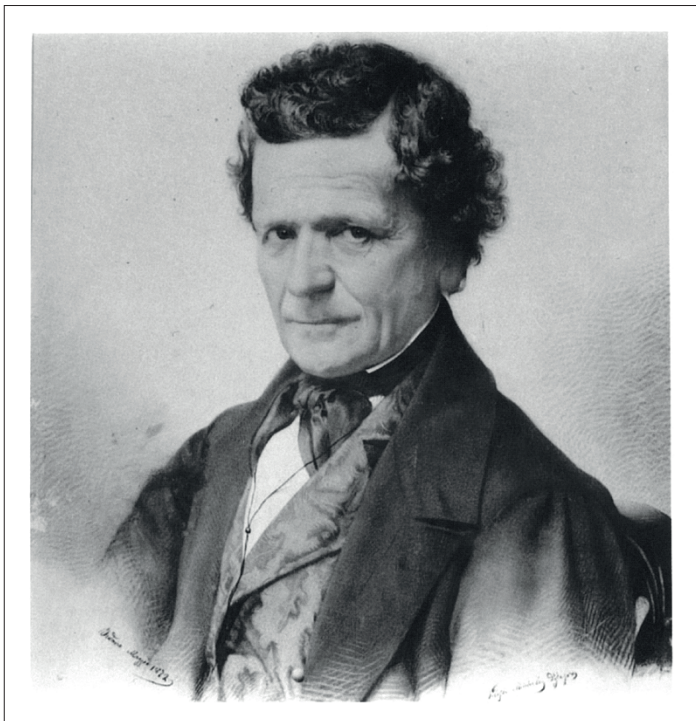


Stefano Franscini

The statistician who built a nation

Modern Switzerland was founded 175 years ago. However, despite being connected by a constitution, the new country remained divided by language, religion, and history – a state but not a nation. It is thanks to the statistician and politician Stefano Franscini that statistics came to play an important role in forging a common Swiss identity. **Servan Grüninger** tells his story



Left: Portrait of Stefano Franscini in around 1852. Source: Fotografia Nessi de Côme (Archivio di Stato del Cantone Ticino, Bellinzona, Fototeca/52.12).

The Swiss nation is an invention. An invention based on historical fictions, statistical facts, and a bit of political force.

As with many events of the nineteenth century, it all started with the French Revolution. Back then, Switzerland only existed in the form of a loosely connected federation of states. These states, called “cantons”, shared neither a common language nor a common religion and had been largely self-governing until they were conquered by the French Revolutionary Army in 1798. As a result, they were forced into the Helvetic Republic, a precarious centralised state in which French speakers in the west were joined

with Romansh communities in the east, and the Italian-speaking minority south of the Alps suddenly had to contend with the German majority in the north. Over all of it loomed the danger of religious conflict, as Protestants needed to reconcile themselves with Catholics.

Unsurprisingly, the Helvetic Republic was short-lived. It ceased to exist after barely 5 years. Years of turmoil followed, with the majority of the political power returning to the cantons. Then, in 1848, after a brief civil war, in which wily diplomacy thankfully trumped mindless bloodshed, the Swiss Confederation emerged. Switzerland had become an independent state, but threats to

its existence continued to loom both outside and within its borders. Abroad, European monarchies were eyeing the newly formed democracy in their midst with suspicion. Domestically, Switzerland’s unity was jeopardised by the lack of a joint national identity. While the former danger could be addressed by skilful diplomacy and a strong military, the latter challenge was more difficult to overcome. Leveraging historical myths of the past was key, but so was creating a shared understanding of Swiss society in the present.

Thanks to the statistician and politician Stefano Franscini, the formation of the Swiss nation went beyond mythological fictions and included statistical facts, too.

From shepherd to schoolmaster

When Franscini was born on 23 October 1796, no one thought that the son of impoverished farmers would become a revered scientist and statesman and rise to the highest ranks of Swiss society.

He grew up herding sheep in the small village of Bodio, in the canton of Ticino, the major Italian-speaking part of Switzerland. Initially, Franscini did not receive a formal education, but thanks to his insistent pleading and his parents’ realisation that the slender boy was not cut out for a farmer’s life, he was eventually allowed to attend school during the winter months. He soon transitioned to a Catholic seminary, learning Latin and Greek, before finally moving to Milan, Italy, in 1815 to become a priest.

Before long, Franscini realised that his calling was more secular than religious in nature. He switched robes for rulers and became a teacher at an elementary school in Milan. In his free time, Franscini remained a student, however, reading the works of philosophers, statisticians, and economists, in



Servan Grüninger is a biostatistician in the department of mathematics and a PhD student in the PhD programme in epidemiology and biostatistics at the University of Zurich in Switzerland

particular those by Melchiorre Gioia and Gian Domenico Romagnosi. He also befriended the economist and political activist Carlo Cattaneo, whose liberal thinking influenced Franscini's own political attitudes and with whom he maintained a close friendship until his death.

In 1824, the deteriorating health of his parents pulled Franscini back to his home canton, where he opened a school based on the principle of mutual education together with his first wife Maria Teresa Massari and her sister, Luigia, both highly educated teachers themselves.

Franscini soon distinguished himself as an ardent advocate of public education, a skilled amateur of the sciences, and an outspoken defender of liberal principles. Yet he was wary of getting involved in institutional politics. In 1826, he wrote in view of the upcoming cantonal elections: "I – not blessed with wealth, not skilled at intrigue, not bound by factions – would hardly be suitable for a place in our Council, which is largely composed of men who are laughing at, or at least indifferent to, those things I revere and love. I would be of little use, I would appear as what many others are, I would throw away my innocent reputation, I might even make a fool of myself in that assembly."

Creating political realities with statistics

Franscini's work inevitably pulled him into politics, though, and he published two books of incendiary power: the first, which he sent to all members of the cantonal parliament in 1828, pointed out the inadequacies of the education system in Ticino and proposed a comprehensive educational reform; the second revolved around a liberal constitutional reform. Fearing reprisals from the authoritarian Ticino government, Franscini had the book printed and published

Franscini soon distinguished himself as an ardent advocate of public education, a skilled amateur of the sciences, and an outspoken defender of liberal principles

anonymously in the canton of Zurich in 1829 and then distributed to key figures in Ticino. Soon thereafter, a political uprising in the canton indeed brought about a constitutional reform and Franscini was elected to the parliament before becoming secretary of state and – a few years later – a member of the Ticino government.

Still, his greatest political legacy is firmly rooted in his scientific writings. In 1827, he published his first major statistical work, *Statistica della Svizzera* [*Statistics of Switzerland*]. What had begun as a translation of the book *Statistique de la Suisse* by the Genevan professor Jean Picot soon developed into a scientific project of its own because Franscini considered Picot's work to be too incomplete and too inaccurate. From topography and economic structures over forms of government and administration to descriptions of population and culture, Franscini provided a painstakingly assembled mosaic of Switzerland in the early nineteenth century. The tome received widespread scientific acclaim, but Franscini, who was convinced of the value of Swiss unity, saw it not only as a work of science but also as a vehicle for promoting awareness of

Switzerland as a unified political entity.

This becomes even clearer in the revised version, published in 1847 as *Nuova Statistica della Svizzera* [*New Statistics of Switzerland*]. In it, he invokes the economist and political philosopher Pellegrino Rossi with the following words: "[The word 'Swiss'] towers above the diversity of our languages, of customs, of religions, of industries: this word, with all the retinue of ideas that accompany it, dominates local traditions, or, better said, in itself absorbs all of them." Franscini then states that collecting statistical material was part of his duty of "making known the state of the Confederation". Here, "state" has a double meaning: it includes the notion of "state" as a descriptive account of the different facets of Switzerland but also aims to "make known" the Swiss state in a political sense, as an independent national entity.

Thus, Franscini knew more than 150 years ago what today many politicians and scientists seem to have forgotten: that statistical accounts do not merely *describe* reality, but instead *create* their own realities. "Behind the numbers ... lies the will to spread ideas, theories, world views", writes economist Christian Marazzi with reference to Franscini. ▶



Above: Inauguration of the monument in honor of Stefano Franscini on the 13th of September 1896 in Faido. Source: Giuseppe Pons, Pollegio (Archivio di Stato del Cantone Ticino, Bellinzona, Fondo Mario Jäggli, Cartella 23.4).

► By using statistics to describe “the state of the Confederation”, Franscini actualises the abstract idea of a Swiss nation as a unified political entity, not by supplanting one cantonal identity with another but instead by combining the different identities of the cantons into a joint understanding of what it means to be Swiss. “Reconstructing a unity out of difference”, as the historian Francesca Sofia calls it.

Yet Franscini’s statistical work should not be mistaken for propagandist flattery. He did not shy away from addressing the many shortcomings and deficiencies of his country and was repeatedly criticised for it. In response, he reminds his critics “that statistics [should] be to the present what an impartial history is to the past”. This necessitates acknowledging “the bad and the ugly” as well as the “beautiful and the good”. As such, Franscini saw that statistical service to his country also meant a commitment to honesty: “[Just] as it belongs to the best friendship to tell the truth, even if it may sound discouraging in people’s ears; so I believe that I love my homeland all the more, the more I dare to tell it the truth in all things.”

Governing a country by making little go a long way

In 1848, love for his homeland took Stefano Franscini all the way to the first Federal Council, the government of the newly formed Swiss state, where he took the helm at the Department of Home Affairs.

Originally, statistics was not one of this department’s official tasks, but Franscini did not waste any time rectifying this oversight. He emphasised the importance of exact numbers about the demographic and economic state of a country for efficient government and highlighted the deficits Switzerland had in this regard compared to other European countries. In doing so, he convinced government and

He did not shy away from addressing the many shortcomings and deficiencies of his country and was repeatedly criticised for it

A peculiar form of government



Above: The first Swiss Federal Council, elected on 16 November 1848. Stefano Franscini is depicted on the bottom left.

Franscini’s struggle to get more support for statistics stemmed in part from a peculiar aspect of Switzerland’s political system. Since its inception, the country has been governed by seven equally powerful ministers. The president of the country is selected from among these seven, but only serves for a year as *primus inter pares*. As such, no member of the government, not even the president, can overrule the others, and decisions – even those pertaining to a particular department – can only be made by majority vote. As Franscini’s colleagues showed far less enthusiasm for statistical work than he himself, Franscini often struggled to gain a majority for his propositions.

Franscini was also embattled outside the Federal Council. In 1854, he was even at risk of being removed from government altogether, as he had lost his seat in the national parliament as a representative of the canton of Ticino. However, as the canton of Schaffhausen had not yet elected all its representatives, Franscini’s party quickly nominated him as a candidate. So it happened that the Italian-speaking Franscini from the southernmost canton of Switzerland became a representative of the country’s northernmost canton with an exclusively German-speaking population.

parliament to conduct the first national census, which aimed for a detailed account of the age, sex, religion, spoken language, family situation, and type of employment of each inhabitant of Switzerland. In addition, he wanted to collect information about the number of foreigners living in Switzerland and the number of Swiss citizens living abroad.

Unfortunately, political support for statistical matters soon started to dwindle. Shortly after the decision to conduct a census, Franscini approached his colleagues in the Federal Council with the request to participate in data collection within their departments. In a detailed account, he outlined how the different departments could combine in-depth knowledge about the topography of the country, its agriculture, industry and commerce, military, finances, and public services. After keeping him waiting for almost year, Franscini's colleagues rejected his plea for additional support and suggested he should take care of things himself. So he did. Despite having limited resources at his disposal, he set out to contact the administrations of the departments and also the cantons to provide him with the information he wanted.

Such self-reliance is a thread that runs through Franscini's entire run in government: time and again, he compensated for the lack of official support with an overabundance of private initiative. For example, Franscini maintained close contact with statisticians in Switzerland and abroad. This kept him aware of the ongoing endeavours in Europe to harmonise the way governmental statistics were collected. Unfortunately, Switzerland did not deem it necessary to send envoys to the statistical congresses where these things were discussed. Hence, Franscini resorted to back channels: through personal connections, he made sure that Swiss statisticians were able to participate privately in these congresses. In return, he asked the people for whom he opened these doors to provide him with detailed accounts of the content of these events. Thus, Franscini could stay abreast of the newest developments without requiring additional finances – something that was harder and harder to come by.

From 1851, Franscini repeatedly asked the parliament for a small budget to produce official statistical publications, to create a statistical archive, to acquire scientific

Such self-reliance is a thread that runs through Franscini's entire run in government: time and again, he compensated for the lack of official support with an overabundance of private initiative

literature and to hire a copyist to help him with his statistical work. The parliament consistently rejected Franscini's requests until 1855, when it provided 1000 Swiss francs. For comparison, Switzerland's participation at the World Fair in Paris in the same year cost the country roughly 21,000 francs.

Despite these difficult circumstances, and many other responsibilities on his desk, Franscini edited five major statistical publications while in office. Together, they formed the *Swiss Population Atlas*, a detailed account of the results of the national census and additional descriptions of the commercial, agricultural, social, and cultural structure of Switzerland as well as its trade relations with neighbouring countries.

Born poor, lived poor, died poor

Eventually, Franscini became disillusioned by the belittling attitude of his colleagues with regard to statistics. When Marc d'Espine, a medical doctor from Geneva, approached him in 1853 with plans for the formation of the Federal Statistics Bureau, Franscini was hesitant. Aware of his colleagues' scepticism, he felt the time was not yet ripe for such an endeavour. In 1854, he wrote in a letter to a friend: "I feel subdued, if not with my desire but with my hopes [to establish a statistical bureau]. [T]he object of national statistics has so far found little encouragement from the higher federal authorities."

Nevertheless, in the autumn of 1855, d'Espine was able to proclaim during the Second International Statistical Congress in Paris that "[a]lthough nothing has been set in stone, the Federal Councillor [Franscini] believes that minds are better prepared".

Indeed, he was right. Five years later, the Federal Bureau of Statistics could be inaugurated, but without Franscini being able

to witness it. In the end, the intense workload and the constant political battles with his colleagues in government, the parliament, and the cantons had taken their toll. Feeling his strengths waning, Franscini had for some time longed for a quieter life. But despite his scientific and political achievements and his many years in public service, Franscini had remained a poor man and thus could not afford to lose his income as Federal Councillor. By the beginning of 1857 his mind was made up, though, and he decided to retire from the government by the end of the year to work in the archives of his home canton of Ticino.

Fate had other plans. Stefano Franscini died unexpectedly on 19 July 1857 in Berne, while still in office. The day before his death, he was still writing letters, requesting documents from a friend and expressing confidence that he would soon recover from his illness.

Had someone else become head of the Department of Home Affairs during those early years of Switzerland, statistics would probably not have received the tutelage it benefited from under Franscini's administration, something which was also recognised by his contemporaries. Yet, Franscini's legacy reaches far beyond statistics. He was a major force behind the foundation of the Federal Polytechnic School, which would turn into one of the world's leading scientific institutions, today's Swiss Federal Institute of Technology (ETH). In addition, he was a major driver behind improving public education and played an important role in calming spirits on the national level after the Swiss civil war.

Nevertheless, Franscini is far from famous in Switzerland. If he is remembered at all, it is primarily as the paragon of a man who spent his life in public service at the expense of personal gains (his epitaph reads: "He was born poor, he lived poor, he died poor"). Some might lament the fact that a man who spent so much of his life forging a national identity is not part of the collective memory of that nation. Yet perhaps it is a fitting fate for someone like Franscini who believed that Swiss identity is based on institutions, not individuals. ■

Note

This text is based on multiple historical and contemporary sources. A fully referenced manuscript can be found here: bit.ly/3Db0oTE