Diversity, immigration, and national identity in Switzerland

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ABSTRACT

With four national languages (three of them official) Switzerland exemplifies great linguistic and cultural diversity. In order to manage key differences in an inclusionary fashion, republican-style "institutional solutions" have been implemented. But how well do immigrants fit into an already divided Swiss identity? Not well at all, the author contends. Public recognition of religious rights and freedoms for immigrants in particular remains an on-going issue.

For many years, Switzerland has been depicted as one of the few success stories in cultural diversity management. Indeed, when it comes to its 'own' linguistic groups, that is people speaking French, Italian and Romansh, along with Swiss German (itself divided into uncountable dialects), Switzerland is a fascinating country in the ways of its dealings with cultural difference. For centuries, before and after the country reached its current geographical shape, administrators, politicians, civil society members, and ordinary people in everyday encounters have succeeded in transgressing linguistic and other cultural barriers not necessarily coinciding with language divisions.

Significantly less known are the religious tensions culminating in the Swiss *Kulturkampf* over 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 that immigrated in the last 50 years. Can their cultural accommodation in Swiss society be seen as a success story, too? Are the immigrants included in the current Swiss We-group definition? The answer is in the negative, as this essay will argue. Let us first consider the Swiss self-perceptions of national unity as formed across 'own' differences, then proceed to the 'new' differences coming about with immigration, and inquire in the final part how the 'new' identities are currently negotiated, and whether they re-shape the Swiss self-perceptions of national identity.

In 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 can also be seen as culturalist because they stress cultural characteristics and differences when conceiving of national communities as thriving in cultural difference. The republican version, on the other hand, sees the citizenry 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 guaranteeing equal rights and duties, and compromises, agreed 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 tend to 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 along denominational lines. In addition, the Swiss see a variety of other distinctions among themselves: regional dialects, local customs (for instance, there exist a variety of ways of celebrating carnival), town-country-side divide, class interests, civil/political allegiance, regional/cantonal belonging. A closer look at the Swiss management of language and religious difference will indicate the ways in which commonalities are perceived, despite all of the differences.

The pre-immigration *multi-lingual Switzerland* consisted of 73% of 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, also have 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.

The reason why language has not been deployed as a divisive force can be explained mainly by political and administrative inclusionary tactics and legal provisions. Throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, Swiss authorities strove to represent all three official languages in key governmental 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 over-represented 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 on 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 into 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 the Christian denominations. Only after the citizens were granted permission to free settlement did this clause cease to exist. However, until few decades ago, instances of discrimination have repeatedly been reported by Christian minorities living in predominantly Protestant or Catholic surroundings.

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 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 no longer 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 marginalization through spatial arrangements.[2]

Notwithstanding the lack of uniformity in Swiss past and present, a strong notion of unity and common belonging has developed. 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 urbanization, even if folkloristic depictions (prone to cows grazing on mountain slopes) are present in some rather nostalgic visions of a common Swiss realm. Remembering a common past in school books and in political speeches on high national holidays has definitely had Swiss We-group overtones, but recent debates addressing the Swiss role during the Second World War resulted in ambiguous undertones when recollecting the Fatherland's past bravery.

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Lacking in 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, did common grounds for managing diversity and other social goals, that do not lie in cultural factors, result. 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 organized 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 organizations 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 a high value stress on equal civic rights and duties. Seen from 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 centuries, 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 the 'second' and 'third immigrant generations' have significantly changed the composition of the Swiss population, 20% of which are not Swiss citizens at present.

Are the immigrants and their descendents included in the Swiss We-group definition? The answer is no. The Swiss trajectory as a multicultural society remained strongly oriented towards accommodating 'own' minorities. Immigrants have largely remained outside of this model and several moments of shifting conjectures in constructing social distance can be discerned. From the 1960s to the 1980s, discourses of '*Überfremdung' (over-alienation)* were abundant. Populist leaders have repeatedly managed to draw 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 1990s 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. The country was not considered an immigrant society in popular perceptions.

The non-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 overseas in Switzerland than in most other Western countries, that there are few immigrant enclaves, and that immigration from overseas is a comparatively recent phenomenon. Yet overt displays of cultural-religious difference are not encouraged, 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 a matter of individual discretion, to be enjoyed in the private realm.

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This integrationist model so strongly embraced by the inlanders' perspective has, until recently, dominated the societal discourse and the institutional dealings with difference. 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 outer religious freedom (i.e. such religious practices as dressing codes, religious prescriptions and proscriptions regarding food and prayer) carried out within governmental and civil society institutions, including 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. The more the new minorities' cultural and religious objectives are negotiated as public issues, the more 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 count about 5% of the Swiss population.[3] While Swiss legislation guarantees freedom of religion and rules out discrimination (Kälin 2000), the problems in realizing such fundamental freedoms came to light, from the early 1990s onward. Exponents of religious organizations have repeatedly confronted state authorities and the public with religious demands and objectives such as school dispensations, erecting own religious structures (mosques, temples and cemeteries) as well as public recognition for non-Christian religions and organizations.

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 organizations, 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 of confining 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 1990s, have been collecting private funds for their own cemeteries, synagogues and religious schools, and by doing so, keeping religious issues out of public agendas with their low profile.

This Swiss pattern of keeping religious agendas private is currently under stress. The Jewish practice, corresponding so well to the general trend to privatize religion, proves unfeasible when immigrants dispose of less financial funds, a lower degree of organizational skill, and when insights from other Western countries reveal that realizing minority rights should not put the entire burden upon the minorities themselves. Therefore, alternative solutions are sought. 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, which resulted in dropping the law 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 to be 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 immigrant 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 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 social distance discourses, on one hand, and the manifold efforts to realize freedoms and 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 no longer defined solely by the 'inlanders.' Immigrants increasingly take part in civic negotiations, even if largely concentrating upon religious issues (whereas there are hardly any key public figures among the immigrants involved in other matters). Whether the Swiss We-group self-perceptions will acquire more pronounced culturalist overtones in this process, 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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Notes

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.

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

3 In the year 2001, 311,000 (4.3% of the entire population) Muslims, 28,000 Hindus (0,4%), 21,000 (0,3%) Buddhists, 18,000 (0.2%) Jews were counted by the official statistics.

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.