Lead Piece

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Is democracy possible in a multilingual country? The Swiss experience and the paradox of direct democracy

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Introduction

Is it possible to establish stable representative democracy in a *truly* multilingual society? If a minimal definition of representative democracy demands a combination of equal voting rights, free elections, and decision-making by majority rule; and if by "truly multilingual society" we understand not a society which members speak two or more languages (in that case I would speak of a "plurilingual" society, like Luxembourg) but a country in which most citizens are monolingual and live in territorially distinct language regions, then we must admit that the answer to this question can hardly be optimistic.

This was, indeed, John Stuart Mill's view when he famously wrote, almost 150 years ago, that "the united public opinion . . . cannot exist" in a country which citizens "read and speak different languages". And the united public opinion, he thought, is "necessary to the working of representative government" (Mill 1993[1861]).

What is the empirical record of Mill's prophecy? A quick look at contemporary democracies shows that Mill was right. If we concentrate on old democracies – that is, countries that became (more or less) democratic in the 19th century – we come up only with three empirical counter examples. These are Belgium, Canada, and Switzerland. Most other democracies recognized and/or imposed only one language as the official language of the country – usually the statistically dominant one – and progressively suppressed other minority languages and/or regional "dialects" (e.g., France, Italy, Germany, Great Britain). Other democratic countries recognized local languages only at the sub-state level, that is, without making the country as such officially multilingual (e.g., German in South Tyrol, Italy, or Danish in Schleswig-Holstein, Germany). In other cases, regional languages have obtained a strong official status in their historical territories but the dominant language still has official status nationwide (e.g., Catalan vs. Castilian in Spain).

Therefore, Belgium, Canada and Switzerland are the only three old *multilingual* democracies for which Mill's remark is still a challenge. In these three countries there are two to four official languages. In spite of the demographic dominance of one language – Dutch in Belgium (ca. 60 percent), English in Canada (ca. 60 percent), German in Switzerland (ca. 70 percent[2]) –, only a minority of citizens belonging to *minority* linguistic groups understand and/or speak the language of the majority. In Switzerland, for instance, only 20 percent of French speakers and 30 percent of Italian speakers are fluent in German (Kriesi et al. 1996: 15). The figures are strikingly similar in Belgium, where 19 percent of inhabitants of

[2]. Swiss citizens only. The figure is lower (slightly above 60 percent) if we include foreign residents.

Wallonie can speak Dutch (Ginsburgh and Weber 2006: 4).[3] In Canada, the percentage of Francophones speaking English is higher (42 percent, in 2006) but it is shrinking and it is lower in Quebec than in other provinces.[4] On the other hand, with the exception of Canada, the linguistic majority displays a higher degree of knowledge of the first minority language.[5]

Mill wrote this sentence in times in which only a small proportion of citizens could actually read. In times when there were no radio, no television, and no Internet. Today his doubts about the prospects of a democracy in a multilingual society pose an even greater challenge to countries like Canada, Belgium and Switzerland. A quick look at the available evidence shows that in these countries the vast majority of citizens (> 90 percent) read newspapers, listen to radio and listen/watch to television only and exclusively in their own language (for Switzerland, see Kriesi et al. 1996: 16-18). How is it possible to achieve democracy in such a context?

The paradox of direct democracy

In this article, I will advance the thesis that direct-democratic tools can greatly (and perhaps decisively) contribute to establish stable democracy in a truly multilingual society.[6] As I will show, this is a side-effect and a true paradox of direct democracy.

Direct democracy has many disadvantages. Thinkers like Plato, Edmund Burke, Max Weber or Joseph Schumpeter expressed doubts about the *competence* of citizens to vote on complex political issues (see Kriesi 2005: 4, Papadopoulos 1998). More recently, Sartori (1987: 120) and Budge (1996) have reasoned along similar lines. For Gerber (1999), direct democracy is often manipulated by rich demagogues and populists and, thus, risks being transformed from an instrument of citizens to an instrument for lobbyists. As such, it seriously undermines representative government (Broder 2000).

But the main disadvantage which should concern us here, is that direct democracy is an institution that by its very nature allows a majority of citizens (50 percent + 1) to impose its will on the minority. As such, it does not seem to be an adequate instrument for multilingual countries made up of a majority and of one or many minorities. Quite the contrary. Many authors consider direct democracy as an "antithesis" of the consociational model (Barry 1975: 485; see also Steiner and Obler 1977: 328, Reilly 2005), which, arguably, is the only model for "divided societies" if they wish to become democratic (Lijphart 2002). Indeed, the empirical record informs us that referendum results may create tensions among language groups (see the referendum on the "royal question" in Belgium, 1950) or, at worse, trigger violence and armed conflict (see the referendum on independence in Bosnia, 1992).

Against this background, it is a true paradox that a country which is generally considered as the most successful multilingual (as well as multireligious, multiethnic, multicultural, multinational, etc.) democracy, is at the same time the world's champion in the practice of direct democracy. Almost a third (555 out of 1840) of all popular votes held in the world at the national level until the end of 2008 took place in Switzerland. The record is even more impressive if we look at the available data on popular votes held at the sub-state level: 4253 out of 7288 (58 percent) took place in Switzerland.[7]

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3. The figure for all Belgium's Francophones is, however, probably a bit higher, since 29 percent of the inhabitants of the region of Brussels speak Dutch.
4. http://www.cbc.ca/canada/story/2007/12/04/language-census.html?ref=rss
5. In Switzerland, French, the strongest of the two minority languages, is spoken by 36 percent of German speakers and by 34 percent of Italian speakers. Italian is spoken by 10 percent of German speakers and 8 percent of Francophones (Kriesi et al. 1996). In Belgium, 59 percent of the inhabitants of Flanders speak French and 11 percent speak German (Ginsburgh and Weber 2006). In Canada, 9 percent of the Anglophones speak French (see Footnote 3).
6. The paper builds on my opinion article "Démocratie directe au secours de la Belgique?" published in *Le Soir*, 24/25 Dec. 2008.
7. All data are available at the website (www.c2d.ch) of the Centre for Research on Direct Democracy, Zentrum für Demokratie Aarau, University of Zurich.

Not only did the Swiss multilingual democracy survive such an intense practice of direct democracy. The *paradox* is that this institution has been an important factor in fostering internal cohesion of Switzerland, by making the whole Swiss democratic system viable and, indeed, stable in the long run. How was this possible?

There are at least four important advantages that a *frequent* use of the Swiss type of direct democracy can produce in a multilingual society: (1) it is a bottom-up type direct democracy which, far from oppressing the minorities, enables them to have a voice in national politics, (2) it creates obstacles to the emergence of (divisive) ethnolinguistic discourses based on stereotypes and the rhetoric of "us vs. them", (3) it fosters the emergence of a common *demos*, necessary for the "functioning of representative government", and (4) it produces centripetal effects across language borders.

Bottom-up approach

We can distinguish between two main types of direct democracy, depending on who has the right to initiate a popular vote. The "top-down" approach is when a single official (president, prime minister) or a single body (parliament, government) decides to call a referendum on a given issue. The plebiscite is the best example of this approach. Compulsory referenda, typically required for constitutional amendments, also belong to this category.

Yet this approach has nothing to do with the Swiss "bottom-up" direct democracy. In fact, in six out of ten cases the Swiss have voted on optional referenda and on popular initiatives which had been initiated by citizens.[8] Basically every law adopted by the federal parliament can be overturned by an optional referendum. 50'000 signatures (less than 2 percent of the electoral body) are sufficient to call such a referendum. And 100'000 signatures are requested in order to launch a popular initiative demanding the introduction of a new article in the constitution.

The bottom-up approach thus enables minorities to put on the political agenda issues which have been ignored or not sufficiently covered by the institutions of representative democracy. For this reason, even though at the end of the day the decision will still be taken by the majority of the citizens, direct-democratic instruments can be seen as positive for minority rights (Kobach 1993: 26).[9]

It is important to stress that by "minority" we shall not think only of *linguistic* minorities. Indeed, in most cases it is a political and/or social minority that launches a popular initiative or an optional referendum. But the very existence of bottom-up direct-democratic tools enables groups situated within a minority language region to put a given issue onto the national political agenda. In November 2008, for example, the Swiss voted on a popular initiative demanding the elimination of "*imprescriptibilité*" in relation to pornographic crimes against children. The initiative had been launched by a small group of activists from the French-speaking part of the country, without an established political or party base. In spite of the fact that the federal government and parliament almost unanimously recommended to the citizens to reject the initiative, in the end it was accepted by a majority of the voters (52 percent).

8. In four out of ten cases, usually for constitutional amendments and decisions about joining supra-national organizations cases, the referendum was compulsory. [Until 2008 the Swiss voted on 169 popular initiatives (30 percent) and 164 optional referenda (30 percent), compared to 188 compulsory referenda (34 percent) and 36 counter-proposals (6 percent) formulated by parliament in response to popular initiatives.]

9. According to Vatter (1997), the bottom-up type of direct democracy is closer to consociational (or "power-sharing") democracy, as defined by Lijphart (2002), than to the majoritarian model.

Ethnonationalist rhetoric and multiple majorities/minorities

Multilingual, as well as other "multicultural" or "multiethnic" polities, constitute fertile ground for the establishment of "us vs. them" political rhetoric and ethnonationalist discourse. This phenomenon has been largely explored in the literature on nations and nationalism. Nationalist politicians tend to simplify the complex reality by using simplistic categories (see Brubaker 1996). "The" Walloons are lazy because they rely on social transfers from Flanders. "The" Flemish are selfish because they lack solidarity towards their Francophone co-nationals. "The" Quebeckers are more leftist than "the" Anglo-Canadians, etc. Yet how can we know what "the" Flemish, "the" Walloons, or "the" Quebeckers really feel or desire? Elections and opinion surveys cannot but provide partial answers to this question.

My intuition is that on a typical daily political issue "the" Flemish, Walloon, or Québécois opinion simply does not exist. It is very likely that within each group there is a huge number of diverging opinions.

Bearing this in mind, we shall note that a frequent use of referenda and popular initiatives directly and deeply undermines the rhetoric of "us vs. them". If, say, the results of an imaginary referendum on Belgium's pension system shows that 60 percent of Dutch speakers and 40 percent of Francophones accept an increase of the legal retirement age, it is hardly possible for French-speaking politicians to claim that "the" Flemish are bad guys who want the destroy the national pension system.

In other words, the results of popular votes constantly cut the ground under the feet of (real or potential) ethnonationalist leaders. If the outcome of a referendum shows strong intra-group divisions it is more difficult for them to speak "in the name" of their group. And even if the result of a given popular vote does deeply divide two linguistic groups and enables political leaders to start developing ethnonationalist rhetoric, direct democracy will probably correct that problem by itself.

In order to understand this last and important aspect of direct democracy we shall mention that a frequent use of direct-democratic tools creates a context of multiple majorities and minorities which "increase the likelihood that members of ethnic minorities will be parts of political majorities on some issues and many members of any ethnic majority will be members of political minorities on some issues" (Rothchild and Roeder 2005: 17). There is more to be said on this. Majorities and minorities can change over time on the *same* (or at least similar) issues. Let me illustrate this point by using the following example taken from Switzerland.

In the 1990s many French-speaking politicians and opinion makers propagated the black-white picture of "open-minded" Francophones, favorable to the integration of Switzerland into the European Union (EU), vs. "closed-minded" German speakers (see Büchi 2000). The trigger was a referendum held in December 1992, when a tiny majority (50.3 percent) of the Swiss rejected to join the European Economic Area (EEA). Most significantly, in *almost all* [10] German-speaking cantons, as well as in the Italian-speaking Ticino, a majority of citizens said "no", whereas in *all* French-speaking cantons the "yes" votes largely prevailed, with percentages above 77 percent.[11] A closer inspection allows us to estimate that 73 percent of French speakers accepted to join the EEA, whereas 56 percent of German speakers and 62 percent of Italian speakers rejected it. Yet the "no" votes prevailed in virtue of the demographic strength of German speakers. Therefore it was en easy game for Francophone politicians and the media to blame the German-speaking majority for blocking the "legitimate desire" of French speakers to integrate into the EU. The linguistic cleavage between the two main language groups – known as "röstigraben" – entered the daily vocabulary of the media

[10]. The only exceptions were the cantons of Basel-Stadt and Basel-Land where the "yes" votes prevailed with, respectively, 55 and 53 percent.
[11]. These figures refer to the four officially monolingual French-speaking cantons. The percentages of "yes" votes were lower in the two bilingual (French/German) cantons, in which Francophones constitute approximately two thirds of the population (Fribourg, 65 percent, and Valais, 56 percent).

and politics. "A person reading the newspapers in those days could have got the impression that Switzerland was about to fall apart", affirms Büchi (2000: 269; my translation).

But Switzerland, of course, did not fall apart. In the 2000s the clichés about "open-minded" French speakers and "close-minded" German speakers could be hardly spotted anymore in the French-speaking media and the political discourse of Francophone politicians. The reason is that numerous popular votes held after 1992 showed that such a picture was totally false. So the claim that French speakers were in favor of joining the EU literally collapsed in March 2001 when 77 percent of the Swiss rejected the popular initiative demanding the start of negotiations for the EU membership. In *no* canton was a majority of the citizens in favor of this initiative. In French-speaking cantons the percentage of "no" votes ranged from 56 percent in Jura to 79 percent in Valais. One year later, the Swiss accepted to join the United Nations (UN). This vote underlined the existence of an urban-rural rather than a linguistic cleavage. Interestingly, some German-speaking urban areas were even more favorable to the UN than the French-speaking ones. For instance, in the city of Geneva – the European seat of the UN – the percentage of "yes" votes was lower than in the German-speaking city of Berne. The stereotype about "closed-minded" German speakers was additionally broken when as many as five popular votes (2002, twice in 2005, 2006, and 2009) concerning the relations with the EU showed that the majority of them were in favor of a gradual opening to the EU. In the aftermath of the last of these votes, on 8 February 2009, an expert on the relations between Switzerland and EU said that "l'idéalisme pro-européen n'est plus là: la Suisse romande, que la cause européenne mettait en transe, ne l'est plus."[12] In reality, "the" French-speaking Switzerland – la *Suisse romande* – was never "in trance" for the "European cause". It was, rather, wishful thinking and a cliché diffused in the 1990s by the media and a part of the Francophone political elite.

This example, I believe, nicely illustrates how the very exercise of direct democracy structurally dissolves a potential tension between linguistic groups and hinders the emergence of the "us vs. them" nationalist rhetoric of politicians.

The emergence of a common demos

Multilingual countries face the problem that they cannot rely on the myths on common linguistic/ethnic/cultural origin in order to construct a national *demos*. Moreover, how can there be "a" people, or "a" nation", if its supposed members speak distinct, mutually unintelligible languages? This was, as we have seen, a major concern for J. S. Mill but a similar concern can be also found in the works of contemporary political theorists who consider the emergence of such a *demos* as indispensable not only for a stable democracy but also for cross-country social solidarity (see, e.g., Miller 1995, Habermas 1998).

In Switzerland it is precisely the frequent exercise of direct democracy at the national level which makes the emergence of such a *demos* possible.

The thesis, here, is that a repeated practice of direct democracy strengthens the sentiment of the Swiss that they belong to the same "people" or to the same "nation". It makes it *visible*. When, in the aftermath of a referendum, politicians and the media affirm that "the people has decided", there can be no doubt what "people" they have in mind: it is the Swiss people, the Swiss *demos*. In a speech held in 2002 in front of the General Assembly of the UN, the Swiss president Kaspar Villiger affirmed that "national cohesion [in Switzerland] is … not to be taken for granted. Its central element is our system of direct democracy, the right of the people to decide all important political issues at the ballot box."[13] Let me recall now a concept advanced in 1882 by Ernest Renan in his famous speech "What is a nation?". According to Renan, a nation is a "daily plebiscite" [*plebiscite de tous les jours*]. Probably no

12. René Schwok, interview published in *Le Temps*, 9 February 2009.
13. http://www.efd.admin.ch/dokumentation/reden/archiv/02538/index.html?lang=en (consulted on 22 Feb. 2009).

other country exemplifies this definition better than Switzerland. Of course, the Swiss do not vote every day. But they do vote two to four times every year on major national issues. And it can be assumed that even those citizens who – occasionally or permanently[14] – do not vote indirectly get the feeling that they, too, belong to the common Swiss *demos*. I do not need to play football in order to cherish a victory of my national football team.

We can easily understand that this *demos* can hardly manifest itself in countries in which national elections are held every four years in linguistically separate electoral districts and in which other factors (especially linguistically segmented public spaces or the impossibility to rely on myths on common cultural origin) further prevent its emergence.

In order to grasp this last point I shall underline that in Switzerland popular votes held at the national level take place in a single constituency or "voting district". This is only apparently mitigated by the fact that in 70 percent of the cases (i.e. in votes on compulsory referenda and popular initiatives) a double majority was required, of the people *and* of the cantons. The main claim of this section of the article remains unaffected by this consideration, since the cantonal *demoi* do not *substitute* the Swiss *demos*, they are *additional* to it. Besides, only in a very small number of cases, the last time in 1994, was the will of the majority of the Swiss people overrun by the majority of the cantons.

If the thesis advanced in this part of the article holds, than direct democracy also helps to explain why is it incorrect to consider Switzerland as a "multination" state composed of distinct, linguistically defined, "nations" (see Kymlicka 1995, Ipperciel 2007) and why is it more appropriate to consider it as a single, albeit multilingual, "nation" (see Stojanovic 2000, Grin 2002, Dardanelli 2008).

Centripetal effects of the single voting district

If the common *demos* can be considered as a product of *vertical integration* triggered by the frequent exercise of direct democracy, the single voting district creates another important centripetal effects at the level of *horizontal integration* (see Tresch 2008: 278-9). By "horizontal integration" I mean the emergence of cross-linguistic dialogues as well as the flaw of political views and opinions from one language region to the other.

The fact that popular votes are held in a single voting district creates incentives for politicians, political parties and social movements to cross cantonal and linguistic borders in order to seek support in other parts of the country and create ad hoc cross-regional coalitions (Hug 1994). It is in their interest to do so. The media play their role. The public radio and television channels, for instance, invite politicians with different linguistic backgrounds to participate in debates on the upcoming referendum.[15] The newspapers, too, often quote or publish interviews with politicians coming from different language regions. A recent empirical analysis of two votes on foreign (i.e. European) policy, held in 2001 and 2002, shows that in the articles published by the German-speaking *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* five out of ten most cited politicians were German speakers, four were French speakers and one was an Italian speaker. On the other side of the language border, in the French-speaking *Tribune de Genève*, top ten positions were held by five Francophones, four German speakers (two of which were in the first two positions!) and one Italian speaker (Tresch 2008: 193). However, it shall be stressed that this horizontal integration concerns only the well-known federal politicians. The inter-linguistic dialogue of other actors, not to speak of "simple" citizens, is

[14]. The participation rates are rarely above 45 percent.

[15]. This is even a formal duty for the Swiss public broadcasting service (SSR SSR Idée Suisse). Among its corporate principles we can read the following statement: "When it comes to creating programmes, we orientate ourselves towards the varied needs of the majorities and minorities in multilingual and multicultural Switzerland" (http://www.srg.ch/336.0.html?&L=4). And the federal law on radio and television of 2006 states (art. 24) that among the duties of the public broadcasting service is to "promouvoir la compréhension, la cohésion et l'échange entre les différentes parties du pays, les communautés linguistiques, les cultures et les groupes sociaux, et tenir compte des particularités du pays et des besoins des cantons" (http://www.admin.ch/ch/f/rs/7/784.40.fr.pdf).

low. Only rarely do actors from different linguistic regions criticize or support each other in public. (Tresch 2008: 278).

A further centripetal effect of the single voting district is that it favors the flaw of information between linguistic regions. As a matter of fact, as we have seen in introduction, multilingual polities face the challenge of segmented public spaces. If elections are held in numerous electoral districts which borders more or less fit the language borders, and if the media cover the elections only in their own linguistic region, there is the risk that citizens discuss completely different political issues. Direct democracy mitigates this problem insofar it obliges the politicians in all regions of the country to discuss *the same issue(s), at the same moment.*

Of course, two different groups can discuss the same issue by relying on completely different sets of arguments. Indeed, in Switzerland this phenomenon has been observed by some authors (e.g., Kriesi et al. 1996: 7). For instance, in French and Italian-speaking regions the votes on issues of social security like maternity leave are typically characterized by debates revolving on questions of social justice and family policy, whereas the financial sustainability of the proposal is usually at the centre of debates in German-speaking Switzerland. Nonetheless, the centripetal effect mentioned above – the fact that politicians cross linguistic borders – allows for a degree of permeability. The ideas and arguments of one region flaw into the public space of the other region, and vice versa. This further centripetal effect shall not be underestimated. Indeed, the already mentioned study by Anke Tresch has shown that in referendum campaigns which preceded the two votes on foreign policy there was an increasing convergence of the arguments among the linguistic regions. The authors comes to conclusion that "there is no *fundamental* [grundsätzlich] contradiction between linguistic plurality and an integrated public space" (Tresch 2008: 277; my translation; emphasis in original).

Conclusion

Let me sum up. In this article I have tried to show how direct democracy, an institution which is apparently inimical to "plural" societies because it does not contain measures for protection of minorities, may contribute to internal cohesion of a multilingual society and, more specifically, may foster integration of linguistic minorities. By exploring the Swiss experience I have identified four main advantages of direct-democratic instruments. First, the bottom-up approach which is proper to the Swiss type of direct democracy enables tiny minorities to raise issues, which they deem important, on the national political agenda. Second, the frequent use of direct democracy creates multiple majorities and multiple minorities which enable everyone to be, depending on the issue, every now and then on the winning side and, at the same time, it makes the life difficult for ethnonationalist politicians who cannot develop a permanent "us vs. them" rhetoric. Third, the practice of direct democracy at the national level promotes vertical integration and allows the emergence of a common *demos*. Finally, the fact that popular votes at the national level are held in a single "voting district" produces centripetal effects of horizontal integration by providing incentives for politicians, parties and social movements to cross language borders and by facilitating the flow of information and arguments across linguistically segmented public spaces.

It is important, however, to make two important disclaimers. First, the article does not claim that direct democracy is *the only* factor which explains why Switzerland has been and still is a stable multilingual democracy. But it does claim that it is an important factor. Indeed, direct democracy is an institution which structures, powerfully, a set of other practices and institutions which are often cited as "the" secret of the Swiss success. For example, the Swiss "Konkordanzdemokratie" – that is, the fact that at all levels (federal, cantonal, municipal) governments are composed by representatives of major political parties, covering the whole political spectrum – is a by-product of direct democracy (Neidhart 1970). And even the fact

that all major Swiss parties, as well as organizations of civil society, are multilingual has been recently explained as a consequence of direct democracy (Tresch 2008: 280).

Second, the article does not claim that this typically Swiss institution can be transposed *tel quel* to other multilingual societies and that it can immediately produce similarly positive results. Direct democracy is, indeed, a fundamental element of the Swiss political culture. But this culture did not emerge from one day to another. It is, rather, a result of a long-term process which started back in 1866, when the first national referenda were held. Even though I believe that its introduction in other contests may, in the long run, produce positive results, certain mechanisms of protection of minorities should be introduced. In fact, even in Switzerland the use of direct democracy did at some point create tensions between language groups. I shall recall the example of the 1992 referendum on the EEA. My analysis of the impact of direct democracy on inter-group relations in the four multilingual cantons (Stojanovic 2006) has also shown that a linguistic cleavage and tensions emerged on a number of votes which concerned "communitarian" issues (like the use of languages at schools, or a new electoral system with effects on linguistic proportionality in the cantonal government). Such issues are better dealt with at the level of representative democracy where it is easier to reach consensus.

Direct democracy is far from being the panacea for all ills of a multilingual democracy. But it is worth exploring its virtues. And it might be worth trying them.

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