Feature Article 【專題論文】

European Identity:
Traditions, Constructions, and Beliefs
歐洲認同：
傳統、建構與信仰

Wilfried LOTH[*]

---

* Professor of Modern and Contemporary History, University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany.

Abstract

In order to evade the traps of ideological descriptions of identity, this contribution will look at European identity from a historical perspective. I will argue that European identity is based on a succession of numerous historical layers. However, these do not apply geographically, and, therefore, it is impossible to write a continuous history of the evolution of European identity. Yet, the layers constitute a cultural context, which the shaping of community in Europe could be built on. For the European identity of present times, the decisive experience was contrast between the traditions of Christianity and Enlightenment and the catastrophes of the 20th century. By working on the prevention of such catastrophes Europeans are confirming their identity.

摘要

為了避免在描述認同時受意識形態所限,本文從歷史的視野觀察歐洲人的認同。我將論證歐洲人的認同乃是築基於無數相互接續的歷史層疊之上。然而,這些歷史層疊在地理學上並不適用,因此,不可能寫出一部具連續性的歐洲認同演變史。儘管如此,這些層疊建構出一個文化脈絡,而歐洲共同體的成形可能即是建立於此之上。就當代歐洲人的認同而言,最重要的經驗即是基督宗教及啟蒙思想傳統與二十世紀所發生的大災難之間的對比。歐洲人正經由致力於避免此類的大災難再度發生,以鞏固其認同。

What is European identity? Given the plurality in the everyday life and culture of the Europeans, given the fragmentation of European borders, and given the overwhelming wealth of literature on European identity, this question is not easy to answer. Characterizations of identity never outline the whole, usually tend toward stylisation, and, in disassociation from other identities, tend to overemphasize contradictions at the expense of common traits. At the same time, they often serve as a political platform: They are not only formulated to show how things are but also to express how they should be, formulated by intellectuals acting in their favourite role as the makers of myths.

In order to evade these traps of ideologizing descriptions of identity, it is advisable to look at identities from a historical perspective, using the instruments of critical historical research. We are what we have become; and thus, insights into the particularities of a certain identity are more easily gained by examining the historical developments that influenced them, shaped them, and determined their institutions, social rules and cultural ideas as well as ways of thinking and behaving.

It can be said of European identity that it is based on a succession of numerous historical layers. However, these do not apply geographically, and, therefore, it is impossible to write a continuous history of the evolution of European identity. Yet, the layers constitute a cultural context, which the shaping of community in Europe was able to build upon.

This cultural context begins with the ancient Near East, where essential bases of our modern culture emerged – state, religion, science, writing, military, and war. Much of this still shapes our everyday life: The alphabet, the manner in which we organize time, currency and the organization of money, talk about the part of town we live in, technical innovations such as glass and the construction of bridges, cultural inventions such as church music and militarism. As with most other civilizations, one cannot imagine European civilization without the

foundation provided by the first advanced civilizations; for a long time it has been part of a cultural context once centred in the ancient Near East.

From the ancient world, European culture took over the idea of the *polis* of free and equal citizens who make joint decisions and appoint officials for agreed upon terms, the idea of finding the truth by engaging in dialogue, accepting the strength of arguments as well as the necessity of scientific autonomy. Further, the expansion of the *Imperium Romanum* and the Roman language imparted the rationality of Roman law, and finally, the orientation towards a concept of education based on the arts, the "*studia humanitatis*," which can essentially be traced back to Cicero and stems from the pragmatic orientation of Roman culture.

In Western Roman medieval times, which achieved a certain uniformity in matters of civilization at the beginning of the 12th century, enlisting these foundations helped to develop a principle of structure which up to now has shaped European culture more than everything else: The often-cited principle of unity based on variety. Although it has degenerated into an empty phrase owing to its frequent application, this principle actually does make a fundamental contribution toward explaining European successes and characterizing European identity. Here on the one hand, Christianity worked institutionally to ensure the preservation of the Greco-Roman tradition despite many ruptures in that tradition. On the other hand, it also functioned as a catalyst: The personal relationship posited by Christianity between the creator and each of his creatures accentuated and universalized the idea of the freedom of the individual; the concept of Christendom as an earthly community of believers served to bind together the resulting diversity into an overarching unity.

Unity based on variety at first characterized the form of the constitution of European states: There always were numerous kingdoms despite many imperialistic schemes. The constant competition among the individual states for

increased prestige never led to their unification in a universal empire; yet the competitors always remained united in their knowledge of belonging to universal Christendom.

Unity based on variety also resulted from the separation of ecclesiastical and secular power, of *regnum* and *sacerdotium*, which remained reciprocally dependent on each other and, therefore, limited each other's power. Emperors and kings required transcendental legitimacy, which could, however, always be withdrawn; popes and bishops depended on secular power, which they could never count on incontestably. This both supported the competition of states as well as the organization of the church based on the principles of ranked participation and presentation. The pope had to contend with councils, the bishops with synods.

From this competition among individual states there followed what have often been considered elements of the "modern" state: The emergence of the idea of sovereignty, the progressive intensification and rationalization of statehood, that is, the emergence of the institutional state with a rationally organized administration; and finally the idea of legislation with the concept of law being defined in writing and through a formal constitution.

Secondly, closely connected to the rise of the state are vassalage and alliance (*conjurationes*), meaning respectively treaties between unequals and treaties between equals. Vassalage led to the establishment of the dualism of king and parliament, and thus to the principles of representation and of governmental procedures in accordance with law, to the individual's legal security, and his or her protection from acts of despotism. The idea of *conjuratio*, of course, made voluntary alliances possible, which were productive because of their marked distance from the state: This applies to the merchant and craft guilds as well as to communities and their confederates, as it does to the occidental university with its right of co-optation and its autonomy in formulating statutes. Co- operatives,

clubs, associations, parties, and trade unions are modern results of this principle of organization.

It can easily be seen that Europe's successes in the modern age are based on these structural principles:

■ Religious schism added an essential dimension to the fundamental pluralism of Western culture that paved the way for the expansion of enlightenment, rationalism, and modern science.

■ The competition between states and lordships promoted the development of modern technology. Scientists, philosophers, and reformers – who in Europe like everywhere else in the world were chased away because their rulers feared change – at the same time always found shelter in other countries – usually because their rulers hoped to gain advantages over rivals. The role of the Huguenots in Prussia is a prominent example.

■ In combination with the relativization of overlordship through representation, the competition of states as well as the communities and universities – all committed to the same concept of civilization – offered good prerequisites for the development of modern movements of emancipation, which aimed at participation or social advance. This is what democracy and the modern welfare state are based upon.

The significance of Christianity for the emergence of these structural characteristics becomes clear when comparing the development of Christian-influenced European scholarship with Islamic writing and Islamic thought. Islam did embrace numerous elements of Greek philosophy and science, as well as

useful components of Roman jurisprudence and statecraft. Yet it did so eclectically: Individual examples of Greek and Roman learning were selectively translated into Arabic and then embedded in the pre-existing scholarly structure. Conversely, in late antiquity and the middle ages in Europe, ancient writings were absorbed first in Latin and subsequently in Greek as well. Christian learning is indissolubly linked with the traditions of antiquity. For example, patristic literature drew on the tradition of Platonism and Neo-Platonism, while Thomism extended the Aristotelian tradition. The ethics and anthropology of antiquity were so thoroughly incorporated into Christian thought that the writings of the late stoa – aside from a lack of reference to God – read like Christian treatises.

In this way, the Greek and Roman spirit remained alive in Christian Europe. The jolt to the Christian worldview caused by nominalism and astronomy was all that was necessary to inspire the revival of the ancient tradition as an influential historical force in the form of humanism and the Renaissance. The authors who led these movements sought emancipation from medieval dogmatism by drawing upon the fullness of ancient thought. Gassendi restored Epicurus to his proper place vis-à-vis Aristotle, Giordano Bruni rehabilitated Plato, Machiavelli mined Roman treatises. This Renaissance of ancient thought (which gives the epoch its name) prepared the way for the European Enlightenment, which gave rise to an extraordinary dynamic in Europe: A flowering of the sciences and the emergence of a European university landscape, a transformation of the bases of political sovereignty in the American and French Revolutions, and the eventual victory of the urban middle classes as well as the Industrial Revolution.

Humanism and the Enlightenment thus stand at the centre of the self-understanding of Europeans today. The drawbacks of rationality in planning, progress based on division of labour, and technical efficiency are not usually ignored – after all, it was the immense possibilities of accumulation and misuse of power that turned European history into a chain of catastrophes over the past two centuries: However, there seems to be fundamental consent among European

societies (and this has to be formulated with some care) to use the instruments provided by European culture to prevent a repetition of such catastrophes. Mass death during both world wars, the Stalinist terror, and above all the Holocaust were traumatic experiences which gave rise to doubts as to the viability of European culture and shattered the Europeans' sense of self-assurance. Simultaneously, however, it also awakened a broad need for catharsis, renewal, and a joint restructuring of a European civilization.

At this juncture, I should say that identities are not supplied by characteristics alone, but also by experiences and their interpretation. The emphasis has been on long term influences up to this point, but experiences must now be accounted for. The closer they are to the present, the weightier they are. Thus, it should not be a surprise when I assert that the Europeans' contemporary identity has primarily been determined by the contrast between European traditions in the form of Christianity and the Enlightenment on the one hand and the catastrophes of the twentieth century on the other. Not all Europeans experienced these catastrophes with the same intensity, and they were not processed to the same extent at the same time. They were nevertheless shared experiences interpreted in the context of shared traditions, and given that the European countries have shared an inescapable common fate since the Second World War at the latest, they became shared experiences in the European psyche.

This explains why we today in all European countries share a fundamental consensus on the orientation of values, one which ought to guide joint action. "Freedom as a means to overcome despotism; individual self-determination within the framework and the possibilities of collective social movements; unrestricted, unbounded thinking as a basic model of inter-subjective discourse; openness as a ubiquitous principle of communication" – formulated like this or in a similar way structural principles of European society can in any case count on broad approval. There should also be broad consent that they rank higher than

some particular national value or achievement. Orientation on these principles was and is bound up with the idea of European unification.

Central to the understanding of the European Union and its dynamics is the realization that it arose in resistance to the National Socialist domination of Europe. Key motives of the unification movement were the restoration and safeguarding of democracy in Europe, the preservation of peace and the self-assertion of the European nations; despite numerous disruptions, these motives led to the establishment of the European Community and, finally, were also decisive for the development of that Community into today's "EU 27." Not all Europeans shared or share the conviction that the achievement of these goals necessitates an indissoluble connection among European states. To that extent, commitment to a united Europe does not constitute an element of the central core of today's European identity. Yet, it can be seen that efforts to deal with the recent past also promote identification with the European Union.

Since the middle of the 1980s, the European Community has been understood more and more as a community of values committed to pluralism and democratic freedoms, the rule of law, human rights, and the protection of minorities. To that extent, a common constitutional inheritance arose from the discussions of recent decades and has resulted in a constitutional patriotism on the European level. This European patriotism, which expresses commitment to a system of values rather than being based on an emotional affinity, is compatible with national patriotism. In times of dynamic change as in present times, it even contributes to stabilizing national patriotisms, informed as they are by different historical experiences, different languages, and different cultures. In this regard, one can certainly speak of European identity in the singular. This is certainly not a particularistic conception of identity but instead a universal one which respects national identities and national achievements.

In the foreseeable future at least, the European project will not lead to the demise of nation-states. Rather, that project is the prerequisite for their survival, which, however, can only be survival in a changed form and with more limited functions. As far as we can anticipate, European identity will therefore not simply replace national identities. Instead, it becomes apparent that people in Europe live with a multi-layered identity, one that combines regional, national, and European elements. This is made clear on a regular basis when Eurobarometer surveys ask citizens of the Union about their self-understanding. In 2006, forty-one percent of the citizens of the EU 25 identified solely with their nation. Some fifty percent, however, saw themselves as members of a European nation and simultaneously as Europeans as well. Six percent regarded themselves as above all Europeans and only secondarily as members of a nation. Three percent saw themselves as exclusively European.

In principle, the questions of whether and for how long national identity can claim the power to create stronger bonds than European identity have to remain unanswered. There is no plausible proof for the claim that the nation-state *alone* has the ability to bind together society's forces strongly. As the priority of European values and the increasing transnationality of lifestyles show, empirical findings are already pointing in a different direction. With both the expansion of shared tasks and the democratization of European politics, the shared traits of the Europeans will undoubtedly show themselves more prominently.♦

♦ Responsible editor: Yeh-ming Chin (金葉明).

Bibliography

Tullio-Altan, Carlo
    1995   *Italia: una nazione senza religione civile. Le ragioni di una democrazia incompiuta* (Udine: Istituto editoriale veneto friulano, 1995)

Bitsch, Marie-Thérèse, Wilfried Loth and Raymond Poidevin (eds.)
    1998   *Institutions européennes et identités européennes* (Bruxelles: Bruylant, 1998)

Bluche, Lorraine, Veronika Lipphardt and Kiran Klaus Patel (eds.)
    2009   *Der Europäer – ein Konstrukt* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009)

Checkel, Jeffrey T. And Peter J. Katzenstein (eds.)
    2009   *European Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridte University Press, 2009)

Elm, Ralf (ed.)
    2002   *Europäische Identität: Paradigmen und Methodenfragen* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2002)

Joas, Hans and Klaus Wiegandt (eds.)
    2005   *Die kulturellen Werte Europas* (Frankfurt/Main: Fischer Taschenbuch Verlag, 2005)

Loth, Wilfried (ed.)
    2009   *Europa: Geschichte und Kultur* (Essen: Unikate Universität Duisburg-Essen, 2009)

Nida-Rümelin, Julian and Werner Weidenfeld (eds.)
    2007   *Europäische Identität: Voraussetzungen und Strategien* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2007)

Schmale, Wolfgang
    2008   *Geschichte und Zukunft der Europäischen Identität* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2008)