

# Boundary mechanisms and symbolic resources: towards a process-oriented approach to national identity\*

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OLIVER ZIMMER

*History Department, University of Durham, 43 North Bailey, Durham DH1 3EX, UK*

**ABSTRACT** This article argues that the classical distinction between civic and ethnic forms of national identity has proved too schematic to come to terms with the dynamic nature of social and political processes. This has caused difficulties particularly for those historians and social scientists studying particular national movements rather than concentrating on a handful of thinkers and intellectuals or taking a broadly comparative approach. As an alternative to the classical model, I propose to distinguish between, on the one hand, the *mechanisms* which social actors use as they reconstruct the boundaries of national identity at a particular point in time; and, on the other, the *symbolic resources* upon which they draw when they reconstruct these boundaries.

## **Introduction**

In the introduction to the first volume of his *The Identity of France*, the French historian Fernand Braudel noted that ‘A nation can have its *being* only at the price of being forever in search of itself...’ (1989: 23). One need not take on board Braudel’s slightly essentialist terminology to recognise that his argument about the dynamic nature of nationhood is valid and indeed important. Appreciating this dynamism involves more than the recognition that the communities referred to as ‘nations’ are socially constructed. Not much is gained by reiterating this omnipresent truism. A more interesting line of inquiry, I suggest, concerns the mechanisms and cultural patterns that have conditioned the definition of national identities ever since nationalism rose to prominence from the close of the eighteenth century.

As defined here, the term national identity relates to the process whereby ‘the nation’ is reconstructed over time. National identity, thus understood, is a

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public project rather than a fixed state of mind. Taking place at the interface of culture and politics, the public definition (and re-definition) of nationhood is contingent within certain limitations. National ideologues face both cultural and political constraints. While ideological innovation is by no means impossible, such innovation tends to take the form of novel combinations rather than pure invention.<sup>1</sup>

Based on an assessment of the standard distinction between ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ conceptions of nationhood, this article develops a process-oriented approach to national identity. It begins by tracing the evolution and illustrating some applications of the classic distinction between civic and ethnic nationhood. I argue that, at least in the manner in which it is commonly used, the differentiation between civic and ethnic nationalism is ill suited to locate and explain shifts in the definition of national identity. Instead, I propose to distinguish between boundary mechanisms and symbolic resources. The second part of the paper draws on Swiss examples to illustrate how this alternative framework can help to highlight the dynamics of national identity. The concluding section emphasises the limits of the concept of civic exceptionalism in a nationalist era.

### **The ethnic–civic dichotomy revisited**

Given the elusiveness of both nationalism and nation formation, it is not surprising that scholars have attempted to form ideal-type distinctions in an attempt to cope with the complex nature of their data. In fact, a glance at the most seminal works produced in this field in the course of the twentieth century shows that the typological method has found wide application. Among the various typologies applied, the distinction between a ‘civic’ and an ‘ethnic’ form of nationhood has perhaps taken the most prominent place of all.

Civic nations, so the classic argument runs, derive their legitimacy and internal cohesion from their members’ voluntary subscription to a set of political principles and institutions. In sharp contrast, ethnic nations are founded on a sense of self-identity determined by ‘natural’ factors such as language or ethnic descent. Consequently, civic nationhood is the outcome of deliberate human commitment, while ethnic nationhood results from long-term cultural and historical evolution. Political theorist Bernard Yack has juxtaposed the two conceptions in a critical analysis:

The myth of the *ethnic* nation suggests that you have no choice at all in the making of your national identity: you are your cultural inheritance and nothing else. The myth of the *civic* nation, in contrast, suggests that your national identity is nothing but your choice: you are the political principles you share with other like-minded individuals.<sup>2</sup> (Yack 1996: 198)

In its scholarly guise, the civic–ethnic typology developed against the background of the public controversy over the Alsace that preoccupied the French and German public in the immediate aftermath of the war of 1870–1. In

1882, the French scholar Ernest Renan argued polemically against the insistence on language, blood and soil – Germany’s justification to prevent Alsace from returning to France against the will of the majority of the province’s population. Whereas in the German romantic tradition the nation represents an organic community – Johann Gottfried Herder wrote that nationality was ‘as much a plant of nature as a family, only with more branches’, a point of view that was later politicised by such eminent intellectuals as Johann Gottlieb Fichte and Heinrich von Treitschke<sup>3</sup> – Renan (1995) argued that the nation was essentially a voluntary community whose continued existence depended on a recurrent civic plebiscite: *un plébiscit de tous les jours*. While he conceded the significance of collective historical experiences for national consciousness, he none the less insisted that nations would soon wither if it was not for the civic commitment of their members.

Renan’s thoughts in turn provoked a response from the eminent German historian of the first half of the twentieth century, Friedrich Meinecke. In his seminal *Weltbürgertum und Nationalstaat* (first published in 1907), a study of the intellectual genesis of the German national state, Meinecke introduced the ideal-typical distinction between *Kulturnation* and *Staatsnation*. At the end of the Second World War, Hans Kohn (1945) based his influential *The Idea of Nationalism* on a similar framework, this time by keeping apart a ‘Western’, political type of nationalism from an ‘Eastern’, genealogical-organic one.

The civic-versus-ethnic bipolarity has retained its important place in more recent studies of nationalism. Among the authors to have used it systematically and contributed to its refinement, the works of Anthony D. Smith (1991), Rogers Brubaker (1992), Liah Greenfeld (1992), and Michael Ignatieff (1994) spring to mind. To be sure, each of these authors has different terminological preferences. Brubaker contrasts a ‘state-centred and assimilationist’ with an ‘ethno-cultural and differentialist’ conception of nationality, while Smith, Greenfeld and Ignatieff use the terms ‘civic’ and ‘ethnic’ to separate different types of nationalism. Greenfeld has proposed to further subdivide civic nationalism into an ‘individualistic-libertarian’ and a ‘collectivistic-authoritarian’ variety. To some extent, these terms reflect different conceptual emphases. It cannot be our task here to trace these differences in every detail.<sup>4</sup> Whatever the terminological and substantive differences separating these authors, one or more of the following three dichotomies tend to inform their conceptualisation of the civic–ethnic distinction.

### **Civic voluntarism versus organic determinism**

The first dichotomy separates two orientations that could be termed ‘political voluntarism’ and ‘organic determinism’, respectively. While the civic or political conception of nationhood is voluntarist, putting human will above naturalistic criteria, its ethnic counterpart conceives of the nation as determined by ethnic descent and tradition. These properties, so the

assumption runs, have a life of their own and influence human actors irrespective of their being aware of it. This notion is present in all works discussed above that make use of the concept, sometimes under the heading of ‘cosmopolitanism versus particularism’, but it is perhaps captured most evocatively by Ernest Renan:

Man is the slave neither of his race, his language, nor his religion; neither of the courses of the rivers, nor the mountain ranges. One great aggregate of men, of sound spirit and warm heart, creates a moral conscience that is called a nation.<sup>5</sup> (Renan 1995: 58–9)

### *State-centredness versus culture-centredness*

The second dichotomy is between a state-centred and a culture-centred conception of nationhood. The civic nation, so the argument goes, is primarily a political reality. As such, it is rooted in the institutional framework and administrative apparatus that underpin the modern state, resulting in a near equation of ‘nation’ and ‘state’. The legitimacy of ethnic nationhood, by contrast, rests on the claim to a shared culture in the broadest sense of the word, embodied in a common language, religion, shared historical experiences or genealogical descent. The civic conception of nationhood, we are told, is likely to emerge where the state developed prior to or coincided with the emergence of nationalism, as was the case in England, France, the Netherlands and the United States. An ethnic conception of nationhood, by contrast, is more likely to be found where the realisation of a national state was protracted and contentious, as was the case, for example, in Germany and, above all, in many societies of Eastern Europe where nationalist movements sprang up in opposition to imperial rule. In Hans Kohn’s famous phrase:

Nationalism in the West was based upon a nationality which was the product of social and political factors; nationalism in Germany did not find its justification in a rational societal conception, it found it in the ‘natural’ fact of a community, held together ... by traditional ties of kinship and status. (Kohn 1945: 391)

### *Modernism versus pre-modernism*

The third dichotomy refers to the temporal dimension that distinguishes a modernist conception from one that emphasises the role of the pre-modern past in the evolution of nations. From this viewpoint, civic nationhood is not only voluntarist but also essentially modernist. That is to say, civic nationalists are mainly concerned with the development of the nation as a political and cultural community in the present. This modernist outlook, we are told, even inspires the historicist rhetoric and language of civic nationalists searching for national founding moments. While they too may show a keen interest in determining national origins, they tend to go back no further than the late eighteenth century. They show a marked preference for revolutionary turning points – 1776, 1789 or 1848 – when the ‘sovereign people’ became an

autonomous actor and when politics became a public affair. The classic example here is, of course, the French revolutionaries' insistence that they had achieved a clean break with the past.<sup>6</sup> In sharp contrast, the proponents of ethnic nationalism conceive of the nation as an organism that develops slowly and more or less continually in the course of history's evolution. Friedrich Meinecke, in particular, saw the difference between deterministic and voluntarist understandings of nationality in decidedly evolutionary terms. For Meinecke (1917: 6), then, progress meant that nations were moving from a 'vegetative and dormant' period to a period when the people 'express themselves in great united actions and manifestations of will'.

### **A reformulation: boundary mechanisms and symbolic resources**

The analytical distinction between civic and ethnic forms of nationhood undoubtedly has helped to shed light on the complex genesis of nationalism, not least by enabling comparisons between a wide range of different cases and historical periods. It has proved particularly effective in institutional analyses of the kind Rogers Brubaker pursued in his comparison between France and Germany, where he showed how different understandings of nationhood were translated into contrasting citizenship legislation. In France, this led to the adoption of *jus soli* in 1889, whereas in Germany the *Reichs- und Staatsangehörigkeitsgesetz* of 1913 rested on the more exclusive *jus sanguinis* (Brubaker 1992).

A quite different framework is required, however, if our concern relates to the discontinuously occurring public redefinitions of nationhood rather than to long-term developments, parliamentary or government debates, or legislative arrangements. The classic model has turned out particularly inadequate when it comes to analysing national identity as a public discourse as represented in newspapers, public speeches and the like. Its limitations have become particularly obvious to historians and social scientists studying national movements and political ideologues rather than focusing on a handful of selected thinkers and intellectuals. They have often found themselves unable to distinguish as neatly as some historians of ideas have done between civic and ethnic nations, and between civic and ethnic forms of national identity.<sup>7</sup> In a sense, of course, this is because nationalism is almost by necessity a complex blend of these two visions – the voluntarist and the deterministic – in accordance with its proponents' two-fold aim of creating a new community while at the same time circumscribing its cultural boundaries.

Yet the temptation of classifying entire cases rather than examining national identities in terms of a dynamic process has not been confined to historians of ideas and political philosophers. In some recent works of historical sociology, too, the distinction between civic and organic forms of nationhood has been employed in terms of a scheme of classification rather than as a Weberian ideal-type. This has been true in particular of large-scale comparative studies

involving Germany. Liah Greenfeld (1992), for example, ends up equating the German case with the ethnic type of nationalism, while she defines France as civic. Even Rogers Brubaker (1992), although he takes great care in his comparison of German and French citizenship legislation to avoid turning ideal into real types, comes up with a similarly clear-cut picture of a French civic and a German ethnic nation. What is more, all these works tend to equate ‘cultural’ factors (e.g. references to language) with the ‘ethnic’ type, and ‘political’ factors (e.g. references to state institutions) with the ‘civic’ type.<sup>8</sup>

Instead of abandoning the classic conception altogether, however, what seems to be needed is a framework that can grasp the process-like nature of national identities. Rogers Brubaker himself has recently called for a rethinking of the parameters that traditionally have informed the study of nationalism. Specifically, he has proposed to conceive of nationhood as ‘a contingent, conjunctureally fluctuating, and precarious frame of vision and basis for individual and collective action, rather than as a relatively stable product of deep developmental trends in economy, polity, or culture’ (Brubaker 1996: 19). I suggest that the reformulation of the classical civic–ethnic dualism ought to form part of a rethinking along the lines Brubaker has outlined.

As an alternative to the classical model, I propose to distinguish between two levels of analysis that are not kept separate in either of the standard formulations of the civic–ethnic distinction. We need to distinguish, on the one hand, between the *mechanisms* which social actors use as they reconstruct the boundaries of national identity at a particular point in time; and, on the other hand, the *symbolic resources* upon which they draw when they reconstruct these boundaries. On this basis, I differentiate between two *boundary mechanisms*. The first of these two boundary mechanisms rests on a voluntarist conception of nationhood and can therefore be described as the *voluntarist boundary mechanism*. The second is predicated on an organic and deterministic conception of nationhood and we can therefore call it the *organic boundary mechanism*.

Of the three dichotomies that tend to inform the classic formulations, I thus propose to retain merely the first one, between a voluntarist and an organic conception of nationhood. I use the word ‘organic’ rather than the more common ‘ethnic’ because it stands for the precise opposite of a voluntarist conception of nationhood. The term ‘organic’ is meant to denote a particular, namely deterministic, mechanism of constructing national identity. In contrast, the term ‘ethnic’ refers to a specific *understanding of* national identity – one in which ethnic descent appears as the prime factor. This understanding tends to arise when the ‘historical past’ is perceived through an ‘organic’ (i.e. deterministic) lens. I also wish to disengage ‘voluntarist’ and ‘civic’. The latter concept is commonly used to denote a brand of nationalism that combines an emphasis on politics and political institutions (as manifested in the modern state) with a voluntarist vision of community. The drawback with this widespread usage of the term ‘civic’ is that it conflates a particular symbolic resource (political values and institutions) and a specific mechanism of identity

construction (voluntarism) into a single concept. A concept, moreover, that is ill suited to come to terms with the process-like nature of national identity.<sup>9</sup>

We can avoid this problem by differentiating between boundary mechanisms and symbolic resources. The idea behind this analytical distinction is similar to what Skocpol had in mind when she distinguished between ‘ideology’ and ‘cultural idioms’. As she explains:

Cultural idioms have a longer-term, more anonymous, and less partisan existence than ideologies. When political actors construct ideological arguments for particular action-related purposes, they invariably use or take account of available cultural idioms, and those idioms may structure their arguments in partially unintended ways. (Skocpol 1994: 204)

To rephrase this statement for our own purpose: Employing voluntarist and/or organic boundary mechanisms, nationalists create new ideological syntheses from available cultural idioms and resources. It goes without saying that the two boundary mechanisms I propose – ‘voluntarist’ and ‘organic’, respectively – form ideal types rather than practical historical categories (see Table 1). In the context of nationalist discourse, organic boundary mechanisms fulfil the function that Mary Douglas has termed the ‘naturalization of social classifications’. As she has put it in a crucial passage:

There needs to be an analogy by which the formal structure of a crucial set of social relations is found in the physical world, or in the supernatural world, or in eternity, anywhere, so long as it is not seen as a socially contrived arrangement (Douglas 1987: 48).

‘Nations’ and ‘national identities’ are prime examples of the sort of naturalised institutions Douglas is discussing in her book. Where voluntarism with its emphasis on the constructed character of communities would leave ‘the nation’ underdetermined, references to its alleged organic rootedness serve to establish a link with the invariant in a world of recurrent change.

At the same time, I propose to distinguish between *four symbolic resources*: political values/institutions, culture, history and geography. These cultural

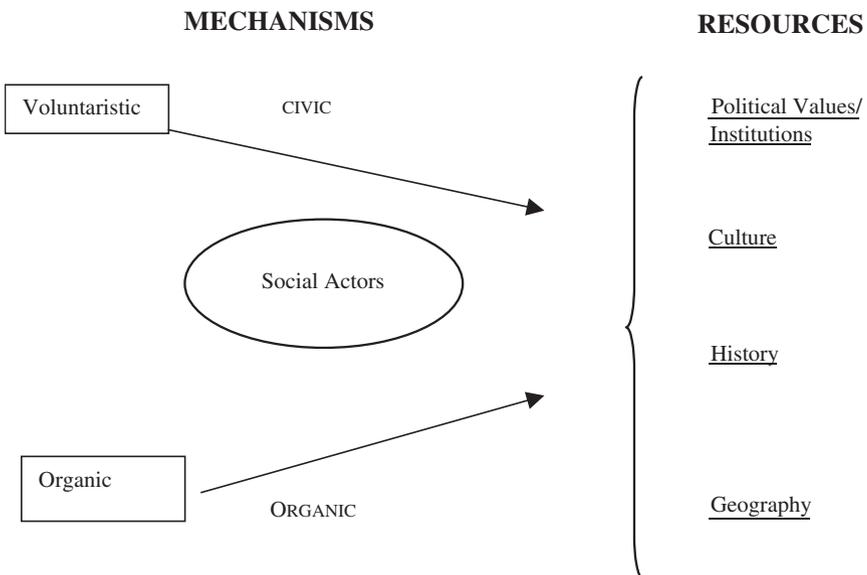
**Table 1.** *Conceptions of nationhood*

<i>Mechanism</i>	<i>Logic</i>	<i>Focus</i>
Voluntarist	Constructivist	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● community of law</li> <li>● state institutions</li> <li>● modernity</li> <li>● political culture</li> <li>● community of native culture</li> </ul>
Organic	Deterministic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● pre-modernity</li> <li>● ethnic descent</li> <li>● geography</li> </ul>

resources provide the symbolic raw material, as it were, which social actors use as they define national identities in public discourse. Yet, depending on which boundary mechanism they employ – voluntarist or organic – a different picture of national identity emerges.

The subsequent analysis, then, intends to demonstrate what we have already noted in connection with Renan’s distinction between voluntarist and deterministic forms of nationalism, namely, that particular definitions of national identity rise to prominence in particular historical situations where they serve to address, and potentially resolve, specific political problems. Thus, instead of conceiving of voluntarist and organic nationhood in terms of references to cultural content – such as language, history, political values or institutions – we might more suitably regard them as different mechanisms for constructing national identity. By exploring the definition of nationhood along the conceptual axis of ‘voluntarist’ and ‘organic’, and by relating these constructions to shifts in the domestic and international context, we can move beyond the rigidity and pervasive determinism of the classificatory approach.<sup>10</sup>

There is, admittedly, considerable evidence to support the argument that those who subscribe to a voluntarist brand of national identity are likely to show a preference for political institutions and rather unlikely to embrace the notion of shared ethnic descent to buttress their claims. At the same time, proponents of an organic variety of nationhood tend to display a preoccupation with ethnic descent or geography (embodied in concepts such as ‘nature’, ‘homeland’, or the ‘native landscape’), reflecting their conviction that a purely constructed nationality would be hopelessly underdetermined. Even so, on closer inspection things present themselves in a less clear-cut fashion. The



**Figure 1.** Boundary mechanisms and symbolic resources

evidence to be deployed in the second part of this essay suggests that what matters with regard to the construction of national identities is less *what* resources political actors draw upon than *how* they put these resources to practical use: the voluntarist conception of nationhood processes the available resources in voluntaristic terms – as a product of human action; the organic conception of nationhood, by contrast, processes the resources in deterministic terms – as manifestations of the communal organism called ‘the nation’. (These operations are summarised in Figure 1).

Before turning to an analysis of the Swiss case, it might be useful to consider briefly a relatively familiar example. The use of language in the national discourse of other European societies can help us to illustrate the usefulness of the above analytical framework in a very general manner. Like the communal past or political values, language can be conceived of in both voluntarist and organic terms, as can be demonstrated by comparing France and Germany, the two cases that are often portrayed as the archetypes of ethnic and voluntarist nationalism. Thus, while Herder and the German Romantics portrayed language as an expression of the organic growth of a community, in the second half of the nineteenth century some liberal champions of *Kleindeutschland* regarded linguistic assimilation as the solution to the question of a national language.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, during the so-called school strike in Polish Silesia in 1926, the *Deutscher Volksbund*, hardly an organisation committed to an inclusive conception of nationhood, sought to defend the interests of ethnic Germans under pressure from the state-building nationalism of the Polish authorities by arguing that membership in a minority was a matter of personal choice (Fink 1972: 341–2).

In France too, a country frequently portrayed as a showcase for an inclusive nationalism, both voluntarist and organic visions have found prominent expression in public debates over national identity. The role attributed to language can again serve as an illustration. The French revolutionaries, to be sure, saw the role of language in society from a predominantly voluntarist perspective. Thus for them, the willingness to acquire the standard French that around 1800 was only mastered by a minority of France’s inhabitants was the clearest proof of national loyalty. As David Bell observes: ‘They did not consider language a primordial, determining element of national character but, rather, a sign of full assimilation into a community created on the basis of political will’ (1995: 1404). By contrast, at the close of the nineteenth century, many anti-Dreyfusards clearly saw language and nationality through a decidedly organic perspective.<sup>12</sup> This led them to allege that certain sections of the French public, notably Jews, could not become French even if they mastered the national language. Language, from this perspective, was regarded as a determining force, rooted in ancestry and the soil, a manifestation of an organic French national character whose purity was seen to be under threat. Meanwhile, the political discourse of the Third Republic more generally suggests that a synthesis of voluntarist and organic conceptions occurred in the rhetoric of various political groups.<sup>13</sup>

### The Swiss scenario – a general outline

The Swiss case lends itself even more to bringing out the limitations of the traditional typological approach, because within Switzerland claims to nationhood have had to be realised in a polyethnic environment. It is precisely this seemingly paradoxical constellation – the structurally imposed inability to conform to classic nationalism, which in turn triggered efforts aimed at defining national identity in ways that could satisfy its essential normative assumptions – which renders Switzerland an intriguing case for the study of national identity. Because its polyethnic composition deviated so obviously from the nationalist norm and had its legitimacy periodically contested both domestically and abroad, it was never self-evident but had to be constantly reasserted and redefined. What the Swiss case brings into sharp relief is what we have already noted in connection with Renan's distinction between voluntaristic and deterministic forms of nationalism, namely, that particular definitions of national identity rise to prominence in particular historical situations where they serve to address, and potentially resolve, specific political problems.

Thus, when modern nationalism began to spread across Europe, and above all with the rise of ethno-linguistic nationalism in the last third of the nineteenth century, Switzerland's political class faced a particularly challenging task. Unlike their counterparts in countries such as Germany, France or England, Swiss would-be nation-makers could not refer to shared ethnicity, in the sense of shared ethnic descent or linguistic affiliation, to bolster their claims. This posed serious problems in terms of legitimacy and international recognition in a Europe where cultural homogeneity was regarded as the cornerstone of true and authentic nationhood. Yet, the national ideology they constructed out of this quandary was neither purely voluntarist nor purely organic. Rather, they responded to the challenge of ethnic nationalism by constructing a national identity that combined voluntarist and organic elements. While fervently embracing the rhetoric of civic exceptionalism, Switzerland's political and cultural elites at the same time fostered an ideology of organic (rather than ethnic in the sense of ethnic descent) nationhood. More specifically, they claimed that the Swiss nation was both a voluntary and a natural community.<sup>14</sup>

The Swiss scenario thus confirms that what matters with regard to the construction of national identities is less *what* resources political actors draw upon than *how* they put these resources to practical use. For example, most of those who participated in the controversy over Swiss nationhood from the late eighteenth to the late nineteenth century were preoccupied with the Confederate past. What is significant, however, is that their historicisms were not of a piece. Some conceived of the late medieval liberation myths primarily in ideological terms, as didactic frameworks that could inspire political action. This applies in particular to the radicals and liberals of the 1830s and 1840s who fought for the establishment of a federal state, reflecting their aim of integrating different religious and linguistic groups into a single national state.

In 1841, the Swiss novelist and radical, Gottfried Keller, fiercely criticised the view, promoted by the editors of several German and Italian newspapers, which reduced nationality to a matter of linguistic affiliation and ethnic descent. There was no question, Keller argued against the proponents of ethno-linguistic nationalism, that the Swiss formed a separate nation rooted in a distinctive national character. The latter, Keller asserted, was the product of two emotional attachments: 'love of liberty and of independence', and love of the 'small yet beautiful fatherland'. Foreign nationals who shared these dispositions, who loved Switzerland's political institutions [*schweizerische Staatseinrichtungen*] and voluntarily adopted Swiss customs [*unsere Sitten und Gebräuche*] were to be considered Swiss citizens in the same way as those Swiss whose fathers had fought in the medieval wars of liberation. In fact, Keller argued that those native Swiss who preferred foreign values and customs to those they found in Switzerland (an attitude he considered entirely legitimate) had ceased to be members of the Swiss nation.<sup>15</sup>

By contrast, the opponents of the liberal state that was established in 1848 tended to adhere to a genealogical interpretation of the Confederate past, seeing it as a testimony that the Swiss Confederation had grown organically out of the ethnic core provided by the founding generation. Thus, for the self-declared defendants of the loose confederation (*Staatenbund*) that had preceded the 1848 Constitution, the new federal state (*Bundesstaat*) was an artificial construction that went at the expense of the authority of the organically evolved cantons. This organic historicism came to form the common denominator in the conservative counter-nationalism of the 1840s and beyond. A Catholic newspaper report of 1846 encapsulated this position:

The question that remains to be answered is this: who constitutes the Fatherland, the Nation? The divided authorities, the party that breeds revolution and public outrage, or those immediate descendants of the heroic forefathers who constitute the pillars of our Fatherland's history and liberty?<sup>16</sup>

The Swiss case reveals a similar ambiguity concerning 'national culture'. Those who advocated a voluntaristic conception of culture, while conceding that it pertained to the historical *longue durée*, none the less insisted that it could be changed more or less at will. The champions of organic nationhood emphatically denied this, arguing that national culture represented a manifestation of the nation's continual and natural growth. The same holds true for attitudes towards the state and its constitutive institutions. Those who adhered to a voluntarist conception of nationhood tended to portray them as man-made, as the outcome of deliberate human action. Those who subscribed to an organic conception, on the other hand, tended to brandish the liberal state of 1848 as an artificial creation designed to suffocate the cantons' traditional rights and liberties. Moreover, when Switzerland's polyethnic conception of nationality found itself challenged from the 1870s by the ethno-linguistic varieties that prevailed in Germany and Italy, this triggered a variety

of responses. Some argued that Switzerland was a voluntary nation and thus different from its neighbours; some maintained that she had evolved a national cultural essence over the centuries since her founding in the late medieval period; and yet others displayed a rhetoric that fused these two narratives into an ostensibly convenient ideological synthesis.<sup>17</sup>

### Switzerland in the 1930s – between *Willensnation* and *Wesensgemeinschaft*

The complex interaction of voluntaristic and organic boundary mechanisms, between the visions of *Willensnation* and *Wesensgemeinschaft*, assumed a new urgency in the inter-war period. It was in this era of Swiss history, moreover, that the public debate about national identity reached a level of intensity that was unprecedented. The 1930s therefore deserve special attention. While several factors contributed to this development, geopolitical developments played the decisive part. In particular, the rise of National Socialism and its ideological companion, *völkisch* nationalism, engendered a popular counter-nationalism. Many contemporaries were well aware of living in a public climate that was highly charged with national emotion. As the Social Democrat, Ernst Nobs, commented in 1938, after Austria had been incorporated into the German Reich: ‘Under the pressure of recent European developments, the will to defend the country by both military and spiritual means has asserted itself with a degree of unanimity, vigour and passion that is unprecedented in our history.’<sup>18</sup>

But while a succession of ideological and actual threats had helped to engender a popular nationalism in Switzerland, there was still considerable variety as to the way in which Swiss nationhood was to be defined. Depending on their traditional worldviews and the ways in which they perceived the developments around them, different groups emphasised different elements as they defined Swiss national identity. This reactive nationalism, then, combined voluntarist and organic boundary mechanisms and drew on various kinds of symbolic resources.

#### *Political values/institutions*

Political values and institutions were the key symbolic resource in the voluntarist discourse of nationhood. Those subscribing to a voluntaristic conception of nationhood pointed to the contrast between Switzerland’s democratic system and that of their autocratic neighbours, emphasising the constitutive role of liberal values and democratic institutions. That political values and institutions would play a prominent role for liberal groups is hardly surprising, given that these were ideally suited to underscore civic nationalism’s central creed: that the nation is a voluntary community of individual citizens. The view that Switzerland, to a greater degree than most other European nations, represented such a ‘voluntary community’ frequently surfaced in

public debate. We encounter it in the assertion that the survival of the Swiss nation-state is contingent on the will of its citizens to preserve it as a distinct political, historical and cultural community. As the historian Hermann Weilenmann encapsulated this creed in 1938: 'Switzerland's national essence is of a mental kind, because it lacks both the tangibility of physical features and the mythical dream of an *Urvater*: the will to preserve this state unites this people and secures its alliance.'<sup>19</sup>

However, the reconstruction of Swiss nationhood by referring to democratic institutions and values was not confined to liberal and left-of-centre groups. Political parties and social movements on the conservative right, too, showed a considerable concern with the state and its institutions in particular. Yet, in contrast to their opponents, organic nationalists demanded changes of more drastic proportions. The national revival that they envisaged asked for a return to a pre-modern order that had allegedly been corrupted by the rise of the bureaucratic liberal state. The aim was to recreate within society 'the feeling of family unity that got lost'.<sup>20</sup> The means proposed to achieve this were twofold: a restructuring of Swiss society along corporatist lines, combined with a strengthening of the powers of the political executive at the expense of representative democracy. Segments of similar economic activity would form the building blocks of the organic polity that was embodied in the corporatist state. As a radical middle-class movement put it: 'The call for the corporatist order is nothing but the natural expression of the turning away from the basic principles of economic liberalism.'<sup>21</sup> In other words, whereas liberal and social-democratic groups portrayed the state, its institutions and underpinning values as a product of human will, adherents of the conservative right, envisaged the ideal state as an organism that was determined by the 'natural' needs of human beings.

### *History*

Historicism is not the preserve of organic nationalists. As a symbolic resource, history takes a vital place in the rhetoric of those who adhere to a voluntarist conception of nationhood too. Yet as with regard to civic values and institutions, civic nationalists' approach to history was sharply distinct from those who argued along organic lines. Specifically, liberal and left-of-centre groups tended to associate the historical roots of the Swiss nation with the revolutions and constitutional reforms of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. For a typical comment on the historical dimension of Swiss nationhood from such a perspective: 'Our culture goes back to the bourgeois revolutions in late-eighteenth century England, France, and later developments in Germany.'<sup>22</sup>

While leaving no doubt that the events of 1798 and 1848 represented the landmarks in the evolution of modern Switzerland, some contemporaries admitted a longer historical trajectory. The late founding and liberation myths in particular possessed considerable resonance. But unlike conservative circles

who subscribed to an organic view of Swiss nationhood, liberal groups interpreted the myths in the light of the republican revolutions of the turn of the eighteenth century. Allied to this civic historicism was an 'ideological myth of descent', epitomised in a narrative that portrayed the national founders as abstract role models rather than genealogical ancestors.<sup>23</sup>

In the organic vision of the national past, history represents a force in its own right, a fate to be accepted rather than a process to be interfered in at will. As a contemporary put it in 1939: 'There are no deliberate new beginnings in the life of history ... only a hopelessly confused or seduced person wants to be in charge of their own fate'.<sup>24</sup> Two features in particular were characteristic of the way in which organic nationalists implemented history in their constructions of national identity. First, the pre-modern past takes the key role, while the revolutionary transformations of the eighteenth and nineteenth century receive little attention or are depicted in negative terms. The second feature that is typical of the organic view of the national past is a conspicuous interest in, and tendency to elaborate on, the issue of genealogy. Unlike the champions of the voluntarist conception, genealogical descent is a central tenet in the historicism of organic nationalists. Quite often, this line of thought is embodied in a 'genealogical myth of descent'. The Catholic-Conservative newspaper *Vaterland* supplies us with a particularly clear statement on this theme. Contrasting the organic view of the nation with the civic conception and practice dominant in liberal and left-of-centre discourse, the conservative newspaper wrote:

We are talking a lot about fatherland, but many of us have lost the true meaning of this world: the land of the forefathers. The fatherland has become a mere object of patriotic festivals. In our daily lives, a lively patriotism has given way to a mere belief in the state. But this is tantamount to an impoverishment of our cultural life.... The homesickness that tends to haunt the Swiss abroad is not rooted in the state, but in the fatherland, the land of the forefathers.<sup>25</sup>

### *Geography*

It was between the late nineteenth century and the end of the Second World War that geography markedly gained in currency as a symbolic resource in the reconstruction of Swiss national identity. Depending on whether geography was viewed through a voluntarist or an organic lens, the nation was defined in a different way. A glance at the use of semantics is instructive in this regard. When Liberals and Social Democrats referred to geographical features, the term they most frequently used was 'territory'. Switzerland, they argued, not only possessed a national history and distinct political institutions, but a national territory as well. This territory was seen as bearing the stamp of the people who inhabited it. There were also mythical depictions of the natural environment, but these followed the voluntarist credo that the natural environment, rather than shaping 'national character', reflected national virtues.<sup>26</sup>

By contrast, groups that adhered to an organic conception of nationhood – particularly conservatives and those further to the right of the political spectrum, but increasingly also portions of the liberal elite – used terms like ‘nature’, ‘landscape’ or ‘homeland’ to forge a link between Swiss nationhood and geography. In the course of this process, geography – primarily in the form of alpine landscape – came to take the role of a surrogate for language. For unlike a shared language, geography could be invoked to buttress claims that the Swiss were in fact a nation with a distinct national character. At a time when ethno-linguistic nationalism was on the rise in much of Europe, the Alps in particular were portrayed as a force capable of shaping the Swiss nation and the character of its population; as a force, that is, which had the power of transforming a polyethnic population into a homogeneous and united nation strong enough to stand up to the challenge of Italian and German nationalisms. A quotation dating from 1935, taken from a Zurich-based newspaper aimed at a lower middle-class readership, reflects this organic variety of geographical national identity:

We understand by Swissness a certain inheritance of spiritual and physical features which we find among the people as a whole between the Alps and the Jura throughout the centuries of our history to the present day. ... We are the only typically Alpine state in Europe. ... The Alps are our actual strength, for it is in the Alpine human being that we find our common ground.<sup>27</sup>

### *Culture*

My final example concerns the role of culture in the Swiss nationalism of the 1930s. The available evidence leaves little doubt that from around 1935 onwards references to culture gained centre stage in the overall endeavour at forging a distinct Swiss identity. The ideological threat of *völkisch* nationalism provided the major impetus behind a conspicuous public interest in the issue of Swiss national culture. In the face of the challenge at hand, history and political institutions – the symbolic resources traditionally favoured by those who adhered to a civic conception of nationhood – seemed somewhat deficient. As the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* expressed this dilemma in 1936:

No matter if we trace our *Swissness* back to an original population or if we regard it as the result of historical experiences or shared struggles for liberty: what will remain decisive in the eyes of our people is that the centrifugal force which may result from our constituting a unity out of three different nations is outweighed by converging forces of an actually existing rather than simply imagined *Wesensgemeinschaft*.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, under specific historical conditions liberal nationalists in search of an essentialist *Wesensgemeinschaft* placed culture at the centre of their overall endeavour at fortifying Swiss nationhood. To substantiate their claim that Switzerland in fact represented a distinct national culture in spite of its being composed of four different language groups, a considerable segment of the cultural elite embarked on journeys into the Swiss past. A distinct state-building process that could be traced back to early modern times, some argued,

had favoured the emergence of an authentically Swiss culture. Others, again, emphasised that many of the great cultural movements – Christianity, Gothics or the Renaissance – had affected Switzerland directly, rather than via Germany. The only great cultural movement that had originated in Germany, the Reformation, some pointed out, had undergone a republican transformation in the Swiss context. Zwingli and Calvin, a number of commentators argued, had been democratic humanists, which had brought them in natural opposition to Luther, who had not questioned the authority of the German princes. As one commentator summed up the general argument that played so important a role in this flourishing Swiss cultural nationalism: ‘In other words, there emerged, in the sphere of religious faith as in many other domains, a Swiss cultural commonality that transcended ethnic groups and shaped our ways of life ... in a much profounder way than language ever could.’<sup>29</sup>

One can hardly fail to recognise, however, that the notion of a cultural *Wesensgemeinschaft*, which was evoked with great frequency in the late 1930s, indicates the blurring of the boundary between voluntarist and organic conceptions of nationhood. It is therefore not surprising that many traditional champions of an organic conception of nationhood were sympathetic to the cultural narrative that liberal groups had introduced into the national discourse in the mid-1930s. In the context of the ideological climate of the later 1930s, then, a voluntarist and an organic understanding of nationhood were fused into a highly popular cultural nationalism. This nationalism found its official manifestation in the government’s report on Swiss national culture of 1938, and in the National Exhibition of 1939 in Zurich.<sup>30</sup>

The message to the nation that was constantly conveyed by the National Exhibition rested on the same combination of voluntarism and cultural determinism that we have already encountered in public discourse. On the one hand, Switzerland was portrayed as modern, dynamic and future-oriented. On the other hand, this discourse was seamlessly interwoven into a narrative that depicted Swiss nationhood as rooted in an organic Swiss culture. The voluntarist conception, with its rhetoric of the human deed, was balanced by proclamations in the vocabulary of organic growth. One newspaper report gave expression to this perception in a striking manner:

The National Exhibition rests on a unique fusion of the natural and the man-made ... In the midst of the natural world we find the products of human creativity ... There is indeed a contrast, but this contrast does not represent a loss but, quite to the contrary, brings reassurance.<sup>31</sup>

### **Conclusion: the limits of civic exceptionalism in a nationalist age**

Starting from a critique of the classic distinction between civic and ethnic forms of nationalism, this article has outlined an alternative framework for the study of national identity. This framework, it has been argued, is better suited to grasp the process-like nature of national identities, shaped as they are by

national movements operating in a rapidly changing social, political and geopolitical context. Such an approach can help sharpen our awareness that national identities tend to rest on a dynamic mixture of voluntarist and organic conceptions, as embodied in the parallel claims of civic exceptionalism and organic nationalism. The discourse of civic exceptionalism, while portraying the nation as virtuous and unique, also brings out its constructed and contingent nature, thus exposing its potential fragility. It is in this context, and particularly if there is a perceived threat to the nation's integrity as a distinctive community, that organic boundary mechanisms can provide a 'stabilising principle' (Douglas 1987: 48).<sup>32</sup>

As the Swiss example has demonstrated, the sole reliance on a voluntarist vision of communal relations posed considerable problems for nation-building elites having to operate in a world defined by the doctrines of classical nationalism. Nations, according to nationalism's core doctrine, had to be 'natural' communities. To be able to do justice to classical nationalism's criteria of national authenticity, the national ideologues of polyethnic Switzerland sought to demonstrate that their nation was organically determined rather than merely a product of human will. The predicament consisted precisely in the fact that the view of society as a dynamic and abstract *Gesellschaft* brings to the fore the constructed and contingent nature of modern nations and national identities. What is more, in propagating the belief in civic exceptionalism, it literally glorifies the voluntary dimension of nationhood, depicting it as superior to the putatively parochial affiliations of language and ethnicity.<sup>33</sup>

There is a fundamental paradox that typifies the parallel use of civic exceptionalism and naturalistic nationalism: historically, the claim of civic exceptionalism allowed polyethnic nations to meet the 'distinctive' criterion of nationhood; but to meet the 'natural' criterion they had, to some extent and under certain circumstances, to undermine the very notion of civic exceptionalism. Yet, in view of what was at stake, such paradoxes and contradictions, while they may strike the scholarly observer who cares about logical consistency, tended to be disregarded by the social actors directly involved. Their principal task was to construct a national identity that was both salient domestically and could secure international recognition for their polity.

## Notes

1 For historical case studies that argue along such lines, see Zimmer (2000 and 2003).

2 For other works that distinguish between two forms of nationalism, see, for instance, Meinecke (1917); Kohn (1945); Kamenka (1976); Plamenatz (1976); Brubaker (1992); Greenfeld (1992); Smith (1991).

3 Quoted in Viroli (1995: 123).

4 For good discussions of these issues see, for example, the essays by Bernard Yack (1996) and Nicholas Xenos (1996), published in a special issue on nationalism in the journal *Critical Review*. For an examination of the pre-1945 debate, see Smith (2000: ch. 1).

5 As is well known, Renan's definition of the nation also contains references to 'common glories in the past', a 'common possession of a rich legacy of memories' and even 'the cult of ancestors' (Renan 1995: 58). Yet while Renan acknowledges the significance of these elements for modern national identities, it is none the less important to stress that he conceives, for example, of the communal past, expressed in a group's collective memory, in voluntarist rather than organic terms. For Renan, cultures and pasts have been fostered and created; they do not determine people's lives in a rigid manner. They may not even shape their thoughts and actions. They only do have an impact if people happen to *make them a part* of their personal and collective memories.

6 'No nation has ever before embarked on so resolute an attempt as that of the French in 1789 to break with the past, to make, as it were, a scission in their life line and to create an unbridgeable gulf between all they had hitherto been and all they now aspired to be' (Alexis de Tocqueville, cited in Chartier 1991: 14).

7 An example of a history of idea approach to national identity is a recent study by political theorist Maurizio Viroli. Juxtaposing thinkers like Voltaire and Rousseau with Hamann and Herder, Viroli writes in his *For Love of Country*: 'For the founders of nationalism the distinctive feature of the fatherland is the spiritual unity based on language ... The birth of the language of nationalism involved a change in the meaning of the concept of fatherland, which gradually became a non-political concept no longer centred on political and civil liberty, but on the cultural and spiritual unity of a people' (1995: 93–4).

8 Works that approach nationalism from an intellectual history perspective are legion. See, for example, Berlin (1976 and 1981); Viroli (1995).

9 The same problem in my view besets the distinction between 'cultural' and 'political' nationalism which has found its most systematic elaboration in the work of John Hutchinson (1994). Although this approach has proved extremely productive for the study of movements of national cultural revival, it also fuses into one concept both forms of identity construction ('voluntarist' and/or 'organic') and symbolic resources ('politics' and/or 'culture') drawn upon by social actors in particular historical contexts. In an excellent essay on Herder and Rousseau, F. M. Barnard (1983) has (implicitly) highlighted the limitations of this framework by showing that the traditionally held view – that Rousseau was a political and Herder a cultural nationalist – is problematic. Barnard is able to show that both Rousseau and Herder were equally concerned with the cultural and political aspects of nationhood. Both believed in the existence of a cultural nation that preceded the political nation arising in the modern era. The cardinal difference between the two most seminal philosophers of the national question in the eighteenth century concerns the mechanisms that determine the formation and development of nations. Rousseau believed that an external legislator would play an indispensable role in the development of a uniform national culture, which he saw as a precondition for a fully functional state. By contrast, Herder regarded the educational activism preached by Rousseau as potentially oppressive because it favoured unity over pluralism, and because it sharply contradicted his view of the nation as organic growth and unfolding. In other words, Herder leaned more towards the organic pole, while Rousseau, although by no means free of deterministic convictions, tended to subscribe to a more voluntarist position.

10 The classificatory approach to national identity has its scholarly origins in large-scale comparisons of entire nation-states, and of the works of philosophers such as Herder, Rousseau, Burke, Fichte, Renan, Weber and Acton. It has not sprung from detailed studies of historical cases and specific sequences of events, which in part explains why it is ill suited to come to terms with the complex and process-like nature of national identity that manifests itself in the modern public sphere, with its political struggles and controversies. For contributions that treat nationalism as a political idea that became significant because it provided a response to the problems of political legitimacy and social order that came to face modern societies, see Breuille (2000); Smith (1981).

11 This is demonstrated in Breuille (1993).

12 As Albert Sorel wrote in 1898 in an essay entitled 'La Langue Française et l'Alsace': 'Every sentence we speak ... expresses our national character. This character comes down to us from our predecessors, who also spoke this language, and who handed it down to us as our inheritance. As we stumble through words in earliest childhood and then eventually learn to impose order on

speech, we are reliving the lives of our ancestors. Their spirits are called back to life; we become saturated with their spirit.' Cited in Delmas' (2001: 161–2) excellent essay on the *École Libre des Sciences Politiques*.

13 See Winock (1998: 5–26, 111–30); Weber (1991: 189–204).

14 If we take citizenship legislation as a touchstone for public attitudes to Swiss nationhood, then a few things are worth highlighting. The first concerns the source of authority in granting citizenship rights. With few exceptions, these matters remained firmly in the hands of the cantons and municipalities. The federal state could but make recommendations, which the cantons and municipalities were free to accept or reject. But the pressure on reform was mounting from the late nineteenth century, when liberal groups, concerned about the low naturalisation rate in the face of increasing labour immigration from Southern Europe (particularly Italy), began to press for the introduction of *jus soli*. On 28 March 1899 the Federal Council sent a circular to all cantonal governments inquiring about their views on *jus soli*. Of twenty-five cantons only eight (Zurich, Basel Town, St Gall, Aargau, Thurgau, Ticino, Vaud, Geneva) expressed support for a change of federal legislation. A federal law of 1903, the so-called *Bürgerrechtsgesetz*, granted cantons the right to introduce *jus soli*. Not a single canton was to make use of this provision. But in practice things were more complex. To begin with, the main opposition to *jus soli* came from the municipalities (*Bürgergemeinden*), which in Switzerland form legal corporations, rather than the cantons. Between 1908 and 1913, 72 per cent of Switzerland's municipalities did not naturalise a single foreign resident, while twenty municipalities – mostly larger towns – were responsible for 63 per cent of all naturalisations. We can thus conclude, as a broad generalisation, that the larger and the more urbanised cantons and municipalities such as Basel, Zurich and Geneva, showed a more liberal attitude to naturalisation and effectively adopted the principle of *jus soli* than the smaller, more rural ones. This situation has remained largely unchanged to the present day. On these developments, see Schlöpfer (1969: 99–105, 170–6); Romano (1996). For two important new studies that emphasise the important role of individual states in determining the practice of citizenship in the German case before the First World War, see Gosewinkel (2001) and Fahrmeier (1997).

15 Keller expressed his thoughts in an essay entitled 'Vermischte Gedanken über die Schweiz'. The text has been published in Morgenthaler et al. (2001: 385–9).

16 Cited in Luzzato (1996: 120).

17 The argument is developed more fully in Zimmer (2003). See also Romano (1996).

18 *Rote Revue. Sozialistische Monatsschrift*, 18 March 1938.

19 *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 12 May 1938.

20 *Die Neue Schweiz. Organ der Bewegung für Nationale Erneuerung*, 17 November 1933.

21 *Neue Schweiz. Organ der Bewegung für Nationale Erneuerung*, 12 April 1935.

22 *Die Nation. Zeitung für Demokratie und Volksgemeinschaft*, 15 March 1935.

23 For the distinction between 'ideological' and 'genealogical myths of descent', see Smith (1984).

24 Cited in Möckli (1973: 8).

25 *Vaterland. Konservatives Zentralorgan für die deutsche Schweiz*, 1 August 1934.

26 They tended to reiterate a thought pattern first expressed by the Swiss novelist Gottfried Keller. In the 1850s, Keller's republican patriotism culminated in the following statement: '[w]ith the thoughtlessness of youth and childish age, I believed that the natural beauty of Switzerland was a reflection of historical and political merit and of the patriotism of the Swiss people: an equivalent of freedom itself.' Cited in Jost (1988: 18–19).

27 Cited in Zimmer (1996: 100). For a systematic examination of the nature–nation link, see also Zimmer (1998) and Kaufmann (1998).

28 *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, 23 August 1936 (emphasis added).

29 *Die Schweiz. Ein nationales Jahrbuch* (1936, vol. VII: 48).

30 See *Botschaft des Bundesrates an die Bundesversammlung über die Organisation und die Aufgaben der schweizerischen Kulturwahrung und Kulturwerbung*, announced to parliament on 9 December 1938. *Bundesblatt* 90(50), vol II (Bern, 14 December 1938): 985–1031.

31 *Der Landbote*, 20 May 1939.

32 This is true not only of Switzerland and of other European nation-states. Recent research suggests that it also applies to immigrant settler societies (Kaufmann 1998; Zimmer 1998).

33 In part, of course, the appeal of the notion of civic exceptionalism lies in its normative affinity with liberal doctrine. As Yack puts it succinctly: 'The idea of the civic nation defends the Enlightenment's liberal legacy by employing the very concept – that of the political community as a voluntary association – whose plausibility has been undermined by the success of nationalism' (1996: 207).

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