The Politics of Switzerland

Continuity and Change in a Consensus Democracy

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1.1 State formation

Until the French Revolution, the Swiss Confederation remained no more than a loose alliance of thirteen cantons with strong ties to allied territories such as Geneva, Grisons or Valais, plus subject territories (e.g. Vaud, Argovia, Thurgovia, Ticino or Valtellina) of their component units or of the federation as a whole. The Confederation exercised only limited governmental capacity. The only stable institution that the Thirteen and their allies maintained was a permanent assembly of delegates – the Diet, which met regularly in order to discuss matters of common interest, especially of war and peace. Together with the ancient pact from the thirteenth century and some other agreements, the national peace treaties, concluded after the religious civil wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, constituted the fundamental law of the Confederation (Körner 1986: 398). Most importantly, in the first peace of Kappel in 1529, which had put a temporary end to the war between the cantons that had converted to the new Protestant creed and the cantons that remained Catholic, the belligerents had promised to no longer interfere in each other's religious affairs. The formula chosen already stated the principle of what would later become a 'defensive' kind of federalism. The second peace of Kappel confirmed the preceding formula in 1531: each camp promised to respect the religious choices made by the other one. As far as common affairs were concerned, the first national peace treaty introduced one more innovation: the powerful Protestant canton of Zurich obtained agreement from the majority of the Catholic cantons that, for common affairs, future decisions would no longer be taken by majority vote but by a procedure called 'amicabilis compositio' (amicable agreement) at the time, i.e. by a consensual mode which gave every canton a right of veto. The contrast with the surrounding absolutist monarchies was striking. Christin (1997: 203f.) concludes that the federalist

structures such as the ones adopted by the Swiss Confederates or the Dutch Republic were better able than the absolutist monarchies to deal with the challenge of religious confrontation and to find compromises which allowed very diverse territories to coexist peacefully over a long period: the weakness of the central state, the sovereignty of the member states in religious affairs and the institutionalization of procedures for negotiation and arbitration opened the way to political equilibria and complex pacification systems which combined the recognition of cantonal peculiarities with the preservation of the common interest.

The old regime of the Swiss Confederation collapsed when Napoleon's troops swept through the Jura and conquered its territory. During the French occupation (1798 to 1802) the basic principles of a modern state, modelled after the highly centralized French pattern, were introduced, just as elsewhere in the occupied territories in Europe. But, contrary to the Netherlands, where the French occupation replaced the existing underdeveloped central state with a durable unitary structure, the centralized state did not last for very long in Switzerland. Upon the withdrawal of the French troops in 1802, multiple rebellions broke out. Only Napoleon's intervention and the imposition of a new constitution in 1803 kept the country together. With this so-called 'Mediation act', Napoleon restored considerable autonomy to the cantons. After the defeat of the French, the Swiss returned almost completely to the old confederate order in 1815. The subsequent drive for Swiss unification led by the Radicals (the liberals) was opposed by seven Catholic cantons – Lucerne, Uri, Schwyz, Unterwald, Zoug, Fribourg and Valais – who wanted above all to defend their cantonal autonomy and who eventually formed a mutual defence league (*Sonderbund*) to protect their interests. The conflict ended in military confrontation – first in a kind of guerilla warfare (1844–5) and then in a short, unbloody civil war (1847) between the radical majority of cantons and the cantons of the *Sonderbund*. The war lasted for twenty-six days and left hardly more than a hundred dead (Andrey 1986: 590). Following the defeat of the conservative forces, the Diet of the Confederation elaborated the first federal Constitution in 1848, which represented a cautiously liberal compromise between the victorious Radicals and the Catholic Conservative losers of the war. Ratifying the new Constitution proved to be a difficult endeavour. While in some cases (Fribourg and Grisons) the cantonal Parliaments decided, most

cantons had to refer to a popular vote. Nine out of the twenty-five cantons rejected the Constitution by majorities reaching up to 96 per cent (Kölz 1992: 609). In the canton of Lucerne, the Constitution was only adopted because the persons not voting were counted among its supporters. In spite of this opposition, the Diet adopted the new Constitution in the autumn of 1848. As observed by Tilly (2004: 197), '[m]ilitary, diplomatic, and popular confrontations from 1830 to 1847 came close to shattering the Swiss federation forever. Switzerland could easily have split into two separate countries, one mainly Protestant, the other almost entirely Catholic. It could also have split into multiple clusters of cantons . . . But Switzerland survived as a direct result of its war settlement.'

The hard-won new Constitution established a federal system, not a unitary state. The cantons lost their sovereignty, but they retained important powers. The price the victors paid for the acceptance of the new state by their adversaries was a far-reaching decentralization of political authority. The new centre was to be weak: the essence of political power rested with the cantonal authorities, which allowed the Catholic losers a large measure of control over their own territories. For many Radicals, the number of concessions that had to be made was too great and they subsequently pressed for a more centralized state. But they met with great resistance: a first reform package containing no less than nine proposals dealing mainly with questions of citizenship and civil liberties was rejected by a popular vote in 1866. Similarly, a first attempt to totally revise the Constitution was rejected in 1872. It failed because of joint opposition from the Catholic cantons and the French-speaking Protestant cantons. The attempt to unify the civil and penal codes proved to be the main obstacle. Two years later, a modified proposal, which took into account the critique of the French-speaking Radicals with respect to the unification of the two legal codes, was adopted by a majority of the population and all cantons except for the seven Catholic cantons of the former *Sonderbund* and the equally Catholic Appenzell Inner Rhodes and Ticino. As in 1848, the population was once again divided between a Radical part and a Catholic Conservative part (Kölz 2004: 624).

The new Constitution of 1874 definitively broke down the economic boundaries between the cantons. Among other things, it introduced the freedom of commerce and trade and improved the freedom of residence. Overall, the new Constitution was business-friendly and

in favour of progress. It was also a democratic Constitution, since it introduced the institution of the optional referendum. Calls for more direct democracy had been made in Switzerland since the 1830s, when the veto was first introduced in Saint Gall and Basle-Country. Several cantons followed these examples in the early 1840s, but the wave was quickly stopped after the cantons dominated by Radicals realized that the use of the veto (an early version of the popular referendum) could contribute to the fall of a Radical government, as it did in the case of Lucerne in 1841. A motion demanding the veto thus was turned down in Zurich in 1842. It was only in the 1860s that the democratic movement, a broad coalition of farmers, artisans and workers, gained more momentum. After its initial success in the canton of Zurich in 1867–9, the paradigm of direct legislation spread decisively to other cantons and was also introduced in the new Federal Constitution. However, the new Constitution did not usher in a centralized state. It also did not fundamentally change the statute of the cantons. The dream of many a German-speaking Swiss Radical to create a national unitary state following the French example had been frustrated (Kölz 2004: 625).

The Constitution of 1874 still provides the fundamental framework for the Swiss federal state. The basic federalist structure remains the same, the only change concerns the numerous shifts of competences from the cantons to the federal government which took place in the course of the following 125 years. Although numerous, these shifts were by no means guaranteed in advance, and always implied intense political struggles between the centralizing reformers and the defenders of the cantonal prerogatives. As Lüthy (1971: 31) pointed out, Swiss federalism has always been an 'anti-centralism', which considered the federal government if not an enemy, then at least a necessary evil which one had to live with but not give in to. From then on, the federal government had to play the role of a stop-gap, i.e. it had to assume all those tasks which the cantons were no longer capable of assuming, but would still cede only reluctantly to the problem-solver of last resort. Chapter 3 will follow these shifts in more detail.

In the aftermath of 1874, the political climate deteriorated, since the Catholic Conservatives did not accept the progressive, centralizing and secular goals of the new Constitution. With the optional referendum, they now had obtained a powerful weapon to mobilize against the radical legislation which attempted to implement these goals. Until

the partial revision of the Constitution in 1891, no less than nineteen proposals were attacked by optional referendums, of which two-thirds were successful (Kölz 2004: 633). In 1891, a partial revision introduced the popular initiative into the Constitution. This revision was a reaction to the grievances of the Catholic Conservatives. At the same time, their first representative was elected to the Federal Council. These concessions allowed for the integration of the Catholics into the Swiss nation-state, which led them to abandon their obstructionist use of the optional referendum.

Until World War II, the continuous modifications of the distribution of competences in the federalist state as well as the numerous popular initiatives led to 140 partial revisions of the Constitution of 1874. The key ideas of the Constitution were no longer recognizable, the language appeared outmoded and several of its elements out of date, while there remained glaring omissions in other respects, for example with regard to the bill of rights (Kölz 2004: 906f.). The general sentiment that there was need for a new Constitution grew stronger in the 1960s, and after thirty years of tinkering a new text was adopted by popular vote in 1999. The new Constitution brought the old text formally up to date, but included only a few substantive changes. A total revision in the classic sense would have had little chance of success. To avoid a cumulation of oppositions, the government chose a 'modular system' of reform: as a first step, the old Constitution was to be rewritten to bring it formally up to date; subsequent steps would revise those chapters that were most in need of reform – popular rights, the Federal Court and the system of government, to mention but the most obvious ones. Since then, only the reform of the Federal Court has been adopted, in a popular vote in March 2000.

According to the French standards of Badie and Birnbaum (1982: 212), Switzerland has 'neither a real centre, nor a real state'. Although they exaggerate somewhat, there is a kernel of truth in their quip. One and a half centuries of stepwise centralization of legislative competences have reinforced the federal government, but it still has to confront powerful cantons who jealously guard their prerogatives. Not least among these is the power to tax. There is probably no better indicator of the continuing weakness of the Swiss central state than the distribution of public revenues over the three levels of the federal state: the federal government gets only about one-third of this revenue, while the municipalities obtain somewhat more than a quarter and the
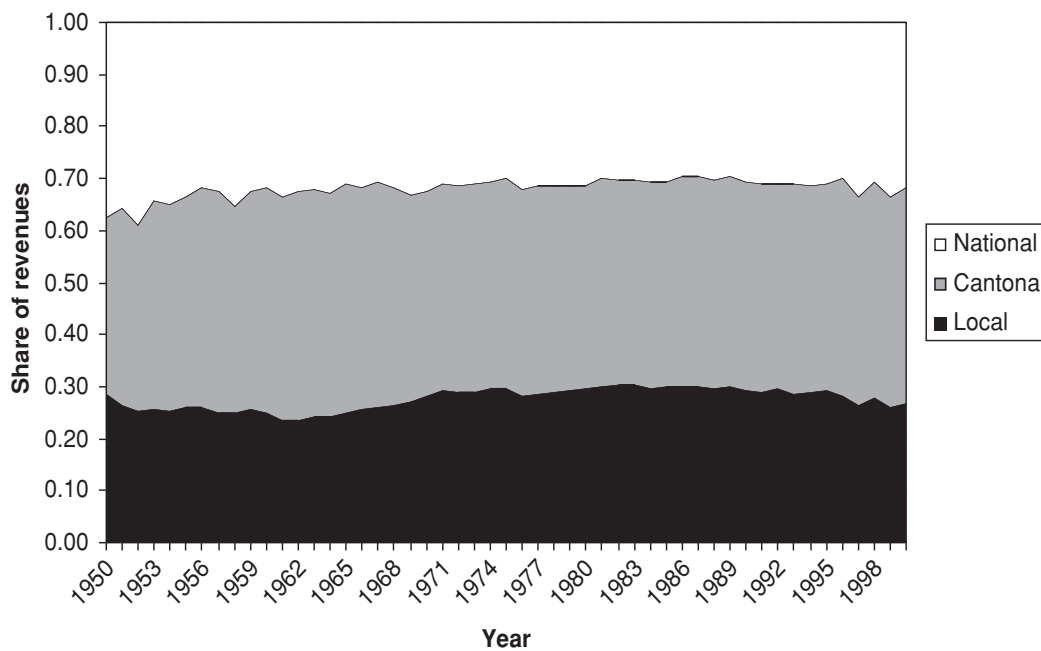
Figure 1.1 Shares of public revenues obtained by the three levels of government (percentages)
Source: Federal Ministry of Finance, Berne, 2004.

cantons 40 per cent. As shown by figure 1.1, this distribution of fiscal power has hardly changed at all over the post-war period.

1.2 Nation building

Religion mattered in the process of European nation building, and the Reformation constituted a first major step in that direction. However, language, as the most obvious and pervasive expression of identity and distinctiveness, became even more important for nation building in Europe and elsewhere. Switzerland is one of the few European countries where *religion* constituted the crucial issue for the formation of the modern Swiss nation, while language hardly mattered at all, despite the fact that the Swiss are divided into four different language communities (speaking, respectively, French, German, Italian and Romansch). In 1848, the new Radical state elite came from all language communities, and the main criterion used in recruiting them was their participation in the Radical movement. Wimmer (2002: 246) argues that when they founded the modern Swiss state of 1848, the elites from all parts of the small country knew one another rather well thanks to the activities of an associational network in which they were embedded: 'After

their rise to power, they were able to rely on this densely woven network of relations stretching all over the country, penetrating deeply into the society, and transcending class and linguistic boundaries.' For Wimmer, Switzerland is a perfect illustration of his thesis that 'nation-building takes an inclusive, trans-ethnic form when the networks of civil society organisations are dense enough to allow the new political elites controlling the modern nation-state to legitimise their rule and to mobilise political support without having to resort to an ethnic constituency and the practice of ethnic favouritism and clientelism' (2002: 241).

These networks of civil society were, however, essentially elite networks and did not integrate the population at large consisting of the different language communities. Moreover, Wimmer overestimates their integrative character since they did not extend to the Catholic Conservatives, who essentially withdrew into their cantonal 'homelands' where they kept an independent power base. The federalist structure of the country allowed for a large degree of self-regulation of the different cultural communities. In Switzerland, federalism constituted a functional equivalent to 'pillarization', i.e. the formation of separate organizational infrastructures by each culturally defined community, in other culturally divided European societies such as Austria, Belgium and the Netherlands. Federalism and pillarization not only create culturally segmented communities but also contribute to their peaceful coexistence in the new nation-state. Lehmbruch (1967: 33ff.) has already observed the analogy between these two mechanisms in his comparison of Switzerland and Austria, where he compared the Swiss 'sectionalism', i.e. the territorial and horizontal integration of federalism, with the formation of '*Lager*', i.e. the pillarization or vertical integration of Austria.

However, under the impact of the process of industrialization, the territorial segmentation of religious groups started to break up. In Switzerland, industrialization gave rise to the emigration of hundreds of thousands of Catholics from their 'homelands' in the Catholic cantons to the new industrial centres in predominantly Protestant regions. In the diaspora, these Catholics made direct contact with other religious communities and with socialism. As shown by Altermatt (1991) and, in a comparative perspective, by Righart (1986), it was at this point that the process of pillarization, i.e. the construction of the Catholic organizational structure, began. Both authors point out that this

process was mainly driven by Catholic elites in the diaspora of the predominantly Protestant cantons, whereas the traditional elites in the Catholic 'homelands' long resisted the formation of a Catholic organizational infrastructure in the union movement and in party politics. The traditional elites were sceptical of the constitution of a mass party because this would imply an extension of political participation and a certain democratization of decision making. To some extent, the pillarization process was also a democratization process, which explains this resistance. To the traditional elites, pillarization seemed to be only a second-best solution which they adopted once their traditional strategy of building up their regional power bases had lost its meaning in a transforming society.

Some authors (Siegenthaler 1993: 323; Ernst 1998: 234) maintain that the successful national integration at the federal level was in fact a precondition for the regional decentralization of the state. Such authors not only overestimate the success of the nation-building effort by the Radicals but also tend to entertain a much too harmonious conception of the resulting state. Although the mechanisms of territorial and social segmentation allowed for the appeasement of the religious conflict, they nevertheless at the same time imposed serious constraints on national integration at the mass level. This is not to say that the process of federal nation building did not continue parallel to the stepwise expansion of the federal government's legislative competence. The industrialization process and the rise of nationalism in neighbouring countries – German and Italian unification, and the establishment of large continental and colonial empires – reinforced the process of federal nation building in Switzerland (Froidevaux 1997: 35). The new nationalism of the late nineteenth century had interconfessional characteristics, which now appealed to the Catholics too (Siegenthaler 1993: 325; Jost 1998: 67). Thus, the year 1891 not only marks the important partial revision of the Constitution and the entry of the first Catholic Conservative into the Swiss government, but also the creation and institutionalization of the Swiss national holiday (1 August), commemorating the anniversary of the original pact between the Confederates of 1291.

Nationalist historiography blossomed, 'portraying late medieval wars as episodes in an eternal fight for independence against the mighty evil lords of the surrounding empires' (Wimmer 2002: 235). The myth of the heroic past of the Swiss was celebrated by the commemoration of historic battles such as the battle of Sempach of 1386,

the erection of monuments, the organization of national exhibitions (Zurich 1883, Geneva 1896, etc.), the foundation of the national archives, the national library, a national commission for art and a national museum, and the displaying of historical paintings such as the famous Marignano frescoes of Hodler in the national museum. Additional icons of the new national myth included depictions of Alpine nature – the Swiss Arcadia in the Alps – the direct-democratic tradition and Helvetia, the Swiss version of the 'maiden with the shield' (Nagel 1999), who still today adorns the most frequently used Swiss coins. The ideologues of Swiss nationalism used existing customary practices – folksongs, physical contests, marksmanship – to construct an invented tradition of a novel type for the purposes of uniting the different component parts of the Swiss nation (Hobsbawm 1992: 6). Although it was a newly invented tradition, it gradually resonated with the Swiss public and served to forge a sense of 'unity in diversity'. As pointed out by Smith (1991: 22), 'it is myths of common ancestry, not any fact of ancestry (which is usually difficult to ascertain), that are crucial'. The question, of course – as Birnbaum (1997: 28) is careful to add – is why some myths and some dreams about common ancestors reinforce nationalist mobilization while others do not.

After the religious divide, it was mainly the *class conflict* that posed a problem for national integration. Swiss labour relations have not always been as peaceful as they were in the post-war period. Indeed, the strong polarization of classes before and during World War I culminated in the declaration of a general strike in 1918. The three principal demands of the strike were the introduction of proportional representation, the 48-hour working week in all public and private workplaces and the introduction of an old-age pension system. Faced with the challenge of the general strike, the government addressed the strike committee with an ultimatum and mobilized troops. The strike committee capitulated unconditionally and ordered the end of the strike. The government, in turn, answered this 'sense of responsibility' with the opening of negotiations about the three basic demands of the strike. Proportional representation was introduced immediately after the strike: in 1919, the new National Council, the lower chamber of Parliament, was elected according to the proportional system. The main beneficiaries of this new electoral system were the Social Democrats and, above all, the new Farmers' Party – the precursor of today's Swiss People's Party (see chapter 6) – while the Radicals and Liberals lost almost half of

their seats. A reduction of working hours was also introduced in 1919, although this measure was later repealed during the economic crisis of the early 1920s. As for the old-age pension, this reform was technically adopted by means of a new article incorporated in the Constitution in 1925, but it took until 1947 to implement this most important pillar of the Swiss welfare state.

The other two crucial events for the integration of the labour movement into the Swiss nation were the conclusion of the peace accord in the metal industry in July 1937, which brought an 'integral peace' to Swiss labour relations, and the co-opting of the Social Democrats into the Swiss government in 1943. Faced with the fascist threat, national coalition governments including the Social Democrats had been formed in other European countries long before World War II. In Switzerland, however, the parties of the right were not ready to include any representatives of the left until late in the war. Only after the decisive turn in the war during the winter of 1942–3 – a turn marked by the German defeat at Stalingrad – was the governing coalition ready to accept the first Social Democrat into the government. After a brief interlude without a member from the left during the 1950s, the government in 1959 finally took the form of a long-lasting grand coalition according to the 'magic formula' which includes members of the four largest parties, including two Social Democrats (see chapter 5).

1.3 Switzerland: a nation-state?

Even in its sacralized and mythological form, the Swiss federal nation remained imbued with the spirit of *civic nationalism*. Thus, in 1875, the liberal Swiss constitutional lawyer Carl Hilty formulated the nature of the Swiss nation in these terms (quoted by Im Hof 1991: 169; authors' translation):

Neither race, nor tribal cooperation, nor common language and custom, nor nature or history have created the state of the Swiss Confederation. It has been formed rather as a contrast to all these great powers, originating in an idea, in a political thought and a will of increasing clarity and is based on it still today after 500 years of existence, just as it was on the first day.

A nation based on political will – this was the voluntarist essence of the renewed federal nationalism. Moreover, the reference to a mythical past not only served to forge a community of sentiments between

the different parts of the Swiss nation, it also provided the narrative fidelity for the democratic movement which mobilized to radicalize liberal ideas in the second half of the nineteenth century. This movement tied its claims for direct democracy to the older heritage of the popular myths about the direct democratic general assemblies (*Landsgemeinden*) in the Alpine cantons and the general councils in city cantons. The protagonists of the democratic movement framed the new paradigm of direct democracy as nothing but a modernization of tradition (Kriesi and Wisler 1999).

Beneath the civic nationalism at the federal level, we find an ethnic conception of nationhood and citizenship at the cantonal and communal level. As Smith (1986: 149) has pointed out, concrete cases of nationhood and nationalism contain both civic and ethnic elements 'in varying proportions at particular moments of their history'. In Switzerland, the two elements are clearly associated with the different levels of the federal system. As Centlivres and Schnapper (1991: 158) suggest, at the federal level, the political unification preceded and conditioned the development of common sentiments of nationhood, which implies that the federal conception of the Swiss nation is closer to the French republican model. At the cantonal level, by contrast, the sense of belonging to a community with a common culture and a common origin preceded the formation of a political unity, which implies a conception of nationhood and citizenship closer to the German ethnic model.

Thus, the multicultural Swiss nation is in fact composed of diverse ethnic groups, each relatively homogeneous within itself. Switzerland constitutes a successful federation of 'nations'. Its citizens are welded together by *a common political culture*, i.e. by a common attachment to a set of fundamental political principles and institutions – most notably, as we have already mentioned, federalism and direct democracy, and, in addition, neutrality – buttressed by a set of myths about past heroic struggles to defend these principles against outside aggressors. However, this common political denominator is minimal. Its purpose is precisely to allow the different cultural groups that compose the Swiss nation to be culturally different from one another. Within a common procedural framework, the different constituent cultures of the Swiss nation lived their own way of life and tended *to ignore one another*. 'Live and let live' was the motto, which allowed the coexistence of different religious and language communities. As Denis de Rougemont (1965: 175), an astute observer of his own country, noted

in his essay on the history of 'a happy people': 'compartments, this is the key word for Switzerland. Geographical or social, historical or sentimental, statutory or initiatory ones, all very close to one another and yet so closed. Without any doubt, there it is, the Swiss mystery.' Moreover, he stresses the differences between the Swiss peoples: 'in fact our federation constituted itself and functions well without the peoples of our diverse cantons needing to know one another, or to establish personal relations or even to love one another as brothers; in fact, they are as different from one another as the Burgundians from the Rhinelanders, or the Swedes from the Italians'.

It is certainly no accident that the ethnic or communitarian element of the Swiss nation is tied to the local or cantonal level. Just as they have jealously tried to guard their political prerogatives, the cantons and the municipalities have also tried to retain the right to define the national identity of their citizens. Just as Swiss state formation has stopped short of the creation of a strong centre, Swiss nation building has not achieved the degree of standardization we find in other European nation-states. The civic conception of Swiss nationhood and the pride in one's exceptional political institutions did not preclude a restrictive, assimilationist conception of citizenship, which closely resembles the German conception before it became considerably less restrictive in the mid 1990s. According to such a conception of citizenship, it is possible for immigrants to become part of the national community and obtain full rights as individuals, but only under a strict set of conditions, one of which is the willingness to give up one's original ethno-cultural allegiance. The Swiss conception, which is closely tied to the self-perception of the territorially segmented cultural communities composing the Swiss nation, is diametrically opposed to the multiculturalist conception of the Dutch, which builds on the long tradition of pillarization, i.e. the coexistence of different cultural groups within the same territory (see Koopmans *et al.* 2005).

The Swiss naturalization law, adopted at the height of European nationalism in the wake of World War I and only marginally modified since, renders acquisition of Swiss citizenship very difficult (Froidevaux 1997: 51). The Swiss naturalization procedure is characterized by three particularities (Centlivres and Schnapper 1991: 153; Kleger and D'Amato 1995: 266). First, Swiss citizenship is acquired by becoming a citizen of a local community. Second, while the cantonal and communal naturalization procedures vary from one canton and municipality to

another, they are never of a purely administrative nature (Helbling and Kriesi 2004). They often involve a decision by communal legislative assemblies, and in some municipalities they even involved decisions by popular vote until very recently. Third, it is the commune's responsibility to assess the suitability of an applicant to become a Swiss citizen. This assessment considers especially the applicant's integration into the local community, their familiarity with Swiss lifestyle and habits, and their conformity with Swiss law. Still today, the naturalization procedure is notoriously slow, cumbersome and, not least, often rather costly for the applicant.

Given the internal diversity and the lack of a 'thick' common culture, *external pressure* provided the glue that has preserved Swiss unity. It was at its most extreme during World War II – the historic moment which more than any other event forged the Swiss nation – although external pressure continued to consolidate Swiss unity during the Cold War, when the communist threat and the massive immigration of workers from southern Europe served as functional equivalents to the Nazi menace during World War II. It was only with the fall of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe that, in the Swiss perception, the external pressure lifted. The Swiss then found themselves in the geographical heart of a continent no longer at war but integrating at a rapid pace. Faced with this new reality, and suddenly lacking any foreign threat, the Swiss public to some degree actually experienced a sense of loss.

This surprising reaction has to do with the fact that Swiss multiculturalism within a common institutional framework came at a certain price. Mutual ignorance within and abstentionism without – these were the implications of the Swiss national identity. Externally, the minimal common denominator did not allow for more than a minimal involvement in international affairs. As we shall see in chapter 2, Swiss neutrality had, primarily, an internal function: it contributed to the coexistence of the country's various component parts. Today, in an increasingly interdependent world, in a world of regional integration, of expanding international regimes and globalizing markets, both of these components of Swiss national identity are called into question. The Swiss are forced to resituate themselves with respect to one another and in relation to the rest of the world.

As Theiler (2004) points out, the new situation constitutes the greatest challenge for the *German-speaking Swiss*. More than any other

population in Western Europe, German-speaking Switzerland ranks highly on all four main correlates of euroscepticism – Germanic or Anglo-Saxon (as opposed to Latin) cultural roots, a successful political legacy, economic privileges and cultural predominance in a culturally divided country. The French-speaking Swiss, by contrast, share only two of these four predictors, since they constitute the Latin minority. However, according to Theiler, the predicament of the German-speaking Swiss in an evermore integrating world goes even deeper. His argument has two sides: on the one hand, he argues that given the 'thin' common culture, Switzerland's position vis-à-vis the European integration process in particular is more vulnerable than that of its more mono-cultural neighbours. Given that, at the federal level, Switzerland is predominantly if not exclusively based on civic foundations, if these civic foundations are taken away, Switzerland 'will be no more'. As we will argue in chapter 11, the Swiss institutions are hardly threatened by a possible Swiss membership of the European Union (EU). Yet the threat may still be perceived as real and, as Theiler argues, the perceived threat may be particularly important for the German-speaking Swiss because of their more negative perceptions of the EU which, in turn, result from the already mentioned cumulative impact of some more general factors. Finally, German-speaking Switzerland is in a cultural position that differs sharply from its francophone counterpart and is quite unique in Europe. The key issue is language: Swiss-German lacks a standardized written idiom, which means that German-speaking Swiss are bilingual in the sense that they speak Swiss-German but use standard German for writing. In other words, the German-speaking Swiss find themselves in a peculiar linguistic position vis-à-vis their northern neighbour. The cultural boundary between them and the Germans is problematic and insecure. Language separates the German-speaking Swiss from the Germans, but it is also language that keeps them tied together. Theiler (2004: 648) interprets this particular situation in psychoanalytic terms and suggests that small cultural differences give rise to 'a process of continuous self-differentiation and often subconscious fears of insufficient separation from and damaging exposure to the other category'. Seen in this light, the German-speaking Swiss position with regard to Germany is fundamentally different from that of the French-speaking Swiss with regard to France. To complicate this predicament further, the German-speaking Swiss must negotiate this relationship without the backing of an institutional safety net: the flipside of the federal

Swiss 'state without a culture' is a Swiss-German culture without a state. As a result of their cultural insecurity, large sections of German-speaking Swiss society have adopted a generally defensive and often inward-looking and isolationist stance.

With the increasing secularization of modern society, the traditionally dominant religious conflict has lost much of its force and no longer threatens the unity of the country. But given the divergent sensitivities of the major language communities with respect to the changing international context, *language* is becoming more important for Swiss national integration than it was in the past – with the possible exception of World War I, when the French-speaking Swiss sympathized with the Entente, while the German-speaking Swiss were quite germanophile. Language is also becoming more important because of the increasing political importance of *the public space*, which is segmented by language: members of the major language communities generally only use the television, radio and press of their own respective communities (Kriesi *et al*. 1996). Moreover, rather than following the TV programmes of the other Swiss language communities, the members of the several Swiss language groups pay considerably more attention to the programmes of their respective foreign neighbours who speak the same language. In other words, French-speaking Swiss watch francophone Swiss television and French stations, while the German-speaking Swiss watch germanophone Swiss television and German and Austrian programmes. Although linguistically segmented, the public space need not lack unity. It may still be a national space, if the issues debated are the same in all the different language segments and if the lines of political conflict are not segmentally specific. To the extent that all language groups debate the same national issues (e.g. within the framework of a direct-democratic campaign), and to the extent that the political camps opposing one another on the various issues are the same in all language groups, politics can still result in national closure (Ernst 1998: 230). To be sure, given the linguistic segmentation of the public space, public debate about common issues in the different language communities may possibly develop in opposite directions. However, as Tresch (2008) has recently shown in a painstaking comparative analysis of the debate about Switzerland's policy with respect to the European Union in the two major language regions, there is hardly any systematic differentiation between the two regions.

1.4 Conclusion

Switzerland has often been represented as an ideal model of 'unity in diversity' for European integration. In spite of the difficulties which we have just described, we believe that there is some truth in this observation. The development over a period of one and a half centuries of an ambiguous combination of a mainly cultural or communitarian nationhood at the regional level with a civic or political nationhood at the central level holds out some promise for European integration. The Swiss example of a '*federation of nations*' may indicate the way forward. There is no guarantee that this recipe will work, of course, as the failure of Yugoslavia amply illustrates. Like Switzerland, Yugoslavia was built around a federation of nations, and a common cultural-historical experience (Smith 1991: 146). But the Swiss example holds out the promise that it might work.

In many ways, today's Europe resembles the Swiss Confederation of the early nineteenth century, on the eve of the creation of the federal state. In the Swiss case, the federal state together with universal suffrage (for males) was imposed by a liberal elite, which subsequently created a national myth of the civic, republican type to shape the national identity of the populations of all the cantons. In the European case, the elite created a political structure, which so far lacks the political institutions for the appropriate integration of the European populations, and which also still lacks a civic myth that would assist in the creation of an appropriate common, federal identity for the different populations at the European level. The Swiss experience suggests that, in order to be successful, the construction of a common European myth must employ ancient materials in order to create a new type of tradition that resonates well with the past experiences of the different European nations. Suffice it to say that the history of Europe offers many possibilities from which to add the required 'historical depth' to the invention of a common European tradition.

The Swiss precedent also suggests that there are limits to the common European experience. Just as in the Swiss case, unity may come at the price of external political abstentionism and far-reaching internal decentralization of political authority. Again following the Swiss example, state formation at the European level may stop far short of the traditional model of the European nation-state. Neutrality in foreign affairs and multilevel governance with a relatively weak centre may

be a possible recipe for European state formation. There are plenty of indications that this is exactly the direction in which the European polity is heading.

In many ways, however, the Swiss model is not sufficiently complex. This can be illustrated with the question of *language*. It is true that Switzerland has been capable of integrating different language communities based on the principle of territoriality. This principle implied that only one language was to be spoken on a given territory, but that the language could vary from one territory to the next. In order to communicate with one another, the members of the different language communities are supposed to understand (if not to speak) both of the two major languages (French and German). The European Union of course embraces many more languages than Switzerland, and in the EU there are more than just two major languages. The Swiss solution will obviously be impossible in this case. India may constitute a more adequate point of reference in this respect. As Laitin (1997) points out, India is a multilingual state where citizens who wish to have a broad range of mobility opportunities must learn at least three languages plus a possible fourth: English and Hindi are necessary for communicating with the central state; the language of the member state is necessary for communication with the corresponding administration; and minorities in a member state may continue to use their native language. In Europe, a similar language constellation is taking shape. European citizens in the future are likely to have multiple languages and multiple cultural identities, just as they are likely to have a multilayered national identity. Our point is that, in the European context, they will most closely resemble the citizens of a European state that has never really achieved political and cultural closure – the citizens of Switzerland.