

**Contribution to the St. Gallen Wings of
Excellence Award 2006**

**Creating an Inspired European
Identity: A Three-Step Approach**

Yeshan Chen

36th St. Gallen Symposium

Inspiring Europe

University of St. Gallen, Switzerland

May 18–20, 2006



36



Creating an Inspired European Identity: A Three-Step Approach

Introduction

Browsing through any world history tome will convince most that the glory from mankind's greatest achievements in the last half-millennium belongs largely to Europe. Most aspects of life today, from the automobiles we drive and our understanding of science and medicine, to our notions of sovereignty and state, and the very fact that I am writing this essay in English, are directly attributable to inventions, ideologies or events rooted in Europe.

However, it is foolish to assume that Europe's place in greatness is permanently guaranteed; history provides numerous examples of civilisations tumbling from golden age into fatal decline due to a single error of judgment or generation of complacency. With the United States currently the world's sole superpower, and the economies of India, China and other emerging regions booming, Europe's future is uncertain. Therefore, whether or not Europe builds on its current standing and affluence to herald another magnificent era rests solely with this generation.

Developing the theme of "Competing Regions – Competing Mentalities", I argue that given the current geopolitical climate which favours superpowers and "region states", a divided Europe and European Union (EU) augurs poorly for retaining long-term competitiveness and economic success. Conversely, a united Europe, led by an expanding goal-oriented EU with a pan-European identity is required; concomitantly, obsolete mindsets which give rise to unnecessary bickering between countries must be overcome. This is achievable via a combination of three approaches: (1) concentrating on developing unique European core competencies pertaining to the environment and peacekeeping, (2) exposing sheltered young Europeans to the hunger and competitiveness of developing nations which will emerge as Europe's main economic rivals, through supporting overseas exposure for university students, whilst enforcing the teaching of cultural and religious tolerance in schools, and (3) adopting an economic model that promotes individual hard work,

reduces counterproductive state subsidies, and views EU expansion and immigration not with apprehension, but as advantageous.

This essay's research combines literature review with interviews with twenty young Europeans¹ that I have interacted with on campus. This provides a socio-cultural and psychological perspective, apart from the usual political argumentation. Towards the end, I will also, as a Singaporean, compare the experience of Singapore with Europe where appropriate, and suggest adaptations to solutions Singapore has found to problems now being encountered in Europe.

No Man is an Island: the Decline of the Nation State

Except for superpowers like the US or China, the nation state has desisted from being a viable economic entity². Small-to-medium sized countries trying to act unilaterally in trade often find themselves up against formidable regional organizations with greater clout and bargaining power. To quote Kenichi Ohmae:

“The nation state has become an unnatural, even dysfunctional unit for organising human activity and managing economic endeavour in a borderless world. It represents no genuine, shared community of economic interests; it defines no meaningful flows of economic activity. In fact, it overlooks the true linkages and synergies that exist among often disparate populations by combining important measures of human activity at the wrong level of analysis³”

¹ Those interviewed included four Britons, four Swedes, three Finns, four Germans, three French, on Swiss and one Italian.

² Dora Kostakopoulou and Theodora Kostakopoulou. *Citizenship, Identity and Immigration in the European Union: Between Past and Future* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001), 7.

³ Kenichi Ohmae, “The Rise of the Region State”, in *Globalisation and the Challenges of a New Century*, eds. Patrick O’Meara, Howard Mehlinger, and Matthew Krain (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000), 95.

Survivability today therefore lies in countries being able to group together into “region states” united in economic policy, albeit sometimes with vastly different cultures and political systems (e.g. ASEAN, ECO)⁴.

Does the EU resemble a “region state” in the economic sense? There may be a shared currency, but member states differ vastly on economics and trade. Also, whereas ASEAN members effectively dichotomise economics from culture, cultural policies have direct implications on economic ones for many EU members. If the EU strives to be the “region state” described by Ohmae, how should members balance their own cultural protectionism in agreeing on a common economic policy?

It should be noted here that this essay is about inspiring *all* of Europe, not just current EU members. “Inspiring Europe” calls for a Europe with bright prospects throughout, with sacrifice and profit shared by all; no country should be left behind. Europe’s report-card hereon begins to look worrying: within the EU, founding members persist in defending unsustainable economic policies. The optimism of Maastricht has subsided with a daunting realisation that Europe will fall far short of the goals of Lisbon⁵. Developed EU countries are saddled with the increasing costs of providing benefits for their aging populations and ranks of unemployed. Also, with exclusive ethnicity-based, resource-rich region states like the ECO or Middle East existing at Europe’s doorstep, the way to affluence for Europe’s poorest non-EU countries lies solely in full EU membership.

It is only a matter of time before the EU envelops almost all of Europe. Hence, the prerogative of our discussion should not be focussed on merely bringing prosperity to non-EU states in line with their richer neighbours, but on ensuring that the EU evolves into a force that is capable of leading Europe into the next millennium.

⁴ ASEAN refers to the Association of Southeast Asian nations. ECO refers to the Economic Cooperation Organisation comprising the former Soviet republics of Central Asia.

⁵ Romado Prodi, *Three Challenges Facing Europe*. Speech to Council of Foreign Relations, New York (11 January 2002).

Competing Regions – Competing Mentalities: What’s the Cost of a Way of Life?

Andre Sapir notes that different segments of Europe subscribe to different economic models along socio-cultural lines. There are four main models of varying efficiency:

1. Nordic model—Highest spending on public welfare, unregulated labour markets but strong labour unions with high wages.
2. Rhineland model—Social insurance for the unemployed and strong employment protection with powerful unions and collective bargaining.
3. Mediterranean model—High levels of benefits for the elderly, early retirement and heavy labour market regulation.
4. Anglo-Saxon model—Weak unions, unregulated labour markets and minimal social assistance.

Helle Dale notices the “inverse relationship between employment protection and unemployment levels” and that although the Rhineland model⁶ is in most need of reform and liberalisation, countries adhere to it because it purportedly protects a “way of life”.

What the “way of life” means is anybody’s guess. Is farming or a 35-hour workweek integral to the French existence? Will anti-immigration policies protect the Dutch “way of life”, or are they merely responses to underlying issues?

Regardless, the “way of life” debate remains the root of the most contentious issues within the EU, from deciding on an acceptable level of state assistance, to the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP), fishing regulation, and immigration. Further major areas of discontent and debate within the EU include the nature of the “special (UK-US) relationship”, and how Russia—the largest and most resource-rich European country—should be engaged⁷.

⁶ The Rhineland model is espoused by the many of the most influential EU member states (i.e. Germany, France, Austria and Belgium).

⁷ Former Western European Cold War enemies maintain normal economic relations with Russia, but express misgivings at its handling of Chechnya and its perceived suppression of political opposition. The Baltic Sea nations support closer

Creating a Common European Identity

From my Southeast Asian perspective, the political wrangling in Brussels is sometimes unfathomable. How much can the “way of life” differ amongst Western European countries? Isn’t the fact that they are mostly liberal societies with functioning democracies sufficient as a unifying force? Is there an undercurrent of unfounded nationalistic stereotyping to the arguments centred on protecting the “way of life” at all costs?

During my interviews, I asked the young Europeans for their immediate impressions of citizens of other European countries. The uniformity of responses was remarkable: the French were lazy, Germans boring, British snobby and Italians interesting. There were also unexpected grudges: the Finns all expressed dislike for the Russians or Swedish because “they ruled us”, to which the Swedes reciprocated with accusations of childishness.

Are young Europeans merely perpetuating prejudices that their elders cling on to? Whilst the grudges of those old enough to actually retain residual memories of World War II might tempt marginal vindication, what is the case for the youth pigeonholing fellow Europeans in a time of peace? Do politicians carry generation-old axes to grind when fighting their causes? Can the EU afford to have its youth blindly adopting the grievances of another time?

Most concur that an efficient EU requires a mutual transcending of unfortunate events in history, and that this requires a synergising “European Identity” to be found and felt across Europe. How this is to be done is, unsurprisingly, fiercely contested. However, creating a European “cultural identity” is not impossible.

cooperation not only in trade, but also in healthcare and defence. Former Soviet Republics treat Russia with anything from outright hostility, to warmth and overtures to even relinquish independence to rejoin with Russia. See Daniel Hamilton and Johan Lembke, “Four Priorities after EU Enlargement?” *The Baltic Times*, 329, (2004).

Finding a biological basis for a “European race” is ignorant and xenophobic⁸. Neither is treating the EU as a “superstate” and imagining “European Identity” in purely pragmatic terms a longterm idea.⁹ Economic benefits aside¹⁰, pragmatic nationalism alone “fail[s] to relate the European identity with all the cultural networks in the nation-states, ethnic minorities ... and ignores the relationship between them and the future European identity and citizenship”¹¹. This leaves the EU vulnerable to ethnic tensions from within.

Recently, the term “cultural citizenship” has been mooted. This envisions a Europe providing first-class citizenship, and where pluralism and multiculturalism are concurrently viewed as central to the “European Identity”. However, different regions will express varying notions of what comprises a “first-class citizenship” (does it lie in strong democracy, low taxes, or generous welfare?) Recent race riots in France and anti-immigration sentiment within the Dutch parliament also indicate that pluralism may not be a top priority throughout Europe.

Step One: Concentrating on Core Competencies

In reality, the European Parliament is still run by those old enough to knowingly or unknowingly, carry ancient grudges to the negotiating table, which inspire them to defend “ways of life” using outdated economic theory. You cannot teach an old dog new tricks, so the EU has to live for now with countries led by politicians which will not budge on their own agendas; this also means that “cultural citizenship” might be a pipedream until the older generation of EU MPs are gradually

⁸ Current-day genetic profiling efforts have been abused in some quarters, in attempts to find a genetic/biological basis for European race. This is xenophobic and outright racist, and is often the basis of violent nationalism. This also suggests that there might be severe economic inequalities within Europe regardless of how the EU performs because of biological differences. Also see Franco Ferraroti, “Prospects for Multicultural Societies in Europe”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 7,2 (1993), 166.

⁹ Josep R. Llobera, *Foundations of National Identity: From Catalonia to Europe* (London, Berghahn Books, 2004), 171.

¹⁰ “Superstate” nationalism is merely focussed on meeting the pragmatic demands of retaining competitiveness, i.e. “respond[ing] to threats of national populism... overcom[ing] the pressure from both underneath (unemployment, minorities, etc.) and outside (growing immigration)... aim[ing] to be effective in terms of propaganda, militarism, primary education, rewriting of history and affirmation of identity”. This form of nationalism may be beneficial in the short term, but will not protect the EU from cultural tensions which can undermine its long-term stability.

¹¹ J.M. Delgado-Moreira, “Cultural Citizenship and the Creation of European Identity”, *Electronic Journal of Sociology*, (1997). Available from www.sociology.org/content/vol002.003/delgado.htm.

replaced. However, the EU can greatly insure itself economically by concentrating on unique EU core competencies for now.

The first European advantage requiring full exploitation is that of Europe's positive attitude towards environmentalism. Whilst US companies and citizens still enjoy cheap gas and continue their love affairs with heavily polluting industries and cars, and China still heavily reliant on coal, Europe's environmental consciousness has seen European companies becoming world leaders in developing technologies for generating renewable energy, and in making existing technology more fuel-efficient. European companies should therefore be aided even more generously by the EU to ensure that their research in this area accelerates and culminates in the final goal of nil-dependence on petroleum. If successful, Europe could have the world at its feet to purchase its green technology when the oil runs out; this should guarantee economic survival for decades.

The second European speciality is peacekeeping. The EU itself is a testament to peace, and the embodiment of the fact that full-scale war between European countries is now unimaginable; this is unprecedented in recorded history. The EU therefore has the moral standing to champion peace. This should serve as a rallying-point for European states to devote their military resources to peacekeeping and humanitarian efforts¹²¹³¹⁴. This will not only allow EU members to share a common valuable goal, but will be beneficial for Europe foreign-policy wise when the countries it aids stabilise and become prosperous themselves. However, for this to crystallise, Britain has to dispel the impression that the US can unilaterally affect its decision to wage war, and a speedy resolution to the Chechnya situation.

¹² John Bolton, *Creating a European Security and Defense Identity: Fact or Fantasy?* Policy Forum at the CATO Institute (29 August, 2000).

¹³ Charles L. Barry, 'Creating a European Security and Defense Identity', *JFP*, (Spring 1997), 66.

¹⁴ David Buchan. *Europe: The Strange Superpower* (Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1993), 167,

Step Two: Inspiring European Youth

The focus of any drive towards “cultural citizenship” should be on Europe’s youth who will inherit the EU leadership. The most efficient way of encouraging young Europeans to unite is by exposing them to the “Other”¹⁵; this may have undertones of clichéd Occidentalism-vs- Orientalism debates, but remains pertinent.

In the National University of Singapore, many European students commonly stay for a semester or more on student exchange¹⁶. Most will agree on four main points by their time of departure: (1) They are scared of how hard other Asian international students work, (2) Their own countrymen should see up-close, on foreign soil, how dangerously complacent young Europeans have become as compared to their Asian counterparts, (3) They begin to feel not foreign, nor white¹⁷, nor German/British/Swedish/Finnish but *European*, and (4) They understand why economic models with heavy state assistance are detrimental to Europe.

Therefore, EU universities should intensively encourage their students to spend time studying in Asia, where they can in a predominantly non-White environment, become acutely aware of the “Other(s)” —namely the emerging giant Asian economies—personified by its zealously determined students. To quote one interviewee, “I have never seen half the student population in a university awake and studying at three in the morning”.

Such exposure might be sufficient for European youths to realise the need for heavy sacrifices to ensure competitiveness. That culture-shocked young Europeans emerge relating to fellow Europeans as Europeans, provides solid foundations for nurturing the “European Identity”. Perhaps there is after all already enough to create a European cultural identity in the subtext. Trips abroad will certainly aid in showing Europeans how small their own countries seem in comparison to

¹⁵ Shore, *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration* (London: Routledge, 2004), 63.

¹⁶ The permanent student body of the National University of Singapore comprises about twenty percent from China, twenty percent from South and Southeast Asia (not including Singapore), and more from other countries. European and North American students arrive in large numbers on shorter-term student exchange programmes.

¹⁷ The young Europeans interviewed generally reacted strongly when suggested or asked if they could relate culturally with the Americans, who were perceived to be “noisy”, “crass”, and “not discreet like us Europeans”.

other regional economies or true superpowers and in the futility of squabbles over ways of life, or immigration, or mad cow disease.

Back home, schools should also be obliged to teach cultural/religious tolerance, to prepare the young for a pluralistic 21st-century European society.

Step Three: Finding a New Socio-Economic Strategy

Singapore, like Western Europe, is faced with a rapidly aging native population in danger of decline. In recent years, it has begun supplementing its labour force with foreigners¹⁸; Public discontent at “foreigners taking jobs away” is occasionally palpable, but most agree that supplementing a declining workforce is necessary. Unlike some Western European countries however, Singapore is not a welfare state. Income tax rates are low, although a sizeable proportion of a worker’s earnings are compulsorily channelled into his own Central Provident Fund (CPF) account. These funds are accessible only to him for house loans, personal investment, or upon retirement; creating a personal incentive for hard work. When Tony Blair visited Singapore in 1996 as Labour Opposition Leader, he viewed this “stakeholder welfare” mechanism as laudable and recommended for Europe.

I believe that the economic future of Europe rests in two areas: (1) Policies which encourage hard work, and (2) Each state’s willingness to accept immigrant labour. Europe should waste no time in adopting a variation of Singapore’s CPF system to accompany state assistance, which in turn should be reserved for those in extraordinary circumstances. Where necessary, immigration from less prosperous European countries or beyond should be allowed to supplement surplus jobs in Western Europe, including Russia. In this respect, a tax system which is more accountable to the individual worker serves to dispel the impression that a large portion of high taxes goes to subsidising “poor immigrant populations”.

¹⁸ Foreign labour in Singapore is not used to merely supplement low-wage, low-skilled jobs. Foreigners also feature strongly in scientific research, medicine and finance industry.

Conclusion

The ever-expanding EU is still a work in progress. However, this state of flux is no excuse for unnecessary quarrels between countries. Unresolved disputes, unwillingness to invest in education, or xenophobia may result in a suboptimally functioning EU. Failure to cut bureaucratic red-tape will breed an EU that is merely a gentlemen's debating club dominated by Western Europe, with diminished influence and little power to even help itself¹⁹.

The future will be dominated by super/regional states centred on China, India, America, and oilrich Central Asia. Latin America and Africa, impoverished for so long, may be hiding surprises of their own. Can Europe rise to the challenge, and continue its rich heritage as a multicultural political and economic force beyond the "end of history"? I certainly hope so, and a combination of environmentalism, humanitarianism, good economics, and a commitment to suitably nurturing Europe's youth will doubtlessly shorten the odds.

¹⁹ Pauline Green, *Challenges Facing the European Union*. Speech to the European-Atlantic Group (24 June 1996).

Cited Works

Barry, Charles L. 'Creating a European Security and Defense Identity', *JFP*, (Spring 1997), 62-67.

Bolton, John. *Creating a European Security and Defense Identity: Fact or Fantasy?* Policy Forum at the CATO Institute (29 August, 2000).

Buchan, David. *Europe: The Strange Superpower*. Aldershot: Dartmouth, 1993.

Delgado-Moreira, J.M. "Cultural Citizenship and the Creation of European Identity", *Electronic Journal of Sociology*, (1997). Available from www.sociology.org/content/vol002.003/delgado.htm.

Ferraroti, Franco. "Prospects for Multicultural Societies in Europe", *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 7,2 (1993), 163-171.

Green, Pauline. *Challenges Facing the European Union*. Speech to the European-Atlantic Group (24 June 1996).

Hamilton, Daniel and Lembke, Johan. "Four Priorities after EU Enlargement?" *The Baltic Times*, 329, (2004).

Kostakopoulou, Dora and Kostakopoulou, Theodora. *Citizenship, Identity and Immigration in the European Union: Between Past and Future*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.

Llobera, Joseph R. *Foundations of National Identity: From Catalonia to Europe*. London, Berghahn Books, 2004.

Ohmae, Kenichi. "The Rise of the Region State", in *Globalisation and the Challenges of a New Century*, eds. Patrick O'Meara, Howard Mehlinger, and Matthew Krain Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2000. 93-101.

Prodi, Romano. *Three Challenges Facing Europe*. Speech to Council of Foreign Relations, New York (11 January 2002).

Shore, Chris. *Building Europe: The Cultural Politics of European Integration*. London: Routledge, 2004.