Kinship and Community: Ethnic and Civic Conceptions of Nationhood

Aviel Roshwald, Georgetown University, Washington D.C.

One of the paradoxes in the study of modern nationalism is that it encompasses a seemingly universal phenomenon, one of whose salient characteristics is its defense of cultural and political particularism. Under closer inspection, it appears that many nationalist movements and ideologues are themselves torn between their attachment to a bounded conception of identity and their eagerness to gain entrée for their nation into the global community (through the securing of external recognition, integration into world-trade networks, access to foreign technology and even “global” culture).

For many years, in their approach to this paradox, historians and social scientists tended to distinguish between two broad categories of national identity: ethnic and civic. Ethnic nationalism was characterized by the extension of the kinship principle to the “imagined community” of the nation. The identity of a civic nation was defined by the common political values and loyalties shared by the population of a sovereign territory. The former typology was commonly associated with a xenophobic nationalism, one that was not only closed off to the world but hostile to cultural minorities within the spatial bounds of the nation-state. Civic nationalism was associated with openness to ethno-cultural diversity and the embrace and/or propagation of universal values.

It is not my intention to try and toss these conceptual categories into the dustbin of historiography. But I would like to problematize them. As Yael Tamir and others have argued, drawing the distinction between civic nations and ethnic nations too sharply can lead to simplistic and static understandings of nationalist political cultures. Indeed, civic and ethnic constructions of identity have more in common than one might at first suspect. For instance, both draw on the idea of kinship, albeit in different ways. Perhaps one way of distinguishing between their approaches is to say that ethnic nationalism takes the idea of national kinship literally, whereas civic nationalism uses the image metaphorically. Then again, while ethnic nationalism highlights the importance of shared bloodlines, civic nationalism embraces the idea of mingling the nation’s blood through shared sacrifice on the battlefield and through cross-cultural intermarriage. That is, the prospect of shared descendants rather than the heritage of shared ancestors may be what lends the members of a civic nation their sense of biological affinity.

Beyond exploring ways of refining the nature of the ethnic-civic distinction, this paper will also make a case for employing these categories dialectically. It will sketch out some of the uneasy ways in which elements of both civic and ethnic identity coexist with one other within most national identities. It is precisely the problem of how to define the relationship between these two frameworks of identity that has underlain deep social and political divisions and fuelled fundamental ideological debates in such diverse countries as the United States, France, and the countries of Eastern Europe. This paper will draw on these and other examples to explore the ways in which nationalist movements and nation-states have sought to bridge the gap between ethnic Gemeinschaft and civic/global Gesellschaft.