

 **INTRODUCTION**

In a recent book on Swiss politics, Clive Church points out that Switzerland has largely been neglected by English language social science research and that the country is seen as a '*cas à part*, divorced from the European norms domestically, just as it stands outside the EU'.¹ This assessment is even more accurate when it comes to research on the political history of postwar Switzerland. Historians and political scientists have looked into certain distinct institutions of the Swiss political system, such as direct democracy and federalism, and have studied some of the political actors, such as the new social movements, which had a particularly lively history in the 1970s and 1980s. However, the development of Swiss society and politics has received little overall attention from the academic community outside the country and when they have shown an interest, observers from abroad have tended to draw an idealised picture of the country and mainly seen it as an island of peace, democratic tradition, political stability, economic prosperity and a high standard of living in the midst of Europe. As Clive Church correctly notes, therefore, the view from outside Switzerland is still very much marked by the fact that 'the country generates a large number of inaccurate myths about the utter harmony and boring nature' of its society.²

Recent Challenges in Swiss Politics and Society

In the last two decades, however, a number of events and developments have left scratches on the surface of this picture of a harmonious and monotonous country that has largely been spared major crises and conflicts. As Jonathan Steinberg has put it, Switzerland's 'complacency has vanished'.³ To begin with, the social landscape revealed growing fissures in the 1990s, as the Swiss economy, one of the strongest globalised economies in the world, exhibited some degree of vulnerability and instability. The country experienced its highest rates of unemployment

since the 1930s and the number of working poor people increased considerably. In addition, disagreements over several particularly contentious issues not only caused tensions among the domestic public in the 1990s, but also stained the image of the country in the eye of the international public. For example, Switzerland's reluctance to fully engage in the process of European unification, the continent's greatest postwar project of integration and stability, and the vigour with which Switzerland has clung to its own self-perception as a special case, have generated deep lines of cleavage inside the country. Switzerland's standing aside from the process of unification was not met with a great deal of understanding from abroad and critics considered reprehensible the self-centeredness of a wealthy and prosperous country whose industry and business had already been fully integrated in the global market.

The reassessment of Switzerland's conduct during the Second World War caused another controversial debate that caught the international eye in the 1990s, in which the notion of Swiss exceptionalism was at stake. While some continued to claim that the well-prepared army, the inhabitants' determination to defend their country, and the long-standing tradition of Swiss neutrality were decisive factors in Switzerland's escaping invasion, others insisted that, as academic research has ascertained since the 1980s, financial and economic ties to the National Socialist regime should be regarded as the main reasons why the country was spared the catastrophe of war. Some also argued that ideologies of exclusion and practices of discrimination, both founded on anti-Semitism and xenophobia, were more common in Swiss politics and far more widely endorsed in Swiss society than many had wanted to believe and that Switzerland was in no way different, therefore, from most other European countries at that time.

Swiss exceptionalism has also come under scrutiny for other reasons. In parallel with the controversies over European integration and the history of the Second World War, Swiss politics has become more conflictual and less consensual as long-standing patterns of negotiated cooperation and consensual politics among the government parties have seemed to fade away. Over the course of a long historical process, Swiss consociationalism had evolved into a way of power-sharing that has had a highly integrative effect in a society that is characterised by internal divisions along social, political, linguistic and religious lines. It has helped to reduce the degree of antagonism between social classes, between the political right and the left, between Protestants and Catholics, and between the four linguistic groups (German, French, Italian and Rhaeto-Romance) that territorially are based in different regions.

As the political and social elite complied with the need to accept rules based on agreement and cooperation and to follow specific negotiational modes and practices, a set of consociational arrangements also shaped the country's political culture and found expression in everyday politics as well as in particular institutional settings.⁴ However, in recent years the use of a divisive style in political campaigning and the deepening of cleavages has brought about a significant increase in the polarisation of party competition and begun to undermine the long-standing tradition of Swiss consociationalism. In some ways, this move towards more oppositional politics has brought Switzerland closer to the competitive party systems of most other Western democracies.

A key reason for Swiss politics becoming more antagonistic and contentious has been the role of the Swiss People's Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei* – SVP), a centre-right party that was transformed in the 1990s into a proponent of radical right-wing populism. By adopting a populist strategy and an exclusionist agenda, the party succeeded in bringing about a remarkable expansion of its constituency in elections. Consequently, the party has been recognised as a prominent example of what some have called the third wave of postwar radical right-wing populism in Western Europe. This led the Council of Europe, in a report from 2000, to list the SVP as part of the same trend as the Flemish Block in Belgium and the Freedom Party in Austria, and thereby to express its concern about the rise of political parties that directly or indirectly foster xenophobia, intolerance and racism.⁵

It would be a mistake to think, however, as many contemporary observers tend to, that the Swiss radical right only started to gain momentum in the early 1990s, and as a consequence to restrict one's perspective to recent developments in Swiss politics. On the contrary, political parties, intellectual circles and propagandists at the far right of the political spectrum show a remarkable continuity that extends throughout the postwar era. As early as the 1960s, for example, the emergence of the so-called Movement against Overforeignization, comprised of political parties advocating a fierce anti-immigration agenda, should be considered a precursor to radical right-wing populism in Western Europe. This is a fact that has consistently been ignored in historical overviews of the postwar radical right in Western Europe. To take another example, propagandists of the Swiss extreme right played an important role in the efforts to establish the 'fascist international' in the immediate aftermath of the Second World War and were among the first who sought to relativize and deny the Shoah and other crimes committed by the National Socialist regime.

The Swiss Radical Right: Underrated in Academic Research

Despite this early manifestation and remarkable pattern of continuity, the Swiss case is very sparsely represented in comparative work concerning the radical right, and international scholarship in the area of the radical right has so far shown little interest in the Swiss case. In contrast to other small European countries such as Austria, Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark or Norway, there has been no English language study on the postwar history of the radical right in Switzerland. Virtually none of the recognised edited volumes and articles of recent years have taken the Swiss case into consideration. However, domestic research on the Swiss radical right would also appear to still be in its infancy. While there has been some recent improvement, very few historians, political scientists or sociologists show an interest in the topic. Few studies have consistently applied the theoretical and conceptual premises of international scholarship in this field and many lack cross-national comparisons. This stands in striking contrast with general scholarship on the radical right, which has improved significantly since the early 1990s and has produced a massive body of academic literature on various aspects of the postwar radical right.

The fact that many scholars tend to view Switzerland as a special case is perhaps the key reason for the lack of attention that international research on the radical right have paid to the country. As a consequence, most of the literature wrongly characterises the Swiss case and claims that Switzerland represents a case of failure of the radical right. Historical aspects, along with features of the political system and political culture, as well as the economic situation, have all been put forward in arguments suggesting that such factors must be seen as having created contextual conditions in Switzerland that are disadvantageous for the strength of radical-right politics. Assuming this line of argument, scholars have taken a historical perspective contending that Switzerland has no experience of fascism in the way that most other European countries have known it. As a consequence, they have assumed a very low level of acceptance in the Swiss political culture for an anti-democratic right-wing stance, or a revitalisation of radical-right patterns of thought.

It has also been claimed that Swiss consociational democracy exerts a highly unifying effect, which is reflected, for example, in the strong integrative capacity of the party system. According to this viewpoint, the Swiss party system does not accommodate radical parties unless they follow an opposition policy that is loyal to the system. Another argument has stressed that direct democracy serves as an institutionalised safety valve for fringe political parties from the radical right, since

they receive relatively little support in parliamentary elections. Taking this perspective, direct democratic opportunities allow small parties and voters to express their disagreement with public policy without requiring a strong parliamentary position. Another set of arguments draws on theses concerning the material grievances and economic causes which are often used in research on the radical right. Following this reasoning, it has been argued that good economic conditions and low rates of unemployment in Switzerland have prevented support for the radical right. Finally, a further argument to explain the supposed lack of potential for a radical right in Switzerland has highlighted the alleged existence of a pronounced notion of respect and tolerance toward minorities and other cultures among large segments of the Swiss population. These values purportedly contrast with the ideas and aims of radical right-wing actors, whose ideology generally draws on resentment and intolerance toward minorities.⁶

As I shall show in this book, however, there is a need to review and ultimately revise most of these arguments. While some scarcely stand up to the findings of a longitudinal examination of the postwar Swiss radical right or in the face of new research approaches to Swiss national identity and multiculturalism, other arguments such as those relating to direct democracy and consociationalism actually appear to indicate the existence of conditions and factors that support, rather than impede, the emergence of a radical right. I shall provide evidence that the tendency to present Switzerland as a special case is for the most part untenable and that, on the contrary, the Swiss radical right is certainly suitable for inclusion in comparative research.

An Actor-oriented Approach

The approach applied in this book is in line with recent trends seen in the literature on the radical right which increasingly devotes attention to actor-oriented research and explanations. As Matthew Goodwin argues in an inspiring review article, the study of the radical right has long been dominated by scholars from political science and political sociology who have explained the rise of the radical right as being mainly a result of socioeconomic change and have therefore primarily focused on demand-side dimensions and especially on the sociodemographic or attitudinal characteristics of voters.⁷ This prime interest in dimensions that are external to the actors of the radical right is reflected in approaches which 'typically stress the primacy of demand factors over supply, of structure over agency'.⁸ Following this perspective, factors

such as new social cleavages, political disaffection, partisan dealignment, protest politics and a low threshold in the electoral system are regarded as structural conditions that facilitate the success of the radical right. Explanations centred on supply-side dimensions, which look at groups and parties of the radical right 'as strategic actors attempting to best respond [to] their political and institutional environments, have, by contrast, received much less attention'.⁹ However, looking at the findings so far produced by research on the radical right, demand-side explanations have basically failed to shed light on questions relating to the notable variations seen in the organisational strength and electoral fortunes of the radical right across different countries in Europe. Another question which remains unanswered is why countries that experience similar socioeconomic and sociocultural changes show such large variation in radical right-wing formations and significant spatial and temporal differences in the success and support of the radical right.

Facing this growing criticism of the 'externalist bias' in the study of the radical right, it has been acknowledged that more attention needs to be paid to 'internalist dimensions' and that instead of portraying the parties and organisations of the radical right 'as the by-products of forces outside their own control, in contrast they should be viewed as engineers of their own success'.¹⁰ In a similar vein, Martin Schain, Aristide Zolberg and Patrick Hossay have argued in the introductory chapter of a seminal volume on the radical right in Western Europe that 'causal conditions do not develop in isolation or exist separately from the radical right parties that exploit them: the conditions which facilitate the success of the right are entwined with the party's own agency'.¹¹ Following this interest in actors and agency, a recent volume from social anthropologists on the emergence of far-right movements has asked 'how far is neo-nationalism to be understood as a socio-cultural process introduced and performed, but also opposed and negotiated, by more or less creative agency?'¹²

This also echoes recent trends in historical research which have gradually moved away from the predominance of structural history to a perspective that devotes more attention to actors as driving forces in the social and political processes of the past, and to human agency which plays a key role in the reproduction of social structures. Inspired by constructivism in social science and going along with the 'cultural turn' in historiography, structural settings are no longer regarded as the steadfast and all-determining conditions of history but rather as shifting contexts of historical development in which sufficient space exists for individual and collective actors to engage in activities and develop ideas. In addition, what some call 'new cultural history' has brought

a revival of hermeneutic approaches in the history of politics and has again directed research interest onto ideas, as well as the distinct agents who communicate these ideas.¹³ In summary, taking account of these tendencies in different academic disciplines, new research on the radical right must bring organised and individual actors, as well as ideas, back into focus.

The plead for more actor-oriented research resonates with the deficiencies addressed by some experts on the radical right who have complained for quite some time about how little attention has been paid to the ideology and intellectual inspirations of the radical right, and how even less focus has been drawn to individuals, groups and publications who develop and propagate these ideas.¹⁴ To overcome this shortage empirically, it is claimed that research should invest more in the analysis of the radical right's worldview formulated by party leaders, intellectuals and propagandists and expressed in writings, speeches and policy proposals. Focus on the ideological profile would particularly help to capture more consistently the role played by the intellectuals and authors affiliated with the New Right in the drafting of ideas and concepts and the supply of arguments and ideological inputs to political parties and other organised actors. However, as Jens Rydgren has noted in a recent article on the state of the art in the study of the radical right, 'there has been conspicuously little research on the nonparty sector of the new radical right: the think tanks and more informal circles of intellectuals, the party press and radio stations, and civil society organizations ... associated with the new radical right'.¹⁵ Finally, the need to attach more importance to supply-side factors also calls for comprehensive and in-depth investigations of the radical right's organisational structures, political and intellectual leadership, processes of internal decision making and its resources in terms of membership, partisan commitment and finances.

Main Arguments and Structure of the Book

Following the research agenda expressed in recent literature on the radical right and challenging the above-mentioned notion of Swiss exceptionalism, my argument presented in this book is threefold. First, drawing on primary historical research, I argue that there exists a long and established tradition of the radical right in postwar Switzerland. As is revealed by the investigation of party writings, parliamentary minutes, partisan literature, press reports and other publications, a wide variety of radical right-wing organisations have consistently promoted

exclusionist thinking inspired by the idea that people coming from outside the country are unequal because of their cultural differences, and have thus helped these beliefs to find their way into Swiss political and intellectual debates. In addition to an ideology of exclusionism, the Swiss radical right's political, intellectual and cultural agenda is inspired by a conception of society that is built on authoritarian and hierarchical principles and traditionalist values. As will be shown, this has made the radical right the most vigorous opponent to those ideas of '1968' that were driven by the quest for a multicultural and more egalitarian and emancipatory society.

Second, I make the case in this book that, empirically and analytically, the Swiss radical right represents a political family and collective actor. As part of the same political family, the various members are bound together by common ideas. Following this perspective, it is shown that circles and publications associated with the New Right played a key role in providing ideas and concepts for the common ideological ground of the Swiss radical right as a political family. This approach corroborates the presumption that ideas matter. In addition, as a collective actor, the Swiss radical right is engaged in different forms of activities and its various exponents assume distinct positions in Swiss politics and society. Although the collaboration and linkage between the groups and individuals are usually rather loose and in most cases simply informal, I show that there were specific moments of mobilisation when the partnership became closer and more straightforward, which made it possible to achieve common goals more effectively.

Third, I argue that, as in most Western democracies, Switzerland accounts for a number of the contextual conditions that foster the emergence and consolidation of the radical right. To go further, certain features of the Swiss political system such as direct democracy and consociationalism, and specific aspects of the Swiss national discourse such as the long-standing notion of so-called overforeignization have produced a considerable degree of structural and ideological openness in which it has been possible for the radical right to form organisations and promote its ideas.

The focus of my study stretches over the period from 1945 to 2000. While Switzerland had not been ruled by a fascist regime and the end of the Second World War was merely a starting point of profound changes in domestic policies, 1945 represents a clear break in the history of the Swiss radical right. As the true nature of the atrocities committed by National Socialism was revealed to the greater public, in Switzerland, as elsewhere in Europe, the radical right was genuinely disgraced in the period immediately after the end of the war. As a consequence, iso-

lated individuals and groups of the extreme right were active at some remove from the public at large, throughout an initial period that ran from the mid 1940s to the early 1960s. In the 1960s, however, radical right-wing populist parties emerged with some force and succeeded in consolidating, albeit as fringe parties, at the margin of the Swiss party system. In addition, the first circles and publications of the New Right were founded in the late 1960s, not least as a reaction to the events of 1968. While radical right-wing populism continued to exist as a fragmented party camp into the 1990s, it was during the course of this decade that the Swiss People's Party embarked on a process of profound transformation which was completed by the late 1990s and made the SVP the most powerful representative of the Swiss radical right ever seen. Having achieved an unprecedented success in the National Council elections of 1999, it entered the new millennium as the strongest of all Swiss political parties.

The book is organised into nine chapters. Chapter 1 presents the theoretical and conceptual framework. It develops an ideology-centred definition of the radical right and conceptualises the radical right as a political family and collective actor comprised of three main family members: the radical right-wing populist parties, the New Right and the extreme right. Chapter 2 identifies contextual factors in Switzerland such as national traditions, socioeconomic changes, political institutions and discursive opportunities which help to explain the persistence of the Swiss radical right. In addition, it gives a brief overview of the different members of the political family of the radical right in Switzerland. The next three chapters present a historical survey of Swiss radical right-wing populist parties since the 1960s. While chapters 3 and 4 deal with the development of fringe parties at the margins of the party system from the 1960s to the 1990s, chapter 5 focuses on the transformation of a mainstream party, the Swiss People's Party, into a radical right-wing populist party in the 1990s.

Chapters 6 and 7 examine the New Right by looking separately at the German-speaking and French-speaking parts of Switzerland. The examination of developments since the late 1960s shows that the New Right can be divided into six different currents inspired by distinct intellectual legacies. Chapter 8 concentrates on the development of the Swiss extreme right since the end of the Second World War. It shows that, while acting at the margins of politics, the extreme right has evolved from a small underground scene into a larger, diversified subculture. The chapter draws a main distinction between ideologues and propagandists on the one hand and combative and violent groups on the other, allowing us to differentiate between the variety of objec-

tives and means of action which exist among the heterogeneous extreme right in Switzerland. Finally, the conclusion chapter presents a number of key organisational and ideological features characteristic of the radical right in Switzerland. While it assesses the Swiss radical right as a collective actor dominated by political parties and held together by linkages and interactions, it shows the main patterns of the radical right's exclusionist worldview and intellectual agenda.

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