did not form a crucial part of their political programme nor was it a core element of their understanding of Switzerland's role in world history. While they often mentioned Switzerland's linguistic and, more importantly, cantonal pluralism and were certainly proud of this, linguistic diversity was not a core element of their ideology. The early civil society associations and state-building patriots can best be described as ethnically indifferent, rather than consciously and programmatically multiethnic.

From republican patriotism to multiethnic nationalism

This changed from the 1880s onwards, when an official, state-centred and state-organised nationalism began to supersede republican patriotism. It was mainly a reflection of, and a reaction to, the French, Italian and German nationalisms that flourished during this period and reminded the Swiss that 'their' nation was none from the perspective of culture and language

(Siegenthaler 1993: 326; Zimmer 2003). It also represented an attempt to counter-weigh the internationalist socialism that had started to take roots, mostly thanks to the efforts of German labour activists among the growing working classes (Bendix 1992).

On the other hand, the rise of civic nationalism should also be seen in relation to the introduction of direct democratic institutions. The referendum and the possibility of proposing constitutional articles were both adopted by popular vote in 1874. As a consequence of these constitutional reforms and the rise of participatory politics, the Catholic regions of the country, comprising a large proportion of the overall population, gained in political influence. The liberal Protestant elite were forced to open their ranks, to include exponents of the Catholic Party into the federal council (from 1891 onwards) and to elaborate a new nationalist compromise that reduced the prominence of liberal and republican ideas and integrated more of the corporatist concept of society dear to Catholic elites (Kriesi 1999: 15; Zimmer 2003: part 2).

The religious divide was slowly papered over, at least among this political elite, by the new state-organised civic nationalism. It was based on the idea that the lack of religious, cultural and linguistic homogeneity was not a deficit, as pan-German and pan-Italian ideologues across the border saw it, but the very virtue of the Swiss state, and that this heterogeneity was compensated for by the collective will to form a nation despite not 'being' one. Now the multiethnic character of the state was no longer taken for granted but put at the centre of nationalist representations, and only now did the Swiss nation – rather than the successful liberal revolution – become the primary source of political legitimacy. The term 'nation by will' (*Willensnation*), coined by the liberal constitutional lawyer Hilty (1875), became the catchword characteris- ing the Swiss situation – it is still used today in almost every speech celebrating national days. Nationalist thinkers also began to sacralise Switzerland as 'an entity wanted by God and entitled with a special mission, as a designated people of God' (Hilty, cited by Jost 1998: 69).

Nationalist historiography blossomed further, portraying late medieval wars as episodes in an eternal fight for independence against the mighty evil lords of the surrounding empires. The federal government decided to conserve national historic monuments (in 1886), organised national exhibitions (in Zurich in 1883, Geneva in 1896, etc.), founded the national archive, the national library and a national commission of art, supported festivals to commemorate the late medieval battles against the Habsburgs, introduced a national day (in 1891) and so forth. However, the project was received with great scepticism among the cantonal elites and the population at large. Cantonal and especially communal identities were still much stronger, and nationalism was the affair of a rather small segment of the population (Bendix 1992; on the history of the national day, see also Santschi 1991 and Zimmer 2003).

The major condition for this multiethnic nationalism to develop is, as we have seen: (i) that the networks of civil society organisations emerged before

the modern nation-state was formed and before genuinely nationalist ideologies were crafted; and (ii) that these networks of alliances stretched across the entire territory of the country, thanks to the even spread of literacy and the nature of Swiss society as a conglomerate of city-states with no clear regional preponderance. Because identity and institutional alliances tend to develop in tandem with each other, as my relational argument has it, it was evident to the new elite that 'the people', in the name of whom they came to govern Switzerland after 1848, consisted of this already consolidated, multiethnic bourgeois society organised in overlapping networks of associations. And when this elite, enlarged by the previously excluded Catholic networks, began to develop a full-blown nationalist ideology, the nation was conceived in multiethnic terms and multiethnicity became a cornerstone of nationalist discourse. An ethnic answer to the question of peoplehood never developed and only one, not three of four nationalisms emerged.

This is not to say that there was no ethnic consciousness at all. From the period of Napoleonic centralism onward, cantonal identities, well established since medieval times, were overlaid by a second tier of identity on the basis of linguistic affinity. In 1814, Phillippe Bridel, a folklorist of Herderian inspiration, coined the term *la Suisse romande*, which included all French-speaking parts of the country; in 1834, a Société de l'Histoire de la Suisse Romande was founded. Later on, the term *Suisse alémanique* was invented and popularised (Andrey 1986: 590). However, *romands* and *alémaniques* only became politically relevant categories during the major crisis that the multiethnic, mononational state faced in its history: the First World War.

The First World War as a second critical juncture

In the decade preceding the Great War, some intellectuals and politicians had been attracted by the blossoming ethnic nationalisms of the surrounding 'true' nation-states. These tensions escalated into a serious political crisis during which for the first and only time in Swiss history, political alliances were realigned on the basis of language commonality. The linguistic trench first appeared in public debates when the Germanophile Alemannic officer Wille, with family connections to the German emperor, was elected general of the army (a position only filled during wartime). Subsequently, several political affairs showed to the French-speaking parts of Switzerland that neutrality was mere lip service and that in fact the German-speaking elite was leaning towards the Central Powers (Jost 1986: 764; du Bois 1983: 80 ff.). The ethnicisation of politics was not confined to the elite but appeared also among the rank and file of the army, where French-speaking recruits complained about the Prussian drill on which Alemannic officers tried to insist. On the streets, especially those of bilingual cities, small-scale riots broke out and speaking the 'wrong' language could be dangerous in certain places at certain times (du Bois 1983: 68, 78).

Ethnic nationalism also emerged among intellectuals. In 1916, Francophile circles founded the Ligue Patriotique Romande, where prominent figures such as Villiam Vogt preached Alemanophobic hatred (e.g. in his book *Les deux Suisses*). The Ligue complained not only about the far-from-neutral position of the national government, but also about growing discrimination against French speakers in the central administration and the army (du Bois 1983: 82). German nationalist circles responded quickly by founding the Association of the Swiss German language (Deutschschweizerischer Sprachverein) and mirrored Villiam Vogt's views, for instance on the pages of the journal *Stimmen im Sturm* (Voices in the Storm) (du Bois 1983: 85).

However, such radicalism by no means represented the dominating voice in the debates on Switzerland's foreign policy alignments during the war. Quite the contrary: the elite cartel from all ethno-linguistic groups, which had been dominating the federal state since its foundation two generations previously, moved very quickly to an appeasement policy and tried to cool down emotions and realign political sentiments along the nationalist axis that they had designed in previous decades. They tried carefully to balance out the perceived imbalance within central government and elected the pro-Entente, French-speaking councillor Gustav Ador after the resignation of the pro-German Hoffmann in 1917 (thus making it three French speakers out of seven councillors). They were, all in all, rather successful in pursuing this policy of reconciliation, appeasement and compromise; usually, after the waves of scandal had ebbed away, there were also signs of popular, transethnic nationalism such as shown by the enthusiastic reception of General Wille in French-speaking towns or of French-speaking army detachments in the German-speaking parts.

Not surprisingly, transethnic associations played a crucial role in the defence and ultimate victory of multiethnic nationalism against the ethno-nationalist challenge. Especially impressive in this regard is the role of the New Helvetic Society (NHS), founded in 1914 with the explicit aim of revitalising Swiss nationalism against the growing tide of ethno-nationalist chauvinism. During the First World War, the NHS developed a consistent programme of counteraction and counterpropaganda, disseminating and reinforcing civic nationalism centred on the idea of a 'nation by will'.

In 1915, the NHS began to publish a Sunday newspaper in order to countervail the German Sunday papers that had gained some influence in the Alemanic part of the country. A bimonthly journal, *The Swiss Comrade*, addressed the young public and propagated the same patriotic spirit. A press office was opened, and it placed around 2000 articles in local newspapers during the War. The society organised conferences and gatherings all over the country, including a famous speech by the poet Carl Spitteler in 1914. Spitteler encouraged his fellow countrymen to remain united and to remember the spirit of unity that their forefathers had breathed. A discussion between a German-speaking newspaper editor and a French-speaking one under the title 'Let's remain Swiss' was as widely received as the intellectual Konrad Falke's

essay 'The Swiss cultural will' (published by the NHS). Its president, Gonzague de Reynold, held frequent conferences in different parts of the country (Im Hof and Bernard 1983: 70). Other associations, such as the Swiss Officers' Association, The Association for Public Good, and the Association of Professors and Lecturers, played a similar role – although they did not develop a comparable fully scaled propaganda programme.

The activities of these associations contributed in no small means to counterbalancing the centrifugal tendencies that had appeared in the political arena.[6] Equally importantly, they provided the micropolitical glue for holding the transethnic elite together and prevented a rupture of networks of political alliances, acquaintanceship and friendship along the lines of language. The same structural features of the political alliance system thus helps to explain not only why an inclusionary power structure developed in the crucial turning point of nation-state formation and why a multiethnic nationalism developed subsequently, but also why Switzerland did not break apart along the lines of language in the second critical juncture during the First World War.

Conclusion

The analysis of the Swiss case demonstrates that we need to take genuinely political factors into account in order to explain which types of ethnic categories are transformed into nations and where the boundaries of national belonging in a heterogeneous cultural landscape will be drawn. The structure and reach of political alliances turns out to be crucial in that regard, thus lending further support to a relational and power-configurational account of political identity formation that has been developed in past years. Where the political alliances of the elites controlling the nation-building project reach across an ethnic divide, become institutionalised and organisationally stabilised, a pan-ethnic national identity will develop. Where the networks of political alliances are bounded by ethnic divisions and, importantly, when such ethnically defined networks are excluded from access to state power, ethnicity will be politicised and ethno-national identities will emerge. The boundaries of political networks during the early periods of nation-building and the power configuration between them thus crucially shape the contours of the nation.

This hypothesis helps to explain, as I have argued elsewhere (Wimmer 2002), why Mexico's early-nineteenth-century republican patriotism restricted the idea of the nation to the *criollo* elite, and why this restriction was removed and the *mestizo* majority of the population symbolically embraced after the crucial turning point of the Mexican Revolution. It helps understanding why Brazil chose the path of racial mixture and 'whitening' during the early days of nation-building, while the USA defined the nation as white and excluded the black population both symbolically and politically until the civil rights movement (Wimmer 2008). Similarly to Switzerland, civil society networks in

early-nineteenth-century Belgium reached across the entire country – opposing Catholic and liberal associations (Ertman 2000) – explains why an all-Belgian patriotism emerged and led to the revolution in 1830. In contrast to Switzerland, however, most of these networks were confined to the Francophone aristocratic and bourgeois elites in both the Flemish and Wallonian parts of the country. Correspondingly, the nation was initially defined as French in language and culture, thus politicising the language question over the course of the nineteenth century. A similar argument could be made for Canada and Spain. In all these cases, the reach of established networks of political alliances and the configurations of power between them defines the boundaries of how the nation is imagined.

The same explanation helps us to understand other multiethnic nationalism in the world. In India, for example, the Congress Party played a similar role to that of the associations in pre-national Switzerland, offering a complex, multitiered and far-reaching network of alliances that criss-crossed the territory of British India and integrated most of the non-Muslim language groups, ethnicities, religions and castes. Similar examples from across the developing world could be cited. From a broader comparative point of view, then, Switzerland represents an exception within the Western European context; however, it appears quite unremarkable if we include Caribbean rainbow nationalisms, India and Indonesia, as well as a dozen or so of more or less stable multiethnic nationalisms in the Middle East and Africa that remain outside the horizon of mainstream research on nationalism and the nation-state.

A relational, power configurational argument thus represents a crucial element of a general theory of nationalism and the nation-state. It highlights the role played by political factors that the classic historical sociology of nationalism largely overlooked. Compared to Benedict Anderson's approach, a political sociology account offers a more parsimonious explanation of why national identities sometimes align with language boundaries (as in much of Eastern Europe), or with provincial boundaries that are not marked by language differences (as in Latin America or Western Africa and Indochina), or with the boundaries of existing states marked by linguistic heterogeneity (as in Switzerland and India). It thus integrates Anderson's provincial confinement argument as one specific way in which the boundaries of networks of alliances become associated with those of the imagined national community.

In relation to Ernest Gellner's argument, a political sociology approach highlights the constellations of power and alliance that explain the shift to the nation-state independent of the logic of labour-market mobility (for empirical evidence, see Wimmer and Feinstein 2010). Compared to Ernest Renan's and Max Weber's theory of nationalism as an expression of political will, it highlights the networks of actors within which such a political force can emerge, and the configurations of power that allow them to overcome the forces of the past and to realise their dream of political self-rule and cultural autonomy.

Notes

1 The sole exception is a brief episode during the Napoleonic period, when a group of radicals tried to unify the Ticino with the emerging Napoleonic puppet state of the Cisalpine Republic (today's northern Italy). An outburst of Swiss patriotism throughout Italian-speaking Switzerland followed, and the separatists were quickly overwhelmed (Stojanovic 2003).

2 A similar view had already been expressed by John Stuart Mill, who emphasised that nationhood can be based on language, descent, religion, geography or, most importantly, political history – again citing the Swiss case (Mill 1861: 28777 f.).

3 For literacy data, see the online appendix to Wimmer and Feinstein (2010).

4 According to Stojanovic (unpublished), the share of French and Italian speakers among the councillors who served from 1848 to 2010 was 32 per cent.

5 There were and are, however, important processes of politicisation of ethno-linguistic differences on the cantonal level, i.e. in cantons with bilingual populations. An analysis of these developments is beyond the scope of this article.

6 To be sure, the rise of the social question after the War also helped to cement the existing, transethnic coalition of elites (see du Bois 1983: 88 f.).

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