
Book Review

The radical right in Switzerland: Continuity and change, 1945–2000

Damir Skenderovic

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In *The radical right in Switzerland: continuity and change, 1945–2000*, Damir Skenderovic provides an exceedingly comprehensive view of the development and recent success of Switzerland's radical right from the post-war era up to the new millennium. What sets this contribution apart from other studies on the radical right is its explicit focus on the actor perspective and the rich historiographic approach to the topic. With this shift from contextual factors to the actor, the author 'echoes recent claims in the new literature on the radical right stating the need for more attention to be paid to agent and agency' (p. 331). The resulting rich and extensive picture on Switzerland's radical right actors strongly contributes to a broader comprehension of the central role that political entrepreneurs, organizational formations and ideological suppliers assume in the development of radical right politics.

The broad conceptualization of the radical right as 'political family' and 'collective actor' is laid out in Chapter 1. The author identifies three members of the radical right family: radical right-wing populist parties, the New Right and the extreme-right. Although all members share an exclusionist ideology and agendas marked by identity politics, they strongly vary in terms of their means of action, intellectual sophistication and most importantly in their differing positions in the political and public sphere. By including non-party actors such as subcultures, individuals, groups and even publications propagating exclusionist ideas, this approach clearly surpasses the extensive party-focus prevailing in radical right studies.

At the same time, the tripartite categorization of the radical right proposed by the author is not completely convincing. Such a categorization does not take into account the very different nature of the New Right, which the author describes as providing the ideological fundament for both right-wing populist parties and the extreme-right. Although the inclusion of such a variety of actors is highly revealing, a more subtle categorization would have facilitated



an initial assessment of the relative importance of these actors, as well as an identification of the relevant links and interactions within the radical right political family.

In Chapter 2, the author discusses the ‘success conditions’ of the Swiss radical right. The chapter begins with an outline of contextual factors that are commonly assumed to be important in explaining the emergence of the radical right in contemporary societies, including national traditions, socio-economic changes and opportunity structures, not just institutional but also discursive and cultural. While the examples provided by the author demonstrate the significance of these factors for the Swiss context, he concludes that they largely fail to take into account the central role of political actors.

Accordingly, in his analysis of the radical right in Switzerland from 1945 to 2000, which follows in Chapters 3–7, the author considers both types of factors. Thanks to the historiographic approach, an enormously rich, lively and comprehensive picture of Switzerland’s radical right emerges from these chapters. The detailed description of the ‘Movement against Overforeignization’ from the 1960s to the 1970s presented in Chapter 3 already clearly demonstrates the strong appeal of the combination of a populist strategy, based on resentments against the so-called political and social elite, and an exclusionist ideology, which is typically expressed against immigrants and migration in general. The figure of James Schwarzenbach, a prominent figure of this movement, illustrates the relevance of charismatic leadership for the cause of the radical right. Although Schwarzenbach’s famous initiative ‘Against Overforeignization’ failed in the national vote in 1970, its narrow defeat and the high levels of support for this proposal led to the impression that effective political action was inevitable. In the run up to the vote, the Swiss government chose a strategy of stabilization by implementing strict quotas on annual immigration. This early example shows how Switzerland’s institutional political opportunity structure of direct democracy facilitates radical right parties having an indirect restrictive impact on migration policies.

The strategy of using direct democratic instruments in order to influence public political debates by continually thematizing and expounding the so-called ‘foreigners problem’ was again adopted by fringe radical right parties in the 1980s and 1990s outlined in Chapter 4. Yet, neither the Swiss Democrats as direct continuation of the Movement of Overforeignization nor the Car Party/Freedom Party were really successful as right-populist parties. Although these parties did not gain long-term success, actor-centred factors offer again a persuasive explanation for the relative success of the *Lega dei Ticinesi*, an ethno-regionalist right-populist party from Italian speaking canton Ticino. With the exception of the Lega, the radical right parties during this time lacked strong and charismatic leadership and were characterized by weak internal cohesion at the organizational level.



Chapter 5, dedicated to the surge of the Swiss Peoples Party (*Schweizerische Volkspartei* – SVP), may be considered the core of the book. Actor-centred factors in combination with contextual factors turn out to be particularly powerful in order to explain the phenomenal success of the SVP in emerging as Switzerland's most important party in terms of electoral share. In terms of actor-centred factors, the SVP has undergone a remarkable improvement in organization, campaigning and leadership over the past 15 years. The author furthermore uncovers a very interesting interplay between direct democracy and federalism at the level of institutional political opportunity structures. In the federal context of strong cantonal party sections and the comparatively weak position of the national party, the Zurich faction served as laboratory and training ground for the new national SVP. The Zurich party, home base of the SVP's charismatic leader Christoph Blocher, is known as the most radical SVP cantonal party, and direct democracy helped the Zurich cantonal party to impose their political agenda on the national party.

The author's approach of using contextual and actor-centred factors in order to explain the surge of the SVP over the last two decades is highly persuasive. Accordingly, I agree with the author's statement that 'the new SVP and with it an array of other groups from the radical right must be seen as designers and builders of their own success' (p. 341). One should be careful, however, not to neglect the relevance of contextual factors. It is exactly the combination of context and agency that has the potential for a comprehensive explanation of the current success of radical right parties in Western Europe. The author himself provides numerous examples of the relevance of both factors in the Swiss case, such as leadership, organization and propaganda on the side of agency, or institutional political opportunity structures such as direct democracy and federalism on the contextual side. Another example to illustrate this point is the new socio-economic cleavage between losers and winners of globalization. By taking an actor perspective, the author not only shows that the new SVP profited most in terms of electoral gains from this new cleavage, but also that it in part actively constructed this cleavage even though its origin remains contextually determined, evoked by the phenomenon of globalization and its real implications for people's everyday life.

Although explicit reference to the delayed rise of the SVP in the French-speaking part of Switzerland, which was already observable in the national council elections in 1999 (see Table 5.3, p. 148), is missing, the author addresses the French-speaking part of Switzerland very explicitly in the section on Switzerland's New Right. A detailed examination of the respective actors, individuals, circles and publications is presented in Chapters 6 and 7 for the German- and French-speaking parts of Switzerland, respectively. As the author reveals, such a distinction along Switzerland's linguistic border is indispensable, as the respective strands turn out to be heavily influenced by



New Right thinking in the adjacent countries of Germany and France. In Chapter 8, the author finally turns to the subculture of the extreme-right, situated at the margins of society. With the same attention to detail the author paid to right-populist parties and the New Right, he delineates the evolution of Switzerland's extreme-right scene. Owing to the inclusion of peripheral actors from the New and the extreme-right, the author reaches the margins of the radical right family. Here, we find such bizarre constellations as xenophobic ecologists, Islamist negationists or spiritual nationalist circles, to mention only a few of them.

One last remark regards the rather short final synthesis of the enormous quantity of insights provided in the book. A final assessment of the central actors, decisive factors and crucial interactions explaining the success of Switzerland's radical right is missing and a clear distinction between Swiss specific factors on the one hand and more generally valid factors on the other would have been particularly helpful in order to corroborate the author's assessment of Switzerland's radical right as being 'certainly suitable for inclusion in comparative research' (p. 5). However, this concern in no way impairs the author's impressive exploration of Switzerland's radical right. To conclude, this book is a very rich and important contribution to radical right studies, in which Skenderovic convincingly demonstrates the relevance of agency in the success story of Switzerland's radical right over time.

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