Analysis of the European Cultural Identity through EU Cultural Policy

Wang, Hongyu

Renmin University of China, Haidian Beijing, 100089, P. R. China

E-mail: hongyuruc@gmail.com

Abstract

The EU cultural policy created the ‘European Cities of Culture’ (ECC), which is a primary example of EU attempts at awakening European consciousness, while respecting the national cultures. This goes together with the realization of a collective identity that is the key of legitimization of the EU. European cultural identity is shaped by the EU in the process of ‘imagined community’ and EU cultural policy.

Key words: Cultural policy, European Union identity, constructivism
I. Introduction

The idea, identity, and consciousness of ‘Europe’ are stimulated by the development of European Union (EU) institutions. We emphasize the process of European cultural integration. In short, the EU stimulates the idea of ‘Europe’, as the foundation of an identity and an instrument of legitimization. In particular, this is given shape in the European cultural policy, which was conceived as an instrument to build a cultural identity for the European Union. Among the symbolic initiatives of the EU, the European City of Culture (ECC) is gaining success. It is an intergovernmental action established in 1983 and started in 1985. The European Council selected one city for the title each year until 1999. The ECC is an example of the attempts at awakening a European consciousness, while respecting the contents of national and local cultures. These measures are considerations of the role of the symbolic dimension in the construction and legitimization of social reality (Macdonald, 1993). We should try to grasp the specificity of the symbols and of their use. EU wants to create European cultural identities in contemporary processes.

II. European Cultural Identity – A Short Review

A new wave of studies on Europe is the identification which related to an earlier wave of studies on the idea of Europe that attracted many scholars, especially historians, after World War II, when negotiations on the European Coal and Steel Community were also taking place. Therefore, in order to account for the visions of Europe in terms of cultural identity emerging from the recent literature, it is important to consider current models of European integration—federalism and (neo)functionalism6— as well as in the critique of both, and discourses about the European cultural identity. On the one hand, the common version of the opposition between federalism and neo-functionalism sees federalism as relying on radical political integration to create from the start a supra-national structure. On the other hand, in European studies under the label of neo-functionalism, approaches are classified claiming that political unification can only be the effect of gradual economic integration, thanks to the so-called ‘spill-over’ effect. As neo-functionalism, the only one to be translated into a concrete dominant politics has shown its inner limits both at the theoretical and practical level. A third model yet to be constructed works on the critique and synthesis of the previous two, while claiming to be founded on culture. This scheme provides a grid to understand how Europe is being characterized by the unity of European culture, by unity in diversity. As we shall see, that is not only dominant in recent scholarly approaches, but also, perhaps not surprisingly after these premises, in official EU discourses and policies, including the ECC.

Unity

Federalism was inspired by the belief in a deep, rooted unity and a common destiny. Something called the European spirit, which is based on the legacy of Hellenic rationality and beauty, Roman law and institutions and ethics (with an eye to modern renaissances of those ancient legacies): freedom, civilization, democracy and science. Modernity itself is referred to as a metaphor of Europe. Federalism was never really translated into a direct strategy towards integration, and this still seems out of question today, yet the underlying belief in the depth unity of European cultural identity that informs federalism is far from extinguished, even if it is expressed more as a wish or a challenge than as a. Certainly this perspective is not the dominant one; however, it is still significant. Critiques are varied, their main argument is normally that to choose a core European tradition results in an arbitrary, ideological, selection towards the inside and an imperialist, Euro-centric vision of the world towards the outside. If the simple version of this approach is not defensible in the contemporary intellectual field, recent ideas of cultural globalization theory applied to Europe sustain a renewed version of it. Advanced capitalism brings about unifying processes that not only globalize the scope of capitalist economy but also finally make the world a global village, in which allegiances have cosmopolitan character. According to this version, culture needs to be standardized and universalized to keep up with the increasing complexity and global scale of the social structure, as it once was for the nation-state. The unity of European culture is not so much seen in past and myth, as the result of an ‘objective’ acting of Europe, is a singular subject in the future.

Diversity

A radical critique of the old unity, as of the new version of European cultural identity, is at the heart of the approach stressing its diversity. For this approach, there is no such thing as a European culture; there are instead many European cultures and identities. With respect to those that focus on the unity of European culture, this approach is more – so to speak – minimalist and therefore has a ‘family resemblance’ to neo-functionalism. As in neo-functionalism, ‘technical’ solutions acknowledging the plurality of European traditions are seen as the only possible Europe. Europe should be, above all, a kind of institutional shelter to protect, valorize and diffuse knowledge about European cultures. Culture cannot be the ‘glue’ of European integration, on the contrary, the idea of a European identity is sometimes presented as detrimental because it would endanger the cultural multiplicity indicated as the key feature.

H. Wang
of Europe. Or, in other words, there can only be a European identity if it is civic – based on a ‘social contract’ (not cultural – based on a shared tradition). However, it is possible to critically point out that this neutrality ends where the question of what to count as a pre-political shared tradition and what to include in the civic community emerges: the problem of the first approach is only displaced. National identity as the standard of a cultural community is the usual assumption, but one that can more easily encounter criticism, as suggested by the literature on the constructed character of the nation itself. In this respect it is relevant to note that, as the renewed version of Europe as unity stresses cultural globalization, a renewed version of Europe as diversity responds to it stressing the recent phenomena of nationalist or ethnic recurvescence.

**Unity in Diversity**

Both focus on Europe as diversity and Europe as unity lead to an impasse. New localisms and globalization can both be seen as characterizing, if contradictory, features of our world and demand an approach able to consider them together. If we espouse cultural globalization, what is specifically European, as opposed to cosmopolitan? Why should the national level be the atom of analysis when smaller allegiances are emerging? Both the approaches described above are prone to criticism of realism, as they tend not to question their categories. Moreover, the neo-functionalist reaction to the essentialist language of federalism is based on a vision of individuals as totally rational, interest-oriented beings, thus failing to understand precisely questions of identity as background for the creation of interests. A third model is emerging from a combined critique. This claims that both Europe as unity and as diversity is true and false simultaneously; and thus European cultural identity can be seen as unity in diversity. Edgar Morin, in his much quoted Penser l’Europe (1987), states that the unity of Europe, as well as its uniqueness, lies in its dialogic nature, that is the combination of differences without homogenizing them, making of this attitude towards difference the expression of unity. Here difference is the value. It is not only the basis for cooperation, but also a cultural feature itself. Seen above all as a community of destiny, the European dimension is conceived as a mediating instance between the global scale and local allegiances. They are no longer seen as opposite phenomena, but as the expression of the complexity of the modern world, in which different layers of allegiance constitute what is often called the multiple identity of the contemporary subject.

The ambiguity of this ‘solution’ is the major subject of critique. If it is true that the available cultural identities are nowadays multiple, it is also true that just to name them is not an explanation, and that there is no guarantee that they will be harmoniously nested either. Indeed, often the concept of multiple identities remains optimistically indifferent. The ‘unit as multiplex’ has thus been criticized as a formal solution with no substance, a superficial if successful motto that can easily fall into a new version of Eurocentric triumphalism.

### III. Cultural Identity and Cultural Policy in the EU

Despite being criticized, this formal solution is today’s dominant not only in academic studies but also in official EU discourse. In particular, this emerges with the recently introduced cultural policy of the EU. Article 128 of the Treaty on European Union signed in 1992 in Maastricht (now 151 in the amended Treaty of Amsterdam) states, ‘The Community shall contribute to the flowering of the cultures of the Member States, while respecting their national and regional diversity and at the same time bringing the common cultural heritage to the fore’. Culture is seen as a rather static and bounded whole that lies at the basis of the formation of identity, however, without being exclusively connected to a particular community, in particular to a national one, even if protestation is made in that sense, as a more classical ‘anthropological’ concept of culture would suggest. Therefore, the assumption is that if the corpus of European culture is sufficiently promoted and protected, a European consciousness will emerge naturally. This emphasis on the role of culture in the construction of community makes more obvious the contradiction that affects all cultural policies: promoting the spontaneous flowering of culture, using culture as a legitimizing tool while claiming that culture deserves to be safeguarded as the highest product of human activity, thus as an end in itself. Moreover, the EU has to deal with another sensitive issue, that of fostering the common European heritage without provoking the reaction of national or local cultures (that is, of the much older respective institutions).

The familiarity of EU discourse with concepts of the social sciences proves useful here, as shown by the ability to adopt the complex discourse of ‘unity in diversity’, recently also chosen as the official motto of the EU. The major consequence of this is that the EU has been able to avoid filling in the idea of the European cultural corpus with specific elements. If for academic studies a blurred, formal concept of culture immediately stands as a matter of critique, the EU argues that an institution cannot define a concept such as culture. It should instead approach the question in a pragmatic way, in the limits of what is formally present in official texts and policies, as if pragmatic meant neutral, a legacy of the neo-functionalists technical approach. Such a claim is bound to generate the critiques that try to prevent. It is in particular in the work of Cris Shore that a
The analysis of the European Cities of Culture (ECC) in 2000 suggests that the EU, as an instrument of critique by scholars, is not just sponsoring single actions (e.g., exchange programs), but instead fosters patterns of European culture. This excludes a priori the possibility of conflict, all the more so as culture is considered only for its European dimension, forgetting that which divides a nation, a region from another. Moreover, the discourse of unity in diversity is seen as a rhetorical sabotage to hide effectively centralizing, still failing to give a definite content to its abstract slogans (Shore, 2000).

Along that line of thought the critique can be even more radical, as the ambiguity of the content reinforces, so to speak, the exact reproduction of the form. In creating a style of thought, institutions not only frame the reality they control, but also set the limit and the style within which ‘resistance’ will be possible. However, this suggests also that a slightly different perspective can be taken. If the assumptions hidden in mottoes such as ‘unity in diversity’ are analyzed, it should not be presupposed that they simply trickle down to ‘Europeans’; it should instead be remarked that their ambiguity does allow for different, contrasting uses. The ambiguity of EU discourse about cultural identity and about the very meaning of ‘Europe’ is not per se a flaw, but an element to be schematized. Before struggling to define the elements of a European identity, we should consider the type of means employed in creating such an identity, not so much because we want to evaluate their effects, but more importantly because they are clues to the type of identity they are addressing. Especially when considering an emerging social identity, it is crucial to address the means deployed to build it. It is from this perspective that the following analysis of the European Cities of Culture in the year 2000 takes off.

IV. Conclusion

This connotation of Europe could be a sign of a surreptitious European integration, via the diffusion into everyday life of EU symbols, whose relevance is both difficult to measure and contentious (Shore, 2000: 227–30). The perspective of this article cannot provide a solution to that debate, but tries to look at it from a different angle: not to measure the actual diffusion and practical efficacy of such a European identity, but to consider its nature, as suggested by the means deployed to create it. The EU’s scarce reach on substantial matters of cultural identity (e.g., education instead of just exchange programs, managing cultural heritage instead of just sponsoring single actions) is often both complained about by the EU, and used as an instrument of critique by scholars.

The analysis of the ECC 2000 suggests that the content ambiguity of symbolic actions of the EU is strictly connected to the exact, ritual repetition of their formulae. Ambiguity thus does not mean confusion or weakness. However, its peculiarity (and its flaw as an ideological instrument) lies in that it can work for opposite ends. What ‘Europe’ actually is remains contentious and its positive connotation can sustain both its conflation with the EU and a critique of the same. Indeed, this is borne out by my fieldwork. What Stephen Swedberg noted about how ‘Europe’ functions in the recent literature on the European idea seems relevant here: its very name becomes a kind of fetish, highlighted whenever it appears, traced back from the origin of history, juxtaposing ancient myths and modern institutions, geographical areas and utopian movements. ‘Europe’ works as a community-creating symbol of a type that recalls Durkheim’s analysis of the totem, a symbol that is itself part of the sacred it represents. Needless to say, the notion of totem-like symbol has to be used as a heuristic tool and to question the process of imagining a community in the specific contemporary context. What seems to be in question today is not only the shift from a cultural allegiance to another, but a questioning of the very meaning of allegiance through culture and, therefore, of the analytical instruments we use to interpret it. The EU is not inventing the language of unity in diversity in a void, trying to inculcate people with it. On the contrary, as we have seen when reviewing the literature on European cultural identity, the EU appropriates discourse most suitable to the type of multiple identities that is the more likely to accept a European ‘layer’ of allegiance. If the analysis of discourses about multiple identities – or, in EU rhetoric, unity in diversity – need not to be as fleeting and superficial as they claim the reality described is, an essentialist language of identity than can only see imagined communities as false and weak, often implying a nostalgic look at deeper forms of belonging, is also to be avoided. Both would prevent a serious consideration of what is currently under construction in the European context.

V. References


1 These studies, that flourished from the end of the Second World War to the early 1960s, have invented a genre and possibly an object of study, even if it is precisely in them that we find emphasis on the mythological and ancient roots of ‘Europe’.
The term neo-functionalism has been legitimized by use in European studies and political thought, however, it can be quite confusing, especially for a sociological audience, for which it evokes an altogether different approach. In European integration studies, neo-functionalism is the definition usually attributed to E. Haas’s revision of an earlier functionalist approach by D. Mitrany, similarly based on the concept of functional spill-over Haas, 1958).

This is made possible by a vision of culture mainly in terms of high culture: the arts, architecture, literature; in short, cultural heritage. According to a common scheme, this is mainly contrasted to the vision of culture as ‘way of life’, that is values, customs, ideas, politics, etc. It is in this second meaning that culture is the defining feature of a community, while the products of high culture tend to claim a universal value. A contradiction thus emerges in the EU use of the concept of culture, as the emphasis on high culture is functional to the overcoming of national cultural boundaries, but becomes a weakness when applied to the construction of a new.