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The limits of cultural nationalism: Italian Switzerland from a risorgimento perspective*

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ABSTRACT. This article critiques the 'cultural turn' in Italian Risorgimento historiography by examining Italian Switzerland, and specifically Ticino. This area paradoxically aided and abetted Italian patriots, especially Giuseppe Mazzini, yet rejected becoming part of the Italian national project. This paradox is heightened by the fact that the vast majority of the Italian nationalist literary canon, as identified by Alberto Maria Banti, was republished in Ticino. The paradox is explained in terms of the conflict between long-standing traditions of local autonomy and the idea of any form of uniform or centralised control, as originally represented by the Cisalpine Republic and then by both versions (Napoleonic and Piedmontese) of the Kingdom of Italy. However, I also use Banti's cultural concepts to demonstrate the creation of a powerful counter-myth of Italian Swiss nationalism in the character of William Tell.

KEYWORDS: Alberto Banti, Italian Switzerland, Risorgimento, Swiss nationalism, Ticino, William Tell.

In a relatively recent issue (volume 15, issue 3), *Nations and Nationalism* presented a wide-ranging discussion concerning the latest trends in Italian Risorgimento historiography. In particular it offered a variety of critiques, always leavened carefully with praise, of the path-breaking work of Alberto

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Permissions for images: Figure 1 is an adapted version of a map by Poulpy located at http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Switzerland_Locator_Map_TI.svg. Figure 2 is from *Freiheitsbaum auf dem Münsterplatz in Basel, 1798*, Swiss National Museum, inventory number LM-44587. Figure 3 is from Rocco Torricelli, *Saccheggio della Casa Agnelli li 29 Aprile* (c. 1800), Archivio Fotografico del Dicastero Attività Culturali Città di Lugano. Figure 4 is from Balthasar A. Dunker, *Wilheim Tell Bekämpft die Revolution* (1798), Swiss National Museum, inventory number LM-20965. Figure 5 is from Antonio Soldati, *Rivoluzione del Cantone Ticino, 5 Dicembre 1839* (c. 1840) from the print collection of the Archivio Cantonale di Ticino in Bellinzona.

Maria Banti. That Banti deserves such consideration is obvious in that he has brought new energy to a field of study whose previous explanatory paradigms of Italian unification had been weakened by local studies that seemed to make generalised claims of political or economic primacy highly suspect (Riall 2009). Downplaying both the economic and social causes of the unification movement as secondary, Banti maintained that early Italian nationalists were inspired primarily by the literature they read. Carefully examining the memoirs of thirty-three important figures of the Risorgimento, Banti argued that they commonly attributed the discovery of 'Italianess' to a 'canon' of texts, produced between 1803 and 48, which included poems, plays, histories and operas by such familiar names as Foscolo, Pellico, Cuoco, Guerrazzi, D'Azeglio, Verdi and Amari. These works offered a shared set of formative images or tropes that led to a mythology based on three pre-political and pre-existing totemic matrices – 'family, sanctity and honour' – that allowed for easy reference and recognition of new national concepts (Banti 2000: 30). The sentiment of patriotism was thus built on a framework of familiar feelings and assumptions that already permeated Italian society. Banti's emphasis on culture and emotion as wellsprings of nationalist action clearly resonated with the prevailing need for new directions in Risorgimento study as scholars began to tackle art, opera and literature in creative and exciting ways (see Banti and Ginsburg 2007).[1]

The very sweep of this 'cultural turn', naturally (and professionally) called forth the need for re-examination and revision, and such was the purpose of the previously mentioned issue of this journal. Problems of reception, audience and context, to say nothing about definitions of what constitutes a mass movement, all served as interesting starting points of debate regarding Banti's cultural theory of nationalism. Yet for the most part that discussion remained bounded by the geography of successful Italian unification. In contrast, this article focuses on an example of failed Italian nationalism and specifically on the area of Ticino in southern Switzerland. It argues that Ticino met all the cultural and ethnic criteria necessary to have been influenced by Banti's canon of texts, but local social and political factors, as well as the geopolitical concerns of Napoleon and others, prompted the Ticinesi to reject Italian nationalism and remain steadfastly tied to the Swiss Confederation. In contrast to areas such as Lombardy and Venetia (which were under the direct control of the Austrians) or Parma, Modena and Tuscany (which were Austrian protectorates), Ticino accepted, aided and abetted exiled Italian patriots, but apparently made no move to join the emerging Italian nation. On the contrary, during the Sonderbund Civil War of 1847, Ticino – despite its overwhelmingly Catholic make-up – not only voted against the conservative rebels, but defended the canton in the service of Swiss unity. Likewise, my own research into the cantonal police archives in Bellinzona suggests that at no time after the Restoration did Ticino's local authorities ever really fear that their compatriots might seek a political alternative in Italy. The same was true of confederation officials in the federal

capitol, Bern, despite the fact that they often complained of Ticino's open support of Italian revolutionaries and occasionally sent in federal troops to reinforce Swiss neutrality in the face of Austrian protests. However, while showing the limits of the cultural argument, this article does not throw Banti out with the bathwater. Indeed, sentiments of honour and family played a critical role in creating Italian-Swiss identity in Ticino during the Risorgimento era, as did the mytho-poetic force of Swiss symbols such as the Oath of Rütli (in which delegates of the three ur-cantons swore mutual defence and freedom) and especially the saga of William Tell. All of which argues for an integrated theory of nationalism that appreciates the role of sentiment as well as local dynamics of economics, politics and social structure.

That Ticino should be Italian rather than Swiss certainly occurred to some Italian patriots. Thus, on 24 June 1859, as Piedmontese and French troops struggled against their Austrian counterparts at the Battle of Solferino, a broadside appeared in the newly liberated city of Milan appealing to the people of Ticino to acknowledge that 'an Italian heart beats in your breasts' and to join 'in beautiful fraternity all the different peoples of the beautiful country (*Bel Paese*) surrounded by the Alps and the sea!'. The broadside proceeded to lay out the supposedly obvious logic of rejecting the 'bizarre and shapeless federation with which you have only fictitious relations and of which you are only an illogical appendix'. 'Ticinesi,' it continued:

> Sky, earth, language, habits, commercial interests, historical traditions, misfortunes and hopes all bind us together: everything that you hold most sacred and most vital for a people you have in common with us and not with Switzerland . . . WE WANT TO UNITE OURSELVES WITH OUR BROTHERS, WE WANT TO BECOME AGAIN LOMBARDS AND ITALIANS.[2]

Despite their rather passionate overtones, these assertions were, historically speaking, not without foundation. Ticino had in fact been settled by the Lombards and most of its component parts had belonged to the Duchy of Milan until they were wrested away by members of the Swiss Confederation in a series of campaigns during the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. Subsequently, Ticino was treated as a group of eight feudal territories or *baliaggi*, each under the control of a governor (*Landfogt* or *balivo*), sent from the 'sovereign cantons' on a rotating schedule of two years. It did not become a unified canton of equal status in the confederation until the Napoleonic mediation of 1803, and even afterwards the Ticinesi constantly looked south to Italy both for cultural context and for the dissemination of its own literary output. Economically, the area was consistently and subsistently dependent on Lombardy for deliveries of maize and other grains, while many of its inhabitants migrated to the Italian peninsula to find work. Suffice it to say that when the Austrians (in retaliation for a Mazzinian rebellion in Milan planned and executed from Ticino) closed the border in 1853, they evicted some 6,000 Ticinesi who immediately became a serious economic burden at home. Traffic went the other way as well, and in 1837 Stefano Franscini

Figure 1. Switzerland and Ticino.

reported that Ticino's total population of some 113,000 inhabitants included about 3,000 non-Swiss (presumably mostly Italian) in contrast to only 300 Swiss from the other cantons (Franscini 1837–1840: 294–97). Many wealthy families owned land on both sides of the Lombard border, and young Ticinesi elites almost exclusively attended universities in Italy, especially that of Pavia. Universally Catholic, Ticino's religious life was likewise tied administratively to Lombardy through the bishops residing in Como and Milan. Remaining resolutely Latinate in its language (even today, Ticino's dialects are of the Lombard idiom), in the nineteenth century the area seemed an odd Swiss appendage thrusting down into what would become the nation of Italy, as indeed it still does today (see Figure 1).

Nor were the Ticinesi unfamiliar with the tenets and proponents of Italian nationalism. On the contrary, many Italian exiles from the various revolutions of the Risorgimento period found at least temporary refuge in Switzerland and especially in Ticino. Mazzini used the canton as a staging area for many of his revolutionary activities, including the publication of at least forty of his political writings, and Ticino sometimes paid a heavy price for its generosity and hospitality (Caldelari 2006). On occasion the Ticinesi even fought on the side of Italian revolutionaries, and one perhaps exuberant estimate suggests that in 1848 over 1,000 volunteers crossed the border to aid in the struggle against the Austrians (Biondetti 1942: 29). In short, Ticino had a combination of shared language, cultural affinity and even a history of 'foreign' (i.e. Swiss-German or *Schweitzerdeutsch*) oppression that would seem to have made it a perfect candidate for the romantic ethno-/linguistic nationalism that, according to Banti, proved so powerful in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In

fact, the aforementioned Milanese appeal to the Ticinesi of 1859 reads like a litany of cultural and economic forces that various theorists have stressed as critical in the creation of national identity. Reasonably one could argue that Ticino was as 'Italian' as any of the pre-unitary states that eventually became part of Italy during the Risorgimento. More to the point, the Ticinesi, or at least the literate ones, were presumably very familiar with Banti's Risorgimento canon. Hence a quick check of Callisto Caldelari's *Bibliografia Ticinese dell'Ottocento* (2010) demonstrates that of the twenty-five foundation texts comprising Banti's canon, only three appear not to have been published or republished in Ticino; one might reasonably suggest that given the region's constant economic interchange with Lombardy, those three probably made their way across the border as well.[3]

Yet, as history shows, the Ticinesi remained generally immune to the siren call of Italian nationalism. As noted, Ticino's allegiance to Switzerland was never seriously questioned by federal officials after the Restoration; even in response to the aforementioned 1859 Milanese manifesto, Bern couched its queries about reaction in Ticino in what can only be called the most respectful and apologetic of terms.[4] Similarly, the Ticinese cantonal government immediately replied to those questions by passionately affirming its consistent and undoubted loyalty to the Helvetian Confederation and indeed rebuked the government in Bern for even bringing the matter up: 'The least doubt that anonymous incitement might find an echo in the canton of Ticino would be a bloody insult to this population.'[5]

So what are the roots of this apparent paradox, and how might other approaches to the Italian Risorgimento help us explain the failure of Banti's canon to evoke Italian nationalism among the Ticinesi? First, as evidenced by the founding in 2000 of a new journal, *Rivista Napoleonica* (which is based in Piedmont), the little corporal has returned to the fore as an actor of primary importance on the Italian peninsula; this turns out to be true in spades for Ticino (also see Caldelari 2004; Davis 2006; Grab 2003; Panzera et al. 2004). Current scholarship on Italian Switzerland emphasises Napoleon's decisions (combined with those of the Directory) in deciding the fate of the area; historians seem to agree that if he had annexed Ticino immediately to the Cisalpine Republic – as he did with the areas of Chiavenna, Bernia and the Valtellina from the Graubünden region to the east – then it might well have shared the same Italian future as those former Swiss holdings.[6] This was particularly true for the Sottoceneri district (see Figure 1), which lies to the south of where the Monte Ceneri pass traverses the natural barrier of peaks running along Lago Maggiore. In fact, Napoleon later reconsidered his decision on this part of Ticino, mostly because of smuggling problems within the continental system, and in 1811 he forced the Federal Diet and the canton's own Grand Council to sanction the annexation of the southern Mendrisotto area to the Kingdom of Italy, a radical restructuring of the area perhaps only prevented by his subsequent reversals on the battlefields of Russia and elsewhere.[7] Nevertheless, for the most part his decisions – like

those of the Directory – reinforced rather than weakened Ticino's inclusion in the Swiss Confederation.

The reasons for those decisions are complex and debatable, in part because Napoleon always remained flexible, not to say opportunistic, in his dealings with subject peoples, but there is little doubt that they determined the baseline of Ticino's geopolitical future. As Sandro Guzzi-Heeb has stated regarding the declaration of the French General Chevalier in March 1798 to assign all of Ticino (with the possible exception of Mendrisio) to the nascent (Swiss) Helvetian Republic, 'The voting that took place in the months following was nothing but a formality: the destiny of the territories that today make-up the Canton of Ticino was in substance decided by France' (Guzzi-Heeb 2001: 556). Yet we have to refrain from giving too much credit to Napoleon. After all, the Helvetic Republic, founded in April 1798, was also his creation. But it dissolved under pressure from the conflict within and among the cantons, including Ticino, and had to be replaced in 1803 by a system more in keeping with Swiss traditions. Local agency in Switzerland may have been multi-faceted and even contradictory in the face of Napoleonic power, but it proved important nonetheless.

A second perspective that emerges from Risorgimento research is the importance of local conditions and local power relations (especially tensions between centre and periphery) in helping to understand how and why different areas came to be part of a unified Italy and also how those same factors affected different regions after unity (e.g. Romanelli 2000). Much of the work in this vein for Ticino has already been done by excellent Swiss scholars such as Sandro Guzzi-Heeb, Raffaello Ceschi, Fabrizio Panzera, Antonio Gili and Andrea Ghiringhelli; they have stressed the constant desire for village and communal autonomy as being critical in determining Ticinese identity both before and after the Napoleonic incursion.[8] This was largely dependent on topographical and economic pressures. Ticino is not a forgiving landscape and, as witnessed by the high rates of part-time migration to Italy, economic opportunities were limited. Indeed, survival in the steep valleys depended heavily on centuries-old patterns of common pasturage and rigid routes of transhumance, while critical wood supplies, water access and foraging rights often depended on one's belonging to the local *vicinanza* or community group. Based on long-standing family ties and cutting across class lines, the *vicinanza* was still a remarkably viable social/political organisation at the end of the eighteenth century; it bears pointing out that it still exists today in much of Switzerland, where it plays an important role in the social security system. This sense of communal privilege and identity also extended to the parish churches, whose distance from episcopal control in Lombardy created a tradition of village religious governance that could include the selection of priests and the virtual ownership and usufruct of church property and tithes. As Raffaelle Ceschi has argued, the strength of the *vicinanza* system, which was interwoven with the political structure of the local *comuni* or villages, consistently stymied efforts at reform in the pre-Napoleonic

baliaggi, such as the building of effective roads or the canalisation of the myriad wild streams that regularly ripped through the many valleys, sometimes with devastating effects. Such public projects were often rejected by the communes as serving the interests of others (i.e. other Ticinesi) and impinging on local rights and budgets (Ceschi 2001: 527–50).

This insularity of both interest and identity drew strength from the general pre-French political system of rotating governors (*Landfogten* or *balivi*), whose two-year tenures of office offered little continuity or incentive for change. With power divided among them (the Leventina under Uri being the only exception of sole ownership), the various 'sovereign cantons' were content to pocket the customs proceeds from the two 'frontier' borders to the south and allow the *Landfogten* to earn their keep by speculating on the fines and fees attached to administering justice in their respective *baliaggi*. This was a low-cost, low-control system, and one is struck by the almost total lack of public force in the area prior to the arrival of the French. With few troops, no guards and a couple of court bailiffs (who in no way rivalled the number, ferocity or notoriety of the early police, or *sbirri*, on the Italian peninsula), the *Landfogten* relied on a system of what one might call '*maniera forte mancante*' or 'missing strong-arm tactics' that reflected three important and self-reinforcing aspects of the *ancien régime* in Ticino: first, the rather limited ambitions of the *cantoni sovrani* or 'sovereign cantons' in the area; second, the general lack of a vexatious presence on the part of the old Swiss Confederacy, which generally left the Ticinesi to fend for themselves; and third, the fact that the *baliaggi* remained remarkably stable for 300 years without the presence of coercive structures on the part of the sovereign rulers.[9] Indeed, we have to stretch the term 'sovereign' pretty far when we consider that every two years the various incoming *Landfogten* not only received an oath of allegiance from their charges, but at the same time had to swear a reciprocal oath promising to abide by the rights, customs and privileges of the relevant *baliaggio*.

This was the system in place when Napoleon appeared on the scene, and it helps explain the generally negative reaction of the Ticinesi when they began to hear from friends, relatives and returning emigrants about the radical changes taking place in Lombardy, first under direct French control and then under the Cisalpine Republic starting in 1797. New taxes, military conscription, reform of the clergy, the closure of convents and civil legislation that would have obliterated the traditional 'liberties' of the villages (all carried out in the name of a new, less tangible form of 'liberty' based on abstract principles) resonated rather badly with much of the population north of the border. Culture as well as economics and politics was important here, and many Ticinesi, who were well known for their conservative religiosity, must have recoiled at the tale of a half-naked prostitute complete with Phrygian cap being used to portray lady liberty in a celebratory parade in Como (Pometta and Rossi 1980: 166).[10] Such stories arrived first hand across the border, and there is something ironic in the fact that the common culture and shared

interests of the two areas, which might have fostered a common identity, instead led the Ticinesi to understand and fear the modern 'opportunities' offered by possible absorption into their expanding, centralising neighbour to the south, whether it be the Cisalpine Republic or later the Republic of Italy or eventually the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy. It also bears pointing out that in order to cut back on smuggling, troops of the Kingdom of Italy would later actually occupy Ticino for three years, from 1810 to 1813, and this unpopular intrusion no doubt served as a further vaccination against any future desire to be part of an all-encompassing Italian state, whatever its name or nature.

Be that as it may, the news of French-inspired reforms enacted under the Cisalpine Republic surely set the stage for the crucial struggle that would take place in February and March of 1798, when a minority of elite pro-French Ticinesi joined with a small faction of Cisalpine partisans to carry out a coup d'etat in the Sottoceneri, which they hoped would lead to the annexation of at least part of Ticino to the new Italian-speaking (or at least Lombard-speaking) republic. Lacking sufficient preparation and local support, the initial attempt at Lugano was easily repulsed on the morning of 15 February by a recently established volunteer guard, or *Volontari Luganesi*, and rural supporters of the *ancien régime* were subsequently mobilised to help clean out the remaining groups of Cisalpine 'brigands' to the south.

It is hard to overemphasise the importance of the foundation of these *Volontari Luganesi* in April 1797 as part of Ticino's story: they effectively saved the region from a Cisalpine takeover that might have changed the region's destiny in the following century. Moreover, their role interestingly leads us back to some of Banti's ideas. The exact dynamic leading to their creation remains hazy, but it is obvious that the move was strongly supported (and most likely inspired) by two special plenipotentiary envoys, Ziegler and Amrhyn, who were sent by the sovereign cantons to the Sottoceneri to deal with the uncertainties engendered by the shocking success of Napoleon's troops in northern Italy and the even more shocking Treaty of Tolentino, which affirmed France's presence on the peninsula.[11] The eventual military worth of the new corps became obvious during the aforementioned Lugano insurrection in February and March of 1798, but what needs to be emphasised is its early symbolic significance and specifically its relationship to group conceptions of honour. As noted earlier, Banti lays out the critical recriprocal relationship between Italian nationalism and various forms of honour identity, and his work has been reinforced by recent studies on duelling in Italy that demonstrate how chivalric combat returned to Italy during the struggle for unification and then increased enormously after 1860 (Hughes 2007: 21–69). In light of such studies, we have to unpack the symbolic and emotional impact of creating what was (in its most obvious manifestation) an honour guard for the sovereign Swiss representatives and (in its most obvious function) a new public security force, complete with uniforms for the volunteers, officers' patents for the organisers and a promise that they would

be the only armed corps in the city – to say nothing of a brand-new guardhouse constructed right in the heart of Lugano (Gianinazzi 1998: 35).

Given the region's almost complete lack of a local military tradition, this was a revolutionary step.[12] Facing a rapidly changing political landscape, the old Swiss Confederacy's authorities had organised the elites of Lugano into a militia, the likes of which the *baliaggio* had never seen before, and then more or less said 'we trust you to defend yourselves and our borders'. The significance of the manoeuvre was not lost on the area's rural elites who, jealous of the new urban *Volontari*'s prestige and armed leverage, demanded to have their own volunteer corps with its own distinctive uniform and cockade – a demand readily approved by the sovereign cantons. Ever conscious of the symbolic power of the new militia, the Confederacy's representatives held an elaborate ceremony in Lugano in July 1797, during which they bestowed weapons, bullet moulds and of course a battle flag in exchange for an oath on the part of the *Volontari* to the sovereign cantons (and this was apparently followed by a sonnet, also on the part of the *Volontari*, in praise of the original representatives who had created the corps to protect 'The sacred laws of ancient right' [*Le sacre leggi dell'antico diritto*].[13] Here honour flows both ways, and we would be remiss not to note the emotional effects such dramatic displays can have. In fact, this all added up to a flexible and creative strategy on the part of the *ancien régime*, and one that eventually proved its efficacy in repulsing the Francophile attack of 15 February 1798 and then re-establishing Swiss allegiance in Sottoceneri towns like Mendrisio, which had gone so far as to raise the French/Cisalpine tree of liberty, complete with a Phrygian cap.

These manoeuvres of honour and arms were intermixed with an incremental political approach on the part of the sovereign cantons, who reluctantly agreed (under the pressure of events in February 1898) to reconsider the previous subordinate feudal status of the *baliaggi* within the old Confederacy. They thus acceded to the desires of Lugano's moderate elites, who, in the face of the Cisalpine alternative (not to say aggression), had declared themselves *Liberi e Svizzeri*, 'Free and Swiss' – a motto that would become a battle cry of Ticinese identity for years to come. Put another way, the Ticinesi rejected the Italophone Cisalpine Republic and they were willing to remain Swiss, but only as equal and autonomous players.

Such a compromise ended the first and most serious attempt to bring Ticino into a larger Italian-speaking polity, but exactly the same desire for local autonomy would determine the general rejection of the centralised Helvetic Republic forced upon the old Swiss Confederacy by the French in April 1798. Sporadic yet continuous armed opposition to this new republic reflected what Raffaeli Ceschi has called Ticino's 'irrepressible tendency towards the formation of miniscule autonomous states at the level of the district, valley, or even commune' (Ceschi 1986: 19). The internecine conflict, which in fact was endemic throughout Switzerland, only ended in 1803 when Napoleon gave up on the idea of a French-style Helvetic Republic. He went

back to the drawing board, and with the Act of Mediation (19 February 1803) he returned Switzerland to a loose confederation within which Ticino now found itself an equal and autonomous canton – although even then centrifugal forces eventually dictated that the new cantonal capital would migrate regularly between Lugano, Bellinzona and Locarno (a practice that, amazingly, remained in force until 1878). In sum, within the latitude afforded to them, the Ticinesi consistently pressed for the alternative that guaranteed them the greatest local control. Thus six of the eight *baliaggi* wrote early on to freshly arrived French occupying forces that they preferred to be left to themselves (that is as independent entities), but if that was not possible they would be willing to remain Swiss as long as their religious institutions were respected, their taxes were light and their administrators were of local extraction (Caddeo 1945: 220–21). Such an attitude would continue after the Restoration and ensured that Risorgimento propaganda, much of it printed in the canton, might be appreciated or even supported for its often liberal ideals, but failed to attract the allegiance of the Ticinesi to a larger Italian political project.

One could say the same for Banti's canon, which he claims led to 'the creation of mythology, of a symbology, of a historic reconstruction of the Italian nation that has in it an exceptional communicative force' (Banti 2000: 30). No doubt true, but the Ticinesi appear to have read the same canon in a completely different light based on their own historical imaginations, while adapting the totemic matrices of 'family, sanctity and honour' to fit their own struggle to gain and maintain autonomy. Frankly, more work needs to be done on Ticino's reception of the canon to ascertain if such was generally the case. But what seems obvious is that clearly Banti's matrices resonated nicely with what one could call the 'counter-mythology' that arose quickly among the Ticinesi and that became the focus of both their political aspirations and their Swiss identity. This was of course the legend of William Tell, which, in contrast to its long-standing iconographic currency in the sovereign cantons, only came to prominence as a symbol in Ticino during the struggle in February 1798 between pro-Swiss and pro-Cisalpine forces.[14] It would prove a particularly effective organising symbol in general: it handily enshrined Banti's totem of family (through Tell's son as the literal target of threat) and the armed defence of both personal and communal honour, backed by a sacred oath that smacked of the trinity; however, its stress on protecting local freedom made it particularly appealing to the Ticinesi in the face of the Cisalpine centralising threat from the south.

Moreover, the image of Tell arrived in a dramatic form shaped by compelling events. Specifically, on the day that the local volunteers repulsed the Cisalpine attack in Lugano (15 February), the confederate *Landfogt*, Jost Remi Traxler, had to deal with growing political uncertainty and pressure from local elites to 'free' the *baliaggio* from its subject status. He later reported to his superiors in the north that 'in order to avoid further incidents' he had arranged for the erection of the *Schweizer Freiheitsbaum* or Swiss tree of

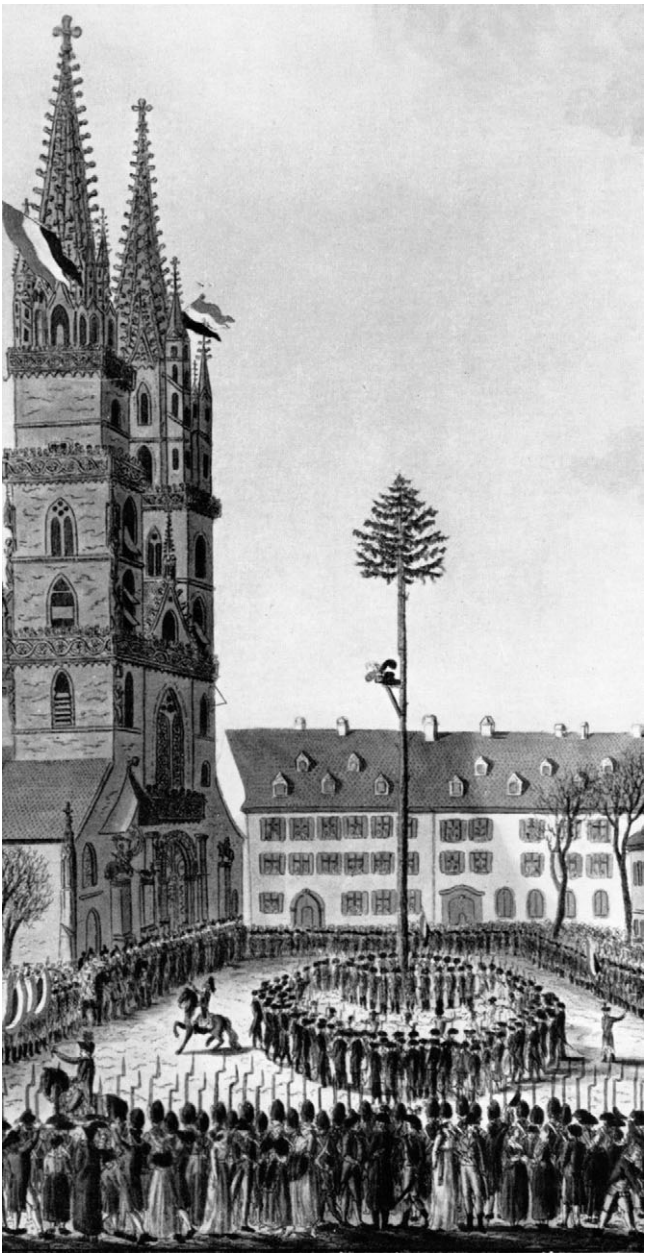

Figure 2. Tree of liberty in Basel, 1898 (Swiss National Museum, DIG-2226).

liberty in the main square. As one can see from such a tree erected in Basel in January 1798 (Figure 2), it would have featured the *Tellenhut* (or feathered 'hat of Tell') prominently, near the top.[15]

This was of course a direct anti dote to the Cisalpine symbol of the tree of liberty topped by the Phrygian cap, which had already been raised throughout Lombardy. Thus, according to Antonio Maria Laghi's contemporary account from Lugano, 'among cheers the people planted the tree of liberty and put a hat [of Tell] on the top as a sign that they wanted to always remain Swiss' (Caddeo 1938: 26). This combination of French and Swiss icons of freedom certainly captured the political flux of the moment and quickly came to symbolise the political motto, *Liberi e Svizzeri*, of Ticino's pro-Swiss elites – as later enshrined in Torricelli's famous watercolour from the period (see Figure 3). Yet it also represented an attempt on the part of the old sovereign cantons to salvage what they could from a very difficult situation.[16]

Not surprisingly, the armed struggle that followed in the Sottoceneri over the critical months of 1798 was paralleled by a struggle of symbols, as pro-Swiss forces replaced the Phrygian cap with the hat of Tell using the tree of liberty as a base, and vice versa for pro-French partisans. For instance, Giovanni Zaccaria Torricelli reported in his memoirs that when conservative rural volunteers took over the town of Magliaso from pro-Cisalpine forces, 'our defenders cut down from the top [of the tree] the abhorrent symbol (*stemma*) of Cisalpine liberty and substituted that of Helvetic liberty' (Galli 1941: 75). On the other hand, the head of the Constitutional Club in Milan, in a speech of 2 March 1798, recalled how pro-French republican forces had universally called in concord: 'let the Cisalpine tree take the place of the hat of Tell which we have thrown to the ground'. Emilio Motta would later explain in his history of 1798 how much pro-Cisalpine partisans disliked the tree with the hat of Tell because, in their own words, it was 'not a symbol of Helvetic liberty but of Helvetic oligarchy that wanted to dominate under the shield of the coming inevitable democracy' (Motta 1992: 60, 107).

Needless to say the supporters of the intrepid crossbowman won the day, but what is significant is how enduring a symbol William Tell became for the Ticinesi. This leads us to an interesting and important side issue that reflects again on elite agency and reaction to the Napoleonic crisis in Ticino. It regards the supposed presentation of an anonymous Italian version of Antoine Marin Lemierre's tragedy of William Tell in Lugano during Carnival of 1798. Four points need to be made about this play. First, it was preceded by an earlier translation in 1796 by an anonymous member of Milan's Jacobin Theatre, a copy of which still resides under Lemierre's name in the Biblioteca Cantonale of Lugano. Second, it is still substantially different from that translation, as well as from Lemierre's original (so much so that Renato Martinoni, who published a version in 2003, decided not to attribute it to the French author). Third, one of its most striking differences is the use of Helvetia rather than Svizzera as a primary patriotic focus of attention, which might have had less historical (not to say oppressive) baggage for the Ticinesi.[17] And fourth (and certainly most interesting) is the fact that if one consults a historical ecclesiastical calendar one finds that Carnival in 1798 started on 15 February, the day of the Cisalpine Francophile attack and of

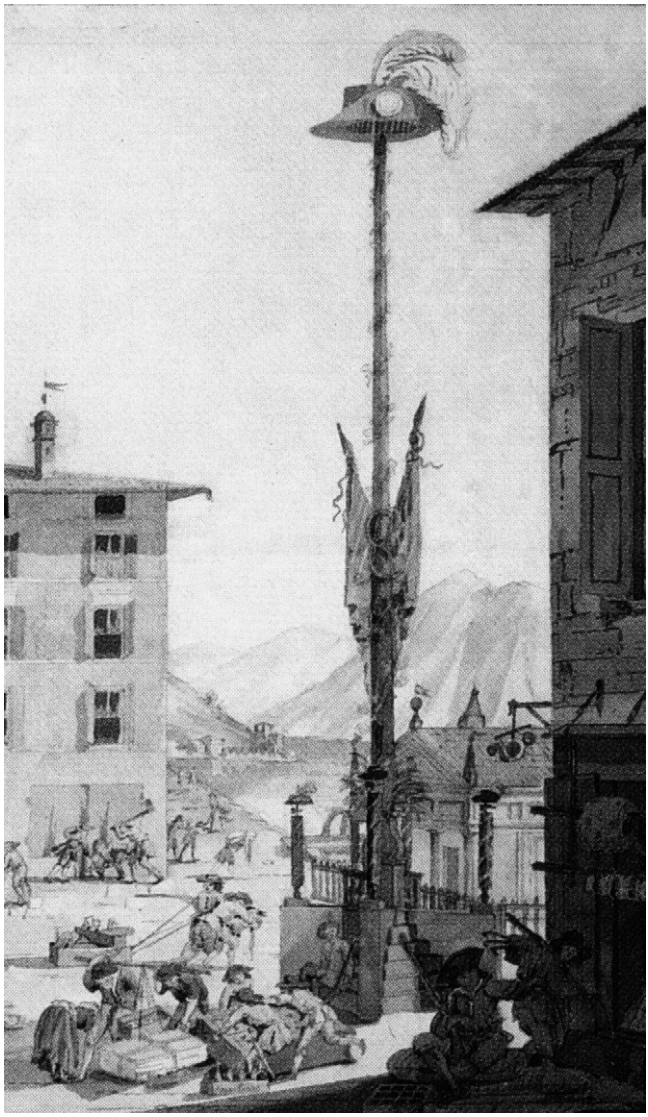

Figure 3. Tree of liberty in Ticino (from Rocco Torricelli, Saccheggio della Casa Agnelli, Collezione Città di Lugano).

Lugano's auto-declaration of liberty and equality within the old Swiss Confederation. So if this production actually occurred at that time (and Martinoni thinks it probably did), it raises the question of who had an elaborate, eloquent, pro-Helvetian, pro-liberty, version of Lemierre's play of William Tell ready to go?[18] And who then produced it during that critical week as the Swiss vs. Italian struggle over Ticino ensued? Was it part of a pro-

Confederate programme (which included the aforementioned raising of the hat of Tell on the tree of liberty in the Piazza Grande) designed to conserve as much as possible in a very unstable situation? All of this again speaks to the issue of human agency in Italian-Swiss history, and I think we have to reiterate that Napoleon was not the only actor on the stage at the time, although he obviously had the lead role. Put another way, the sovereign cantons played all the cards they could to keep Ticino as part of Switzerland.

Whatever the case, there is little doubt about the conscious use of the myth of William Tell in Ticino, where it became the central icon of the short-lived Helvetic Republic, as it did in the rest of Switzerland. Likewise, it could also be used by anti-French forces (both moderate and conservative) as a symbol against foreign oppression (note the *Coq* and Phrygian cap in Figure 4).

In fact, according to one account, when Lugano's tree of liberty was burned by rural reactionaries in 1799, the hat of Tell was first removed and secured in the town hall to keep it safe.[19] But in either case the hat of Tell was resoundingly Swiss, and as Oliver Zimmer consistently pointed out in his 2003 book *Contested Nation*, the ongoing, often bitter political struggle between liberals and conservatives in the Confederation after the Restoration eventually bolstered a general sense of Swiss identity and nationalism.[20] And I would add that the same logic applies rather glaringly to the sometimes violent political struggles among Ticino's moderate/conservatives and radical/liberals during much of the nineteenth century.

Indeed, moving past the Restoration, we must not forget that (as is obvious in Figure 5) the hat of Tell on the tree of liberty became the organising symbol of Ticino's 'radical' liberals in the 1830s and the 1840s as they sought to reform the canton (Ghiringhelli 2000: 100).

Likewise, Tell's headwear became the patron icon of the target-shooting clubs that were the epicentres of liberal political action and saw themselves not only as protectors of freedom against oppression but also as physical re-enactors of the military virtuosity necessary to secure and protect that freedom. Moreover, these were exactly the same people who consistently supported Mazzini and other Italian revolutionaries as they struggled for independence from Austria, which was correctly seen as a common enemy of progressive republican politics in both Ticino and Italy. Rejecting our natural teleological tendencies, we must bear in mind that, despite their eventual successes, liberalism and democracy were still rare and risky propositions after the Restoration. They were very highly contested within Ticino itself, sometimes with violent consequences. Allies had to be aided and abetted wherever they could be found, but especially when they resided in such close proximity across an extraordinarily porous border, both cultural and geographical, such as that between Lombardy and Ticino.

This helps to explain the apparent paradox of how the Ticinesi consistently offered refuge, resources and occasionally armed support to Italy's patriots, yet never faltered in their Swiss allegiance. Here one can play a last Risorgimento card and point to the recent work of Gilles Pécout and his

Figure 4. Wilheim Tell Bekämpft die Revolution by Balthasar A. Dunker (1798) (Swiss National Museum, DIG-2114).

colleagues, who have analysed the emotional ties of fraternity that drove Italian revolutionaries to risk their lives and fortunes fighting for their Portuguese, Spanish and Greek (and one might add Latin American) 'brothers' in the general cause of freedom.[21] Pécout asserts that the notion of friendship became more democratised with the French Revolution and argues that romanticism inspired a movement of 'political friendship' aimed

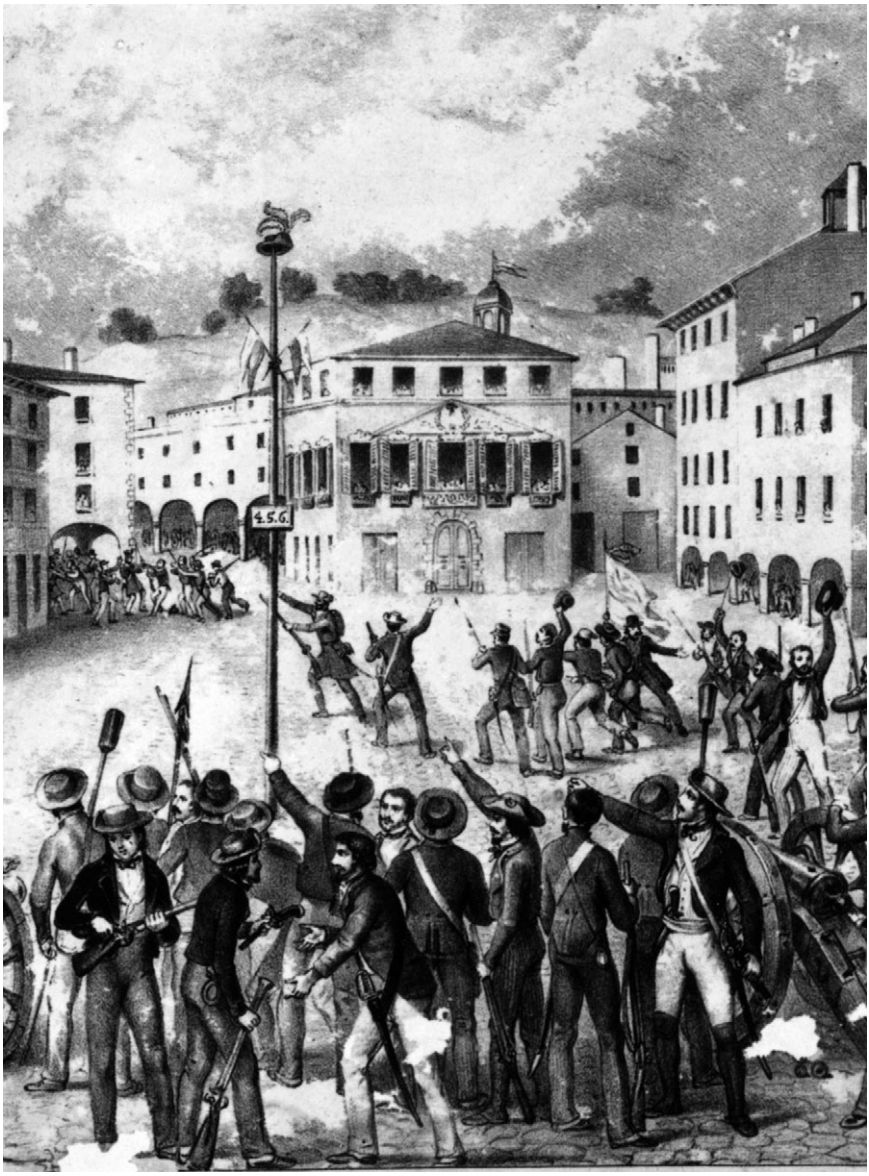

Figure 5. Antonio Soldati, Rivoluzione del Cantone Ticino 5 Dicembre 1839 (Archivio Cantonale di Ticino).

at international freedom 'especially through appeals to the 'brotherhood of peoples' in an age before nationalism became the principal instrument of political mobilisation' (Pecout 2004: 406). One might want to revisit the literature on Ticino's support for Italian revolutionaries with these tropes in mind, and also consider how similar fighting for liberty in Italy or Spain might

seem to fighting for liberalism – carbine in hand, beneath the hat of William Tell – against local conservatives, as was the case in 1839 in Ticino. This struggle of 'peoples for peoples' saw no contradiction between the international and the national, and consequently the Ticinesi – or, more accurately, some Ticinesi – could aid and abet the Italians without the slightest weakening of their allegiance to the Confederation that had provided their own cherished liberty and autonomy.

Of course, Ticino could also see itself as a leader in this grand transnational scheme, and it bears pointing out that the canton's liberal armed constitutional 'regeneration' (which threw out the pro-Austrian restoration regime) of 23 June and 2 July 1830 occurred before the July Revolution in Paris. Ticino's exemplary role as a free republic within the matrix of the Swiss Confederation could only reinforce the local liberal pride that then fed into both cantonal and federal identity. Thus political issues within the canton, such as secularisation, modernisation and public education, played out on parallel lines with the debate over Italy's struggle with Austria, yet remained firmly rooted in the context of Swiss federalism. These dynamics led to the seemingly paradoxical situation in which the Ticinesi who were most aggressive in their support of Italian patriotism were likewise those most aggressive in breaking down local resistance to greater Swiss patriotism, or at least greater co-operation with the policies of the federal government. Nor is it surprising that the Canton's encouragement of Italian independence became rather less enthusiastic when it became clear that liberty and liberalism on the peninsula would come under the auspices of a centralising Piedmontese monarchy (as opposed to a republic), whose ministers would soon enough make noises about including Ticino as one of the lost irredenta.[22] Which brings us back to 1859 and to the enduring counter-myth of William Tell, who figured prominently in Ticino's response in June 1859 when asked by the federal government if the aforementioned appeal from Milan had found any resonance in the canton:

> . . . if the Ticinese people are frankly and loyally proud to manifest their sympathy for the Italian peoples, it is also proud of its Swiss name, and as such it profoundly feels the force of those sacred duties that bind it to the 'madre patria'.
> Nor is the strength of that federal attachment of recent origin. Need we remind you gentlemen that on the day of the 15th of February in the year 1798 the people of Lugano, energetically resisting the blandishments and the threats of the envoys of the Cisalpine Republic, raised the tree of liberty on the Piazza Maggiore, but instead of the frigian cap they placed upon it the hat of William Tell.[23]

In conclusion, it is fair to say that the case of Italian Switzerland clearly calls into question any assertion of a purely cultural genesis of nationalism: the discursive traditions of northern Italian and Ticinesi liberal elites were overlapping if not identical in the first half of the long nineteenth century. Rather, Ticino demonstrates how personal agency, especially as illustrated by Napoleon, can actually determine the geographic and political parameters of which regions eventually become part of which nation-states – and this subsequently inflects notions of national identity. Napoleon's role also supports a modernist approach

in that the destruction of the old order automatically forced a corresponding evolution of Ticinese identity from feudal subjects to national republican citizens to autonomous cantonal citizens, all in the course of a few intense years. National sentiment was thus as much about losing one's way as about finding it. Similarly, the manoeuvres of the old Swiss confederacy in 1797 and 1798 to co-opt Ticino's conceptions of local liberty into a new Helvetian identity that offered equal status to the region in exchange for continued Swiss control over access to the Brenner and the Gottard passes reinforces constructionist conceptions of nationalism, and it is critical to note that without a very real political accommodation of the canton's desire for autonomy one has to wonder if a Swiss solution would have succeeded. Thus power relations, both internal and external, clearly had a critical role to play in how national identities eventually emerged. Likewise for Italy, one can argue that without other attending factors, such as the endemic social problems of the peninsula, Austrian/French geopolitical rivalries or the political failures of the old regimes after 1848 (and the counter-example of Piedmontese liberal successes), Banti's canon was a necessary but not sufficient condition for the Risorgimento to play out as it did.

However, at the same time we have to recognise the role of what John Breuilly has referred to as group 'primoridial' sentiment in understanding Ticino's reaction to first Cisalpine and then Italian patriotic blandishments (Breuilly 2009: 441–44). Consistently local attachments and interests dominated the emotions of the Italian Swiss as they came up against modern alternatives of identity. This, of course, is why they took so readily to the symbol of William Tell, whose fight for freedom and family resonated with their desire for local – even village – autonomy and was Swiss to boot.[24] Moreover, William Tell was an important component of Banti's Risorgimento canon, and the crossbowman's complementary careers in Italy and Ticino point out not only the high political valency of such narratives, but also their critical role in establishing a sentimental basis of identity and political actions. It seems that the Ticinesi had barely heard of William Tell prior to the end of the eighteenth century but he quickly took on a particularly important role for them, first as they struggled to maintain local control and then as liberals subsequently fought for social and political reforms in the face of internal and Austrian resistance. That struggle helps explain the willingness of Ticino's elites to actively aid Italian nationalists who consistently combined a liberal agenda of reform or revolution as part of their programmes. Subject to the same canon of Italian tales of honour, family and Christianity, they simply conceived of their nation in a different way, consistent with their new-found traditions of 'free and Swiss'.

Notes

1 Consider, for instance, the programme of the 2008 conference in New York entitled *The Risorgimento Revisited*, some of which is forthcoming from Palgrave Macmillan in an eponymous volume edited by Lucy Riall and Silvana Patriarca, organisers of the original conference.

2 The entire document can be found in Bern, Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Bestand 2, Band 1150. Special thanks to Donna Erismann for her hospitality and camaraderie during different phases of this archival research and to Hans Bühlmann for his help with copyright permission.

3 Likewise, more research is necessary to know how much of Ticino's production of Banti's 'canon' and other Risorgimento texts (such as the many works of Mazzini) was intended for local consumption rather than for export to the rest of the peninsula.

4 '*Nous avons une trop bonne opinion tant de l'intelligence que du patriotisme du Peuple Tessinois pour que nous mettions une importance particulière à cette libelle . . .*' (*ibid.*), Conseil Fèdèral to Tessin, Conseil d'Etat, 27 June 1859, n. 2723.

5 '*Il solo dubbio che quell'anonimo eccitamento possa trovare un eco nel Cantone Ticino, sarebbe una sanguinosa ingiuria per questa popolazione*' (*ibid.*), Consiglio di Stato del Cantone di Ticino to Alto Consiglio Federale in Bern, 30 June 1859, Ris. n. 12760.

6 On the relevant differences between the Valtellina and Ticino, see Bareggi (2002).

7 Certainly there was no lack of desire or projects on the part of first the Cisalpine Republic and then the Kingdom of Italy to secure control over Ticino for cultural, economic, political and geostrategic reasons. See Ferri (2002) and Ribi (2002).

8 Thanks to these scholars, as well as to Carlo Moos and Padre Callisto Caldelari, for taking the time to talk to me about these issues. Unfortunately there was no time to interview Sandro Guzzi-Heeb. Also thanks to the young scholars group, including Maurizio Binaghi, at the Archivio Cantonale in Bellinzona for inviting me to discuss a rough draft of this article at their monthly meeting. Among that group special gratitude goes to Simona Canevascini, Francesca Corti and Monolo Pellegrini for making the ACB both a useful and a friendly place.

9 The one notable act of political resistance against one of the sovereign cantons during the 'feudal period' was in 1755, when the northernmost *bagliaggio* of Leventina opposed Uri's attempt to reduce some of its tax privileges. The 'revolt', which was of a non-violent nature, was dealt with harshly, with three of the supposed leaders being beheaded in the town square of Ariolo with the male members of the canton forced to kneel in submission during the execution with hats in their hands. See Fransioli and Viscontini (2006).

10 On religiosity in nineteenth-century Ticino, see Panzera (2000).

11 For a short summary on the founding, see Galli (1941: 17–18) and Ghiringelli (2002: 30).

12 In evidence of the latter, one could mention Giuseppe Martinola's *Pagine di Storia Militare Ticinese dall '500 al '800*, which dedicates a total of only seven pages to 'The Militias of the *Baliaggi*' between 1500 and 1798 – and half of these pages contain reprinted documents.

13 The sonnet is in Galli (1941: 22).

14 The first Italian version of the myth appears to have been published in 1782 by Father Francesco Soave in his *Novelle Morali* (Gili 1998: 209–19). Soave's is a very short recounting of the story, in which Tell is portrayed as an ingenuous peasant who falls foul of the tyrant Ghesler by sheer accident – and not as a political action. The version of Soave consulted was the seventh edition, published in Venice by Graziosi a S. Apollinare in 1802 (109–16). One cannot help but wonder what Soave's connection was to the success of the Tell myth in Ticino, for he was a Luganese who was active in anti-Cisalpine activity in the area. One author suggests '*aveva grande influenza sul clero e sul popolo luganese. A lui si deve in gran parte se nel periodo 1797–98 i Luganesi non seguirono i novatori francesi e cisalpini*' (Anastasi 1932: 5). On the Tell myth in general, see Bergier (1991).

15 There is substantial confusion over the *Tellenhut*, and people have pointed out to me that in the tale of William Tell, the hat actually represented the mad tyranny of Ghesler, the despotic Austrian governor oppressing the people. This is of course completely correct, but somewhere along the way the Swiss transmuted the symbol of oppression into a symbol of liberation – a development not unknown in other historical situations. Certainly, by the time the myth of Tell reached Ticino, that transformation was already complete. For a psychological interpretation of such transference, see Dundes (1997: 59–60).

16 Guzzi-Heeb agrees with Caddeo that it was the *Landfogt* who arranged for the original tree to be raised (Guzzi-Heeb 2001: 557). For the more traditional patriotic account see Torricelli, who claimed that neither Traxler nor the Swiss representatives had anything to do with it (Galli 1941: 49–51).

17 Neither Lemierre's original nor the Milanese translation contains the terms Helvetian or Helvetia. For an exhaustive edition of Lemierre's play, see Brett-Bitoz (2005).
18 A note of thanks to Renato Martinoni for discussing the play and its context with me at length.
19 Caddeo (1938: 65). Torricelli's watercolour of the burning of the tree of liberty in 1799 shows one of the smaller hats of Tell being consumed by the flames, although it is, perhaps significantly, not the main one from the top of the tree.
20 It should be noted that he admits to not dealing at all with Italian Switzerland.
21 See in particular the group of articles in Pecout (2009). Along with Catherine Brice and others, Pecout has an ongoing project at the Institut d'Histoire Modern et Contemporaine of the École Normale Supérieur dedicated to exploring issues of fraternity and political volontarism.
22 In 1862, no less a personage than Nino Bixo, Garibaldi's second in command during the adventure of *I Mille*, called in parliament for the annexation of Ticino to the newly created Kingdom of Italy, and he was seconded by the foreign minister Giacomo Durando. Their comments called forth a vociferous denunciation from Ticino's government and press (Panzera 1995: 482; Motta 1961: 57, 63).
23 Bern, Schweizerisches Bundesarchiv, Bestand 2, Band 1150, Consiglio di Stato del Cantone di Ticino to Alto Consiglio Federale in Bern, 30 June 1859, Ris. n. 12760.
24 Thus William Tell for the Ticinesi is an excellent example of what Anthony Smith has described as a 'cultural-ideological' myth of nationalism as opposed to a genealogical or biological one (Smith 2000: 1394–95). On one hand he represented the ideal of local autonomy, which they enthusiastically embraced as part of being 'Swiss', but on the other hand his ethnicity and lineage were clearly tied to the German-speaking cantons, more specifically Uri.

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