

Revisiting Civic Nationalism in the 21st Century: Role in Liberal Democracy

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ABSTRACT

Civic nationalism emerged as a new idea of nation-building in 1970s Canada in the backdrop of end of the second world war, followed by downfall of fascism and beginning of globalization. Civic nationalism as a concept ought to replace the dominant prevalence of ethno-centric nationalism which focuses on ethnic and other personal identities as the basis of a nation's foundation. The supporters of ethnic nationalism are also the proponents of classical nationalism who believe in homogenized national identity, i.e., citizens belonging to same cultural groups or non-titular groups merging into the titular groups to create the homogeneity. The proponents of civic nationalism, on the other hand, argue for shifting emphasis from ethno-centric identities of nation-building and focuses on the requirements of modern democracies in an increasingly globalized world. While ethnic identities of groups living inside a national boundary play its role in national politics, they argue that it is the civic identities and duties of each citizen that should be the basis of national identity and nation-building. In this context, it is important to understand the place of civic nationalism in the modern, liberal states of the 21st century. The effectiveness of civic nationalism has to be measured by studying some of the world's most vibrant liberal democratic states.

Keywords: Civic nationalism, ethnic nationalism, liberal democracy, nation building, identity

INTRODUCTION

“A society which emphasizes uniformity is the one which creates intolerance and hate...”

(Pierre Trudeau, *At the Ukrainian-Canadian Congress, October 9, 1971*)

Spoken by Pierre Trudeau, the father of the Canadian nation and an eminent politician, statesman and philosopher, this statement laid the foundation of civil nationalism as the new ethos of national identity in the 1970s. Ethnocentric nationalism has been an accepted model of nation-building ever since the treaty of Westphalia in 1648. It defines a nation by assuming that the people are united by a common or uniform ethnic and cultural identity or identities (Chinoy, 2022). National identity is expressed in terms of uniform cultural and ethnic identity as per this concept. Meanwhile, Pierre Trudeau and the likes of him diverge

from this classical view and asserted that in a modern society characterized by migration and globalization, it is not only incorrect to assume that people are culturally uniform, but it is also impractical to even wish for such a possibility (Kent, 2008). In opposing ethnic nationalism for Canada, Trudeau propagated the idea of civic nationalism based on the political loyalty of the people towards a nation (Ibid).

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Received	Reviewed	Accepted	Published
02-Feb.-2023	27-Mar-2023	22-April-2023	10-May-2023

Volume	Issue	May	ISSN
No. 5	No. 1	2023	2583-1852(P)

How to cite this article: Sahu P., 2023. Revisiting Civic Nationalism in the 21st century: Role in liberal democracy. *THE THIRD VOICE REALITY AND VISION*. Vol No-5, Issue No-1, May, P: 12-18

ACCESS THIS ARTICLE ONLINE

Quick Response Code:



Available online at :

thirdvoice.voiceforvoiceless.in

DOI: doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8242246
Article No - TVRV00027

Most societies of the world are multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. Therefore, in any society where multiple cultural, ethnic, racial and linguistic or class identities exist, political affiliation is the only plausible and common cord that can unite its people. Furthermore, civic nationalists envision that ethnic nationalism does not suit the democratic model of statehood (Foran, 2017). This is because a democratic state does not discriminate among its citizens based on their personal or group identities, and envisions everyone equally in the eyes of the law. Rather, political and civil rights, political citizenship, voting and popular participation in the day-to-day affairs of the nation should be the basis of nationalistic rigour and national identity in modern, democratic nation-states.

Civic nationalism is a liberal, modern theory of nationalism and this paper analyses the context and contemporary standing of this theory in the 21st century. In doing so, the paper focuses on the various features and applicability of the theory in modern, democratic nation-states from across the world to examine if civic nationalism is capable of becoming the dominant model of nationalism in the 21st century. The goal is to evaluate the nation-building model of the various democratic states in terms of the nationalism style they follow; and then position civic nationalism in the context. Various existing literature on civic and ethnic nationalism and its place in the nation-states of the 21st century have been examined thoroughly to conclude the question that is being asked. The sources used in this research are secondary and have been collected from trustworthy internet sources including cited articles from peer-reviewed journals, book chapters, news articles from reputed websites and analyses of political experts. However, before the credibility and suitability of civic nationalism in this century is examined, the term must be explained with its elaborate theoretical foundation.

Theorizing Civic Nationalism Origin

Civic nationalism grew stronger as a concept and a practice after the devastations of World War II, the decline of fascist Italy and Germany, and increasing globalization. One important factor for the growth of civic nationalism was also the decline of ethnic nationalism in popularity after the world evidenced the horrors of ethnocentric nationalism in Hitler's Germany, during the Japanese empire and the British colonial rule (Bonikowski and DiMaggio, 2016). Meanwhile, in Western Europe, such as France and Great Britain,

homogenous societies transformed into heterogeneous communities as a result of migration (Bjørnbekk, 2020). It was a paradigm shifting moment in the history of nationalism and civic nationalism emerged as a new model among liberal leaders and their institutions. Similar changes occurred in postcolonial nations that were searching for new political identities to unite fragmented communities. In the post-colonial South Asia, for example, communities within nations were divided by individual identities to the extent that after colonial governments left, it became imperative for the national elite to create common civic identities such as citizenship, voters and more (Lacours, 2010). It was indeed the fight against colonialism that led many post-colonial nations to look for alternative nationalism models in a changing political dynamics of the late 20th century.

Evolution

In societies that experienced immigration, open trade and liberal political ideas in the 18th century, civic identities started blooming (Breton, 2010). The works of prominent political theorists including Hobsbawm and Connor criticised the ethnic model of nationalism and offered a solution in the form of civic nationalism. Hans Kohn's *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background* (1967) is probably the most significant influence on the development of civic nationalism. The political leadership in the West started viewing nationalism differently simply because it was made possible by upcoming political theories, supported by great political thinkers of that time. To put in other words, if nations are indeed 'imagined communities' as pointed out by Anderson, then it would certainly be possible to imagine a nation differently than merely on an ethnic or cultural basis. Hence, the liberal politicians, both in the West and the East, started imagining modern, inclusive, heterogeneous nation-building projects.

Definition

Civic nationalism is defined by a preference for political cohesion, rather than a cultural one. A legitimate state commands sentimental and political allegiance of all the people from across communities, irrespective of their personal and group identities (Breton, 2010). Common and equal rights, justice, duties, and values of citizenship surpass the ethnic divisions that the community shares. In civic nationalism, ancestry, kinship, and primordial identities remain intact but national identity is marked by civic participation in state affairs. In this context,

O’Faolain, an Irish political philosopher, argued that every group carries forward some of their customs and ancient traditions, however, these traditions cannot be completely revived by conservatives or eliminated by the liberals (Roshwald, 2012). A synthesis between ethnic and political identities is required for modern nation-state membership. O’Faolain criticised the ethnic nationalists as stubborn, frustrated and short-sighted policy-makers who clung to an outdated model of nationalism based on an antique past (Roshwald, 2012). This is why democratic systems emphasized on writing constitutions, establishing institutions, building legal frameworks, and creating new customs and symbols to build hybrid and new identities that could allow both indigenous and non-indigenous communities of the land to live together in harmony. This is why most of the nations we see today are not completely based on ethnic lines, rather they are refurbished political units of old regimes, following new customs and traditions. Thus, civic nationalism can be understood as an evolved brand of classical nationalism, which sought to transform the old loyalties of the people into new one’s.

Contextualizing Civic Nationalism in the 21st Century : An Intellectual Imagination?

Civic nationalism is often branded as an intellectual imagination by the supporters of ethnic nationalism. The argument stems from the fact that civic nationalism does not replace old ethnic loyalties, and create new one’s; rather it assigns new powers in the hands of the ethnically dominant national group. The divide between ethnic and civic nationalism is a 20th century-creation. In political theory, early thinkers of nationalism became a part of an academic debate wherein they categorized the role of politics and culture in nation-building from two different viewpoints. In 1908, German historian Meinecke recognized the dual nature of nationalism in a changing world and he called them *Staatsnation* (state-nation) and *Kulturnation* (Cultural nation) (Roshwald, 2012). Hans Cohn, also known as the ‘father of the study of nationalism’, observed that political and cultural nationalism are not only two separate branches of nationalism but also define the differences between the political culture of the West and the non-Western world (Brubaker, 2004). Snyder, who was a student of Kohn argued that only in the Western nations, could a liberal nation survive. In his worldview, the global South was much more ethnically polarized than the global North, and hence, a liberal, civic model of nationalism could not be possible.

Snyder who was one of the first thinkers to use the term ‘civic nationalism’, believed that the model of nationalism in a state dependent on three main factors (Dalberg-Acton, 2007). In 1996, Snyder wrote a paper titled “Nationalism and the marketplace of ideas”, argued that in democratic countries, the political elite cultivates nationalism around electoral politics. In pre-democratic period, nationalistic sentiments among the masses used to be strong, however, functional democracy requires inclusive identities which is why ethno-centric nationalism sees decline in modern, democratic states (Snyder, 2000). Likewise, British political philosopher Plamenatz called ethnic nationalism illiberal and dangerous as it could not only threaten the survival of the different groups living peacefully in a state, but also the very standing of the state itself (Ibid). Thinkers such as Hobsbawm and Habermas called civic nationalism ‘constitutional patriotism’, thus, suggesting that anything different was unconstitutional and unpatriotic, i.e., ethnic nationalism, in this context.

Ethno-nationalism has been adopted largely by early romantic thinkers such as Johann Herder who argued that a nation is an organic body of people belonging to a particular ethnic group. British politician and philosopher J.S. Mill opined that while nations are a modern phenomenon, ethnicities and kingdoms existed before and hence, to discard the influence of ethnic identity in the formation of the state would be a mistake (Smith, 1998). In his *Considerations on Representative Government*, Mill stated, “experience proves that one nationality can merge and be absorbed in another: and when it was originally an inferior and more backward portion of the human race the absorption is great to its advantage. Nobody can suppose that it is not more beneficial to a Breton, or a Basque of French Navarre, to be brought into the current of the ideas and feelings of a highly civilized and cultivated people- to be a member of the French nationality, admitted on equal terms to all the privileges of French citizenship, sharing the advantages of French protection, and the dignity of French power- than to sulk on his rocks” (Mill, 1859). Likewise, Renan (1882) argued that kinship, religion, race, language and ethnicity are such components of a nation around which a nation is built and rebuilt. However, Renan also mentioned that a nation is a ‘daily plebiscite’, thus, implying the participation of all the people in the process of governance. Constituting national identities around the ethnic and cultural identity of only one or few groups,

therefore, is not a feature of the modern nation-state. Cannon in 1978 was of the view that nations do not occur suddenly but as a result of years of conscious efforts of the people (Evarsflaten, 2005). This consciousness is not an elite business, but rather a mass phenomenon. Therefore, ethnic nationalism, which is an exclusive, elitist form of nationalism cannot contain the elements of mass appeal. Deutsch (1954) highlighted the same flaw in ethnic nationalism stating that local loyalties get eliminated in a modern state which is either ruled by a group of leaders, one leader or especially, a constitution.

On the other hand, ethnic nationalists such as Foley have argued that even constitutions have deeply ingrained religious, cultural and ethnic values (Foley and Lahr, 2011). The supporters of ethnic nationalism are not only classical and conservative thinkers of the 19th and 20th centuries, but also constitute a section of the academia today. Amoah's theory on the rationalization of ethnonationalism claims that harmony can be found between ethnic and civic nationalism since they are not opposite of each other, but rather complementary (Bolaji, 2012). However, this approach has been criticised on the ground that ethnonationalism does not harmonize the relationship among different ethnic groups (Ibid). A harmony between the two is particularly difficult given civic nationalism seeks to shape political institutions and culture by replacing ethno-centric politics.

Despite this, the supporters of ethnic nationalism and sceptics of civic nationalism argue that ethnic identities are older than political, civic and constitutional identity (Lacours, 2010). Others suggest that the distinction between the two brands of nationalism is artificial and misleading (Tabachnik, 2019). It is argued that the difference between the two models only describes a handful of the population, for example, in the US, only just about half the population has national pride on civic-political grounds (Bonikowski and DiMaggio, 2016). Ethno-nationalists also suggest that civic nationalism promotes weak patriotism and that the younger generation of the well-educated population lag behind in terms of national pride (Yack, 2008). Their main concern is employment, education, defence, social service, politics, health and luxury, rather than national security.

If this argument is assessed, it can be seen that the younger generation has started participating in the process nation-building by new means, which includes actively engaging with social media, infrastructure-

building, promoting technology, start-ups, contributions in the economy, and the service sector. From social media to international sports events, competitive and cultural platforms, and elsewhere, patriotic and nationalistic feelings are expressed by the youth in various ways (Schwarzmantel, 2004). The youth is participating in the nation's politics via unconventional means because the conventional means (political activism, leadership, contesting elections) are seen in negative light. They are considered as less effective by today's youth and online activism has become a more popular means. In the US and UK, a substantial number of youngsters representing the middle and upper-middleclass background participate in political discussions and the well-being of society (Cushion, 2007). Another study among the Indian and Swedish youth between the years 15 to 25 has shown that social media has influenced the civic engagement of the youth in matters of national interest, development, and security (Banaji, 2008). Besides, if there is a decreased interest among the youth in patriotic matters or national interests, it could be the result of many factors including unemployment, war, mental health, higher pursuits and social engagement elsewhere rather than a shift from ethnic to civic nationalism. Therefore, to argue that ethno-centric nationalism encourages rigorous involvement in nation's affairs is not substantial.

A Fitting Alternative?

Civic nationalism is clearly more suited to the design of modern, globalised and liberal societies of the 21st century. From Lord Acton to Gellner and Hobsbawm, Kymlicka, Almond and Verba, Huntington, Putnam and Lucien Pie, prominent political theorists have argued that in multi-ethnic societies, ethnocentric nationalism creates socio-political divide. Putnam even argued that to build modern Italy, civic engagement, political equality, trust, tolerance and solidarity were the virtues that were used. Huntington (1996) believed that political modernization is at the heart of national development and hence, nation-builders need not focus on cultivating a mass culture. Societies that have embraced advanced technology, science, and modern economic approaches need to have a secular approach to social relations to ensure stable conditions for overall growth. In their personal spaces, communities need to be allowed to practice their ethnic culture, customs and languages. However, in public affairs, it is the civic culture that allows for peace and prosperity of the nation (Pie, 1965). Thus, theorists legitimize the idea and practice of having civic nationalism for an inclusive nation-building.

Civic nationalism in practice has found its place in various democracies across the world. Canada is one of the most prominent case examples of civic nationalism's success. Justine Trudeau, the current prime minister of Canada and the son of Pierre Trudeau (pioneer of civic nationalism), stated in one of his public addresses in 2017 that Canada no longer had a dominant cultural, national identity and that it is friendly toward immigrants and their culture (Foran, 2017). In 2016, former US President Barack Obama praised Canada for its civic nationalism model and agreed that the world needed 'more Canadas' (Ibid). In 2017, the Economist also called Canada the example of liberty in the world and probably the last immigrant nation standing. The same year, a survey among Canadians showed that around 85% of permanent Canadian citizens wanted to accept more refugees and immigrants and welcome all faiths and ethnic identities within its borders (Ibid). This has been an exemplary case of civic nationalisms success in today's age. This is an illuminating hope that perhaps a major part of the democratic world is ready to embrace an inclusive and modern nationalism model.

Academic research in this area also affirms the aspirations of those who preach and promote civic nationalism for the 21st century. Studies have confirmed that immigrants do not steal jobs, rather they pay the way for new opportunities for development (Maxmen, 2018). Studies have also shown that the countries where the fertility rate is low and need more human resources, are gradually moving away from ethnic nationalism and embracing civic and political nationalism to attract more immigrants. Examples include Canada, Russia, Iceland, Germany, Greece, New Zealand, Ireland, Chad and the Nordic republics (The Golden Capitalist, 2021). Even in the Arab world, where religion and clan systems are considered strong, states are opening-up doors to immigrant labourers and providing them with security, income and even citizenship. Many nations have citizenship policies relaxed for immigrants, including but not exclusive to Norway, the US, Japan, New Zealand, Sweden, Australia, Singapore and many more (Sherman, 2019). This is a reflection of moving away from a rigid, ethnocentric, nationalist model that is helping nations to grow economically.

India may be one of the most interesting cases on point for civic nationalism. Especially, the political shifts and ethnocentric nationalism that the nation evidences from time to time, it is crucial to understand that civic nationalism is imbibed in the very foundation of independent India. The founding fathers of the nation

built a system to accommodate different ethnic and religious groups. The majority nationalism in India does not always imply majoritarianism. It is an accommodationist form of nationalism where the voices of the majority count (Mishra, 2016). Additionally, ethnic varieties are much wide in India for any political party to favour, despite efforts. British colonialism promoted a cord of divide among various religious and social groups for a long time, promulgating ethnic insecurity and conflict. The influence of such dividing policies remains and is carried on by certain elements and actors till today. Attempts have been made to mainstream religious and ethnic divides in the civic affairs of the nation. Despite this, the good old Indian idea of inclusivity and 'unity in diversity' has prevailed via institutions, policies and the national intelligentsia; allowing India to build a nation based purely on national allegiance (Shani, 2021). The government's policies, despite party ideologies, cannot bifurcate from the line civic nationalism because of the constitutional mandate and foundational design of the nation, created after independence. Some of the currently launched government policies including 'Make in India', 'Digital India', 'Start-up India', ration and scholarship schemes, employment and loan schemes, 'One Nation One Grid', 'One Nation One Card' and 'One Nation One Tag' that do not discriminate based on ethnic and religious lines in both principle and practice (Sinha, 2020). They foster a new India with the vision of entrepreneurial leadership. Political parties can manipulate, but not supersede the model of civic governance in democracies, despite continuous efforts. Such is the design of civic nationalism.

Furthermore, the USA has been one of the success stories of civic nationalism in the 21st century, despite occasional setbacks. Studies show that the public narrative in the certain parts of the USA, especially in the non-Southern region and in more developed America is strong for civic values such as rationality, tolerance, opportunity, rule of law and national commitment rather than the Jacksonian tradition of religious conservatism and racial profiling (Tudor, 2018). Studies have also shown that those who have resisted civic nationalism in the US belong to the older citizens living in southern states with less education and are White Evangelical Republicans (Bjørnbekk, 2020). The younger generation, living in affluent parts and participating in different aspects of the American nation-building recognize the importance of the American dream as well as the value of cosmopolitanism (Cohn, 2016). Such sentiments are supposed to multiply across nations not only with

globalization but also with rapid democratization. Robert Dah pointed out that between 1900 to 1900, there were only eight democratic nations in the world that treated all cultural groups with political equality (Ariola, 2012). Between 1940 to 1949, this number rose to 25 and in 1997, there were around 87 democracies in the world working towards civic nationalism (Ibid). In 2008, the Bertelsmann Foundation argues that there are around 125 democracies in the world, including 70% of the world population (Bail, 2008). Therefore, it is only natural to argue that civic nationalism has a better chance of survival in the age of democracy and ethno-centric nationalism which emerged against pre-globalized, ethnically-concentrated societies.

CONCLUSION

Civic nationalism is yet to become the dominant model of nationalism. There is no denying to the fact that ethnic and cultural identities still very much deter the polarizing forces in today's society. However, polarization has proven to be more challenging for peace, stability and growth than for glueing people together into one nation. Modern states encounter complex problems of integration due to the irreconcilable nature of ethnicity-based identities. Civic nationalism needs to be put into charge of unifying modern nations, and for this, there is need to study and develop the concept further so that it can be put widely into practice.

FINANCIAL SUPPORT AND SPONSORSHIP : Nil

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST : There are no conflicts of interest.

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