

Study on European Union Integration from a Constructivism Perspective

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Abstract: *Since the end of the cold war, the accelerated pace of globalization has brought countries closer together, and the common requirement to safeguard global interests and solve global problems has provided the conditions for the creation of a public platform to international dialogue and cooperation. As an important means of international cooperation, international organizations play an irreplaceable role and have become one of the key actors in the international community. Parsing with the concept of constructivism identity breaks from the limitations of traditional international relations theories which emphasize the role of material or external factors, also brings a new explanatory path to the study of international organizations. Social constructivism represented by Alexander Wendt believes that interaction contributes to the formation of a collective identity of the European Union, which in turn confers interests on actors, generating correspond actions under the norms of interests. Now simply rely on functionalism is no longer sufficient to promote European integration to a deeper level, a reconstruction based on identity and cognition is needed to create a general sense of identity and belonging, to build a supranational European collective identity.*

Keywords: *Constructivism; European Union; Collective Identity; Integration*

1. Introduction

The sudden and peaceful end of the Cold War has weakened the explanatory power of the two dominant theoretical paradigms, neorealism and neoliberalism, meanwhile emphasized the broad vision and deep insight of constructivism in observing the world. Constructivism theory in the field of international relations emerged in the 1990s, it has derived into branches of moderate constructivism, conventional constructivism and radical constructivism after a period of development. Among which the moderate constructivism represented by Alexander Wendt, has been the most influential, and it establishes a middle path between rationalism and reflexivism. Although the branches of constructivism have different theoretical claims on certain issues, they all take the three core concepts as the basis for the establishment of the theoretical framework, norms, identity and culture[1].

2. Wendt's Constructivist Theory

In 1999, Alexander Wendt comprehensively elaborated his theory of social constructivism from a perspective different from rationalism in his masterpiece *The Social Theory of International Politics*. Explaining the group-activated nature of states, culture of anarchy and the process of structural change, which has propelled constructivism become a major theoretical paradigm of international relations. Emphasizing the significance of concepts, Wendt's theory of social constructivism takes holism as its methodological foundation, conceptualism as its ontological foundation and scientific positivism as its epistemological foundation, analyze in depth the role of international system in the construction of national identity and interests.

2.1. Basic Structure and Principles

Wendt's social constructivism takes conceptualism and holism as its basic structure. The constructive relationship between material conditions, interests and perceptions constitutes the overall structure, with perceptions being the decisive variable, and in the international community, "perceptions determine identities, identities determine interests, and interests determine behaviors" is the logic of inter-State interaction. Thus, structure of the international system is essentially a structure of

perception, constituted by the shared perceptions of the actors, and the most fundamental element contained in the structure is shared knowledge. Shared knowledge is the understanding and expectations that actors share in a particular social environment, such as norms, institutions, ideologies, laws, etc. International cooperation is based on shared perceptions, but whether and how long it lasts does not depend on how much shared knowledge is available, but on what that shared knowledge actually is.

Wendt's social constructionism includes two main principles, anti-rationalism and anti-materialism. Wendt against rationalism, which is dominant in international relations theory, emphasizes subjective cognition, arguing that the structure of world politics is social rather than merely material, and the identities and interests of actors are not given and static, but rather are constructed in a process of socialization, whereby changes in the modes and logic of interaction lead to changes in identities and interests. Sociality is contained in the material attributes of international structures, in particular the changes in identities[2] and the socialization of actors in the process of their interactions. Thus towards a view of international relations as a social relationship.

2.2. The Three Cultures of Anarchy

In his book *Anarchy is State-Made*, Wendt suggests that anarchy is not a given, unchanging international political condition, as rationalist theory suggests, but rather an outcome of the interaction of state actors[3]. States acquire shared perceptions in the course of their interactions, and these shared perceptions constitute the attributes of anarchy. Different logics of interaction produce different cultures, and based on this, Wendt proposes three cultures of anarchy. The Hobbesian culture defines the relationship between the self and the other as hostile, implying a zero-sum game relationship between states, which are prefer to rely on military competition rather than cooperation to ensure their respective survival. The Lockean culture defines the state's role structure as a competitive relationship, with a considerably less critical sense of state security and survival than the Hobbesian culture, and the possibility of corresponding cooperation, in addition to engaging in competition. The Kantian culture defines the structure of roles as friendships, the State is guided by the principles of non-violence and mutual assistance, and the goal of action is to pursue a collective security of "all for one and one for all", which in turn gives rise to a genuine collective identity. Anarchy in the international community can be constructed, and in the three cultures of anarchy described above, different constructions of actors' identities bring about distinctly different positioning of national interests, which in turn leads to the implementation of actions based on the actors' identities and interests

2.3. Identity Theory

Wendt believes that identity should receive primary attention as an attribute of an intentional actor, and that only after the identity of the actor has been established can the actor's interests be defined, and it is within the specification of the interests that the corresponding actions can be generated[4]. A single element of materiality does not explain all the behaviour of actors, whose identification and awareness of interests is realized only in the process of interaction with other States, which is culturally constituted and must be placed within the framework of the concept of identity. Qin Yaqing noted that constructivism is a theory of identity politics in a sense. In the international community, role identity and collective identity are the two most important social identities that actors have[5].

According to Wendt, role identity "exists in relation to others" [6] and calibrates a positional relationship, and the distinctions between different role identities lies in the different positions[7] that actors occupy in the social structures. The construct between structure and actors is bidirectional, in other words, the interests and behaviors of actors are determined by their role identities. while at the same time, the interactions between actors lead to the transformation of the role identities, which further leads to changes in the conceptual structure of the international system. Collective identity is a higher requirement for role identity based on national interactions, where people identify not only with the destiny of others, but also with their own identities and the identities of others who are in the same group as them. Collective identity facilitates the internalization of shared perceptions and norms, allowing cooperation to manifest itself at a deeper level, and a culture of cooperation reinforces collective identity among nations and reconfigures national interests. Wendt identifies role interaction between actors as the main process of community identity construction.

2.4. Constructivism with European Integration

In the practice of modern international relations, membership within the European Union is by far

the closest to a collective identity relationship. Constructivism builds a theory of European integration from two basic points, the social structure of international politics and the fact that international structures affect the identities and interests of actors, which is important for the study of the integration process, and understanding of its continued expansion and the choices of the European Union's Common Foreign and Security Policy (CFSP). Constructivism argues that the dominant explanatory theories of European integration have long overemphasized the role of the material at the expense of social factors. Among these social factors in the European Union, rules and norms have the strongest shaping effect on member states, not only defining the behavior of actors, but more importantly constructing their identity. These social factors construct the identities, interests, and behaviors of the various actors in the European Union, while at the same time actors can change and recreate these social factors.

It is thus clear that the European Union system can not only play the instrumental role emphasized by rationalism, but it will also have a normative and guiding effect on the behavior of actors, and is a central factor in the construction of their identities and interests[8]. As the European Union establishes its identity, defines its interests, determines its policies and implements them, European Union and the external environment are always in a circular process of interactive construction.

In contrast to the general state, whose international actor identity is relatively stable in terms of its basic nature and image in the eyes of other actors, although it has changed under the interactive construction, but the European Union's international actor identity, due to the widening and deepening of its integration as well as to internal developments, has changed more dramatically under the interactive construction with the external environment and is in a constant state of flux.

3. The Establishment of a Collective European Identity

European identity is the transcendence of the existing national identity of the European peoples on the basis of peace, equality and mutual respect, which is mainly embodied in the dimensions of European cultural identity, European Union citizenship and its foreign and defense identity[9].

The Copenhagen Declaration of 1973, in which European identity appeared for the first time as a concept in an official document, suggested that the collective identity of the Community should be consciously cultivated. In the Treaty on European Union, the meaning of European identity was elaborated in greater detail and proposed the promotion of a common cultural heritage while respecting the diversity of countries and regions. In addition, the European Union has introduced citizenship on the basis of respect for the national identity of the member States and the development of their commonalities in order to shape their shared membership, determined to create a kind of citizenship shared by nationals of all countries.

The construction of the European Union's identity is an interactive process and the definition of the European Union's interests is constantly being adjusted. The European Union system constructs its distinctive norms and principles, which in turn further influence and shape the identities, interests, discourses and behaviors of its member States, allowing them to act in a way that reflects their socialization effects. As an actor composed of Western countries, the EU defines as its interests the defense of the Union's common values, the development and consolidation of democracy, the rule of law, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms. It is on the basis of the definition of identity and interests that the European Union is able to define its policies and adopt its external behavior. The creation of a European identity was a complex and difficult process, and to this day, the European Union's concept of collective identity is still expanding in connotation and innovating in practice.

3.1. Cultural identity in Europe

Europe's cultural heritage is the common cultural wealth of the European people, and this valuable cultural wealth promotes cultural exchanges among the European people, enabling them to recognize the homogeneity of Europe in terms of cultural ideology. The European Union promotes a sense of European identity by strengthening cultural exchanges and adopting cultural policies, and utilizes historical and cultural legacies to make European identity go beyond national identity.

Cultural identity in Europe refers to the identification with the common European civilizations, including ancient Greek and Christian civilizations, the cultural movements since the Renaissance and the ideas they have produced, the common values shared by Europeans and the symbolic objects of the European Union[10], such as the flag, the euro, and the EU passport. The Maastricht Treaty of 1991 set

out the specifics of European cultural policy, which strives to establish a common cultural belonging and a European sensibility, so that Europeans realize that they are not only citizens of one country, but also citizens of Europe. In developing its cultural strategy, the European Union is guided by the principle of respect for the common prosperity of national and European cultures, thus establishing a dual identity for national and European cultures, which is manifested in a common sense of belonging and identity for the European Union among its member States and will provide impetus for the deepening of European integration.

3.2. Citizenship in the European Union

European identity is expressed through membership in the EU. Unlike traditional citizenship, EU citizenship is a supranational concept of identity. The creation of EU citizenship expresses a view of equal attention and respect, with the intention of bridging the gap between the European Union institutions and the population, and that citizens of each member state should be equal members of the European Union as a community[11]. The Maastricht Treaty made the concept of "citizenship" an important basis for the development of the sense of identity of European Union members, and EU citizenship was established as an important status for nationals of the Member States, giving equal status to those who hold it and allowing them to enjoy uniform and equal treatment, independently of their ethnic group and without prejudice to special provisions of the law. It also allows them to enjoy consistent and equal treatment, independently of their ethnic group and without prejudice to special provisions of the law. This makes the average EU citizen aware of being a member of the EU as a community[12] and strengthens their sense of identity and belonging to the EU. Although EU citizenship is still only provided for and supplemented as an adjunct to the citizenship of the Member States to some extent.

3.3. The European Union's diplomatic and defense identity

The European Union derives its power from the cession of sovereignty by its member States, and by extension, its ability to act is constrained by this. As integration deepens, the governance capacity deficit exacerbates the European Union's legitimacy crisis. The debt crisis, Brexit, terrorist attacks and the refugee problem have exposed the fragility of the European Union's governance capacity, weakened the European public's trust in integration, significantly limited the ability to act externally as a whole, constituted a direct threat to its foundational strength, and deepened the European Union's own sense of crisis. For this reason, the European Union hopes to enhance the unity of will and independence of action in Europe through the establishment of an independent defense, so as to develop Europe's external identity in international affairs, so that Europe speaks with one voice, establishes a mechanism for collective action on common interests, and embodies the collective identity of the EU at the international level.

Strategic autonomy is an important goal of European integration, aimed at overcoming the vulnerability of the European Union caused by its excessive dependence on external forces, enhancing the autonomy of its operational capabilities and safeguarding the European Union's position in the global geopolitical competition. In July 2016, strategic autonomy was elevated to the position of a key strategic objective in the Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy for the first time[13]. Since then, the European Union has continued to strengthen its capacity building and related cooperation, emphasizing the development of economies of scale through the European Defense Fund in the framework of the "Permanent Structured Cooperation". In September 2020, European Council President Michel further clarified and refined the objectives pursued by strategic autonomy, namely the preservation of the internal stability, the promotion of EU standards and values[14].

In 2022, the Council of the European Union adopted the plan of the Strategic Compass for Security and Defense, which sets the goal of enhancing its common defense capabilities, marking a substantial step forward in the field of strategic autonomy and common defense. This plan includes the establishment of a rapid reaction force, the strengthening of analytical intelligence capabilities, the improvement of response mechanisms to deal with hybrid threats, the enhancement of cybersecurity, and the development of security and defense strategies for space and the oceans[15]. In order to achieve these goals, the member States have committed themselves to substantially increasing their spending in the area of defence, while improving their capacity for innovation in defence technology, and also to strengthening their cooperation with the United Nations, NATO and other organizations.

4. European Identity and European Integration

4.1. The role of European identity in promoting European integration

The formation of European identity is an important part of European integration, which makes up for the shortcomings of traditional international relations theoretical studies and provides new explanatory paths for the in-depth development of integration. The continuous and deep development of European integration needs to rely on the establishment of a European collective identity[16], to build the European Union into a community of culture and ideas, so that Europe can truly become a commonly recognized European by all European people.

On the one hand, the establishment of European identity can increase the political legitimacy of the EU, which refers to the consent and support of the people for political power and the political order it maintains, based on tradition or recognized norms, and the legitimacy of the EU implies the support of the EU population for the power of the EU and its governance[17]. European identity promotes the harmonization of individual and group interests, thus creating a genuine psychological sense of belonging to the EU among citizens, and the legitimacy of the EU built on this basis enables the public to bear the short-term loss of interest in favor of European integration, thus effectively addressing the democratic deficit.

On the other hand, the establishment of a European identity facilitates the formation of a sense of community. Constructivism believes that in the process of European integration, actors' identities and interests change, and that this Europeanization of identities and interests motivates political actors who will further support pro-integration policy approaches, thus pushing European integration deeper and deeper[18]. Only on the basis of European identity can the EU countries speak with one voice and act as one whole in order to gain more interests and say on the world political stage.

4.2. The Dilemma of European identity and European integration

Alexander Wendt pointed out in *The Social Theory of International Politics* that "when a higher level group threatens the realization of the original group's own needs, the original group opposes the formation of the higher level group." During the formation of the European collective identity, the nation-state, sensing the threat from the European Union, revolts against the construction of the collective identity.

The nation-state is the most basic object of social categorization and identity attribution in the modern international system. By defining the membership of its people through a common language, culture, and system of citizenship, and using the emphasis on difference and exclusion of the other to create borders and construct identity, the nation-state constitutes the socio-psychological basis for state conflict in anarchy. In addition to cooperation between states through rationality and adherence to international law and contracts, one of the ways to resolve this international conflict dilemma is to construct a larger model of collective identity that transcends the nation state[19]. Only through the complementary and interdependent development of European identities and national identities can the program of European identity construction be successfully carried out. Brexit is the biggest crisis faced since the European integration process, also reflects the importance of constructing a European identity.

The lack of function also hinders the construction of European identity. For a long time, the European Union has been faced with the path of intergovernmental cooperation versus supranational cooperation, and the deepening of European integration requires the state to cede more sovereignty, yet "in smart areas where the need for sovereignty is more sensitive, the state retains its autonomy". For example, the European Union practised co-decision-making in areas such as trade and economics, where the sovereignty of member states is largely ceded to the European Union; however, in the area of security and defence, the European Union only has the competence to coordinate the common actions of member States. The limitations of the mechanisms and competences have led to a significant contradiction between the autonomy of action pursued by the EU and the reality of decision-making, resulting in the inability of the EU as a whole to exert the influence it deserves in the international community and to better provide legitimacy to the citizens of Europe. While the EU constructs European identity, it must first prove to the European public the important value of its own existence. However, due to the lack of function, when the nation-state identity is being shaped towards the European level, it is not guaranteed accordingly, resulting in the absence of a common sense of belonging, which makes the architecture of European identity encounter obstacles. Therefore, the establishment of a European identity shows an important value, which can prompt the people of the EU

to become a real whole from the psychological cognition, and expand the social self from the nation-state to Europe.

5. Conclusion

International organizations are the embodiment of the desire of actors in international relations to seek cooperation and can be seen as a collective identity or identification constructed in interaction. Identity in international society refers to the shared knowledge developed by the main actors in their interactions, what constructivism calls beliefs, norms, rules, wills. Constructivism holds that the international norms and values embedded in international organizations have a direct impact on State behaviour and inter-State interests, and the international system and actors are in a mutually constructive relationship.

European identity reflects the challenge to traditional national sovereignty posed by globalization and regionalization, where the nation state is no longer the only source of political and social rights and identity for its citizens. European integration has developed on the basis of the nation-state system, and it is bound to face the resistance of nationalism and the broader identity of nation-states and regional ethnic. At present, the European Union has formed a certain degree of this super-nation-state identity, but in the actual operation of power and governance process, the dominant position is still the nation state. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to focus on the future of Europe and the common interests of European nations, and on this basis to build a sense of belonging to the EU, a sense of common destiny and a desire to live together, and ultimately to construct an EU collective identity based on a common social psychology.

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