Reflections on the Swiss *Sonderfall*

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This collection of articles on Swiss national identity is impressive on several counts. First, it gathers together the finest scholars of Swiss nationalism of the new generation: a cohort steeped in the lexicon of theories of nationalism and multiculturalism. Second, it displays impressive rigour: the pieces are so analytical and restrained that one can divine neither whether the authors are Swiss or not, nor whether they are moved by its spirit. Finally, all of these works step in and out of the Swiss case with ease to draw similarities with, and differences from, other countries. They are impressively broad-gauged, moving seamlessly from early modern history to political theory, international relations to social-network analysis. All the while, their analytical frame shifts incessantly from state to canton to commune and back.

The Swiss are famous for their watches; in order to make sense of the complex workings that have resulted in Swiss nationhood, the authors have had to dissemble the country down to its 2,800 communes, examine the parts from many angles, and observe them in action as they are assembled into cantons, language regions and, eventually, an entire clockwork. It is an impressive display of craftsmanship in the finest interdisciplinary tradition of nationalism studies.

Rather than provide a second-rate summary of the articles, I will speak from the perspective of a theorist of nationalism with roots in more traditional instances of multinational statehood (UK, Canada). Thus I ask how insights from the Swiss case open up new sightlines into the nature of nations and nationalism broadly conceived. These articles throw up two main questions: (i) why Switzerland is important when it comes to explaining nationalism; and (ii) in a world where high levels of ethnic polarisation are associated with violent conflict (Montalvo and Reynal-Querol 2005; Schneider and Wiesehomeier 2009), or, at the very least, democratic separatism, how has Switzerland managed to not only contain conflict but build a peaceful, prosperous, united nation?

The articles generally concur on the following points:

1. Switzerland is not a typical nation-state but rather a *Sonderfall* (or exception), which, on present definitions, may border on 'non-nation-hood'.
2. Switzerland's multitiered political structure and its lack of a feudal and absolutist past has shaped its subsequent evolution as a nation-state.

3. Cross-cutting social cleavages – religious, ideological, linguistic, economic – kept fissiparous tendencies in check through much of Swiss history.

4. Culture, *étatisme* and the capitalist mode of production are secondary to political history when it comes to explaining Switzerland. It is not a complete outlier. It partook of many strands of the classic nation-building model, subject to the constraints imposed by its confederal structure. The fact that it lacked the others and still held together offers us a natural experiment as to the minimum conditions necessary for a sense of nationhood to develop. Its relative success suggests that a shared culture is not a prerequisite for the formation of successful nations. Therefore, it problematises the notion that 'normal' nations are the monocultural creations of states, in the modernist view (i.e. Anderson 1983; Gellner 1983), or of ethnic groups, from an ethno-symbolist perspective (i.e. Smith 1986).

5. Switzerland is multicultural, but it is not a multinational state as conceived by multicultural political theorists (Kymlicka 1995; Taylor 1993). Its language groups lack the defined set of myths, symbols, boundaries and political aspirations that characterise nations or even ethnic groups.

6. Switzerland is not a consociational state, but has generated its interethnic co-operation somewhat spontaneously. Buffeted by chance military, political, religious and economic forces, political alliances were forged that subsequently gained normative traction in the form of willed national identity.

7. The Swiss are not distinguished from others by being more nobly cosmopolitan: they express their sense of imagined kinship through communal, cantonal or linguistic identities rather than via ethno-nationalism. This ethno-communalism is occasionally expressed politically in debates and referenda on citizenship and immigration.

The authors do disagree on a few points. First, to what extent are cantons the equivalent of ethno-nations? Wimmer writes that linguistic faultlines cut through cantons. Yet Donald Ipperciel – echoing Wolf Linder and Adrian Vatter – demurs that they tend to have a high degree of homogeneity, and that where this has been missing secessionist movements such as that of Jura have emerged. Chollet adds that 'some cantons experienced 'national' liberation struggles: Vaud or the Jura against Bern, Ticino against the bailiffs coming from the northern side of the Gotthard, Neuchâtel against the King of Prussia. . .'. This point is important because it intimates that Switzerland (or any would-be Switzerland) can only succeed if its polyethnicity rests upon a Herderian substrate where there is a congruence of culture and politics, as in 'normal' European nations. It also suggests that countries without a similar ethno-segmental political morphology cannot emulate the Swiss model successfully.

Second, how much do local perspectives – what I term 'lenses' (Kaufmann 2008) of nationhood – filter Swiss national identity? Is there, as Zimmer

writes, a *heimat* version of the nation, where the nation is in some sense perceived as the commune or canton writ large? Might linguistic regions also be transposed onto a wider, Swiss plane? For instance, do those in the German-speaking cantons see Switzerland as an extension of themselves – albeit with a Franco-Italian-Romansch garnish that spices at the edges only? There are further lenses at work. It seems that those in liberal, Protestant, urban, economically successful cantons cherish the modern Swiss state of 1848 or perhaps 1791; meanwhile, the Catholic central cantons look to the old Confederacy and 1,291 for inspiration (Zimmer 2003a). This may likewise be true when it comes to interpreting Swiss symbolic resources. Those in Catholic German-speaking cantons may feel more at ease with the 'organic' Alps and Swiss-German confederate myths than most Francophone, Italophone and urban Protestant Swiss, who embrace civic voluntarist ideas such as multi-national exceptionalism, neutrality, economic success and liberal democratic ideology. In other words, there can be no Swiss exceptionalism because Swiss national identity is itself a 'zone of conflict' (Hutchinson 2005) between competing conceptions; some relatively organic – even ethnic – in nature, others more voluntarist.

This leads us onto the wider 'ethnic–civic' scholarly battlefield. Switzerland helps us unpack this admittedly crude typology. As Karin Reinhardt shows, the line between ostensibly 'ethnic' Germany and 'civic' Switzerland is more blurred than one might imagine. There are civic elements to German identity (such as pro-European ideology) and 'ethnic' sentiments in Switzerland (communal and cantonal exclusivity). Moreover, Switzerland, although ostensibly non-ethnic, has hardly escaped from the Europe-wide norm of dominant ethnic nationalism as expressed through anti-immigrant politics (Kaufmann 2004; Norris 2005). The relative ethnic homogeneity and quasi-national consciousness of many cantons – especially rural Catholic ones – may render them less permeable to diversity than the liberal cities. As Wimmer notes, this can raise barriers to internal migration where the other differs in language or religion (at one time, Catholics migrating to Protestant communes and cantons were the main 'problem'). The response of communes and cantons has been to refuse to confer local citizenship. The same is obviously true of immigration – be it from Italy or India. In effect, the skittishness of communes about the in-migration of the other radiates upward to the cantonal and national level in a popular democracy like Switzerland's. This, as several writers note, produced the discourse of 'overforeignisation' in the 1910s as well as contemporary anti-immigrant movements like the People's Party, whose influence Chollet laments.

Will Kymlicka, in his empirical observations, draws a neat distinction between national and ethno-cultural minorities and their mode of recognition. Switzerland frustrates this Canado–Eurocentric typology at every turn. As Reinhardt remarks, not all forms of diversity neatly fall into 'multinational' and 'ethno-cultural' containers. Though multicultural, Switzerland is neither multinational nor a country of ethno-cultural groups. Indeed, Switzerland

helps us to see that the mononational vs. multinational opposition is always quite stylised and that almost all nations have Swiss-like characteristics (for instance Germany's historic recognition of Danish and Sorbian minorities). This problematises neat classifications.

One could go further and flag a number of observations that spring from the excellent points raised in these fine articles:

What underlies Swiss 'success'?

Are 'modernist' factors more important and, if so, can we point to a particular political structure of confederalism, a trans-ethnic party system (Horowitz 1985: chapters 7–9), enlightened education policies or 'bridging' social capital (Putnam 2000; Varshney 2002) as the ingredient that made the difference? Andreas Wimmer's sophisticated arguments about political networks come closest to this position. If so, the Swiss could have a great deal to offer others who seek new tools – beyond the standard consociational, federal and integrationist measures – to build national unity and mitigate centrifugal ethnic demands.

Premodern influences

A number of authors skate over, yet mention, premodern inheritances that may have made the difference. How important are these premodern factors? The accretion of communes and cantons into a multitier confederation after 1,291 in response to external geopolitical and trading stimuli, and the existence of crosscutting linguistic and religious divisions, are important – but are they necessary to explain Swiss success? If so, then the Swiss case emerges as more curious than praiseworthy; more a royal flush of lucky historical cards than a shining example of confederalism or multicultural policy that others ought to emulate.

The role of myths and symbols

Ethnosymbolist (Ozkirimli 2010; Smith 1998) arguments may also be detected in these articles around the edges, despite the fact that Switzerland is clearly multicultural. For instance, how vital is the unifying presence of the Alps and the myths, symbols and history of the old Confederacy, especially as preserved in Catholic cantons such as Uri and Schwys? Even if these memories were lost – and, to be sure, many were inconsistent in their treatment of the Alps as symbol – the fact that such 'symbolic resources' (Zimmer 2003b) exist meant that Swiss Romantic nationalists had this material on their palettes to work with. If Switzerland had a nondescript landscape and its founding cantons had not resisted the Habsburgs in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries,

would it have mattered? Arguably the resonance of subsequent constructions such as Wilhelm Tell, or the myth of the Oath on the Rütli Meadow, would have been ~~reduced,~~ and the claim of Swiss elites on the loyalties of the cantons and communes correspondingly weaker.

The importance of a Swiss-German core

In addition, is there any significance to the fact that German-speakers form three quarters of the population and have a distinct dialect and history from most Austrians and Germans? That the French and especially Italian cantons joined centuries after the initial confederation was formed? O' Leary (2001) argues that federations can only survive if underpinned by an ethnic majority. If Switzerland was made up of four equal-sized language groups, would this have rendered the confederation, and subsequent nation, more unstable? Perhaps not: the cross-cutting cleavages are simply too impressive in the Swiss case.

However, now that religion is fading as a cross-cutting issue and, as Donald Ipperciel notes, language regions are gaining more coherence, perhaps it is fortunate that there is no contest over which language is largest. Even if language regions – which already serve as distinct public spheres – emerge as important arenas of political identity, the German-speakers could comfortably make the sacrifices needed to placate Romande demands, should they arise. Once again, the sun shines on the Alps!

Concluding remarks

My final point concerns the possibility that Switzerland is not alone in the universe. It may seem especially unusual because it is surrounded by übernations (Germany, France, Italy), but we must bear in mind other unusual cases. These include small states like Andorra, San Marino, Liechtenstein, Luxembourg, Malta and Gibraltar. Such places have political histories and patriotism, but, like Swiss cantons, are part of wider cultures and therefore confound the classic ethno-national model, albeit in a manner different from Switzerland.

A number of multiethnic countries elsewhere enjoy an impressive degree of comity. Mauritius, with its blend of Indian, European, African and Chinese residents, manages to carve out a relatively harmonious, palm-fringed society in the Indian Ocean off south-east Africa. As in Switzerland, history helped by introducing all the constituent peoples to this uninhabited island around the same time, preventing any group from laying claim to the mantle of 'true' Mauritian. Most groups, apart from the tiny white minority and some Chinese and Indian traders, came over to work the plantations. This reduced ethnic stratification, smoothing the path of integration. Then there is Tanzania: hardly an economic tiger, but politically favoured by the fact

that it has over 100 small ethnic groups rather than a small number of large ones. With the special exception of Zanzibar, the country therefore escapes ethnic polarisation and the violence attendant upon it.

Even so, one comes away from this global survey impressed by Swiss distinctiveness, for it combines the intraethnic political diversity represented by an Andorra or Malta with the interethnic diversity of a Mauritius or Tanzania. Moreover, like its famous chocolatiers, it wraps these elements into one of the most attractive packages in the world. The articles in this section help us understand why this is so; and why the Swiss case provides a cautionary tale for those scholars of nationalism and ethnic conflict who too eagerly place their faith in abstract typologies, concepts and policy solutions.

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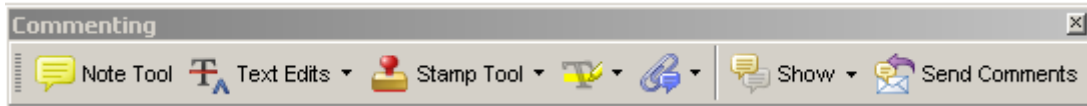

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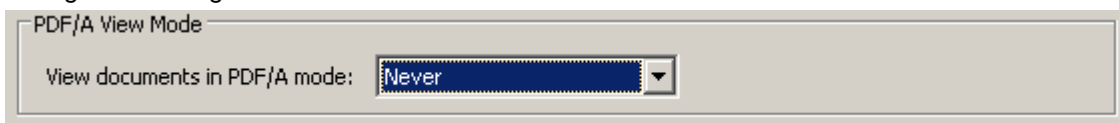
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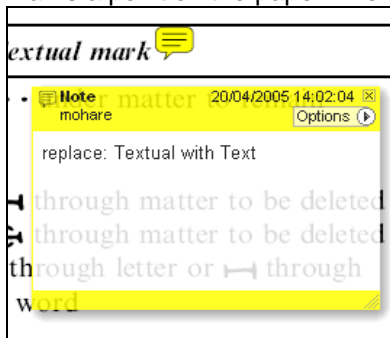
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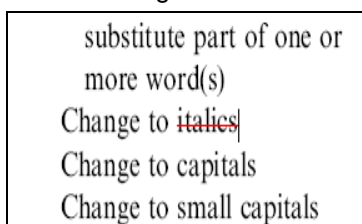Strikes red line through text and opens up a replacement text box.
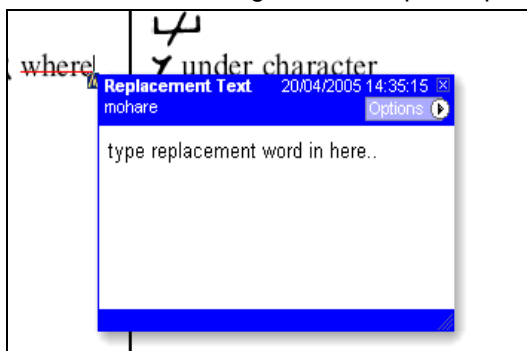
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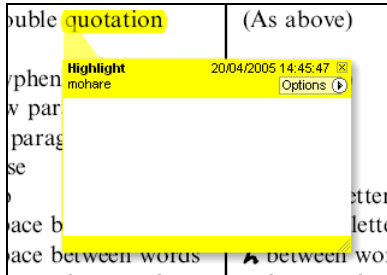

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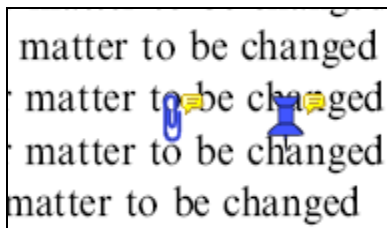Highlights text in yellow and opens up a text box.

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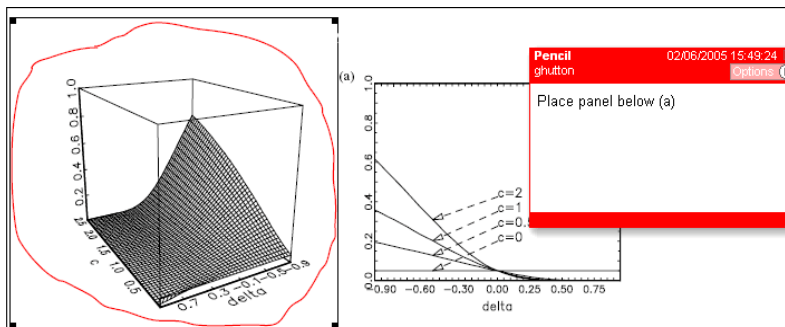
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