Swiss Political Science Review

Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Politikwissenschaft
Revue Suisse de Science Politique
Rivista Svizzera di Scienza Politica

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SPSR

Communicative Nation and Multi-Nationalism
Paolo Dardanelli versus
Donald Ipperciel

Debate:
Communicative Nation and Multi-Nationalism

Multi-National Switzerland?
A Comment on Ipperciel

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Introduction[1]

Students of nationalism have long been attracted to Switzerland, whose peculiar features appear to defy some of the fundamental "laws" of nationality. The traditional interpretation in the literature has been that Switzerland is an unusual mono-national state rather than a multi-national state. Donald Ipperciel's article for this journal (2007) sets out to challenge this interpretation and to show that the country should be characterised as multi-national. In doing so he is among a number of authors, mainly working within the growing literature on multi-national democracy and multi-national federalism (Dardanelli 2009: 2). This note offers some reflections on his thesis and identifies a number of aspects which call for deeper analysis and debate within the scholarly community.

An Original Approach?

Ipperciel presents his argument as a refutation of the notion of a single Swiss nation, implying (p. 43) that the latter is mainly – or even only – defended by the Swiss themselves. However, it is worth bearing in mind that

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[1] I am indebted to Clive Church for bringing Ipperciel's article to my attention and I am grateful to him and to François Grin for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this piece.

this traditional interpretation has predominantly been shaped by non-Swiss scholars, some of them cited by Ipperciel himself.

Ipperciel starts from the premise that both objective and subjective approaches to the study of nations are unsatisfactory, the former because no single criterion can be found to be valid in all cases, the latter because it depends on volatile variables such as national identity. In response to this dichotomy, and the dilemma it generates, he proposes an approach including both objective and subjective elements centred on the concept of communication. While he acknowledges his intellectual debts to Habermas, he does not refer to the work of authors who have adopted a similar approach in the past and have even drawn similar conclusions to his. Just to cite a few examples, Deutsch (1966) developed long ago a theory of nationalism centred on the concept of social communication, Anderson (1983) saw communication made possible by print-capitalism as the crucial springboard for the emergence of "imagined communities" while, more recently, Erk (2003) studied the role of language in the spheres of communication and education in Switzerland and concluded that the country had become multi-national.

Nations Defined by Communication and Sovereignty?

The central postulate in Ipperciel's argument is that a nation is constituted and defined by communication among its members which creates a public sphere and leads to the formation of a common will (esp. p. 40). Such "political discussion" is premised on, and revolves around, the notion of national sovereignty (pp. 40, 44, 62). In turn, for communication to take place, a single language must be present (p. 40). Ipperciel further states that it is the existence of communication *per se* which defines a nation rather than its contents (p. 61) but that the presence of communication is only a necessary, not a sufficient, condition for the existence of a nation (pp. 41–42).

Given its scope, this note cannot, of course, do justice to the question of the extent to which communication is essential to the emergence of a nation. Suffice it here to say that there are clearly both compelling theoretical arguments and abundant empirical evidence to support such a notion but that it would be difficult to appreciate its role if we divorce the "container" from its "contents". Even if we accept Ipperciel's axioms in isolation, his postulate is inconsistent for it is vitiated by a double contradiction. Firstly,

if contents are irrelevant to the communicative constituting of a nation and can thus be ignored, how can we observe whether such communication revolves around the notion of national sovereignty? Ignoring contents logically leads to the impossibility to observe a national sovereignty discourse hence to the negation of one of the fundamental properties of a nation as understood by Ipperciel. Secondly, if contents are irrelevant and if it is the "fact of communication" that is decisive, then the presence or absence of communication does become a sufficient condition, not merely a necessary one, for the existence of a nation. A nation exists because there is communication, regardless of what that communication is about. Besides being intuitively implausible, this then violates the claim that communication is necessary but not sufficient to the existence of a nation. There are, of course, many examples of communities around the world in which there is plenty of communication and yet they are not nations. To mention Renan's (1947: 893) famous example, the higher degree of communication and homogeneity existing in Tuscany compared to Switzerland clearly does not explain why the latter is a nation while the former is not. Likewise, the high degree of state-wide communication existing in Canada and Spain has not prevented them from becoming multi-national. Finally, by ignoring contents Ipperciel negates his central aim of combining "objective" and "subjective" elements and is forced to resort to anecdotal "objective" elements alone to support his argument.

Ipperciel's characterisation of communication itself is equally problematic. He presents communication in dichotomous terms, either there is communication or there is not (e.g. p. 61) and does not elaborate on how such understanding is formed and can be justified. Yet, this is a misrepresentation of reality since it is clear that communication exists in a continuous form. However we want to measure it, there are *degrees* of communication, not presence/absence. On the one hand, "perfect" or "total" communication is hardly possible for there is always a margin for misunderstanding and incommunicability even between the closest of people. On the other hand, even between people speaking totally mutually unintelligible languages, a degree of – non-verbal – communication has been shown to take place. A closer approximation of reality would be to say that there is a larger or smaller amount of communication within any given group of humans.

As public spheres are created by communication and the latter is continuous, it follows that the former should also be conceptualised as points on a continuum defined by higher or lower *density* of communication rather than presence/absence. Furthermore, multiple public spheres usually

exist – some nested within each other, others overlapping to a greater or lesser extent with each other yet others largely unconnected – and citizens are typically involved in a number of them at the same time. The relevant question is not whether there is a public sphere or not, but how *dense* a given public sphere is compared to others. In order to operationalise the concept, a measure of such density thus needs to be devised and a "threshold of significance" – i.e. when a public sphere is dense enough to sustain a *national* communication – should be identified.[2]

Ipperciel's claim that communication is only possible in the presence of a single language clearly derives from his dichotomous understanding of communication which suffers from the problems identified above. By reducing communication to the existence of a single language, he discounts both people's ability to speak – or at least to understand – a second or a third language and, more generally, the ability to communicate and circulate ideas across linguistic barriers. Passive knowledge of a second language – which is quite crucial in Switzerland, for instance – in particular, plays an important role in cross-language communication. Likewise, numerically small but socially and politically influential bi-lingual – either actively or passively – elites act as "transmission belts" and help communication to take place between people whose mother tongue is different. There is plenty of historical evidence, *in primis* from Swiss history itself, that communication across language barriers can be considerable.[3] Rather than denying the existence of communication in multi-lingual contexts, it would thus be more fruitful to say that the *density* of the public sphere in a given community is likely to be a function of the ease of communication among its members. In turn, the latter is likely to be correlated to the extent to which the language/s in use in that community is/are widely spoken and understood.

No Swiss Nation in Historical and Constitutional Terms?

Ipperciel argues that there was no notion of a Swiss nation when the modern federal state came into being in 1848 (p. 45) and that there is no notion of it either in constitutional practice today (p. 44). Both claims rely on a

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[2]   The need for measurement in order to study the role of social communication was already stressed by Deutsch (1966: esp. ch. 4).

[3]   See, for instance, Zimmer (2003: 41–79).

narrow reading of the letter of the constitution and miss important aspects of Swiss constitutionalism.

As regards the first claim, Ipperciel argues that art. 1 of the 1848 constitution[4] should be interpreted as indicating that, at the birth of modern Switzerland, the principle of nationality was set at the cantonal level. A different interpretation, however, has a lot to commend itself. As I have argued more extensively elsewhere (Dardanelli 2009: 11–12) there is a large body of evidence as well as authoritative scholarly opinion to the effect that the 1848 constitution was the product of a nationalist movement and the federal state was a creation of the Swiss people not of a compact between cantons. The anachronistic wording of the constitution should thus not be taken at its face value but should be understood as a pacification tactic in the aftermath of the dramatic confrontation between Radicals and Conservatives which preceded the drafting of the constitution. In a similar way, the fact that Switzerland is still officially called – in Latin, French, Italian and Romansch though not in German – a "confederation" does not mean that it is actually one.

Even more difficult to accept is his claim that sovereignty is assigned to the cantons rather than the people in the current constitution. The assertion is based on article 3[5] but fails to appreciate that this applies to the relations between the cantons and the federation only and that popular sovereignty is at the very heart not only of the substantive spirit of the constitution but also of actual constitutional practice, as embodied in the extensive provisions for direct democracy. It is surprising, to say the least, to claim that there is no popular sovereignty in Switzerland when no other country in the world has gone to such lengths in giving practical meaning to this notion.

In a similar way, Ipperciel's claim that the cantons are the true "nations" of Switzerland (p. 45) is difficult to square with the available empirical evidence and is in tension with his conclusion, discussed below, that French speakers constitute a nation. Not only does Ipperciel not explain how the bi-lingual and tri-lingual cantons manage to be nations despite their language diversity while the latter prevents the federation from being so, but he pushes his argument even further by arguing that a Swiss canton and

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[4] "The peoples of the twenty-two sovereign cantons of Switzerland, united by the present alliance, i.e. Zurich [...] and Geneva, together form the Swiss Confederation", author's translation from the French.

[5] "The Cantons are sovereign insofar as their sovereignty is not limited by the Federal Constitution; they exercise all rights which are not delegated to the Confederation", author's translation from the French.

France have virtually the same constitutional/national status (p. 46). This is because both are nations which have delegated some of their powers to a supra-national entity – Switzerland and the EU, respectively. In so doing, he overlooks the crucial fact that there is no evidence that Swiss citizens perceive their canton to be a nation (Dardanelli 2009: 21–23) while French citizens clearly perceive France to be so.

Lastly, his claim, based on Kymlicka, that Swiss patriotism is explained by the fact that the state acknowledges the national character of the language communities (p. 63) is not empirically supported. Not only do the language communities not possess any institutional status of their own but they are not, and never have been, recognised as nations in Switzerland's constitutional practice (Stojanovic 2000: 66; Dardanelli 2009: 20–21).

No State-wide National Communication in Switzerland?

Ipperciel notes that the mass media landscape and the patterns of media usage in Switzerland are highly segmented by language. Assuming that Switzerland is subject to the same "logique communicationnelle" (p. 46) of the other nations, he then argues that there is no state-wide national communication in Switzerland but rather, as far as French speakers are concerned, a national communication at the level of the *Suisse romande*. With the disappearance of dialects and the growth of *Suisse romande*-wide media, a French-speaking public sphere emerged and with it a sense of a French-speaking identity. Although such an identity has not displaced the cantonal nations it is fuelling the emergence of a *romande* nation (p. 47).

Leaving aside the tension generated by the use of the term nation to refer to both cantons and language communities, it is certainly the case that media usage in Switzerland is heavily determined by language and that, as a result, the state-wide public sphere is rather segmented. Yet, while the starting point is broadly correct, the consequences Ipperciel derives from it are more questionable. There are four main problems with his argument. Firstly, in his eagerness to contrast Switzerland with France, Ipperciel overlooks the fundamental differences between the two countries. A decentralised federal state such as Switzerland, in which a great deal of political discussion and deliberation takes place at the cantonal and communal level, surely needs a differently-structured public sphere to that of a still highly centralised unitary state such as France. The fact that the Swiss public sphere is much denser at regional and local level than at the state

level closely matches the constitutional structure of the country and the reality of its political life.[6] Secondly, while the state-wide public sphere in Switzerland is clearly less dense than in France, it is certainly far from non existent. Even though most people use a single language in their daily life, active or passive knowledge of at least another language is widespread[7], notably at the elite level, and such elites act as "transmission belts" for the circulation of ideas across the language divides. Reversing Ipperciel's logic, the fact that political ideas, values and identities are largely similar across the language divides indicates that there is a sufficiently dense public sphere to sustain a state-wide national communication.[8] Thirdly, and crucially, the French-speaking public sphere – even according to Ipperciel's definition – is not a *national* public sphere because it is not in any sense structured by a focus on national sovereignty for French speakers. Among several other factors, this is also so because the dominant media outlets, most notably where television is concerned, that help to define the French-speaking public sphere in Switzerland are actually foreign ones, more specifically French. If Ipperciel's logic were correct, i.e. that it is the "container" of communication rather than its "contents" that define nations, we should then see the *Suisse romande* increasingly identifying itself as an *irredenta* portion of France rather than as a separate nation or a part of the Swiss nation. There are no signs so far, however, of this happening. Fourthly, despite the fact that *Suisse romande*-wide media have existed for over fifty years now, primary identification with the language community vis-à-vis primary identification with Switzerland as a whole has actually declined rather than risen.[9]

Divergence and *malaise* among French speakers?

Ipperciel argues that the existence of two, largely disconnected public spheres explains the chasm between the language communities, the so-called *Röstigraben*, and the political divergence between them. In turns this generates frustration and *malaise* among French speakers (pp. 52–59).

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[6] See also Grin (2002: 269).

[7] See Grin (1999: 85–100).

[8] See, among others, Schmid (1981: 150), Grin (2002: 279) and Kriesi and Trechsel (2008: 20).

[9] Compare Kerr (1974: 20–26) and Kriesi et al. (1996: 54–61).

While Ipperciel is probably correct in identifying media segmentation as one of the factors contributing to the *Röstigraben*, his argument that this creates a politically significant *malaise* among the *Suisse romands* is largely unwarranted. To begin with, Ipperciel does not elaborate on his definition of *malaise*, does not attempt to measure it and does not put it into context. His "dependent variable" in this case appears simply to rest on the observation that several books dealing with such presumed *malaise* have recently been published (p. 55). Yet, if one delves a bit deeper into it and places it within a fairly basic cross-sectional and cross-temporal frame, it becomes clear that there is no politically significant *malaise* among French speakers. Firstly, while French speakers do think there is a *fossé* between the language communities, its political salience is very low (Kriesi et al. 1996: 53–72). This is not unrelated to the fact that, in many respects, the *Suisse romands* are a numerical minority who are "punching well above their weight".[10] Secondly, lamentations as to the lack of knowledge and understanding between French and German speakers are as old as Switzerland yet have never been framed in terms of linguistic nationalism. Indeed, whatever *malaise* may exist today, it pales into insignificance compared to the situation during the First World War when tension between French and German speakers was at its peak.[11] Thirdly, divergence in political behaviour between the language communities, as measured for instance in popular votations, has declined rather than increased over time and it is smaller than that created by other cleavages, notably the urban/rural one. Contrast, for example, the *Landesring der Unabhängigen*'s failure ever to establish itself in the *Suisse romande* (Gilg and Hablützel 1983: 259) with the Swiss People's Party's success in this decade which has seen it becoming the largest party in Vaud and Geneva (Dardanelli 2008). Last, but certainly not least, a degree of discontent and frustration in some sectors, either social or territorial, of the national community is quite simply a fact of life for most, if not all, countries in the world and is by no means confined to Switzerland. Should we take the *malaise* between the north and the south in Italy or between the Ile-de-France and the *province* in France as an indication that Italy and France are multi-national?

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[10] For instance, Schmid (1981: 85) found that *both* French and German speakers overestimate the size of the French-speaking community.

[11] In addition to the tensions generated by the war between France and Germany, between 1913 and 1917 there was only one French speaker in the Federal Council and the main party, the Radicals, was split along linguistic lines, see Jost (1983: 124, 131).

The *Romands* as a Nation That Dares Not Speak Its Name?

Ipperciel does acknowledge that there is no *romand* nationalism at present and that this poses a problem for his thesis. His answer is to try and explain away this fact by arguing that it is the *discourse* of nationalism which is absent not its substance (p. 59). According to him, French speakers are afraid of using nationalist terminology but harbour nationalist aspirations, i.e. *la nation romande* is a "shy" but emerging nation.

However, this claim too is problematic when set against the empirical evidence. To begin with, it is not the case that French speakers are reluctant to use the terms "nation" and "national". In fact, they are actually *more likely* to use them than the German speakers (Bendix 1992: 770; Stojanovic 2000: 66–67). It is rather that they use them with reference to Switzerland as a whole rather than to its French-speaking portion. Secondly, as mentioned above, primary identification with Switzerland vis-à-vis primary identification with the *Suisse romande* among French speakers has *grown* not declined over time and a whole range of other cognitive and behavioural indicators confirm this trend (Dardanelli 2009: 19–21). Even at the height of the Jura crisis, no significant *Suisse romande*-wide nationalist discourse emerged. Hence, as already observed, the focus on national sovereignty – which, according to Ipperciel, defines nations – is totally absent in the political discourse of French speakers, *ergo* the latter cannot be characterised as a nation. Thirdly, there are powerful structural factors which militate against the nationalist mobilisation of French speakers for the foreseeable future (Dardanelli 2009: 24–27). That there are cultural differences between French and German speakers and that some of these are politically salient is beyond dispute but that does not make *nations* of the respective language communities. Ipperciel's neglect of the Italian-speaking community is in this context a further limitation which prevents him from appreciating the true nature of linguistic identities in Switzerland. In the light of the above, his claim that "tout pointe vers ce phénomène" (p. 60) cannot but puzzle the reader.

Conclusion

While Ipperciel's focus on communication is a welcome contribution to the debate on nationalism, his operationalisation of the concept and its application to Switzerland suffer from several sources of tension and weaken

considerably the validity of his conclusions. To be a helpful framework to identify which human communities are nations and which are not and why certain communities have become nations while others have not, his thesis calls for a deeper theorisation of the concept of communication and the development of a method to quantify it. Likewise, in applying the framework to Switzerland it is important to take fully into account the body of empirical evidence which points to the mono-national character of the country. Switzerland is certainly a crucial case for the study of nationalism and the greater the scholarly effort devoted to it so much greater the potential to deepen our understanding of the phenomenon and of its complex dynamics.

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