

Taiwan, Nationalism and Democratization **Shelley Rigger, Davidson College**

Everything Ed Friedman writes is informed by his deep humanitarianism. His writings on nationalism challenge and deconstruct historical narratives that seek to naturalize the power claims of nation-states against citizens. His writings on democracy insist on understanding democratization as a process for securing human freedom – not as a tool of state power. This essay is inspired and guided by Ed’s humanitarianism to endorse civic nationalism as an ethic that can create unity in diversity.

After World War II, many of the nations undertaking the transition from colonialism to independence aspired to install democratic governments. During this wave of transitions and attempted transitions, political scientists tried to identify which characteristics made nations good candidates for democratization. Among the many factors they studied was identity, and what they found did not augur well for diverse societies. These early studies found that diverse societies were poor candidates for democratic politics, mainly because they lacked a widely-shared popular concept of national identity. Recent research, too, has reinforced this finding.¹

A shared sense of national identity is necessary, scholars reasoned, because where there are competing national definitions citizens will not accept the radical uncertainty that accompanies democratization. Only if all (or nearly all) citizens agree on a common definition of the nation will they have faith that others will not use the democratic process to destroy it. According to these scholars, national identity was a precondition for democratization – it could not be created within the democratization process. Without it, the effort to bring democracy to a nation was likely to fail. As Dankwart Rustow put it, “the hardest struggles in democracy are those against the birth defects of the political community.”²

Rustow’s metaphor suggests that some states are born healthy, without the deadly flaw of an uncertain identity. For them, the categories of nation and state align effortlessly, and democracy is attained relatively easily. But where identities are diverse, and the definition of the state is contested, democratization has little chance of success. US history offers a good example of this “birth defect.” Even

¹ André W.M. Gerrits and Dirk Jan Wolffram, eds. *Political Democracy and Ethnic Diversity in Modern European History*. Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005.

² Dankwart Rustow, “Transitions to Democracy: Toward a Dynamic Model,” *Comparative Politics*, Vol. 2 (April 1970), p. 360.

after the US Constitution replaced the Articles of Confederation, Americans continued to hold opposing concepts regarding the sovereignty of the individual states relative to the Union. Some believed the national government existed only to coordinate interactions among sovereign entities (the states) while others believed the national government should dominate. These competing concepts of US national identity could not be reconciled through the democratic process. The question of US national identity ultimately was settled in the worst possible way, through a bloody, protracted, fratricidal war.

The idea that the question of national identity must be resolved before democratization can occur is an uncomfortable finding democracy's advocates because it suggests democracy is a prize only some nations can win. It is uncomfortable, too, because too often, "national identity" is taken to mean "ethnonational" or "ethnocultural" identity – identity based on the idea that the nation is comprised of people whose common origins make them a "natural" community. As David Brown defines it, ethnocultural nationalism is "a sense of community which focuses on belief in myths of common ancestry; and on the perception that these myths are validated by contemporary similarities of, for example, physiognomy, language or religion. The myth of common ancestry, related myths of homeland origin and migration, and the pride in the contemporary linguistic, cultural or physical evidence of common kinship, provide the basis for claims to authenticity, and thence for claims to the right of collective national self-determination."³ And we know from the work of Hobsbawm and others that these myths are easily manufactured and manipulated by elites for their own selfish purposes.⁴

National identity based on ethnocultural bonds would seem to produce the strongest polities. If everyone knows who "we" are (and, by extension, who "they" are), the mutual trust on which democracy relies should be easy to build, and a community that is "natural" should require very little effort to maintain. In fact, this is what people have in mind when they say democracy is easy in homogeneous societies, but difficult in societies with ethnic, religious, cultural or political diversity. There has even

³ David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism* (London/New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 51

⁴ Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction," in Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, Eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984.

come to be a feeling of inevitability about all of this, a feeling that certain countries can never attain democracy because their citizens are too diverse.

Buried within this logic is an assumption: human beings are locked into the identities with which they are born, and can never transcend those in-born loyalties or extend their trust to others who are not like them. And this assumption betrays an ideology. As Seyla Benhabib puts it, “The identification of belonging to a people with membership in an organized political community is the bad trick played by all nationalist ideologies. To conflate principles of national and ethnic belonging with those of democratic citizenship is always explosive and dangerous.”⁵

In this quotation, Benhabib points toward a very different way of understanding the relationship among diversity, identity and democracy. In her view, democracy is a political arrangement, not the embodiment of an ethnocultural bond. As such, it can accommodate many identities, and its strength lies precisely in its ability to resolve conflicts among groups in a way that acknowledges, and ideally respects, all of them.

But without a common identity, what will hold this democratic polity together? What will make people want to compromise and cooperate? What will inspire them to trust one another enough to take the risk that is democracy? The answer is democracy itself.

In his essay “Citizenship and National Identity” the German political theorist Jurgen Habermas reverses the relationship between national identity and citizenship contained in the nationalist conception of the state. He writes, “The nation of citizens does not derive its identity from some common ethnic and cultural properties, but rather from the *praxis* of citizens who actively exercise their civil rights. At this juncture, the republican strand of ‘citizenship’ completely parts company with the idea of belonging to a prepolitical community integrated on the basis of descent, a shared tradition and a common language.”⁶

⁵ Seyla Benhabib, “Democracy and Identity: Dilemmas of Citizenship in Contemporary Europe,” Paper presented to the Legal Theory Workshop Series, University of Toronto, 1998, p. 23.

⁶ Jurgen Habermas, “Citizenship and National Identity,” in Theorizing Citizenship, Ed. Ronald Beiner (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995), pp. 258-259.

The practice of democracy, in other words, generates a new kind of national identity: civic nationalism. Civic nationalism articulates a shared sense of national identity that does not require ethnocultural homogeneity. Rather than basing the claim to membership in a community on individuals' descriptive status, civic nationalism roots members' commonality in their shared participation in democratic political institutions – a shared participation that gives them a common moral frame in which to pursue their individual interests and to thrive as autonomous human beings.

David Brown describes civic nationalism as “a sense of community which is focused on the belief that residence in a common territorial homeland, and commitment to its state and civil society institutions, generate a distinctive national character and civic culture, such that all citizens, irrespective of their diverse ancestry, comprise a community in progress, with a common destiny. This commitment to a common destiny, tied into the idea of common loyalty to the territory and its institutions, means that civic nationalism implies the acquisition of ethical obligations, and should not be regarded simply as a voluntary association lacking emotive power.”⁷

In other words, civic nationalism allows for all sorts of identities to coexist, so long as all (or, in practice, most) members of society value and observe the principles of democratic citizenship, participate in a democratic governing process and accept its results. To put it in the American context, native-born or immigrant, black or white, gay or straight, able-bodied or disabled – all are equal before the law and the ballot box (at least in theory; in practice, US history is one long fight to realize this egalitarian promise). No one needs to choose between assimilation and alienation, because participation in the civic order is open to all identities.

If civic nationalism can resolve the contradiction between diversity and democracy, why does ethnocultural nationalism still appeal to so many citizens of democracies, both new and old? Ethnocultural nationalism is seductive because it seems to offer a shortcut to national harmony. By situating citizens within a mythic ring of common heritage and cultural familiarity, ethnocultural nationalism assumes away the most difficult task of political life: justifying state power. If all citizens are

⁷ David Brown, *Contemporary Nationalism*, p. 52

in some fundamental way “the same,” then the state is nothing more – or less – than an organic extension or expression of their tribe. Thus it needs no further justification.

But even if this were true, which it almost never is, the idea of the organic state can easily be corrupted to suggest that citizen participation is either unnecessary (since the state embodies the people) or even unpatriotic (since participation implies that individuals have interests against the state, and by extension “the people”). A kind of post-political complacency can set in, eroding freedom and human dignity.

Another very attractive quality ethnocultural nationalism offers is its power to unite those within the polity, and to brand those outside the polity. In an ethnocultural state, there is never any doubt as to who is one of us, and who is one of *them*. When a new state – even a new democracy – is forming, knowing who the Other is can be very useful. Ethnocultural nationalism unites divided loyalties by demanding that citizens choose among identities. Both transnational and subnational loyalties must be abandoned in favor of identification with the ethnoculturally-based state, because those loyalties are by definition unnatural and by extension unpatriotic.

Thus, ethnocultural nationalism seems to offer an easy way of unifying the new state. But this unity is ephemeral, and the exclusivity and intolerance of the ethnocultural nation-state is a kind of aneurysm in the heart of a new democracy, a weak spot that is in constant danger of collapse.

From the beginning, Taiwan’s democratization was infused with tension between civic and ethnocultural nationalism. Unlike most post-WWII democratizations, Taiwan’s democratic movement was not born out of resistance to colonialism. Instead, it was a reaction against the Chinese regime that replaced Taiwan’s Japanese colonial masters at the end of the war. The ROC government justified its rule over Taiwan by calling it the resumption of China’s past sovereignty over the island, a rationale rooted in a particular reading of history that many – although not all – islanders accepted.

The ethnonational claim underlying the ROC regime rested on the fact that nearly all the island’s residents were ethnic Chinese. As such, the government asserted, they belonged within the Chinese nation-state represented by the Republic of China government. The fact that the great majority of Chinese

were under a different political sovereignty – the People’s Republic of China – was inconvenient, but not fatal to the ROC’s claims about Taiwan.

At first, opponents of the ROC government made their case for political reform within the framework of the state’s ethnonational self-definition. The earliest political activists were regime insiders, Mainlanders affiliated with the ruling KMT who urged the regime to live up to the promises in its democratic constitution. As the social base for political activism expanded in the 1970s opposition politicians and activists continued to emphasize procedural reforms: the extension of democratic participation and civil rights and liberties to all citizens. Fundamentally, then, Taiwan’s early democratic movement was oriented toward civic nationalist demands.⁸

By the mid-1990s, those demands were, to a great extent, met. Martial law was lifted in 1987; the national legislative bodies were renovated in 1991 and 1992, and Taiwan was looking forward to its first direct presidential election, scheduled for 1996. As the KMT-led government adopted reforms to meet the opposition’s procedural demands, its actions had the paradoxical effect of undermining the opposition’s appeal. The KMT’s grassroots networks had deep roots in Taiwan’s society; its economic policies had enabled decades of rapidly improving living standards. Under the Taiwan-born reformist president Lee Teng-hui, even the KMT’s political approach was hard to criticize. As a result, support for the main opposition party, the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP), stagnated at about thirty percent in elections.

As the political system became more open, democratic and fair, the opposition replaced its demands for procedural democracy with a call for a particular outcome: political self-determination for Taiwan. As the democratic system took hold and the last remaining restrictions on free expression were lifted the opposition’s demands sharpened even further. Taiwanese began openly calling for formal independence. For many (although not all) independence activists, the logic driving their burgeoning movement was ethnonational: independence activists claimed that Taiwan was not Chinese at all, but an entirely different cultural entity. The independence cause appealed to many Taiwanese, but the shift in

⁸ See Christopher Hughes, *Taiwan and Chinese Nationalism: National Identity and Status in International Society*. London: Routledge, 1997.

emphasis from the civic nationalist claims of the early democratic movement to an increasingly hard-edged ethnonationalism was also a product of the opposition's search for new issues that would allow it compete successfully in the new, democratic political system.

The success of this strategy rested on the KMT's own actions. When the ROC government first arrived on Taiwan, it classified the island's residents according to the province in which they were born. This decision effectively divided the society into two politically-significant groups, Taiwanese and Mainlanders. (Later, in the 1990s, two more distinct communities emerged as political forces: Aboriginal people and Hakkas.) At first, the Mainlanders used their version of ethnonationalism to define the Taiwan-born population as a subgroup of the Chinese nation. This designation supported the ROC's sovereignty claim in Taiwan, but it also was consistent with the idea that Taiwanese were a separate group – one that could not attain full citizenship in the Chinese nation without upgrading its Chinese identity. To become fully Chinese, Taiwanese were required to repudiate Japanese influences and adopt the specific variant of Chinese culture (including Mandarin dialect) promoted by the KMT.

The idea that Taiwanese and Mainlanders constituted distinct, identifiable communities was useful to the KMT. It justified the government's decision to defer democratization and limit the political influence of the island's native-born majority. Once in place, however, this cleavage became a powerful resource for the political opposition, especially the DPP. By dividing society, the KMT undermined its own ethnonationalist claim. Instead of unifying Taiwan under the Republic of China, the KMT tacitly endorsed the idea that people born in Taiwan were not really, fully, adequately Chinese. This notion only encouraged the idea that Taiwan should renounce its ties to China and become an independent state.

The ROC government vigorously repressed Taiwan independence activism on the island, but in the 1960s and '70s, the independence movement gained a strong following among Taiwanese exiles in North America and Europe. While political activists on Taiwan pursued a civic nationalist agenda centered on democratic reforms such as fair elections and an end to martial law, the overseas independence activists were ethnonationalists. They supported democracy, but not a democratic ROC. In their view, democracy was a means to an end: the liberation of Taiwan from a foreign regime.

By the early 1990s the KMT had lost the power to suppress the independence movement on Taiwanese soil. Exiled activists flooded back to the island; many became active in DPP politics. In 1991 the DPP amended its party charter to endorse the idea of independence; in 1996, it nominated a pro-independence former exile in Taiwan's first direct presidential election. The ethnonationalist agenda embedded in the independence cause appealed to many Taiwanese, but not a majority. While the percentage of Taiwanese identifying themselves as Chinese plummeted over the course of the decade, the lion's share said they thought of themselves as both Chinese and Taiwanese. Nor did the DPP's relentless ethnic politicking attract a winning proportion. The DPP's most attractive campaign slogans were anti-corruption and democratization – both appeals to civic, not ethnic nationalism.

Taiwanese ethnonationalism may be beneficial psychologically. It promotes a positive self-perception for Taiwanese, and helps erase the shame many felt during the period of KMT-enforced Chinese ethnonationalism. As a political force, however, ethnonationalism has done considerable harm. It has split Taiwanese society and encouraged deeply divisive ethnic politics. Taiwanese ethnonationalists have authorized themselves to decide who is authentically Taiwanese and who is not. Too often, they use this power to exclude people who can imagine no other homeland than Taiwan. In their zeal to claim “Taiwan for the Taiwanese” they have alienated many Aboriginal people and Hakkas as well as second, third, and fourth generation Mainlanders. In the process, the Taiwanese ethnonationalists have created a third category of citizens in Taiwan: those who love their homeland, but are put off by the ethnonationalists' essentializing claims. This “silent majority” welcomed civic nationalism, but they are deeply disappointed by the way Taiwan's democracy has unraveled under the influence of ethnonationalist agendas.

With globalization, homogeneity is growing rarer throughout the world. Few states can resist the pressure to open their borders to newcomers, and even within homogeneous groups, individuals are discovering and embracing new identities that demand recognition. But states – including democracies – that are based on ethnocultural nationalism are hard-pressed to adjust to this new reality. In Europe, the ethnocultural nation-state is under pressure from immigration and integration. In both cases, the transition

is painful. European integration makes it impossible to hold the Other at arm's length; immigration makes the idea that "we" all share a common ancestry, language, and religion unconvincing. But if the basis of the state is ethnocultural nationalism, how are these diverse identities to be incorporated? Ethnocultural nationalism demands that "outsiders" either assimilate to the dominant culture or remain excluded from the polity. For democrats, these are both bad choices.

The answer for democracies, new and old, in the era of globalization is civic nationalism. Civic nationalism squares the circle; it reconciles identity and democracy. Indeed, once diverse identities blossom within a polity, what choice is there but to deepen and expand democratic citizenship? Only democracy can allow groups to have their say; only democracy can force groups to resolve their differences through persuasion and compromise. It doesn't always work (witness our Civil War) but what other form of government can do better? Ethnonationalism has served Taiwan particularly ill. In its Chinese form, ethnonationalism justified authoritarianism and the denigration of Taiwan and its people. In its Taiwanese form, ethnonationalism threatens to crowd out the quest for liberty and justice, and replace it with a mission to build a Taiwanese nation-state based on an exclusive, ethnically-based definition. Taiwanese would do well to emphasize the virtues of an inclusive democratic state over one that elevates a nationalist message above all others.