On the Significance of Culture Construction

of European Identity

Ying Wang

Department of English of the Party School of CPC Shandong Provincial Committee

Jinan 250021, Shandong, China

E-mail: wangying@sddx.gov.cn

Abstract

Being a part of the global integration tide, European Union is becoming the important member in the world of multi-political and multi-economical entity. It is not only the inevitable product of European politics, the economical, the security and the foreign policy development, moreover it has its deep thought background, that is the European identity which is affecting the European integration theory and the practice deeply, therefore has historical status in the European thought history.

Keywords: Significance, Culture construction, European identity

Nowadays, impetused by the global integration tide, European Union becomes the important member in the world of multi-political and multi-economical entity, it is the model of region economy and the political integration. After more than fifty years' development, the success of the European integration movement, from the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community in 1952, the establishment of the European single market in 1993, the circulation of the euro in 2002 up to the European Union's sixth enlargement in 2007, has attracted worldwide attention. The European union tendency gets further enlarge, not only is the inevitable product of European politics, the economical, the security and the foreign policy development, moreover it has its deep thought background. As the thought background of the European integration, the "European identity" is affecting the European integration theory and the practice deeply. It takes an idea formative year in the course of the European integration movement which has become the original thought and the forerunner of the movement, therefore has historical status in the European thought history.

In this thesis, European identity is defined as EU identity. We know that people may feel a sense of belonging to Europe, while they do not feel a sense of belonging to the EU. However, as an active European identity builder, the EU has successfully gotten identity hegemony in terms of defining what it means to belong to "Europe". EU membership has significant constitutive effects on European national identities. Nation-states in Europe now are accustomed to being defined as EU members, non-members, or would-be members. It is impossible that European nation-states can ignore the EU. In the context of EU eastward enlargement, central and eastern European states put forward the slogan "return to Europe", as if they were outside Europe. When Italy prepared itself to join the Euro zone, the main slogan was "entering Europe" as if Italy, one of the six founding members of the EU, had ever left it. In these contexts, Europe is used synonymously with the EU. Identifying with Europe signifies identifying with the EU. Therefore, we can say that European identity, to a great extent, is equal to EU identity.

Generally speaking, European identity is used in two ways: externally and internally. External identity appears to consist of a common approach amongst the member-states to their foreign relations It refers to a common security and defence policy. Internal identity refers to more cohesion and integration. To be more specific, it means European citizens' feelings of belonging to the EU based on their awareness about their common historical and cultural heritage and common values such as freedom, democracy, human rights, peace and prosperity.

The key feature of the process of identity construction is its artificial nature. In many ways, it is a process of community creation. Identities are culturally constructed. There is a clear correlation between culture and identity. Some theorists, such as Raymond Williams and E.P. Thompson, state that culture delivers identity, and that people determine their social position or identity by their culture.

Culture plays quite a significant role in the European integration process. As European integration moves forward, the

idea of "culture" becomes more and more important. The elites of the Community have noticed that if European citizens embrace a "European culture", opposition to further economic integration can be lessened, and public support for the integration project can be secured. According to the European Commission, the public are not sufficiently aware of their common cultural values and heritage. In order to remedy this deficiency, the Commission's 1988 communication on the "people's Europe" claimed that action is needed in the cultural sector to make people more aware of their European identity in anticipation of the creation of a European cultural area. Through its action in the cultural sphere, the EU hopes to instill some "European consciousness" into European people's minds so that they can identify closer with the EU.

From a historical and cultural perspective, Europe is a continent of conflicts and differences based on strong national feelings and the idea of one nation's supremacy over others. It demonstrates its diversity in such aspects as nationalities, languages, religions, traditions and even the structures of states. If we look back on the history of Europe, we may find there are indeed some shared historical and cultural heritages in Europe. And they serve as the foundations for the construction of a common European identity. We may say European identity is based on a common cultural heritage and a common historical experience, which allows for the establishment of a family of cultures. Further speaking, there is a common past to be based on for European identity in Europe, which includes the ancient Greek and Roman civilization, Christianity, the Renaissance, the Reformation, the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution.

The historical and cultural traditions of Europe can be traced back to ancient Greek times since Europeans can immediately feel a sense of homeland once they mention ancient Greece . The heroism and the notion of freedom in Homer's epics, the political theories and ethics in Plato and Aristotle's works; as well as the spirits of humanism and rationalism that go through the Greek civilization are all the inheritances left by the ancient Greek civilization. They have given a great impact on the later development of intellectual thought on European continent. The Romans conquered the Greece, but they did not destroy the precious Greek legacies. Because they knew that the Greeks enjoyed an artistic and intellectual inheritance much older and richer than their own, they respected this inheritance and tried to absorb and develop it. Along with the expansion of the Roman Empire's territory, the Greek civilization was accordingly brought to the whole western European continent. The ancient Greek-Roman civilization has been portrayed as the fountainhead of the European civilization. Without the foundations on the Hellenic culture and Roman Europe would not exist.

Christianity has taken a very important position in European history. After the Roman Empire collapsed, there was no central government to keep the order during the Middle Ages, it was the Church holding its supreme power that united Europe under the flag of Christianity. Christianity took the lead in politics, law, art and learning for hundreds of years. Because of its power and influence, almost everyone in Western Europe was a Christian in the late Medieval times. Christianity has been the major religion of the European continent for nearly two thousand years. Christianity and Christian values have had a remarkable impact on European politics and society, and they have influenced European people's life greatly.

The Renaissance was an intellectual, cultural and political movement that lasted from the end of the 14th to the middle 17th ' century. Greece It was a historical period in which the European humanist thinkers and scholars made attempts to get rid of conservatism in feudalist Europe and introduce new ideas that expressed the interests of the rising bourgeoisie, to lift the restrictions in all areas placed by the Roman church authorities. Europe came to be associated with the age of modernity through this process of rebirth.

The Reformation was a European religious movement and socio-political movement in the 16th century. In very simple terms, it could be seen as a call for the reform of the Roman Catholic Church, aiming at opposing the absolute authority of the Roman Catholic Church and replacing it with the absolute authority of the Bible. The Reformation led to the division of the western Christianity into Catholicism and Protestantism. It saved the declining Christianity and made the European people recover their belief in religion. The most important spiritual pillar of European people, therefore, was maintained. The Reformation brought to an end of the papal supremacy in Western Europe. This marked the beginning of a new relationship between European society and Christianity.

The Enlightenment was an intellectual movement in Europe and North America in the second half of the 18th century, with the aim to promote emancipation from superstition and irrationality through knowledge and understanding. Critical reason, human rights, democracy and government by the people have become major values uniting Europeans since that time. The scientific and sceptical spirit of the Enlightenment felt Europe to be superior to the other continents. In the process of fighting against their common enemies, Europeans gradually felt a kind of "European consciousness". By comparing with "others", Europeans realized their commonness. By the 18th century, Europe had already had a clear self-image.

Beginning with the invention of the steam engine, the Industrial Revolution which happened in the mid 18th ' century and 19th century rapidly change the face of Europe, and ushered in a new era. Although the Industrial Revolution of Europe was overtaken by that of America, the early experience of the Industrial Revolution was significant for the

formation of Europe's self-image. Industrialization generated the wealth, the technology and the military power which had made Europe a dominant position in the world for one and a half centuries.

We admit that the above-mentioned historical and cultural heritages, from the ancient Greek and Roman civilization through to the Industrial Revolution, have not touched all parts of Europe equally, but they are felt and experienced in varying degrees by those whose home is Europe and are recognized by many from outside. They have provided the foundations for the establishment of a common European identity.

Although economic prosperity and political stability were put on the forefront by the founding fathers of the EU, the EU cannot have economic and political objectives as its only aim. With the widening and deepening of the integration process, it is more and more obvious that without a strong psychological and cultural identification with the EU in the citizens' minds of different Member States, it is very hard for them to accept and support the further unification in the spheres of both economy and politics, since a great number of citizens still feel a greater emotional attachment to their countries or regions. The fact that the Constitution of EU was vetoed in France and Holland in 2005 can be taken as a good example to illustrate this point. What's more, the EU's six enlargements till now have brought the EU more cultures, more religions and more languages. In particular the participation of the fourteen central and eastern European countries has placed this weak European identity once more into crisis. The European continent, progressive

and confident in the past, appears uprooted and hesitant today.

In order to create an ever closer union among the peoples of Europe that was enshrined in the Treaty of Rome, the EU must go beyond its economic and political objectives and foster a coherent sense of identity and belonging in the hearts and minds of European people. So integration is not simply about the elimination of barriers to trade or the free movement of capital, goods and labour. Rather, it is primarily a humanistic enterprise involving a coming together among peoples of different national cultures. Jean Monnet, one of the Community's founding fathers, once states: "We are not forming coalitions between States but union among peoples." To sum up, a common European identity serves as a pivotal integrative factor in the process of European integration. It is fundamentally important to the maturity and stability of the EU if it is to become lastingly and peacefully integrated. Constructing a European identity, therefore, has become quite a significant and necessary task of the EU.

With the further development of European integration, the issue of a supranational European identity has attracted more and more attention. The existence of a common European identity is essential for the EU's legitimation. Without a common identity to bind Europeans of different countries together, the European polity cannot get the deep-rooted and long-term support which is required from its citizens. As Chris Shore says, defining identity does have its own functional significance in the EU, for "it is a tool for promoting the EC's political legitimacy as well as the goal of 'ever-closer union'". What's more, the formation of a stronger European identity can also help a stronger European Union emerge on the world scene and strengthen the EU's influence on the international affairs.

Historically, the establishment of nation-states went hand in hand with the establishment of national identities designed to replace existing regional and local ones. However, this does not fit the reality of the EU as a multi-level polity inherently different from nation-states. The European integration movement is based on a group of nation-states coming together to cooperate. European identity is, to a great degree, dependent on the membership of one of the European nation-states.

Nobody can become European without first acquiring a national identity. Preserving national identities is a precondition for the construction of a common European identity. Jacques Santer has used the analogy of an orchestra and its instruments to illustrate the relationship between European identity and various national identities: "Just as the orchestra depends on the constituting instruments, the European identity cannot do away with its constituting national identities. Rather, the European identity must find its roots in the differences and diversity of national identities." Roberta Guerrina also holds that "rather than focusing on unity and sameness, the only viable form of European identity is one that recognises and respects diversity and difference". In fact, the stress on Europe's essence is in its diversity, its complexity and its lack of conformity. Europe's diversity can be conceived as one of Europe's particular strengths, contributing to and even constituting Europe as a whole. It has promoted cross-fertilization of ideas and provided a succulent seedbed for the development of Europe. The city of Venice, the paintings of Rembrandt, the music of Beethoven or the plays of Shakespeare are an integral part of a common cultural heritage and are regarded as common property by the citizens of Europe. The European cultural identity, in the Parliament's words, is "the product of interaction between a civilization and a plurality of national, regional and local cultures". The EU has adopted "unity in diversity" as its official motto. This is not-empty rhetoric, but has found expression at the level of practice. Creating a set of European symbols and implementing cultural cooperation programmes and initiatives aim to foster a sense of European identity. But, these efforts are not to create European identity over and above existing national ones. On the contrary, they are designed to try to foster a sense of cultural unity on the basis of supporting and promoting cultural diversity. At first glance, this unity-in-diversity strategy may appear problematic, but in fact it does not. "On the one hand, the theme of unity stresses commonalities, yet does not represent an effort to replace national with European

identities. On the other hand, the theme of diversity points to differences which exist alongside, but do not obliterate, those commonalities." The "unity-in-diversity" strategy represents a reasonable one---perhaps the only reasonable one--- for the creation of a supranational European identity.

The EU has got some achievements in the establishment of a common European identity. More and more people of different Member States have more or less felt a sense of belonging to the EU. Compared with the strong national identity, however, European identity is still at a disadvantage. What's more, the participation of the fourteen central and eastern European countries has brought the EU more traditions, more religions and more languages, which makes the formation of European identity more difficult and complicated. Therefore the construction of European identity should be seen as a process rather than a short-term objective. It needs common and unremitting efforts of both EU's elites and public. It is believed that European identity can be "created", however, it is destined to take a long time. The project of creating a supranational European identity will go with the process of European integration all the time.

References

Chris Shore. (2000). *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration*. Routledge: London and New York, p.16.

Enrique Banus. (2002). "Cultural Policy in the EU and the European Identity" in Marry Farrell, Stetano Fella, and Michael Newman (eds.). *European Integration in the 21st Century: Unity in Diversity?* London: Sage Publications, p.164.

Heikki Mikkeli. (1998). *Europe as an Idea and an Identity*. New York: Palgrave, p.213.

Melissa Pantel, "Unity-in-Diversity: Cultural Policy and EU Legitimacy" in Thomas Banchoff and Mitchell P. Smith (eds). (1999). *Legitimacy and the European Union: The Contested Polity*. London: Routledge, p.52.