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## Book Review: Jonathan Steinberg, *Why Switzerland?*

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Language, Wealth, Religion, and Identity, which I will review in turn below. All text and sources are carefully referenced, there is a 13-page Index, and even an Appendix of how one votes for the Nationalrat in Switzerland, no small feat to present and explain well.

Let us recall that at the time of publication, Switzerland had voted once, in 1992, with a slight popular majority, against joining the so-called European Economic Area, an alternative to joining the European Union outright. This event serves Steinberg often as a benchmark to discuss Switzerland's relevance. But the book was published before the controversies around the Nazi Gold, which formed another identity-shaking episode in the country's recent history. This being considered, and beyond any particular events, in the historical and concluding chapters, Steinberg arrives at conclusions regarding Switzerland's history and future that are solid, objective, multi-faceted, and often brilliant. He managed to write a book that was significant at the time of the first edition (1976), was so once again in 1996, and certainly still is today.

The chapter on History, together with the later one on Wealth, presents the truly dramatic quality of Switzerland's past experiences: the external and internal clashes of political and religious stances, its personalities, and underlying it all, the determination of the people to balance particularistic interest with agreements to form and stay together as a nation. Relatively little known to the English-speaking reader are the country's European Power status in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries; a rather long period of Reformation-related wars; an entrenched and well-functioning Old Regime; a short civil war before the coming of the modern constitution in 1848; a severe national identity crisis during the First World War; the 1918 General Strike, seen by many as a possible worker's revolution; and the 1937 reconciliation on Work Peace. Though written before the thorough reexamination of the Swiss government's and banks' policies vis-à-vis Germany during the Second World War, Steinberg does an excellent job in highlighting the country's finest hour of deterring, in 1940, a German attack, but also subsequently, in these trying times, compromising its neutrality for economic gain and falling short in meeting humanitarian standards once embraced. — To compress a long and complex history into a little more than 60 pages is no small feat, and the author has accomplished the task competently and with balance.

The chapter on Politics masters the challenge of explaining the complicated mechanisms of cantonal vs. national sharing of responsibilities and of the referenda- and initiative-based political decision making. A good portion of the chapter is also dedicated to explaining the various cantonal- and municipal-level intricacies of Swiss politics, and why they matter. Not surprisingly, for the first edition of the book, the process of separating out and forming a new canton for the Jura in the 1960s and 1970s was essential news, but the nine pages still offer dramatic insights on how a regional

challenge could be managed by the interplay of cantonal and confederate politics and mediation. Foreshadowing recent concerns, Steinberg reminds us of the reality that Switzerland had a substantial foreign population long-term. "As early as 1880 Switzerland had nearly six times more foreign workers as a percentage of its resident population than any other European state" (p. 169). The present-day situation, with a still above-average ratio of multi-ethnicity, benefits, one assumes, from that learning curve of living together.

While the collegial, multi-party nature of the Executive is well depicted, the political party spectrum at large and its constancy and changes over recent decades is profiled somewhat less well. For many readers in industrialized countries today it is after all of great interest that the Swiss Left has been able to maintain an almost one-fourth share of political representation for a long time and that the extreme Right has not been able to exceed the 15-percent mark which has often been so worrisome in European politics.

A chapter on Language fleshes out previous explanations of historical and political diversity. We encounter here extremely solid and nicely illustrated descriptions of the four language groups. Within each, there are further distinctions made and exemplified. Steinberg emphasizes what visitors often will not realize: the German-speaking Swiss' "love of dialect," which sometimes gets in the way of competence in the written language (published authors excepted). Paradoxically, a common linguistic experience of Swiss people is that they have no common language (p. 160). This can be a source of insensitivity and lack of contact across language lines (even in professional and scholarly discourse), but often is also a basis for tolerance.

Steinberg's chapter on Wealth admirably presents how dramatic has been Switzerland's emergence from a small, land-locked, resource-poor country to an economy flourishing on advanced, specialized manufacturing and sophisticated financial services. The author also ably discusses the economic-institutional infrastructure (the relatively late advent of the railroads, the central bank) that have facilitated, as well as channeled, the business and manpower forces that produced the wealth—and a wealth per capita that put the country into the top or second position in the world. There is less here on the country's tax structure, cartelization, and the quite parsimonious, but well-thought-out social expenditures system, which all have a hand in producing impressive economic-well-being. Steinberg also reviews that, with all the wealth, Switzerland's income and wealth distribution is quite unequal. His discussion is somewhat incomplete on this score, however, because he fails to point out that the latter starts at a relatively high wage floor; there is little poverty. This being said, it needs to be pointed out as an aside—and Steinberg would not have been able to see that in the 1990s—that recent years have witnessed a debate on the

“working poor” in Switzerland, which the welfare safety net now has to cope with. - A small criticism concerns a table on the development of GNP (p. 192), which was not updated for the second edition; the data stop in 1974. (A table on voter participation, on p. 105, by the way, shares this limitation.)

The chapter on Religion makes another complex Swiss reality transparent and fascinating to read. It is helpful for Steinberg to stress that the major French-speaking cantons are Protestant, which goes a long way to explain the historical identity and distance of the Romandie to France. The author does not shy away from discussing the difficult notion of having state churches, which varies, of course, from canton to canton. He shows that this arrangement can be compatible with a separation between church and state, even though Americans may still not understand this. His exposition remains a little incomplete, even for the one canton he uses to explain the system. A canton like Berne has not one state church, but four established denominations: Protestant, Catholic, Methodist, and Jewish. These are the ones that have a specific church tax collected for them on the cantonal tax return, but this is done by a check-on system; tax payers tithe voluntarily in this fashion. Also not mentioned in Steinberg’s statistics is that the tax return check-ons help to figure the relative strengths of the denominations, a highly unreliable approach due to very substantial secularization, of a degree similar to that in other European countries. Again, this may be hard to grasp for readers in such a god-fearing country as the United States.

The last topical chapter in the book is that on Identity, and it begins to bring together the last part of Steinberg’s study, where he sums up the dramatic and colorful biography of Switzerland. Importantly, he discusses at length how the Swiss army has functioned as both a basis for the socialization of young people and an understanding of what the country is defending. Since the latter aspect has been changing drastically since the late 1980s, it came not as a total surprise that in 1989 a 35.6-percent share of voters expressed their wish that the army should be abolished. But in the years since publication, the army has been downsized and restructured to a degree that has also made it being questioned less. For example, limited Swiss military actions in support of international peacekeeping have taken place so that service to that end can be postulated as at least one modern-day alternative to the Cold War vision of what the Swiss Army was all about.

The army example takes on a somewhat too prominent place in Steinberg’s discussion of Swiss identity. Not that that identity has become easier to explain. But there are other examples to illustrate its fragility and the constant need to work on newly defining it. The divide between Western, French-speaking Switzerland and the German-speaking majority, the “Roestigraben,” has been growing further since 1996, and efforts to overcome this gap, both political and cultural, have striven toward new definitions of what is common to all Swiss. Once again, a national

exposition, EXPO.02 in 2002, attempted to do this, like in 1939 and 1964. Other attempts to map identities have involved a more economy-based regionalism that might replace—and to some extent has already replaced—the small-checked confederate dualism of large and tiny cantons.

Steinberg's book concludes with a chapter on why Switzerland matters. Here the analytic strains of the various chapters come together and culminate in a discussion of the country's relationship to the European Union. This discussion, as many others in this study, make the book valuable indeed for the present-day outside observer. Europe's unification has become unification-plus-expansion, including drastic leaps forward as well as setbacks for the whole edifice. Switzerland has found a tenuous *modus operandi* via "bilateralism," but that may only go so far, as issues like the EU-wide admission of refugees and free labor mobility have to be confronted at this very moment and require positive popular referenda votes. But it also happens that Steinberg's argument that the Swiss political model may have lessons to teach to the EU as it grows is very pertinent now that the latter's new Constitution has been rejected by the French and others. "It will be necessary very soon to learn to govern Europe as if it were Switzerland," argues Steinberg. Also, "Why Switzerland? Because it shows us by reflection who we are (p. 259)."

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### Book Review

Dr. Ernst W. Alther, *Ahnentafel von Bürgern st.gallischen Ursprungs mit Ausläufern nach Genf, Nancy, Nürnberg, Ulm, Lucca und Florenz*. St. Gallen: Amt für Kultur des Kantons St. Gallen, 2003.

To compile a pedigree chart of a few generations, and have it printed, might be considered a private and personal pleasure. However, if such a pedigree is set out to cover all ancestors as far back as the sources allow, the author has achieved something important not only for his family, but for his home town, the canton or even a larger part of the country. Swiss genealogists, especially Konrad Schulthess, have started projects like this during the 1920's; in 1939 Eduard Rübel and Wilhelm H. Ruoff have set new standards with their *Rübel-Blass* genealogy, covering mainly Zurich and Bern families. Franz Niederberger and Johann Paul Zwicky have transferred this tradition to Central Switzerland, and Manfred Strohmeyer has presented the *Merian-Ahnen*, a basic source for Basel.

Now a similar project has been announced for northeastern Switzerland and Graubünden (Grisons). The author is Dr. Ernst W. Alther, St. Gallen, an