

Diversity, immigration, and national identity in Switzerland

For many years, Switzerland has been depicted as one of the few success stories in cultural diversity management. Indeed, when it comes to the ‘own’ linguistic groups, that is people speaking French, Italian and Romansh, along with Swiss German, Switzerland is a fascinating country in the way of its dealings with cultural difference. For centuries, before and after the country reached its current geographical shape, administrators, politicians, civil society members, and generally people in every-day encounters have succeeded in transgressing the linguistic and other cultural barriers – that do not necessarily coincide with language divisions.

Significantly less known are the religious tensions culminating in the Swiss *Kulturkampf* in the course of the 19th century. The bright picture of a multi-cultural harmony is however definitely marred when we consider the ‘alien’ or ‘new’ minorities which immigrated in the last 50 years. Can their cultural accommodation in the Swiss society be seen as a success story? Are the immigrants included into the current Swiss We-group definition? The answer is to the negative as this essay will argue. Let us consider the Swiss self-perceptions of national unity as formed across ‘own’ differences, first, then proceed to the ‘new’ differences coming about with immigration, and consider in the final part how the ‘new’ identities are negotiated at present, and whether they re-shape the Swiss self-perceptions of national identity.

In the debates on the nature of national identities two models obtain. Best known is the ethnic or cultural model of national identity *and* unity. This model highlights cultural commonalities in the realm of language, religion and custom, and those given through sharing past memories of significant events and heroic action. Multiculturalist models of inclusion also can be seen as culturalist because they stress cultural characteristics and differences when conceiving of national communities as thriving in cultural difference. In the republican version, on the other hand, the citizenry is seen as bound together not by cultural commonalities but by sharing equal rights and obligations. The Habermasian notions ‘*nation by will*’ and ‘*constitutional patriotism*’ are informed by the idea of political cultures as shaped by dealings between states and societies. Institutional solutions guarantying equal rights and duties, and compromises reached upon procedures and norms are seen in this model as foundations of political cultures binding societies together. There are problems of distinction between both models, though (see Brubaker 1999), for in particular historical periods the cultural underpinnings of the civic model become reinforced – as the Swiss example amply illustrates.¹

Could Switzerland have developed a culturalist notion of national identity? Obviously, there is no common language and no common religion, in the sense that Christianity is divided by denominational lines. In addition, the Swiss see a variety of other distinctions among themselves: regional dialects, local customs (for instance: there is a variety of ways how to celebrate the carnival), town-country-side divide, class interests, civil / political allegiance, regional / cantonal belonging. A closer look at the Swiss management of language and

¹ There is a third model emerging in current debates. An increasing number of social and political theorists highlight post-national, translocal and flexible societal self-perceptions that clearly transgress the national boundaries.

religious difference will indicate the ways how commonalities are perceived of despite all the differences.

The pre-immigration *multi-lingual Switzerland* consisted of 73% persons speaking Swiss German; 19% speaking French; 8% Italian and less than 1% speaking Romansh as their mother tongue. All four languages are acknowledged as 'national' in the amended Constitution of the year 2000, and with the exception of Romansh, all have also the status of an 'official' language. The Swiss administrative units – cantons and communes – coincide with linguistic boundaries, defining the language used in schools and in administration. Interestingly, no political division lines have ever been drawn along linguistic boundaries in Swiss history.

That language has not been deployed as a divisive force can mainly be explained by political and administrative inclusionary tactics and legal provisions. Throughout the 19th and 20th century, Swiss authorities strived to represent all three official languages in governmental key-positions. To give some examples: the seven Ministers forming the Federal Government are selected, among other things, according to linguistic considerations with the result that Latin languages continue to be overrepresented with at least two Ministers being usually French- or Italian-speakers. Similarly, the high ranks among the ministerial staff – parliament members, central administration, members of parliamentary committees - consist of a proportional number of Latin language speakers. Remarkably, this quota-regulation is based upon tacit agreements, while legal regulations are not seen as necessary. Indeed, According to Andreas Wimmer "It is telling that (in the process of drafting the 1874-Constitution, JPC), the parliament almost forgot to add a constitutional article that declared all three languages national and official" (2002: 231). -There are tensions, of course. Especially, on the occasion of federal votes, differences in value orientations and life-styles come to light. Take for example the vote whether to wear safety belts in private cars. The Swiss in the French and Italian part saw themselves more libertarian and overruled by duty-conscious Swiss-Germans! Still, instances of open conflict have not occurred.

The *multi-religious Switzerland* has lacked a comparative accommodative genius. Pre-immigration Switzerland was divided in 44% Catholic population and 55% Protestant population, the rest being 'Jews and others'. Until the mid-19th century, populations living within one Canton – but for the small numbers of the non-Christians – had to belong to one of Christian denominations. Only after the citizens were granted permission to free settlement, this clause ceased to exist. However until few decades ago, instances of discrimination have repeatedly been reported by Christian minorities living in predominantly Protestant or Catholic surroundings.

The Swiss party politics has reinforced the religious divisiveness. Throughout the 19th century, programs carried by political parties strongly coincided with religious allegiance. The Protestants managed to obtain political dominance over the Catholics through party-politics, and in consequence the complex process of Swiss secularisation has been strongly oriented towards liberalist agendas embraced by Protestant-dominated political parties. The Swiss Constitution of 1874 is a caesura in secularisation politics: It lays down that such crucial fields of societal life as education and birth, marriage and death are under governmental authority, and not anymore religious domain - as in former times. Cantonal legislations were redrafted as well: In the Canton of Zurich, a new legislation ruled for instance that it was not anymore allowed to subdivide spaces at public cemeteries. One important rationale for this

step was given in the authorities' care to affect religious freedom between the Protestants and Catholics and in ruling out marginalisation through spatial arrangements.²

Notwithstanding the lack of uniformity in Swiss past and present, a strong notion of unity and common belonging has developed here. However, cultural criteria are not abundant when it comes to forging Swiss identity. Only a 'thin' culturalist We-group definition is possible here – due to the lack of a common cultural denominator, such as one language. 'Alpine' imageries, if ever considered, have lost their salience with the on-going urbanisation, even if folkloristic depictions, prone to cows (grazing on mountain slopes) are present in some rather nostalgic visions of a common Swiss realm. Remembering common past in school books and in political speeches on high national holidays has had definitely Swiss We-group overtones, but the recent debates addressing the Swiss role during the Second World War resulted in ambiguous undertones in recollecting the Fatherland's past bravery.

Lacking joint cultural-religious characteristics, the pronounced fragmentation along language and religious lines had to be managed through institutional solutions. Indeed, precisely by forging institutional bridges and by striving to reach compromises, common grounds for managing diversity and other social goals resulted, that do not lie in cultural factors. Legal provisions regulate freedoms, rights and duties, and rule out various forms of discrimination. Tacit quota systems according to language and regional belonging are part and parcel of governmental policies such as public appointments. The public sphere is organised by dense civil society networks that cut across language, regional and - to a fair extent - religious barriers. Lifting out key-competences – such as marriage or burials - from religious organisations has enabled state actors to create institutions overarching differences. In the same vein, the potential social divisiveness likely to be given by religious difference has been rather successfully managed by largely confining religious expression to the private realm.

The emerging political culture in Switzerland is strongly oriented towards ideals which are commonly depicted as republican: what binds the citizens together is a strong sense of mutuality and commonness buttressed by the high value stress on equal civic rights and duties. Seen in this perspective, the Swiss avenue for managing difference is not geared towards a culturalist identity construction, but rather guided by a range of inclusionary practices carried out by governmental bodies and civil society networks. The republican model of common national belonging is not devoid of culturalist overtones, however. There is a strong pride of place among the Swiss population. What makes a good Swiss? – Many citizens would highlight neutrality, laboriousness, solidity, and courage, strong sense of realism, honesty, reliability, modesty and non-conspicuousness as character traits widely shared in the country. Such common celebrations of Swiss quality translate into an almost culturalist perception of a unique character of Swiss institutions which have made the country prosper. The material benefits of the efficient institutional set-up (especially through the welfare system) tend to accompany exclusivist attitudes towards persons not considered Swiss (Wimmer 2002: 222-268).

Enter the immigrants. Looking back at a prolonged migration out of the country, throughout the 19th and early 20th century, in the second half of the 20th century, Switzerland saw the situation reversed. Measured in proportion to population numbers, Switzerland is among those countries worldwide with the highest immigration rates. For fifty years now, labour migration, including the 'guest workers' from Italy and Spain, highly skilled experts, asylum seekers and

² Earlier practised for instance against suicides or adherents of non-Christian religions.

the 'second' and 'third immigrant generations' have significantly changed the composition of Swiss population, 20% of which not being Swiss citizens, at present.

Are the immigrants and their descendents included into the Swiss We-group definition? The answer is to the negative. The Swiss trajectory as a multicultural society remained strongly oriented towards accommodating 'own' minorities. The immigrants have largely remained outside of this model and several moments of shifting conjectures in constructing social distance can be discerned. From the 1960ies to 80ies discourses of '*Überfremdung*' (*over-alienation*) were abundant. Populist leaders have repeatedly managed to draw behind themselves large popular support against immigration and migrants' rights, barely missing the margin at several popular votes. A presumed distance vis-à-vis non-Western European values and codes of conduct found expression in the 'three-circles'-model endorsed by the Swiss administration until the mid 1990ies that gave priority to immigrants from Western Europe and North America, to be followed by those from remaining European countries, with persons from the remaining overseas regions coming last. As a result, a culturalist We-Swiss orientation was strengthened in opposition to the alien newcomers. Until today, the country's being an immigrant society is not mirrored in popular perceptions.

The lacking acceptance of Switzerland as an immigrant society goes hand in hand with a rather low visibility of the 'new' elements of cultural-religious difference. It is the case that there are comparatively less persons from the overseas in Switzerland than in most other Western countries, that there are few immigrant enclaves, and that immigration from the overseas is a comparatively recent phenomenon. But also overt displays of cultural-religious difference are not encouraged, even if not actively discouraged – as Swiss integration policies reveal. Several Swiss policy-makers and scholars working in the field of immigration management have endorsed integration policies which stress the importance of structural assimilation – language, skills, education, access to labour market and civic competence in selected areas - while declaring cultural-religious aspects as an matter of individual discretion, to be enjoyed in the private realm.

This integrationist model so strongly embraced by the inlanders' perspective has dominated the societal discourse and the institutional dealings with difference, until recently. Currently, a new trend comes to surface: Civic negotiations emerge as an important vehicle for immigrants to express their cultural-religious difference. Notably the negotiations over the outer religious freedom (i.e. such religious practices as dressing codes, religious prescriptions and proscriptions regarding food and prayer) carried out within the governmental and civil society institutions, including the legislation, tend to highlight the new elements of cultural-religious difference. The more *civic inclusion* (to use a term in Brubaker 2001) religious activists enjoy today, the more cultural and religious goals transgress the embattled public-private divide. There more the new minorities' cultural and religious objectives are negotiated as public issues, the more the immigrants become part and parcel of the Swiss public sphere.

During the last 20 years, immigrants have carried diverse versions of Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism into Switzerland. Together with the adherents of Judaism, they make for about 5% of Swiss population.³ While the Swiss legislation guarantees freedom of religion and rules out discrimination (Kälin 2000), the problems in realising such fundamental freedoms came to light, from the early 1990ies onwards. Exponents of religious organisations have repeatedly confronted state authorities and the public with religious demands and objectives such as

³ In the year 2001, 311'000 (4.3% of the entire population) Muslims, 28'000 Hindus (0,4%), 21'000 (0,3%) Buddhists, XY Jews were counted by the official statistics.

school dispensations, erecting own religious structures (mosques, temples and cemeteries) as well as public recognition for non-Christian religions and organisations.

Several recent trends are of interest with regards to identity formation. The public attitudes as displayed in mass media, or in the recent vote whether to publicly recognise Islam and Judaism in the Canton of Zurich that resulted in a very clear-cut rejection, continue not to be favourable to ‘alien’ faiths, especially towards Islam. On the other hand, civil servants, governmental and non-governmental commissions and forums, politicians, representatives of various organisations and individual persons have repeatedly combined their efforts in supporting religious representatives in communicating their objectives and seeking for suitable modes of religious accommodation, negotiating solutions and looking for compromises.

In the current negotiations over modes of managing religious difference resulting from migration, the successful Swiss pattern to confine the cultural-religious difference to the private realm appears to be impeding the non-Christian minorities’ goals. The authorities and their civil society partners have been careful to withdraw these negotiations from public scrutiny, in some cases rightly fearing negative interference through publicity. Also, the earlier established Swiss patterns in dealing with religion and religious difference have set certain standards. The Jewish citizens, the numerically most important non-Christian minority until the 1990ies, have been collecting private funds for own cemeteries, synagogues and religious schools,⁴ and by doing so, keeping with their low profile religious issues out of the public agendas.

This Swiss pattern of keeping religious agendas private is currently under stress. The Jewish practices corresponding so well to the general trend to privatise religion proves unfeasible when immigrants dispose of less financial funds, lower degree of organisational skills, and when insights from other Western countries reveal that realising minority rights should not put the entire burden upon the minorities themselves. Therefore, alternative solutions are looked for. These appear to be public in character, however, one option being provisions of public funds for religious purposes (still very seldom in Switzerland); another - change of legislation in cases of collusion with religious freedom rights. The change of legislation in the Canton of Zurich in the year 2001 resulting in dropping the ruling prescribing subdivision of burial spaces is a good example. This law considered progressive in late 19th century because it aimed at establishing religious freedom between the Catholics and Protestants, proved cumbersome at the end of 20th century for the adherents of the Muslim faith whose ritual burial prescriptions require special plots.⁵ Yet another option lies in enlarging the areas of discretion in interpreting legislation – for instance in cases of dispensation from classes at state schools.⁶

The Swiss history and the unique Swiss political culture have provided a particular institutional “script” for accommodating the immigrants’ cultures and religions, highlighting republican ideals and (putatively) embracing politics of neutrality. This ‘script’ proved successful in accommodating ‘own’ minorities for over 100 years, but currently a new avenue is opening up. While dealing with the immigrants’ religious objectives, Switzerland is now undergoing a significant shift in orientation and practice, but this process has not been generally acknowledged. A substantive rift exists between popular perceptions thriving on

⁴ See Pfaff-Czarnecka 1998. ‘Let sleeping dogs lie’

⁵ See Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004. Subdivision of burial grounds for the Muslim death is necessary because the direction of the tombs towards Mecca must be followed whereas the tombs are to lie in parallel rows.

⁶ See Pfaff-Czarnecka 2004, forthcoming.

social distance discourses, on one hand, and the manifold efforts to realise freedoms and to acknowledge the 'new' dimensions of Swiss diversity on the other. For Switzerland certainly became an immigrant society!

One important implication of this on-going change is that public agendas are not anymore defined by the 'inlanders' solely. Immigrants increasingly take part in civic negotiations, even if largely concentrating upon religious issues (whereas there are few key-public figures among the immigrants involved in other matters). Whether in this process the Swiss We-group self-perceptions will acquire more pronounced culturalist overtones (and which), and whether the We-group self-definition will oscillate towards a 'Swiss multi-cultural immigrant society'-model remains to be seen. What we can discern at present, is a subtle shift from a structural assimilation paradigm endorsed in accommodation practices to a more inclusive *civic negotiation*-model.

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