How voluntary is national identity?

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ABSTRACT. It is generally assumed that predominantly civic nations are 'voluntary' and 'inclusive', while predominantly ethnic nations are 'ascribed' and 'exclusive'. But how voluntary is national identity really? At the group level, the question is to what extent the contents of national identity can be chosen. At individual level, the question is to what extent individual membership in the nation is a matter of voluntary choice. The article is organized around three main arguments: 1. The degree of voluntary choice varies according to the stage in the nation-forming process. 2. To perceive any national identity as something entirely determined by free will is to understate both the stability of national identities and the amount of coercion involved. 3. Membership in any nation ('civic' or 'ethnic') is more a matter of identification and recognition than a matter of free choice on part of individuals.

The distinction between a civic and an ethnic nation concept is nearly universal within the field of nations and nationalism. Civic nations are often assumed to be inclusive, voluntary, and liberal, whereas ethnic nations are depicted as exclusive, genetic, and illiberal. As Anthony D. Smith (1998: 126) has pointed out, the distinction is primarily analytic and normative, and the ideal typical 'civic' and 'ethnic' nations are rarely approximated in real life. Nevertheless, the assumed characteristics of the civic and the ethnic nation are often attributed to real life nations, and moreover, these characteristics are used as a point of departure for normative judgments, usually to the effect that civic nations are preferable (Smith 2001: 41). The Habermasian tradition of 'constitutional patriotism' e.g. rests on this idea.

Others have argued that the ethnic – civic dichotomy is inadequate to analyze how nations distribute membership, or have criticized the related assumption that civic nationalism is intrinsically liberal and cultural nationalism is intrinsically illiberal or authoritarian (Nieguth 1999, Brown 1999, Smith 2001). The point of departure for this article is another aspect of the dichotomy, namely the assumption that the civic nation is voluntary in character, while the ethnic nation is genetically determined, and thus outside the domain of will.

The question is: How voluntary is national identity really? I argue that the difference between predominantly civic and predominantly ethnic nations is not all that great in this respect. Instead we need to ask: Voluntary for whom? When? Under what circumstances? The subtext is that the question must be addressed in a historical context.

In the following, I will first briefly outline the distinction between a civic and an ethnic nation concept. Then I will describe the nation forming process as a backdrop for the discussion, which will be focusing on the stage of the nation-forming process, the amount of coercion and stability involved, and the dual processes of identification and recognition.
Aspects of the distinction between civic and ethnic nations

Let us first try to unpack the distinction between civic and the ethnic nation concept. One aspect concerns the contents of the bond uniting the members of the nation. The uniting features of the civic nation are territory, a community of laws and institutions, and common civic culture and ideology. The uniting features of the ethnic nation are common descent, vernacular languages, religion, customs and traditions. As Smith points out, however, every nation contains civic and ethnic elements in varying degrees (Smith 1991: 9–13).

A second, interrelated aspect of the distinction concerns to what extent national identity can be acquired or changed. In the civic case, according to Liah Greenfeld, nationality is at least in principle open and voluntaristic; it can and sometimes must be acquired. In the ethnic case, nationality is believed to be inherent and can neither be acquired nor changed; it has nothing to do with individual will, but constitutes a genetic characteristic (Greenfeld 1992: 11). This rests on the assumption that the civic bond can be chosen (at will), while the ethnic bond cannot.

A third aspect is the association of the two nation concepts with the two standard European routes to nationhood. The civic nation is associated with the route of the 'first-born' 1 West European 'state-nations', where a (civic) nation was formed within the borders of an existing state. The ethnic nation is associated with the nationalist route, where a national movement helped form, or in the eyes of the members, reawakened the (ethnic) nation, in direct opposition to the foreign ruling elite of the multiethnic empire.

Finally, in parts of the literature, a normative evaluation is embedded in the classification of nations and/or nationalism in terms of 'civic' and 'ethnic'. The idea is that the civic type is liberal ('good') and the ethnic type illiberal or authoritarian ('bad'). This harks back to Hans Kohn's distinction between a liberal, western type of nationalism, and an authoritarian, East European type. The idea that 'civic' nationalism is inclusive, open and participant in character – as opposed to 'ethnic' nationalism – also lies at the heart of much of the recent normative literature about the relationship between liberalism and nationalism, although those terms are not always employed (Miller 1999, Kymlicka 1998 & 1999, Smith 1998: 210–13).

Liah Greenfeld (1992: 11) refines Kohn's position somewhat by asserting that while ethnic nationalism is necessarily collectivist-authoritarian, civic nationalism can be either individualistic-libertarian or collectivist-authoritarian. For normative purposes, the result is almost the same: If ethnic nationalism is necessarily collectivist-authoritarian, the only kind of nationalism that can be combined with liberal ideas is the civic nation model. As David Brown (1999: pp. 281 ff.) shows, however, the fact that a particular nationalism can be described as civic rather than ethnic does not automatically imply that it is liberal – or the other way around. Some cultural nationalisms are liberal, and some civic nationalisms are not.

The core of the dichotomy between the civic and the ethnic nation comprise the first two aspects of the distinction, and this is where my main emphasis will be.
The nation-forming process

Most scholars today distinguish between two main routes to nationhood in Europe, with the Germans, the Italians and partly the Poles sometimes presented as a third category (Mann 1995, Hroch 1985). In West European 'nation-states', originally culturally heterogeneous populations were welded into nations; in the great multi-ethnic empires, national movements mobilized culturally more homogeneous populations against a foreign ruling elite. The labels differ – small nations versus ruling nations, nations based on vertical versus lateral ethnies, state-subverting versus state-reinforcing nations, etc., but the same cases are included (Hroch 1985 & 1993; Gellner 1983; Hobsbawm 1992; Mann 1995; Smith 1986, 1991 & 1995).

In both cases, nation-forming required a national elite with the necessary means a) to formulate the contents of nationhood, and b) to diffuse the awareness of being a nation to the people or 'the masses'. This process was completed around the middle of the 19th century at the earliest. National identities are thus fairly modern phenomena. However, already by the end of the Middle Ages, elites and urban populations many places in Europe had developed an awareness of belonging to over-local communities, based on some (cultural) sameness. These ethnic identities were diffuse and socially limited, and their importance for the nation-forming process is disputed. Were they irrelevant or indispensable? To paraphrase a famous debate between Ernest Gellner and Anthony D. Smith, the question is not really whether nations have navels, but whether these navels matter (Gellner 1996, Smith 1996). This debate need not concern us here, but for the record, I tend to agree with Smith that navels matter.

What happened during the transition from ethnic to national identity was thus twofold: On the one hand, a nation-forming elite (or competing nation-forming elites) more or less consciously formulated what it meant to be a nation. They did so by defining the features (or rights and obligations) that separated the nation-to-be from the important others – which in turn functioned as criteria of inclusion and exclusion. These features varied from case to case, depending on the historical circumstances. In addition, 'imported' ideas of what it meant to be a nation played a role. Herder's idea of language as the soul of the nation was especially influential, also in cases where language was not originally an important part of the pre-national identity – as in Serbia (see Banac 1988).

On the other hand, the nation-forming elite disseminated the new national identity (certain features, the awareness of sharing these features, and the solidarity it implied) to all strata of the nation-to-be. These were often interconnected processes: The contents of national identity changed simultaneously with the inclusion of more groups in the nation. The contents of national identity may (and do) change even after the nation-forming process is completed.

While ethnic identities crystallized over a long time through interaction within and between culture groups, there was at least some element of conscious planning or 'invention' in the case of the nation. This is especially clear in the case of 'nations from below', where the national movement actively promoted the formation as well as the diffusion of the new national identity. The element of construction was initially less pronounced in the case of the 'first-born nations', where the incorporation of new groups and regions in the dominant ethnies was largely an unplanned side effect of other processes. However, even in France, national awareness permeated the masses only after the idea of belonging to the French nation could be advanced through a compulsory education system, in the late 19th century.
There are of course some important differences between the two routes, especially in terms of the power of the agents of the nation-forming process. Ruling elites had superior coercive power through the control of the secret police, the judiciary and the military, as well as having superior control of incentives and means of promoting their national project, through the education system, the administration, the political system and the mass media. By contrast, national movements had to mobilize support for their cause mainly through agitation, rallies, newspapers (if allowed), clubs and meetings. People might or might not listen to them.

Also, the contents of national identity (or the uniting bonds) seem to vary according to the route to nationhood. Generally, the contents of national identity seem culturally 'thicker' in the cases that followed the nationalist route to nationhood, while they were more political in character in the 'first-born' nations. However, these differences should not be overstated. Also the 'state-nations' were clearly based on a certain cultural heritage, namely the heritage of the dominating elite; or, in A. D. Smith's term, the ethnic core. Conversely, the contents of identity in the 'cultural' nations were not linked exclusively to cultural features, but also to some extent associated with a territory, or a homeland.

**How voluntary is national identity?**

It is now about time to return to our topic: How voluntary is national identity really, and is there any difference between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nations in this respect? According to my Cassell Concise English Dictionary, 'voluntary' means 'proceeding from or determined by one's free will or choice, not under external constraint,' or alternatively, 'acting or done willingly, spontaneous, intentional, purposive, designed'. The point of departure is, again, the claim that the bonds of the civic nation can be chosen, while the bonds of the ethnic nation are allegedly ascribed and thus outside the domain of will.

First, we need to distinguish between 'voluntary' and 'subjective': Virtually all scholars today see mass subjective awareness of belonging to a national community as a precondition of nationhood, whether the bonds uniting the nation are predominantly 'civic' or 'ethnic'. No matter how they come about or what the contents of the national identity are, all national identities involve some sort of self-categorization and mutual recognition. Second, we may have to distinguish between the various uniting features that are subsumed under the 'civic' and the 'ethnic' nation model in order to determine how voluntary national identity is.

This question can be addressed at two levels: At the group level, the question is to what extent the contents of national identity can be chosen. At the individual level, the question is to what extent individual membership in the nation is a matter of voluntary choice. I will organize the following discussion around three main arguments:

1. The degree of voluntary choice varies according to the stage in the nation-forming process.
2. To perceive any national identity as something entirely determined by free will or choice is to understate both the stability of national identities and the amount of coercion involved.
3. Membership in any nation (whether predominantly 'civic' or 'ethnic') is more a matter of identification and recognition than a matter of free choice on part of individuals.
Stages of nation-forming

The first point I want to make is that, historically, the degree of voluntary choice in terms of the contents of nationhood as well as individual membership in the nation varies according to the stage in the nation-forming process, and furthermore, that there is no big difference between predominantly 'civic' and 'ethnic' nations in this respect.

First to the contents of national identity: All national identities are in fact chosen at some point in the sense that in the early stages of the nation-forming process an elite defined what it meant to be a nation, by proposing elements that were supposed to unite the members of the nation-to-be, and at the same time distinguish them from the (important) others. As Fredrik Barth (1969: 14) has argued, not all features are seen as equally relevant; some (cultural) features are used as emblems of differences, others are ignored, and in some cases radical differences are played down and denied. Even in cases where the proposed contents of nationhood are predominantly 'ethnic' or cultural, the membership criteria must be chosen over other potentially uniting features. On the other hand, the features the members of the nation-to-be actually share (or can be made to share), restrict the room for choice.

In the period when the contents of national identity were being formulated, the room for choice was larger than later on, first because the contents of national identity were still diffuse, and second because there were often competing conceptions of what it meant to be a nation, even within the same nation. Let me illustrate the point with a few examples:

In the Czech case, a territorial conception of what it meant to be Czech coexisted with a more narrow cultural-linguistic conception until well after the turn of the 19th century. According to the territorial nation concept, it was possible to be German-speaking and Czech (or rather Bohemian) at the same time. After 1815, the linguistically based nation concept gained the upper hand under the influence of Romanticism. Mastery of the Czech language became essential in order to be regarded as a part of the Czech nation. The final break between Czechs and Germans occurred only after 1848, when the Czechs were able to monopolize Czech/Bohemian identity (Drabek 1992: 307, Kočí 1978: 91, Bakke 1999: 138–39).

Likewise, the idea of a Natio Hungarica was formed in the late Middle Ages, and was originally linked to the nobility. Under the influence of the Enlightenment, it became transformed into a citizen-oriented, political nation concept. Finally, with the national revivals under way, Hungarian identity came to be understood more and more in Magyar (cultural) terms. This went hand in hand with an increasing Magyarization pressure. As long as the Hungarian nation was perceived in political terms, it was possible to be linguistically Slovak or Rumanian and at the same time a member of the Natio Hungarica. In the 19th century, non-Magyars were faced with the choice between assimilation into the Magyar (cultural) nation and adherence to a separate (e.g. Slovak) nation (Bakke 1999: 137–40).

In the Norwegian case, the nation-forming process was contradictory and conflict-ridden. Øystein Sørensen (1998: pp. 17 ff.) distinguishes between two nation-forming elites – one consisting of government officials in the capital (embetsmenn), many of whom had their roots in Denmark, the other an alternative elite in opposition to officialdom. Conceptions of Norwegian national identity vacillated between 'civic' symbols (like the Constitution of 1814, the Parliament, the Norwegian flag, and after 1945: The Royal family) and cultural elements (like history, language, (Lutheran) religion and folk culture). This also illustrates that the contents of nationhood are not determined once and for all: They can even change after national awareness has been disseminated to a majority of the people.
In the French case, which is usually presented as the example of a predominantly 'civic' nation, the conception of identity changed before as well as after the nation-forming process 'proper' started. The medieval conception of France as the 'most Christian kingdom' tied French identity to the French language, religious piety and the patria. After the 1789 Revolution, France was seen as a nation, and French identity as coterminous with citizenship, based on the voluntary adherence of individuals (and later districts) to common laws. This Revolutionary conception soon gave way to the Jacobin version of the nation as one and indivisible, which was totalitarian in essence. Eventually, the 'civic' conception of French identity also got competition from a traditionalist and anti-republican version, where French cultural tradition, French community of fate and pre-national elements of French identity were emphasized. Obviously, the room for choice was larger during the Revolution than later (Alter 1989: 39; Østerud 1994: 30–33; Greenfeld 1992: 97, 177; Johnson 1993: 48).

If we turn to the matter of individual membership in the nation, the room for choice was also here larger in an early stage of the nation-forming process, and especially in cases where proponents of different nation projects competed among themselves for the 'souls' of the nationally unaware masses. This was essentially the case in most nationally mixed areas in East Central Europe and the Balkans during the early stages of the national revivals.

The most striking example is perhaps late 19th century Macedonia, which was the object of rivalry between Greeks, Bulgarians and Serbs. The population was predominantly South Slav – with Turkish, Greek, Albanian, Vlach, Jewish and Gypsy enclaves (Magocsi 1993: 99). Religiously, the population was Orthodox and Muslim. There was no clear historical pedigree; Macedonia had been under the suzerainty of a number of states, including the Byzantine Empire, the Serbian and Bulgarian Medieval states, and the Ottoman Empire. A separate Macedonian identity did not exist prior to 1875, neither in terms of clearly formulated contents of nationhood nor widespread national awareness.

In the rivalry over Macedonia, all contenders used the historical argument: The Bulgarians and Serbs claimed Macedonia on the basis of their respective medieval states, and the Greeks invoked the heritage of Alexander the Great and the Byzantine empire. In addition, the Bulgarians and the Serbs argued that Macedonian dialects were respectively Bulgarian or Serbian, while the Greeks saw the Slav population as Slavophone Greeks. Bulgarians and Greeks also claimed ecclesiastical jurisdiction on behalf of the Bulgarian Exarchate and the Greek Patriarchate. In this situation, it was quite possible for a father to have one Greek, one Bulgarian and one Serbian son. A side effect of the rivalry was that a fourth, Macedonian nation project eventually surfaced (Mønnesland 1992: pp. 128 ff.; Jelavich 1983: pp. 89 ff.).

The Slovaks of former Hungary are another interesting example. Slovak identity was quite diffuse until the second half of the 18th century, the Slovaks had no prior history of statehood, and no Slovak literary language existed; Czech was used in Protestant churches, otherwise the language of administration in Hungary was Latin until 1784. As the cultural nation concept gained ground towards the end of the 18th century, the small Slovak elite split into three factions: A noble faction adhered to the idea of a Hungarian political (and eventually cultural) nation. A Protestant faction believed in Czecho-Slovak unity based on a common literary language (Biblical Czech) and common cultural traditions; and a Catholic faction believed in a separate Slovak nation/a Slovak tribe within a Slav nation. The two latter factions joined forces only in the face of increased Magyarization pressure in the 1840s. The rewards of choosing Magyar instead of Slovak nationality were great, especially for the intelligentsia, and a substantial number of people of Slovak origins did 'convert'. Many of these 'Magyarones' came forward as Slovaks after Czechoslovakia came about.
Let me summarize. In the early stages of the nation-forming process, national identity was more 'voluntary' than later, for three main reasons: First, before the contents of nationhood were properly defined, national identity was more diffuse, and thus more open to choice. Second, there were in some cases competing conceptions of nationhood within the same nation project. Third, the room for individual choice was larger in a situation where proponents of different nation projects competed for the 'souls' of the nationally unaware.

Once the nation-forming process is completed, the contents of nationhood are clearly defined and a great majority of the potential members of the national project feel an awareness of belonging together, however, this is an entirely different story. In the first place, it becomes more difficult for a national elite to change the membership criteria, both because the new conception of nationhood will have to compete with an older, more established conception, and because there will be more people to convince than what was the case in an early stage of the nation-forming process (when only a small elite was nationally aware).

Second, once national identity becomes self-evident, it is more or less inescapable for the majority, because it is being reproduced through the institutions of society, including the family, the school system, the mass media, even sports. Especially in cases where nations are protected by the state (nation-states or national states with a majority), national identities are institutionalized to a much larger degree than other collective identities like class or gender. Children are taught national identity in school from first grade on – national culture, national history, national values. Thus, for most people, being a part of the nation is a matter of upbringing and socialization rather than a matter of conscious choice, and this goes for predominantly 'civic' nations like the French as well as for predominantly 'ethnic' or 'cultural' nations like the Slovaks. This does not mean that all individuals, even in modern nations, necessarily have a professed subjective national identity – and least of all intellectuals!

**Coercion and stability**

The second point I want to make is that to perceive national identity as something entirely determined by free will or conscious choice is to underestimate both the stability of national identities and the amount of coercion involved. Nations did not form spontaneously, by voluntary adherence and consent. A nation-forming elite, whether of the ruling type or in the form of a national movement, formulated what it meant to be a nation and worked actively to spread national consciousness to the masses of the nation-to-be. They used the means necessary to reach this goal, and the process was not without coercive elements.

According to the civic – ethnic dichotomy, civic nations are supposedly more voluntary than ethnic nations, but historically, the coercion involved was if anything larger in the allegedly 'civic' nations-from-above in Western Europe than in the predominantly 'ethnic' nations-from-below in East Central Europe. This is not really surprising, considering the means they had at their disposal: In the former case, the nation-forming elites were ruling elites, with all the trappings of coercive power, including control of state institutions from the education system to the mass media. In contrast, national movements had to rely on civic society to spread national awareness through appeals to unity and calls for solidarity.

In the nations-from-above of Western Europe, an important part of the nation-forming process was in fact to assimilate cultural and linguistic minorities into the dominating culture. In France administrative centralization and cultural standardization was an important part of the nation-building project after the Revolution, in spite of the fact that nationhood was, in
principle, tied to citizenship and voluntary adherence. French was the 'progressive' language of the Revolution as opposed to 'feudal', provincial languages like Basque, Catalan, Breton and Provençal, and assimilation was a goal (Johnson 1993: 52–53; Østerud 1994: 32).

In Norway, where the conception of nationhood has been as much 'civic' as 'ethnic', a concerted effort was made to deprive the Sami people of their language and religion in order to turn them into 'good' Norwegians; admittedly, with dubious results. This policy changed only after World War II (Sørensen 1998; Stordahl 1997: pp. 139 ff.).

The Magyarization campaign in the Hungarian part of Austria-Hungary after the Ausgleich of 1867 is admittedly a Central European example of the same. Magyar became the only official language of the state, in the state administration, the courts, the Parliament, and higher education; even primary schools were increasingly Magyarized. At this point, the nation concept in Hungary was becoming increasingly cultural, but not 'ethnic' in a genealogical sense (Bakke 1999: 115–16, 130).

I am not hereby suggesting that predominantly 'civic' nation projects necessarily involve more coercion than predominantly 'ethnic' nation projects. The point is rather that the 'ethnic' – 'civic' dichotomy is not very useful. A coercive assimilation policy makes sense only if you believe that national identity can be acquired, and if the national membership criteria are at the same time (at least in part) cultural. This does not apply to a strictly 'ethnic' nation, which if it existed would be united by descent. If membership can be acquired only by birth, assimilation is not possible. Conversely, in the case of a strictly 'civic' nation, assimilation would not be necessary. This also suggests a need to differentiate between the various features that are labeled 'civic' and 'ethnic'. I will return to this in the next section.

Finally, the fact that national identities have been known to persist for years under foreign oppression is in itself suggestive of stability outside the domain of will alone. Nations are not objects of choice the way e.g. political parties are. People do not change their national allegiance over night – actually, most people do not change national identity even once in their lifetime. Indeed, if nations really were – in Ernest Renan's famous phrase from 1882 – 'a daily plebiscite' (un plébiscite de tous les jours), upheld by a day-to-day vote of confidence only, they probably would not last very long (Renan 1996: pp. 42 ff.).

A matter of identification and recognition

The third and final point I want to make is that once the nation-forming process is completed, membership in any nation, (whether predominantly 'civic' or 'ethnic' in terms of the features that supposedly unite people), is more a matter of identification and mutual recognition than a matter of individual choice. However, and this is where predominantly 'civic' nations arguably differ from predominantly 'ethnic' nations, nations may still be more or less inclusive to outsiders, depending on what the contents of nationhood are. I argue that the civic – ethnic dichotomy is nevertheless far too sharp also on this account.

As Margalit & Raz (1999: 84) have pointed out, membership in the nation is a matter of belonging. You cannot choose to belong to just any nation in the world, just like you cannot chose to belong to just any family or any club – or any gender, for that matter. We belong because of who we are in relation to others. To belong to a family, you must be born, adopted or married into it. To belong to a club, you have to apply for membership and be accepted by the others as a member, according to certain membership criteria. Membership in the nation
rests on (self) identification on part of the individual, but more importantly, it is a matter of mutual recognition, and the chances are that if you do not share the membership criteria, the others will not accept you as belonging to that nation.

The range of choice is thus severely restricted. You cannot choose to be something you are not. If you live in an environment where one national identity is pervasive, and you fill the membership criteria of that nation only, you can at best choose whether to define yourself in national terms or actively reject the national identity you were brought up with. This will be the situation of the majority nation once the nation-forming process is finished.

Minorities and immigrants, on the other hand, are in a position where they in principle can choose between at least three alternatives; they can adapt and become a part of the majority nation, (provided that they are accepted by the others), they can retain their national identity, or something in-between. A quite common outcome in the case of second-generation immigrants is situational and dual identity (see e.g. Liebkind 1989, Portes 1996).

However, there is no such thing as a free lunch. In order to belong to a different nation, minorities must change those parts of their social biography, culture or values that conflict with the membership criteria of their new nation, e.g. by adopting a different language and culture. Or else, the membership criteria of the 'host nation' will have to change to accommodate new groups, which is a slow process. Again, change of national identity is not only a matter of individual choice, but also a matter of being recognized by the others.

What is then the difference between predominantly 'civic' and predominantly 'ethnic' nations, as seen from an individual perspective? First of all, the difference is more a matter of degree than the great Either/Or dichotomy would suggest. For immigrants or minorities who want to change their national identity, it is in most cases possible to do so in at least two generations by adopting the elements that make up the membership criteria. Not even predominantly 'ethnic' nations are closed or ascribed; the many Slav surnames among Germans and Austrians and the many German surnames among the Czechs testify to the assimilation processes that were historically at work in linguistically mixed areas.9

The difference between the civic and the ethnic nation is rather in the receiving end. It may be argued that once a person has decided to change his or her national allegiance, it may be easier to achieve recognition from the other members in a predominantly 'civic' than in a predominantly 'ethnic' nation, because it is easier to fill the membership criteria. Also, it may be argued that a civic nation will let you keep more of your original culture. The underlying assumption is that 'civic' elements of nationhood are easier to acquire than 'ethnic' elements. This is, however, not necessarily the case for all 'civic' compared to all 'ethnic' elements. Moreover, as I have already suggested, we need to distinguish within the 'ethnic' category between genealogical descent on the one hand and other, more cultural criteria on the other.

If genetic heritage is an explicit membership criterion, national identity can be acquired only by birth. To what extent assimilation is possible, however, depends on how rigorous the descent criterion is applied. If one grandparent is enough, members of one nation can over generations become assimilated into another nation through intermarriage. If a pure bloodline is required, the nation in question will in principle be closed to outsiders.

However, membership in predominantly 'ethnic' nations is seldom a matter of genetic characteristics. Common descent is more myth than reality in most cases, especially in Europe, where migration, conquest and assimilation processes have made any pretense of a 'pure bloodline' quite ridiculous. In spite of variations in terms of eye color, hair color and stature in
Europe, it is impossible to tell a German from a Czech from a Norwegian just by looking at them. And again, in most cases descent is not an explicit membership criterion.

The Sami of Norway are one of the few known examples to the contrary in Europe. Descent is not only an accepted criterion of Sami identity among the Sami themselves, but has even been codified by Norwegian law. When the Sami parliament was established, suffrage was based on a combination of two criteria: In order to register, you must identify as Sami and at least have one great grandparent who had Sami as his or her mother tongue (Semb 2001). However, since many Sami are of mixed heritage, they have to choose the Sami part of their heritage in order to vote in the Sami elections. This also illustrates that not even a national identity based on descent is entirely ascribed.

Beside descent, religion is probably one of the more restrictive criteria of nationhood. It is in principle possible to change religions over night, but only if it has no consequence to you. In practice, religion is connected to marriage and a number of other traditions (food, dress, legal codes, values etc.); most religions e.g. practice endogamy and frown upon mixed marriages, if they allow them at all. Since intermarriage is an important part of integration and assimilation processes, different religions may serve as a barrier against the change of national identity, on part of the majority and the minority, in cases where the minority does not want to give up its religion, and the majority will not allow it to become a part of the nation unless it does. The large Muslim immigrant groups in Europe may be a case in point, especially where Christianity forms a part of the national identity.

More often, membership in predominantly 'ethnic' nations is associated with command of a national language. It is possible for some (gifted) people to become fluent in a foreign tongue, to the point where they can pass as indigenous. In these cases, change of national identity is possible in one generation, otherwise at least in two – in both cases, provided that the individuals or groups in question want to change their national allegiance. A national identity based on language may be more or less inclusive, depending on the required language skills. If it is enough to be able to communicate, it will be easier to be allowed into the nation than if you have to be completely fluent.

Some cultural habits may be harder to acquire; how we treat women – or our elderly (badly, by Asian standards!), whether or not to look people directly into the eyes, how we address people we do not know, how close we stand to people in a conversation (some of us find the Continental habit of standing within one foot from the other person's nose unnerving), whether or not to invite people home, what to serve, and so on. These are habits that may cause misunderstandings, although they may not be (explicit) membership criteria.

Other cultural elements may be easier to acquire; anyone can buy a Norwegian folk costume to wear or a Norwegian flag to wave around on Constitution day. Norwegian food traditions can be acquired by buying a recipe book – if there is such a thing as national food traditions anymore, in this era of international cuisine. Unless there are religiously based norms against it, anyone can conform to the dress code of any society, if he or she wants.

If we turn to the more 'civic' elements, a territorial notion of nationhood can be more or less inclusive. If you have to be born in the homeland (within the borders of the nation-state), it is not possible for first generation immigrants to belong to the nation, while the second generation will become members by birth. In this case, membership in the nation is ascribed in the sense that there is nothing you can do to fill the criteria of nationhood. Conversely, if it is enough to be a resident, anyone can come to belong by moving to the territory in question. In practice, however, membership is restricted for non-citizens. First, in most states you need
an entry permit to get in, and a residence permit in order to stay. Second, in order to get full rights and obligations, enabling you to be a part of a community of laws and institutions (one of the other 'civic' elements on A. D. Smith's list) you need citizenship. A minimum requirement for naturalization is permanent residency (e.g. seven years), sometimes you must also pass a competency test (e.g. of the Constitution or language ability).

It should be noted that not all rights and obligations depend on citizenship. The obligation to pay taxes, send your children to school and obey the laws usually depends on residency. Some states, (including Norway) also allow foreigners to vote in municipal elections, provided they have been permanent residents for a certain number of years. In contrast, you have to be a citizen (of the nation-state) to be eligible to vote or run for office at the central level. It is thus not a matter of choice to be a part of a community of laws and institutions either; laws are imposed on you and rights to vote etc. are granted only on the basis of fulfillment of the criteria.

The last 'civic' element on A. D. Smith's list – a common civic culture and ideology – is more a matter of socialization than choice. It is possible to acquire knowledge about how a democratic system works, e.g. through compulsory study of the Constitution, like in the United States, but democratic values and the unwritten conventions may be harder to acquire. Most people do not go around changing their values every week. If it is true that a functioning democracy requires a minimum of shared values and interests, then immigrants that already share the basic values of their host society will have a better chance of adapting than immigrants that do not. If this is the case, democratically inclined political refugees may be easier to integrate in a 'civic' nation than economic refugees without such values.

The final question is whether 'civic' nations in a pure form are at all possible. As far as I am aware, there is no such nation. The French nation is sometimes presented as an example of a civic nation. As Øyvind Østerud points out, however, the Republican (French) nation was not only a system of equal rights and obligations, but also required communication as a basis of shared institutions and principles (1994: 32). Cultural standardization was a part of the nation-forming process in France, and while the Revolutionary conception of nationhood may have been civic, the present-day conception of French identity also includes cultural elements, e.g. language. David Miller makes a similar point when arguing that nations require a common public culture, which is most easily expressed through a national language that everyone can speak (1999: 22). At a minimum, the members of the nation must thus be able to communicate in a common language (their mother tongue or a lingua franca).

Conversely, also predominantly 'ethnic' nations have a connection to a homeland, a territory that is unique and 'ours', and they are what Miller calls communities of obligation: the members recognize duties to meet the basic needs and protect the interests of other members (1999: 83). We feel that we owe more to our fellow compatriots than we owe to foreigners, by virtue of our identification with the nation. This may have something to do with the conception of nations ('civic' and 'ethnic') as extended families with a history and a future.

Let me summarize: Change of national identity is possible, but not necessarily in one generation. Such changes require willingness on part of the individual, but they are as much dependent on the recognition of the others. Nations may be more or less open to outsiders, depending on what the contents of the national identity are. The sharp dichotomy between 'civic' and 'ethnic' nations in terms of inclusiveness is not very appropriate; there are degrees of inclusiveness within each category. Finally, most nations are mixed, and it is dubious whether pure civic nations are at all possible.
Conclusion

I think this discussion has shown the need to dissolve the fusing of concepts inherent in (some versions of) the dichotomy between a 'civic' and an 'ethnic' nation. The description of 'civic' nations as inclusive (open), voluntary and liberal and 'ethnic' nations as exclusive (closed), ascribed and authoritarian (or illiberal) is misleading. My main task has been to show that neither 'civic' nor 'ethnic' nations are very voluntary.

In my opinion, the only part of the dichotomy between a civic and an ethnic nation that has any merit is the aspect that concerns the contents of nationhood: The things that nations share apart from the feeling of belonging together. This distinction is a useful tool to describe variation, but it is more helpful to see 'civic' and 'ethnic' nations as the end points of a continuous scale than as a dichotomy, especially since the pure forms do not exist.

The distinction between 'civic' nations as 'voluntary' and 'ethnic' nations as 'ascribed' is misleading for two reasons. First, membership in nations is a matter of identification and mutual recognition more than individual choice. Once the nation is fully formed, the room for choice is quite limited for a majority. In the early stages of the nation-forming process, the room for choice is larger, both in terms of the proposed contents of the identity and in terms of individual choice between nation projects. Likewise, minorities and immigrants may choose between their original identity and (partly) adapting to the identity of a majority, but change of identity is never easy, and requires the recognition of the others.

Second, 'civic' nations are less voluntary, and 'ethnic' nations less ascribed than the dichotomy suggests. In both cases a nation-forming elite had to formulate what it meant to be a nation by pointing out the elements that supposedly unite the members, and in both cases, the membership criteria set limits for inclusion and thus for individual choice. Some 'civic' membership criteria may be as difficult to acquire as the 'ethnic' criteria (e.g. values).

The dichotomy between 'civic' identities as inclusive and 'ethnic' identities as exclusive is thus far too sharp. 'Civic' nations are not open to just anybody, and 'ethnic' nations are hardly ever a matter of genetic characteristics. No nation is completely open or closed to new members, and the degree of openness does not necessarily coincide with labels like 'civic' or 'ethnic'. Besides, we need to distinguish between the nationalist worldview (whether they describe nations as organic entities or voluntary associations) and reality here: Assimilation or integration into another nation is possible; the question is under what circumstances. Even a predominantly 'ethnic' nation will be more open to outsiders early in the nation-forming process than later, and nations with contested national identities may be more open than nations where the contents of nationhood are well defined. How open or closed a nation is, is an empirical question, not something that can be decided on the basis of a label.

The pertinent question is whether the distinction between a civic and an ethnic nation is a useful tool for research. With the usual connotations, I find the distinction more obscuring than really helpful. Stripped of connotations like inclusive/exclusive, voluntary/ascribed and liberal/authoritarian, however, it will in my view be a much better tool.
Notes

1 The term was coined by Leah Greenfeld (1992).

2 Not all typologies that distinguish between 'good' and 'bad' nationalism equate civic with good and ethnic with bad. Peter Alter (1989: 28) e.g. defines 'Risorgimento nationalism' as 'an emancipatory political force that accompanies the liberation both of new social strata within an existing, formerly absolutist western European state, and of a people that has grown conscious of itself in opposition to a transnational ruling power in East-Central Europe.' The Risorgimento category, which is here liberal, thus contains the French case (the standard example of civic nationalism) as well as the nations-from-below of Eastern Europe (examples of cultural or ethnic nationalism).

3 In fact, most of the predominantly ethnic national movements in the Habsburg empire were liberal, in the sense that national and democratic demands went hand in hand. And this makes eminent sense, since the extension of suffrage would benefit the politically and nationally underprivileged – e.g. the Czechs (Bakke 1999: 114).

4 There is still no scholarly agreement as to whether nations are artificial constructs or the outcome of historical processes, and whether they represent continuity or break with the past. See Bakke (1999: pp. 33 ff.) for my views on this.

5 According to A. D. Smith, ethnie share the following attributes: a collective proper name, a myth of common ancestry, shared historical memories, one or more differentiating elements of common culture, an association with a specific homeland and a sense of solidarity for significant sectors of the population (Smith 1991: 21).

6 The conception of the French language as an important part of French identity did not, of course, at the time correspond to any reality in terms of linguistic unity with the territory of France. There were five main spoken languages in the Middle Ages, with great variations within each language (see Johnson 1993: 41).

7 Today, historical Macedonia is divided between the states of Macedonia (Vardar Macedonia), Bulgaria (Pirin Macedonia), and Greece (Aegean Macedonia).

8 The total number of people who switched national affiliation from Magyar to Slovak between 1910 and 1930 cannot be ascertained precisely, but an educated guess is that it was under half a million and over 250,000 (Kowalská 1993; Bakke 1999: 130, 140, 307).

9 A stroll around the old part of the main cemetery in Prague is quite fascinating. Here the assimilation process can be read on the tombstones: The first two entries will be in German, then a Czech first name shows up, and the last generation is buried entirely in Czech.

10 This is a descent criterion camouflaged as a language criterion; whether you are fluent in Sami or not, is beside the point.

11 The Sami have been living in the north of Norway since before the state borders were established, and thus have the status of an aboriginal people. Whether they can be regarded as a nation, is another matter. It is quite obvious that a nation-forming process is going on, but there are still a large number of people who fill the membership criteria without defining themselves as Sami. Part of the problem is that most people in Finnmark (the northernmost county in Norway) are of mixed origin, due to longstanding contact between the Sami and
others groups (including Norwegians), combined with the Norwegian assimilation policy in the late 19th and early 20th century. This makes it difficult to choose between identities. For more on the Sami, see Stordahl (1997), Semb (2000), Skogerbø (2001).

12 The moment membership in the nation requires that not only you, but also your parents and grandparents must be born in the national homeland/territory of the nation-state, the conception of nationhood is no longer territorial, but genealogical.

References


