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Cultural-Ethnic and Political Identity

Summary: Against the backdrop of current debates around the concepts of “nation” and “nationalism” in Serbia, the paper analyzes cultural-ethnic and civic conception of the nation. After reconstructing these two models of understanding the “nation”, the author points to numerous difficulties arising from their one-sided application in complex socio-historical reality. The exclusively cultural-ethnic concept of the nation results in a mono-cultural, closed state, while the exclusively civic concept of the nation disregards the importance of cultural-ethnic affiliations in constituting political community. Attempts to reconcile these two opposed approaches, evident in various theories of multiculturalism, are discussed in the central part of the paper. Finally, three basic political and evaluative attitudes to national culture in today’s Serbia are identified. The first relies on the organic, cultural-ethnic concept of the nation, while the second calls for cultural Europeanization of Serbia and starts from the “civic” concept of the nation. The third attitude – “liberal-nationalist” – attempts to combine the former two, i.e. to defend cultural identity while cherishing political values and institutional models of contemporary Europe.

Key words: identity, nation, culture, civic concept of the nation, cultural-ethnic concept of the nation, multiculturalism

Our intellectuals are faced with a formidable task – to reproblematicize our attitude towards the world and particularly towards the West. This task also entails an extensive and tolerant debate about the problem of the relationship between civil and cultural-ethnic concepts of nation. In this regard, there is great confusion and hence great misunderstandings in our environment.

The proponents of the cultural-ethnic concept of nation often lose sight of the negative implications of its radical version. The link between the purely cultural-ethnic concept of the nation and the closed state is not only historical and contingent, but also conceptual. Here I think especially of the fact that immanent to this concept of nation is a monocultural state which, to be preserved as such, requires legal protection of its culture as its substantive basis. In other words, the state, which wishes to draw on the cultural and ethnic principle, has to pres-

ent its basic constitutional principles by using special cultural and ethnic terms. So, for example, if Serbia wishes to adhere strictly to cultural and ethnic principles as the principles of its state constitution, it must be defined exclusively as the state of the Serbian people, where only the Orthodox church is recognized and the like. Consequently, it would have to close itself formally to members of other ethnic groups, members of other religious groups and the like, and incorporate the mechanisms of public protection of its culture into its legislation. Hence isolationism forms part of the very concept of the state based on cultural and ethnic principles. It appears not as the result of a deviation from these principles but, on the contrary, as the result of a strict adherence to them. The ideal state of this type would be the Fichtean closed state.

It must also be noted that the state based on cultural and ethnic principles, in its pure form, is incompatible with the precedence of individual rights, because in such a state these rights are *pre-determined* by one's affiliation to a specified cultural and ethnic group. Therefore, the original right-holder is a specific cultural-ethnic group and not the individual, because the specific cultural-ethnic substance, as *conditio sine qua non* of a given state, cannot be left to something that is changeable, as is the case with individual will.

Thus, it follows that a radicalized version of the cultural-ethnic concept of state is absolutely incompatible with the civic concept and, thus, its orientation is anti-liberal and anti-Western. Such an orientation becomes evident if the principles, value systems and policies of the state based on such a concept are compared with the principles, value systems and policies of a purely liberal state. Insofar as the basic cohesive factors are concerned, the state based on radical cultural and ethnic principles insists on substantial unity being derived from pre-political relations (common origin, beliefs, customs, fate and the like): here the system of government is just a legal codification of this pre-political unity. By contrast, the unity of a purely civic state is based on consensus achieved by a specified group of individuals with respect to the system of government, whereby the cultural-ethnic origin of those individuals is irrelevant for the character of such a political community. Therefore, from the standpoint of a purely civic concept, the political sphere is regarded separately from the cultural and ethnic components, which are shifted to the private sphere, that is, the sphere of civil society. Under such a concept, the cohesive factors are the ethos of individual rights, constitutional patriotism, political culture and the like. As for the value system, the contrast between purely cultural-ethnic and purely civic states can be viewed as a contrast between particularism and universalism, ethnocentric collectivism and individualism, organic solidarity and competition, state religion and religion separated from the state, isolationism and openness and, on the level of political organization, as a contrast between centralized and minimal state, ideological control of society and free expression of interests, clientelism and equal opportunities, interventionism and *laissez faire*, etc.

On the other hand, bearing in mind the negative implications of institutionalization of a purely cultural-ethnic concept of nation, the proponents of the civic concept of nation tend to reject completely the relevance of the former for the constitution and survival of a modern state, thus easily disregarding any empirical evidence which is not in their favour. Namely, the countries dominated by a single cultural-ethnic pattern are more numerous, so that the members of the majority ethnic group can actually be favoured and the official calendar, rites and public ceremonies be under the influence of a specific ethnic or religious tradition. Therefore, it will gain such political support that will enable it to have privileged status in relation to other religions. Moreover, in a considerable number of multiethnic countries, cultural and ethnic criteria appear to be relevant for the political sphere, because political principles and institutions are adjusted to a greater or lesser degree to this multiethnic and multicultural composition of states, thus deviating from the principle of one person-one vote. Where this is not so, different minority cultural and ethnic groups may put forward their claims for public protection of their cultures or, more exactly, to be treated as political units to a degree. A more radical repoliticization of ethnicity was recorded not only in the countries of real socialism – whereby the Soviet, Czechoslovakian and Yugoslav citizens proved to be the least effective construct in comparison with other cultural-ethnic groups – but also in some countries with a long parliamentary tradition such as, for example, Canada and Britain. All this points to the relevance of the cultural-ethnic concept of nation for the political-state sphere which, if disregarded, may lead to an attempt to implement a purely civic concept of state (resting on an individualist paradigm), which would not be based on free consent of individuals, but on violence over their will.

A considerable number of our theoreticians present themselves simultaneously as the proponents of a radical civic option and maximalist multiculturalism. However, these two things are hardly compatible, because a radical civic concept of nation – as the concepts proceeding from the individual, irrespective of his or her cultural and ethnic affiliation – is neutral from a cultural-ethnic standpoint. On the other hand, multiculturalists revive the cultural-ethnic concept of nation to a greater or lesser degree, giving to cultural-ethnic groups the status that surpasses the status of a given group in civil society. Thus, they view these groups to a greater or lesser degree as political units, that is, as something relevant for the political sphere. This tension between purely civic nation and multiculturalism, which arises from their very concepts, becomes all the higher if multiculturalists are closer to maximalist variations, i.e. to the understanding of specific cultures as homogeneous identities, which implies a purely cultural-ethnic concept of nation. Namely, regardless of the extent to which multiculturalism attempts to find the best possible solutions for the co-existence of different cultures within a broader community, this co-existence – based on the assumptions of maximalist multiculturalism – becomes hardly attainable, since the concept of nation as purely cultural and ethnic identity, requires a monocultural state and not a multicultural one.

This tension between a purely civic concept of nation and multiculturalism can be illustrated by the example of the United States where the state and political elements are separated from cultural and ethnic ones. The proponents of the existing constitutional system of the American state – which is the closest to the ideal civic model – would certainly reject any demand that one's cultural-ethnic features exceed the limits of privacy of "civil society", since that would bring their existing state organization in question.

However, if the political demands of a cultural-ethnic group in one state, where cultural-ethnic identity is separated from political one, become really strong, because they are upheld by a great majority of members of that group, they cannot be completely ignored in the name of a purely civic principle, because that would actually imply repression over the will of the majority of members of that group. Therefore, insistence on the pure concept of civic state at all costs, regardless of the given historical context, may give rise – regardless of the motives of those who insist on it – to violence over reality, whose indicator is the freely expressed will of individuals. On the other hand, if the political demands of specified cultural-ethnic groups are satisfied, this implies a departure from purely civic principles unless, naturally, it is the question of maximalist demands aspiring to secession. In other words, such a contradiction can be overcome by incorporating the elements of the cultural-ethnic concept of nation into the civic one. The case of Quebec in Canada can serve as an empirical example.

It should also be noted that a prerequisite of modern democracy is the precedence of individual rights, which arise from the civic principle. Only by establishing the precedence of individual rights will it be possible to combine the elements of the cultural-ethnic and state-territorial concepts of nation, which is often practiced in modern democracies. So, they incorporate into their constitutions the articles that modify the purely civic principles, thus guaranteeing collective cultural rights, linguistic pluralism, cultural autonomy, as well as appropriate quotas for cultural groups by which the principle of one person-one vote is upgraded (a good example is the Spanish Constitution, which is a combination of civic and moderate multicultural concepts). The precedence of individual rights actually means that the original right-holder is the individual and not the group. In other words, collective rights are derived from the will of its members as individuals. Therefore, individuals cannot be forbidden to mix with other ethnic groups, come into contact with other cultures or leave their country if they wish. This means that, in principle, cultural-ethnic identity is not protected any more, since individual will is changeable.

In contrast to more moderate versions of multiculturalism, which are compatible with the civic concept of state, maximalist multiculturalism is not. It essentially proceeds on the assumption that cultures are homogeneous identities, which determine their members too rationally insofar as their choice of values is concerned and which, as pure particularities, require appropriate, particular, po-

litical and legal systems. In real fact, the final outcome of maximalist multiculturalism is a complete change of the logic of liberal-democratic model. Whereas the latter postulates the precedence of individual rights, the former must establish the precedence of collective ones. Whereas the civic concept attempts to establish the basic legal framework, which does not anticipate any particular concept of good so that any concept of good can be followed, maximalist multiculturalism must radically bring in question just that basic framework so as to acquire the status of public goods for different particular goods, that is, the goods of different cultural groups, whereby the neutral instance of common (national) goods in relation to particular goods takes, at best, the form of *modus vivendi*, which is the result of political compromises of different forms of ethnocentrism with respect to the fragile and unstable co-existence of different legal and political systems by which the goods of given cultural groups are codified. This brings to light the aspiration of this form of multiculturalism to transfer cultural and ethnic elements from the private sphere to the public one, thus reviving a purely cultural and ethnic concept of nation.

In fact, all three mentioned concepts of state are based on the appropriate understandings of culture. The starting point of maximalist pluralism is cultural pluralism of Herderian type, which tends to absolutize the difference among specific cultures or, in other words, to regard cultures as something that is *sui generis* or *causa sui*. The final implication of this approach is the introduction of the logic of holism into specified cultures and the states based thereupon. If cultures differ absolutely among themselves, then they cannot be treated as heterogeneous entities, but as entirely homogeneous ones, which gives rise to the demand for cultural uniformity of their members, since they would not have an opportunity to choose from among different cultural options. Thus, the absolutization of differences among cultures leads to the elimination of differences within them.

On the other hand, moderate multiculturalism views the difference among cultures as a difference that includes relation and interaction. Although it regards a particular culture as something that retains its specific features, it still treats it as an entity being open to external influences and, to a degree, heterogeneous.

A radicalized civic version brings in question the very notion of particular culture: according to it, that which is called "our culture" is not a homogeneous identity, but a mosaic of cultural fragments, which originate from different cultural sources, that is, different cultural traditions. Thus, the individual does not choose from among different options, which are offered by the basically identical cultural pattern, but from among combinations of different cultural fragments.

The last two approaches can make reference to empirical evidence and are compatible with a liberal-democratic state. However, the former is only a modern version of understanding nation in purely cultural and ethnic terms, which leads to self-apartheid and self-segregation.

In general, in our country there are three basic value and political systems insofar as the attitude towards national culture is concerned.

The first attempts to establish a new mythological cult – metaphysics and pathos of the past – instead of the former mythological cult of revolution, which insisted on a radical break with tradition. According to its interpretation, “a return to the roots” has direct normative force. It is actually a call for the reintegration of cultural-ethnic and political identity. Regardless of its radical anticommunist rhetoric, such discourse gives precedence to a collectivist pattern or, more exactly, intra-tribal organic solidarity over the logic of pluralism, based on the rationality of formal procedure. Behind this concept is the demand that we accept the ethnocentrist limits of our thinking and equate objectivity with an intersubjective consensus, which exists among the members of a tribal group. The discourse of this new tribalism must be anti-Western discourse: there can be no reconciliation between the life devoted to the pursuance of the common good, which has its roots in elevated Byzantine culture, and Western atomistic individualism, whose motto can be expressed by quoting Cioran: “I was never attracted by the souls that tie themselves to only one form of culture. Never take root anywhere, do not tie yourself to only one community, that was always my motto”. In contrast to St Sava’s view, the proponents of this concept hold that there is no bridge between Serbia rooted in Byzantium and the uprooted West.

The other value and political tendency attempts to reconcile that which is irreconcilable under the first concept: a return to the roots and integration into the modern world; traditional and modern constitutional patriotism; cultural and ethnic pride and pride in political, liberal-democratic culture of one’s own country. It proceeds on the assumption that the liberal legal framework is compatible with different cultural and value systems. Therefore, according to this interpretation, tradition has no direct normative force, but only symbolic one.

The third political and value concept – which treats “liberal nationalism” as “wooden iron” – advocates the view that Serbia cannot be modernized if it opens itself to Europe only in the narrow economic and political sense and not in a broad cultural sense as well.

It seems that the first, anti-western, tendency has already suffered a historical defeat. It remains to be seen which of the two will prevail. Both of them can be based on empirical evidence. Judging by the hitherto reaction of the electorate, it seems that social reality offers stronger resistance to the latter.

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Translated by V. Gligorijević