

Readers may redistribute this article to other individuals for noncommercial use, provided that the text and this note remain intact. This article may not be reprinted or redistributed for commercial use without prior written permission from the author. If you have any questions about permissions, please contact Klaus Nellen at IWM, Spittelauer Laende 3, 1090 Vienna, Austria, e-mail <nellen@iwm.at>.

Preferred Citation: Lucka, Daria. 2004. Nation and Civil Society: An Attempt at Theoretical Considerations. In *Thinking Together. Proceedings of the IWM Junior Fellows' Conference, Winter 2003*, ed. A. Cashin and J. Jirsa, Vienna: IWM Junior Visiting Fellows' Conferences, Vol. 16.



## **Nation and Civil Society: An Attempt at Theoretical Considerations**

Daria Lucka

The main goal of this article is to examine the relationship between nationalism and democracy, as well as – at the level of social structure – between nation and civil society.<sup>1</sup> Although my considerations here will be mostly of a theoretical nature, in the future they are supposed to serve a more detailed analysis of an empirical case – Polish society in the 1990s.

Why such a problem? Why is the relationship between nation and civil society in Poland important? A famous Polish poet, Cyprian Kamil Norwid, once said that Poles are a great nation, but a very bad or poor society. These words could become a motto for this article, since they show the character of the Polish heritage: strong nationality, and at the same time, some problems with creating a society under democratic conditions – a civil society.

---

<sup>1</sup> Civil society is understood here as a public space at the *mezzo* level – between family and state – in which citizens associate within a framework of law guaranteed by the state. In other words, self-organization of society. It includes different forms of activity which are independent from the state, such as individual charity, social protests, social movements, non-governmental organizations. It also includes electoral turnout, membership in political parties, etc. (Keane 1988: 14, Cohen, Arato 1992, Sztompka 1998: 191-192, Dahrendorf 1994: 236).

Generally speaking, nation has played a very important role in framing Poles' social consciousness. For many centuries – especially during the period of partitions in Poland – national identity was based on cultural heritage and organized around such values as common history, tradition, and religion. The lack of statehood resulted in an increase in national feelings. In public discourse, there was an evident domination of holistic concepts – concepts of nation, society, people – in contrast to those of the individual, an association, a social contract, or a legal and political system (Kurczewska 1995: 45, 53-55). The understanding that the nation was under a constant threat was – paradoxically – one of the reasons for strengthening national identity.

National rhetoric also played an important role in anticommunist opposition. It was “us” – a positively-valued Polish nation with its long history and tradition – who fought against “them” – an external power, alien to national community. A famous observation made by Polish sociologist, Stefan Nowak, comes from those times: Poles identified themselves with micro-structures, such as family, and with macro-structures, such as nation. Between those two, there was a so-called sociological vacuum, which meant that the realm of civil society remained empty (Nowak 1979: 123).

After the collapse of communism, nation is still the most important frame of identification for Poles, more important than the identification with family, Catholic religion or regional community (Nowicka, Lodzinski 2001: 61). Cultural heritage – common culture, national symbols, historical memory – around which Polishness is organized, seems to be of a great importance to many Poles. According to some sociologists, the holistic character of national identity creates an obstacle to the development of individualistic and pluralistic civil society. At the same time, Polish society has become an open one, accepting immigrants and facing problems of national minorities; therefore, more and more resembling its Western equivalents (Nowicka, Lodzinski 2001).

Charles Taylor (1995) asked in the title of one of his articles: “How much community do we need in democracy?” Paraphrasing this question, one could also ask: How much nationalism do we need in democracy? What is the place and the role of national feelings within a modern, democratic society? What conditions does nationalism have to meet in order to become compatible with civic order? And finally: How can we describe the character of the Polish nation? Is strong national identity a factor fostering or blocking the development of civil society?

There will be three main points in this article. Analyzing each of them I will try to show that, although there exist rooted or set conceptualizations of certain prob-

lems, they might require reconsideration. One should take a closer look at them, in a way rethink them and find out more details behind them.

### *1. Beyond the opposition: Nationalism versus democracy*

The first problem I would like to consider is a very general issue of the relationship between nationalism and democracy. On one hand, the view that democracy and nationalism are mutually hostile seems to be predominant. “Democracy has become a term linked to adjectives like ‘good’, ‘civilized’, ‘progressive’, ‘rational’ and so on, while nationalism is associated with ‘backwardness’, ‘immaturity’, ‘barbarism’, ‘irrationality’, and the like” (Nodia 1994: 3-4). On the other hand, in the opinion of some researchers, nationalism is often an ally of democracy; what’s more, they claim that democracy can never exist without nationalism. “The two are joined in a sort of a complicated marriage, unable to live without each other, but coexisting in an almost permanent state of tension” (Nodia 1994: 4). It is worth remembering that, “In Western Europe, nationalism played a vital role in liberating various countries from monarchical absolutism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In our own day, nationalism is serving as an agent of liberation from communist dictatorship in a similar way (Fukuyama, Avineri 1994: 23).”

What are the arguments for the claim that nationalism and democracy can be allies? Here are a few ideas to support it.

In a feudal society, there were strong social distances and barriers between different social strata. The modern nation was created as a result of the disintegration of such feudal structures and the destruction of legally approved social barriers. National solidarity started to dominate over – or even destroy – old tribal, regional, estate, or religious identities. National feelings became common. The creation of a nation, therefore, should be understood as identical with the creation of modern, post-feudal society (Walicki 1997: 40-41, Szacki 1997: 29-31, Radzik 2000: 46-51, Gellner 1991). “nationalism and democracy can be seen to have emerged out of the same process of industrialization...the economic process of industrialization created certain conditions under which nationalist ideas could flourish. Industrialization breaks down the old class lines typical of traditional agricultural societies, and necessitates the laying of a common linguistic and cultural groundwork upon which a national economy can be built” (Fukuyama, Avineri 1994: 23-24). Such a modern society, becoming also a capitalist one, was characterized by the increase in social mobility. This required a certain level of homogenization of a society (in order to compete for jobs, people have to understand each other and have similar back-

ground), which could be reached through the popularization of national rhetoric and through the introduction of a unified educational system.

Weakening collective mentality and dissolving feudal structures also meant strengthening individual identity. Within nation, the level of individual autonomy of its members was much higher than within previously existing ethnic groups. Therefore, one can talk about the processes of the development of individual identity accompanying the creation of nation. Nationalism here means the liberation of an individual from communal ties, from a corporative agrarian society (Nodia 1994: 11-13, Radzik 2000: 38-39).

It is obvious that modernity, capitalism, and individual autonomy provide necessary conditions for a democratic system; therefore, associating their development with the creation of a nation creates a direct link between democracy and nationality. What's more, however, is that all those changes were accompanied by the radical change in the nature of state, which was transformed from a dynastic state into a national and, at the same time, democratic one. "it started to draw its legitimacy not from a divine law of kings, but from the will of free citizens, who have equal rights. Nation as a new form of social integration emerged together with a new form of political power's legitimacy; none of them seems to be possible without the other. Therefore, creation of nation was strongly connected with the process of people becoming citizens – the process of the development of democracy" (Szacki 1997: 14). It was national consciousness that transformed subjects of political power into citizens and led to the creation of a political community in which people feel responsible for each other

However, "there is nothing in democratic theory *per se* that indicates where the civic or territorial boundaries of the sovereign people should be drawn. There is agreement on the principle of self-determination, but no clear standard for deciding what properly constitutes the 'self' that has the right to determine its own political destiny" (Diamond, Plattner 1994: xi). Nationalism was the historical force that provided the political units for democratic government. "Democracy has always emerged in distinct communities; there is no record anywhere of free, unconnected, and calculating individuals coming together spontaneously to form a democratic contract *ex nihilo*. Whether we like it or not, nationalism is the historical force that has provided the political units for democratic government. 'Nation' is another name for 'We the People'" (Nodia 1994: 7).

Although there are opinions that an ideal of civil society excludes all kinds of nationalism, a deeper insight allows one to say also that the creation of modern civil society as one of the dimensions of a democratic system is parallel with the creation

of a homogenous national community. Members of a civil society can be to some extent nationalists. Civil equality requires cultural equality; therefore, it requires the elimination of language and cultural differences as forces destabilizing or even destroying society. “If we want equality of chances, if we want people...not to be ascribed to particular social roles – we must accept the situation, when people within a state are anonymous citizens who are comparable to each other in terms of their basic background and abilities; they do not create culturally closed social groups or local communities” (Walicki 1997: 41).

## *2. Beyond the dichotomy: Civic nation versus ethnic nation*

Even if we agree with the arguments presented above, there is no doubt that there exist “good” and “bad” nationalisms, and behind them, two concepts of nation. How should we describe the difference between them? One of the possible answers to this is the concept of civic and ethnic nation (Szacki 1997: 20-23, Kubiak 1999, Radzik 2000: 42-61). Both of these are ideal-types.

The so-called ethnic nation is a community defined by natural elements, such as the same origin, blood ties, tradition, and culture. It is therefore a historically developed “community of fate” to which one belongs regardless of his or her will. Such a notion was created by intellectuals in Eastern Europe, where the middle class was almost absent. An ethnic nation is perceived as a holistic unity with a mystical “soul” and a “mission.” Members of such a nation are unified by solidarity, honor, faithfulness, and loyalty; they show a strong, emotional national identity. They are granted citizenship just by birth within a certain nation. A society is suspicious and hostile towards any sort of ethnic differentiation – towards ethnic minorities and foreigners. An ethnic nation, as a closed and exclusive structure, is then a negation of civil society, because it is based on the ideal of a homogenous community. It is usually created when national consciousness emerges before the creation of state. The state within which such a nation might be organized is a national state, which favors dominant culture. The political identity and political rights of members of a nation are based on ethnic identity.

Ethnic nationalism – embracing the ethnic concept of nation – seeks to expand by including ethnic “kinsmen” outside the present boundaries of the ethnic nation, or by forming a much larger ethno-national state through the union of culturally and ethnically similar ethno-national states. “Failure to tame the ethnic flesh of nationalism can lead to chauvinism, racism, or even fascism. Yet these manifestations of nationalism’s ugly side arise not from excessive ethnicity but from the lack of a

robust political expression for national feeling. When they have no political or institutional achievements to take pride in, people may boast instead of their inherited racial, linguistic, or cultural identities (Nodia 1994: 15).”

In the concept of civic nation, nation is a political community whose members are unified by the common will to live under the same socio-political order. Therefore, nation, as “a community of choice,” is an association of people who live in the same territory and who submit to the same rules of a government and of a legal system. The identity of a nation is drawn from a consensus regarding basic values, such as respect for democratic rules and responsibility for the state. This rationalistic and association-based concept was created in Western Europe by the middle classes. Members of such nations are unified by so-called civic friendship; their national identity is only one among other identities. Citizenship is granted to them on the basis of socio-political or territorial criteria: legal and formal citizenship, speaking a language, being born in a certain country, and living in a certain country. In such a concept, a nation is an open, inclusive, tolerant, and pluralistic community, accepting cultural and ethnic differences. A custom of tolerance for minorities becomes an important component of national pride. The national order is almost identical with the order of civil society. National consciousness emerges as political consciousness. In other words, to be a member of a nation means being a citizen of a state. The state within which such a nation is organized is a neutral organization of a political community. Political identity is separate from ethnic identity.

Such a concept of nation is accompanied by so-called territorial nationalism, when people try to bring together different ethnic groups, and to integrate them into a new political community to create a new “territorial” state.

On the basis of the above considerations one can say that nationalism is like a coin with two sides – a political one and an ethnic one (Nodia 1994: 14). They might appear in different proportions: if there is a dominance of the political aspect, one has a “good” nationalism; if the ethnic aspect dominates, then one has a “bad” nationalism. However, one should ask if the concept of a civic nation is the only one that can be combined with a democratic system (Walicki 1997, Król 1997).

First of all, one has to keep in mind that the concepts of civic and ethnic nations are applicable in such ideal form very rarely and probably only for short periods of history, and then they become more moderate and internally differentiated. Therefore, a civic nation gradually becomes rooted in history just like an ethnic nation; common tradition and certain values become as important as socio-political identification (Szacki 1997:21). Secondly, it seems that somewhere between these two

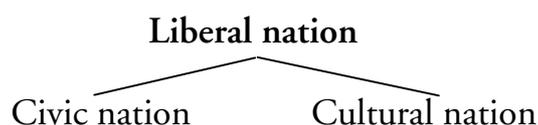
types there is a third type, which I will call the “cultural concept of nation.” Within it, strong national identity, based on culture, is combined with open and tolerant attitudes. Individuals are united by a set of common values, which should involve something more than just the respect for procedural rules of democracy, as in the case of the civic notion. But in contrast to the ethnic understanding, belonging to a nation should be a subject of reflection, a result of a conscious decision, not something totally independent from an individual’s will. Even if a national community preexists an individual and therefore belonging is not fully a matter of individual choice, national identity still requires confirmation – or rejection – by an individual. It cannot be treated as a fact that does not require any interpretation. Therefore, what defines national belonging is, first of all, a state of consciousness of people, a subjective feeling of being a member of a nation.

Such a concept of nation does not have a closed character. Even if there is a dominant national group, even if such a group is in a way privileged, it has to be tolerant and open toward others, respecting their rights and discussing mutual relations. Pluralism in such a community will never be full; rather, there will be a constant search for pluralism, a constant discussion of what might be accepted within our community, which is unified by common values. In this concept of a nation, the sphere of values which exists in a civil society, includes among others – maybe most importantly – the values which are elements of a national culture. Nationality is a source of common identity, making people create their lives together, whereas citizenship is a tool that allows them to do it. Therefore, a group identity is important for the functioning of a democratic state.

It seems that one should treat the dichotomy of civic *versus* ethnic nation as extremes on a continuum. The cultural concept of nation takes an intermediate position on it, combining some elements typical for both those notions (Table 1). The civic and the cultural concepts of nation create two models that might be combined with a democratic system. They both might be called liberal in contrast to the anti-liberal, anti-democratic character of an ethnic nation.

*Table 1. Placing different understandings of nation on a continuum*

	ETHNIC NATION	CULTURAL NATION	CIVIC NATION
<b>What unites nation</b>	Members of an ethnic nation united by the same origin, common culture and tradition; holism	Intermediate understanding of a nation; nationality based on common values, but conscious acceptance of national obligations	Members of a civic nation united by the will to live under the same socio-political order; atomism
<b>Activism or fatalism</b>	“Community of fate”	“Community of identity”	“Community of choice”
<b>Character of national feelings</b>	Emotional, strong national identity; nation as the most important frame of identity	Strong national identification + other frames of identity	“Constrained,” rationalized national feelings; plurality of frames of identity
<b>Criteria for citizenship</b>	Citizenship given by birth (objective criteria, such as blood ties, origin, culture, and tradition)	Citizenship based on a subjective element (the state of consciousness of people, feeling like a member of a nation)	Citizenship based on socio-political or territorial (objective) criteria (speaking a language, being born in a certain country, living in a certain country)
<b>Attitudes toward ethnic differentiation</b>	Exclusiveness, primacy of a dominant ethnic group	Openness, ethnic tolerance	Inclusiveness, ethnic pluralism
<b>Relationship with civil society</b>	Ethnic nation as inconsistent with the order of civil society	Nationality as a source of common values, creating the basis for the development of civil society	Civic nation as consistent with the order of civil society
<b>Character of state and political rights</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nation before state</li> <li>• National state</li> <li>• Political rights connected with ethnic identity</li> </ul>	Nation-oriented state; constant search for pluralism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• State before nation</li> <li>• Neutral state</li> <li>• Political rights independent from ethnic identity</li> </ul>



Individual rights  
 Association-based nation  
 Political side of nationalism  
 Political becoming ethnic  
 Rationalism/instrumentalism

### **Ethnic nation**

Collective rights  
 Holistic nation  
 Ethnic side of nationalism  
 Ethnic becoming political  
 Expressionism

### 3. *Beyond one dimension: Multidimensional mapping of concepts of nation*

The next question is whether it is sufficient to use the above-described continuum. My suggestion is that one should take into account not only one dimension (from association-based nation to holistic nation; from the political side of nationalism to the ethnic side), but also some other dimensions. Firstly, the origin of a society – whether a nation was created as a result of an intentional action of an elite or as a result of a spontaneous process (Szacki 1997: 8-20, Gellner 1991), and secondly, its structure – whether there is a dominant majority or plurality of different groups. Therefore, different variations in understandings of nation are presented in the two tables below (Tables 2 and 3); those tables should be seen as maps. The columns and rows indicate the extreme points; however, the location of empirical cases closer or further to those extremes is also important. It seems that, in both tables, Model II creates the “purest” form of an ethnic nation and Model III the “purest” form of a civic nation, whereas the two others are of an intermediate character.

*Table 2. Nations and their origin*

	CIVIC NATION	ETHNIC NATION
<b>Primordialism</b> (nation as a result of spontaneous development)	I. Grassroots activity of individuals <i>USA</i>	II. Nation waking up, “forced” by external conditions <i>Poland</i>
<b>Constructivism</b> (nation as a result of an intentional action of the elite)	III. The need for homogenization under the conditions of a developing capitalist society <i>France</i>	IV. Nation “woken up” <i>current Balkan nation states; the split of Czechoslovakia</i>
	state->nation	nation->state

*Table 3. Nations and their structure*

	CIVIC NATION	ETHNIC NATION
	Social and political identity separated from ethnic identity	Social and political identity connected with ethnic identity
<b>Dominant majority</b>	I. Assimilationism <i>France, Poland</i>	II. Separatism <i>Germany</i>
<b>Plurality of groups</b>	III. Pluralism <i>USA</i>	IV. Proportional representation <i>Australia</i>
	individual rights nation	group rights

#### *4. An empirical case: Preliminary hypothesis*

On the basis of the above analysis, using the conceptualizations presented, one can formulate a preliminary hypothesis related to the Polish case. They require further analysis:

- In terms of its origin, the Polish nation can be described as spontaneously created. It “woke up” in the nineteenth century, when there was no Polish state; common culture and tradition, which accumulated during centuries before, became the core of national identity, which can be described as having an ethnic character.
- In terms of its present structure, the Polish nation shows a tendency toward assimilationism. There is a dominant majority of Poles and numerous national minorities which have become “dissolved” within this majority; they quickly learn a language, take up studies, get a job, marry Polish citizens. They are also granted Polish citizenship relatively easily. However, it is worth mentioning that in the Polish case there are also some signs of the “Proportional representation” model, since in the Polish parliament two seats have been reserved for representatives of German minority.
- Because of its ethnic origin, nationalism in Poland to some extent might be an enemy of a democratic system. However, it seems that the Polish nation might be placed between the civic and ethnic models of nationality. Constant balancing between them allows one to ascribe it to the intermediate model of a cultural nation.

## *Bibliography*

- Cohen J.L., Arato A., 1992, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge, Mass.
- Dahrendorf R., 1994, „Co zagraza społeczeństwu obywatelskiemu” [“What Is Threatening Civil Society”], in: K. Michalski (ed.), *Europa i społeczeństwo obywatelskie. Rozmowy w Castel Gandolfo [Europe and Civil Society. Debates in Castel Gandolfo]*, Kraków-Warszawa: Społeczny Instytut Wydawniczy Znak, Fundacja im. Stefana Batorego.
- Diamond L., Plattner M. F., 1994, “Introduction,” in: L. Diamond and M. F. Plattner (eds.).
- Diamond L., Plattner M. F. (eds.), 1994, *Nationalism, Ethnic Conflict, and Democracy*, Baltimore and London: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Fukuyama F., Avineri S., 1994, “Comments on Nationalism and Democracy,” in: L. Diamond and M. F. Plattner (eds.).
- Gellner E., 1991, *Narody i nacjonalizm [Nations and Nationalism]*, Warszawa: PIW.
- Keane J., 1988, *Democracy and Civil Society*, London-New York: Verso.
- Król M., 1997, “Narodowy albo liberalny?” [“National or Liberal?”], in: *Znak*, nr 3.
- Kubiak H., 1999, “Przyczynek do sporu o naturę i przyszłość narodu-państwa” [“Introduction to the Debate on the Nature and Future of Nation-State”], in: E. Nowicka and M. Chalubinski (eds.), *Idee a urządzanie świata społecznego [Ideas and the Design of Social World]*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Kurczewska J., 1995, “Democracy in Poland: Traditions and Context,” in: C. G. A. Bryant and E. Mokrzycki (eds.), *Democracy, Civil Society and Pluralism in Comparative Perspective: Poland, Great Britain and the Netherlands*, Warszawa: Wydawnictwo IFiS.
- Nodia G., 1994, “Nationalism and Democracy,” in: L. Diamond and M. F. Plattner (eds.).
- Nowak S., 1979, “Przekonania i odczucia współczesnych” [“Opinions and Impressions of the Contemporary People”], in: M. Rostworowski (ed.), *Polaków portret własny [Poles' Self-Portrait]*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo Literackie.
- Nowicka E., Łodzinski S., 2001, *U progu otwartego świata [At the Gate of an Open World]*, Kraków: NOMOS.
- Radzik R., 2000, *Między zbiorowością etniczną a wspólnotą narodową [Between an Ethnic and National Community]*, Lublin: Wydawnictwo Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej.
- Szacki J., 1997, “O narodzie i nacjonalizmie” [“About Nation and Nationalism”], in: *Znak*, nr 3.
- Sztompka P., 1998, “Mistrusting Civility: Predicament of a Post-Communist Society,” in: J.C. Alexander (ed.), *Real Civil Societies. Dilemmas of Institutionalization*, SAGE.
- Taylor Ch., 1995, “Jak wiele wspólnoty potrzeba w demokracji?” [“How much Community is Needed in Democracy?”], in: T. Buksinski (ed.), *Wspólnotowość wobec wyzwań liberalizmu [Communalism in the Face of Liberal Challenges]*, Poznań: Wydawnictwo Naukowe IF UAM.
- Walicki A., 1997, “Czy możliwy jest nacjonalizm liberalny?” [“Is Liberal Nationalism Possible?”], in: *Znak*, nr 3.