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THE INFLUENCE OF THE WEST ON IDENTITY FORMATION IN THE POST-SOVIET PERIOD THROUGH SOCIETAL AND CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

YICHEN HAO*

Summary

This article analyzes how the West has impacted identity formation in post-Soviet Russia by using Brubaker and Hall's theories. It discusses language, literature, and religion to illustrate the cultural differences between the West and Russia and how Western values have influenced Russian society. The article argues that although the West has had a significant influence on post-Soviet Russian identity, Russians have maintained their uniqueness while adopting some Western influences. However, the article suggests that Russia needs to change its attitude towards this influence as identity is dynamic. Finally, the article proposes future studies to explore identity formation in other Central and Eastern European states from different perspectives such as gender and race.

Key Words: Cultural Values, Identity Formation, National Identity, Post-Soviet Period, Russian Identity, Russianness, The Influence of the West.

Introduction

Throughout Russian history, the influence of the West can be seen everywhere. Although Russia experienced a turning point in the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and later became the Russian Federation, the West continues to have a profound impact on every aspect of Russia in the post-Soviet era (Momtaz, 2016: 1), revealing the continuity of Western influence in Russia.

However, Suny argues that there is a complex and contradictory situation when Russia deals with the Western impact on identity formation in the context of Russian culture and society (2012: 17). Thus, it is essential to define the notion of the West from the Russian view. The West is being seen as the “‘other’ in defining Russia’s identity”, and Russia believes that the West potentially threatens Russian unique identity (Tolz, 1998: 995), but Bonnet indicates that the influence of the West on Russian culture and society is an inevitable phenomenon. He mentions that since the mid-eighteenth century, the West has emerged in Russia as one of the key concepts in an ongoing debate regarding the country’s destiny and identity (Bonnet, 2004: 44). By theorizing the notion of the West, it can be seen that both Tolz and Bonnet acknowledge the fact that the Western impact on Russia is extensive and pervades all aspects of Russia, even though it seems that Russia’s attitude towards Western influence remains exclusive and intolerant. To demonstrate how the idea of the West has influenced processes of identity formation in post-Soviet Russia, this article will use societal and cultural perspectives to explore the Western impact on the shape of post-Soviet Russian identity. I will argue that the influence of the West on identity formation in the post-Soviet period is shown in the cultural shock between the West and post-Soviet Russia, the spread of Western values in Russian society, and the interpretation of the three concepts of Russian identity, Russianness and national identity within a theoretical framework as Western values disseminate through Russians. To do this, I will rely on Brubaker’s and Hall’s theories on the above three concepts of identity and culture to highlight the significance of the Western impact on post-Soviet Russian identity.

The Collision of Western and Russian Cultures: Language, Literature, and Religion as Representations of Identity

First and foremost, in the collision between Western and Russian cultures, the emphasis on Russia’s own culture and the preservation of its cultural uniqueness reflects Russia’s superiority in its own identity. In this process, Russia embraces cultural values from the West, whereas Russia is not assimilated by the idea of the West. Instead, Russia domesticates Western cultural values and maintains its own Russian unique identity (Momtaz, 2016: 2). Among the many cultural elements, language, literature and religion are representatives of a country’s cultural values. In this case, these three elements can represent the uniqueness of Russian identity, Russianness and national identity. On the other hand, the limitation of Momtaz’s article on the discourse of cultural elements has inspired the study of these three aspects in this article. It will start by introducing how representation through language plays a crucial role in culture and how this links to Western influence on post-Soviet Russian identity formation. Hall has interpreted that “language is one of the ‘media’ through which thoughts, ideas and feelings are represented in a culture” (1997: 1), which means that language as a signifying practice provides a means for how representation and culture work together by using signs and symbols (semiotic approach). He emphasizes that if language loses its signifying systems, then there is no clear expression of a culture, and even the language of identity will become ambiguous without symbolic practices (Hall, 1997: 5-6). In this sense, representation through language and culture is a key to reveal ideas of national identity by showing production and meaning at the same time, so Hall’s theory on language illustrates that the meaning of identity should be clearly represented in culture. In the case of Russian identity, Bassin and Kelly reveal that language use in post-Soviet Russia connects with Russia’s cultural superiority in their daily life (2012: 5), and this also proves Hall’s idea that identity can be expressed in language. Gorham applies Hall’s theory to his discussion of symbolic ambiguity in the language culture of the 1990s, especially while the Western positive discourse on language such as free speech, democracy, and liberation is used to

compare with Russia's negative language on barbarization, vulgarization and criminalization (2012: 246-247), which represents the difference of language ideology between the West and Russia. It seems that Western language use has hegemony over Russia, reflecting the point that Hall has made regarding the debate of Western hegemony and Orientalism to demonstrate that the imbalance of representation through language derives from the imbalance of power (1997: 259). Based on this point of view, Russia excludes Western influence on the use of language in identity formation, so Russia's representation through language focuses on Russianness and national identity (Gorham, 2012: 249), which echoes Tolz's argument on Russia's view of the West as the other and language is the main marker of Russia's national identity (1998: 995), and Momtaz's analysis of Russian unique identity (2016: 2).

Nevertheless, the language of national identity raised an identity crisis in the 1990s through a different representation of identity in the West and post-Soviet Russia. According to Brubaker and Cooper, identity is too ambiguous to define its meaning from the language of social analysis, because other words can express identity (2000: 2), which means that there is no consensus on what identity should look like, and the meaning of identity becomes more complex. Brubaker and Cooper's theory on the language of identity is similar to Hall's viewpoint on the importance of clear expression of language and culture (1997: 5-6). Likewise, the issue of alternative terms of identity indicates that it may cause misunderstanding of identity when using other words to express identity. For instance, the word self-understanding is used to highlight individual and collective identity, but these two kinds of identity are different from each other, and identity implies sameness across time or persons (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 17-18). Thus, self-understanding has no connection with sameness. Brubaker and Cooper also note that self-understanding is a superficial and subjective term without claiming a strong understanding of identity. Conversely, identity is a deep and objective term to provide a deeper perception of the language of social analysis (2000: 19), emphasizing clear representation through the language of identity. It is worth mentioning that Brubaker and Cooper's theory on individual and collective identity is reflected in Sharafutdinova's evidence of an identity challenge in Russia in the 1990s. Sharafutdinova uses the word self-negation to show Russians' attitude towards their post-Soviet Russian identity, since the West represents individual identity, and Russia's national identity is based on a collective level (2020: 79-80). Additionally, Russia is regarded as an external state after the collapse of the Soviet Union, which is never trusted by the West (Sharafutdinova, 2020: 82). This reveals an identity dilemma that whether Russia should follow the pattern of the Western identity or maintain own identity in this case. As a result, Russia's nation-building projects focus on culture and language to consolidate the foundation of Russia's national identity (Sharafutdinova, 2020: 82) and unify different ethnic groups (Tolz, 1998: 1000), amplifying Tolz and Momtaz's arguments regarding Russia's emphasis on its own identity and the influence of the West on the language of identity as other. Overall, although the idea of the West has infiltrated into identity formation in post-Soviet Russia through language and culture, Russia does not follow the Western model. On the contrary, they emphasize the significance of their traditional culture and their own understanding of the language of identity based on Western influence on them, which reflects the unique status of the definition of Russianness, Russian identity and national identity.

The Role of Literature in Post-Soviet Russian Identity under the Influence of the West: A Discourse Analysis

Furthermore, literature is one of the most important cultural elements as the uses of identity to illustrate the process of post-Soviet Russian identity under the influence of the West, and reflect

Russians' public opinions regarding identity formation in society. Brubaker and Cooper argue that identity is supported by the usage of literature on social movements, gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism as a category of social analysis and practice to show the core aspect of individual or collective selfhood. Following this discourse, they utilize Foucault's literature on post-modernism to highlight that identity is unstable and fragmented (2000: 7-8), which demonstrates the complexity of identity in literature. The reflection of literature on gender, race, ethnicity, and nationalism plays an essential role in having a strong understanding of identity (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 10), representing that it is necessary to understand the meaning of identity and social perception of identity by connecting with other themes. Since the nature of identity is instability and fragmentation, a weak understanding of identity is caused by literature's fluid and multiple explanations of identity (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 19), which points out a contradictory viewpoint of literature. Regarding Brubaker and Cooper's new analytical perspective on national identity, the case of Russia's national identity can be traced back to the early 1980s, when most literature developed "powerful concepts such as the 'construction of nationhood' and 'imagined communities'" and indicated the dynamics of national identity. Western literature on the narratives of Soviet people and national identity also emerged to reflect the Soviet social development process (Bassin and Kelly, 2012: 5-6). At this stage, literature on the interaction between the West and Russia's national identity is limited until after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Similarly, Tolz uses the definition of a nation in literature to show the relationship between literature and national identity during the Soviet period. She depicts that a nation is "an ethno-social community, characterized by ethno-cultural and socio-economic ties" and formed by "an objective historical process" (1998: 1004). If the germination of national identity in literature during the Soviet period served as the development of national identity in the post-Soviet period, the literature of the post-Soviet period can be said to be a straightforward expression of Russians' anti-Western and xenophobic ideology (Shlapentokh, 2011: 878), implying the continuity and change of the role of literature in the process of identity formation.

As noted above, Western literature has a limited interpretation of its influence on post-Soviet identity during the Soviet period, but this circumstance is reversible swiftly afterwards. Marsh's article provides an overview of post-Soviet culture and media through the example of literature to discuss whether Russia views the West as other under the theme of Russia and the West (2007: 555-556). Overall, Marsh has the same perspective as Shlapentokh, showing Russia's anti-Western values in the shape of a new national identity. For example, Marsh mentions that in 2002, the Russian television channel ORT serialized Boris Akunin's novel *Azazel*. "They re-created Victorian London and introduced a Jewish-Masonic conspiracy," which exposes anti-Semitism and challenges the West (2007: 568). This example also demonstrates the anti-Western bias of Russia's state-controlled media while dealing with the influence of Western cultural values on Russia's national identity. However, the spread of Western cultural values continues through Russia's media. Marsh used a quote from Krupin's story *Stalinskaia dacha*: "From the cloudy lens of the blue screen drunkenness, violence, sex, and shooting were squeezed out in great profusion" (Krupin, 2002: 65-74). This example focuses on the clash of Russian and Western cultural values regarding commercialism and advertisements. Marsh states that products such as toothpaste, washing powder, and other cleaning supplies are used for personal and domestic cleanliness in the Western world. By contrast, these products are not advertised on Russian television channels, particularly during the Soviet era (2007: 570). It implies the cultural impact of Western commercialism on Russian media. The connection of literature and media in Marsh's article is a unique approach to reveal the unique nature of post-Soviet Russian identity as Brubaker and Cooper have mentioned above. By contrast,

Menzel's viewpoint on the literature of occult and esoteric ideas in Russia illustrates that national identity is a motivating force as spiritual legitimization (2007: 77). There is a cultural infiltration between the traditions of Western Christianity and Russian Orthodoxy in Russia's occult and esoteric literature (Menzel, 2007: 72-74), indicating cultural significance and a series of influences: religious influences on Russian literature and the influences of literature on national identity. Menzel has a different starting point by comparing with Marsh, and they are respectively the connection of literature and religion, and the connection of literature and media, but they aim to analyze the relationship between literature and identity formation in Russia under Western influence and have a deeper understanding of identity as shown by Brubaker and Cooper.

Religion and Identity Formation in Post-Soviet Russia: The Importance of Religion as a Criterion for National Identity and the Emergence of Religious Diversity and Identity

In addition, religion is another example of identity's concern as an identification and categorization to connect the influence of the West with post-Soviet Russian identity formation. Identifying people's religions will be useful to identify their identities. This process involves collective identities and groupness, like "the great conceptual melting pot of identity" (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000: 19-20). They show that religion is important to address the question of identity, especially in individualizing identification and classification, and strengthening the sense of belonging to a group with a shared culture. Brubaker and Cooper's theory of religion and identity implies that religion can be a standard to evaluate the national identity, and Tolz also confirms that one of the main markers of Russia's national identity is a religion by emphasizing the role of Orthodoxy and common history in Russia (1998: 1001). It is surprising that Tolz later points out that according to the parliament in 1994, the Russian nation means people of the Russian Federation "regardless of their ethnicity, culture, language and religion" (1998: 1009), which is against the relationship between religion and Russia's national identity. In this case, it seems that religion could not be a criterion of national identity in post-Soviet Russia. Nonetheless, Suny discusses that nations are made up of people who have shared characteristics such as language, religion, and common origins (2012: 19). Suny has a different interpretation of culture by comparing it with Tolz. He claims that culture is central to the state authority, especially in political culture (2012: 19). Religion reflects the contradictions of post-Soviet Russian identity.

Throughout Russian history, the Orthodox population regards their religious belief as part of their identity. Religious rites in the Orthodox Church such as baptism, marriages, and funerals are essential in Russia's daily life (Kelly, 2012: 299). Before the legislation in 1997, Russians only had a singular belief (Orthodoxy) in Russia, since Orthodoxy was a representation of a political force. After the Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organizations of 1997 was implemented, it recognized religious freedom for all Russian citizens. After that, people can choose to be a believer from Orthodoxy or other religious minorities (Muslims, Jews, Catholics, and others), even if it is not compulsory for them to choose a religion. In terms of religious minorities, there is an example from Shlapentokh's article about anti-Semitism under the main trend of the anti-Western social atmosphere. It also demonstrates a contradiction between pro-Western and anti-Western influences on identity. Shlapentokh states that between 1995 and 2004, people who suffered from anti-Semitism declined from 75 per cent to 55 per cent, this data led Jewish people never hid their identities and participate in religious practices in public (2011: 879). This is a good starting point for religious diversity and identity formation in Russian society. Kelly mentions that there is an inversion in the status of religion between the Soviet and post-Soviet periods. Orthodox Church becomes the

focus of public opinion. “Wearing a cross, having children baptized, hanging an icon in your living space, fasting in Lent”, these religious practices that were condemned in the past, now become the main religious practices in society. Although the Russian Federation makes concessions to the Orthodox leadership, never imposes the view that Orthodox belief is essential to being Russian in the sense of citizenship and ethnic belonging (2012: 313-314). Kelly’s argument on religion and nation has the same stance as Tolz’s on the definition of the Russian nation without the restriction of their religion. Unlike Kelly and Tolz, Panchenko affirms the existence of religious and social identity in Russian society (2012: 322). His perspective connects Orthodox practices with rural communities, which makes his argument on religion and identity convincing. He indicates that religious practices gradually decrease due to the mass migration from rural areas to cities and the demographical collapse of rural regions. “The 1990s and 2000s witnessed rapid growth of these ‘post-secular’ forms of popular religious culture in Russia” (Panchenko, 2012: 334). With the emergence of the obsession with alternative spiritualities and new types of religious consumption and identity popular Orthodoxy bloomed so profusely in the 1990s and 2000s in Russia (Panchenko, 2012: 336). Panchenko’s emphasis on religious identity supports Brubaker and Cooper’s theory on religion and identity and agrees with Suny’s recognition of religion as a part of identity, which shows the importance of religion in the process of identity formation in post-Soviet Russia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by investigating the influence of the West on identity formation in post-Soviet Russia, it is difficult to deny that the West has a significant influence on shaping post-Soviet Russian identity, even though the theories of Hall, Brubaker and Cooper illustrate the uniqueness of Russianness, Russian identity and national identity by viewing the West as other and excluding Western influence. Instead, from the cultural impact between the West and post-Soviet Russia and the dissemination of Western cultural values through Russians in society, these examples prove that Russia domesticates the influence of the West on identity formation rather than imitating Western cultural values. By examining cultural practices such as language, literature, and religion, we can clearly see how much Russians value their traditional culture, social values, and national identity, as well as how proud they are of their Russianness. Throughout this process, Russians have found innovative ways, in order to maintain their uniqueness while accepting some Western influences in their culture. This article not only deepens our understanding of the Western influence on the process of identity formation in post-Soviet Russia, but also helps us understand how the Soviet past links to the post-Soviet period. Russia’s attitude towards the influence of the West on post-Soviet Russian identity needs to change over time, since identity is dynamic and unstable, but it depends on which circumstances Russia will face in the future, and then respond to situations. The article has several limitations. The analysis may be incomplete and maybe there are other reasons. The single case provides limited explanations and may not fully explain other cases. The religious aspect has a limited Western influence on the process of identity formation in Russia. Future studies can focus on other cases such as the influence of the West on identity formation in other Central and Eastern European states to make a comparative study with Russia. Also, in order to fully understand the phenomenon, it is worthwhile to explore other perspectives, such as gender and race based on Brubaker and Cooper’s theory of identity. Besides this, the religious perspective also needs to be looked into again through case studies.

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***Yichen Hao** - University of Glasgow, Glasgow, United Kingdom
email: 2431178h@student.gla.ac.uk