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# AN INSIGHT OF EUROPEAN POLITICAL CULTURE: DEVELOPMENT AND FEATURES

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## Abstract

Political culture is a popular concept in many countries around the world. The paper is expected to contribute to a deeper understanding and introduction of some characteristics of *European political culture*. This can also be seen as a *cultural* approach to *politics*. Being one of the cradles of human civilization with the famous Greco-Roman civilization, Europe inherits the quintessence of other civilizations to bring it to a new level and gained brilliant achievements in terms of economics, politics, culture, etc. The politics of Europe has emerged, had certain achievements, and significantly influenced the *political culture* all over the world. The study on *European political culture* is considered as the study of the most basic characteristics of the modern world political culture.

## Keywords

Political Culture, Europe, EU, State, Supranational

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## 1. Concept of political culture

The term of *political culture* was originated in the West from the time of ancient Greece. By the nineteenth century, with the advent of capitalism and democratic politics in Europe, the concept of political culture was understood as civic culture or democratic culture. Political culture is considered as one of the three pillars of political research in the West: the *geographical* aspect, the *legal/constitutional* aspect, and the *political culture* aspect. Political culture officially appeared as a modern political concept in the works of Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba in the 1950s and 1960s and in *Civic culture. Political Attitude and Democracy in Five Nations* (1963). In this classic work, political culture is defined as *the pattern that distributes the orientations of the members of a community towards political objects*.<sup>1</sup> S. Verba points out more comprehensively with the definition: “*Political culture is the constitutive totality of beliefs based on personal experiences, symbols and important value systems; that totality determines the subjective circumstances of political behavior*.”<sup>2</sup> In the objective perception of Western empirical science-oriented researchers, *political culture is the totality of political awareness, political sentiments, and citizens' subjective evaluations of the political system, policy, and political processes*.

The concept of political culture was born in the context of great socio-political changes in the world. It was an era when mankind had just experienced the most terrible period of fascism and the destruction of the second world war. It was the era when the world order of the Cold War was established with the confrontation of the communist and capitalist factions at their peak, the era of struggle of colonial peoples and the birth of young nations. That complex and magnanimous context of world political life has created a particularly strong interest among political researchers around the world, forcing them to question the necessity of content religion, on the legitimacy of moral standards, traditions, etc.

Political culture is closely related to two components: *culture* and *politics*. Political culture is considered as a division, a field of culture and politics. The interplay between culture and politics constitutes political culture. Political culture, like culture, is a product of human creative activity and comes into being only when politics emerges. In other words, political culture is associated with class society and the State. Approaching political

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<sup>1</sup> Greiffenhagen, M. Greiffenhagen, S(ed.) (2002), *Handwörterbuch zur politischen Kultur in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*. Wiesbaden Germany: Westdeutscher Verlag, p.390

<sup>2</sup> Vuong Truong Giang, Khuong Duoc (2002), *Nghiên cứu so sánh phương thức cầm quyền của các chính đảng hiện đại*, Shanghai, p.31.

culture from the perspectives of culture and politics has some notable definitions as follows:<sup>3</sup>

- Political culture is an aspect of culture that crystallizes all political values, qualities, qualifications, and capabilities formed on a certain political background, to realize the interests of the political class, ethnicity, and community in accordance with the development and progress trend of human society. As an aspect of culture, political culture is a *slice* of cultural history according to the field of political activity.<sup>4</sup>

- Political culture is understood as the level of human development expressed in the level of political understanding, the level of organization of the power organization system according to a certain social value standard to harmonize the interests between classes and protect the interests of the ruling class, in line with the trend of social development and progress.

Regarding the birth of political culture, Pham Ngoc Quang said that the political culture of a class or of a social system in general will be formed through the following movement logic: Accumulated knowledges of politics have turned into beliefs, into class ideals, from political beliefs into practical political actions, the results of which form political norms, into traditions, into a way of life, into a habit in dealing with different political situations.<sup>5</sup>

It can be seen that political culture was not born by chance, and it is the result of a long-term movement in human society: the process of accumulation, preservation, and transfer of knowledge and key values. In other words, political culture is a socio-historical phenomenon. Besides, political culture has a close relationship with other historical elements of culture such as education, philosophy, ethics, environment, etc. and especially politics. Moreover, political culture is not constant, but in the process of accumulation, existence and transfer, political culture always changes and receives new elements to match the reality in political life. Thus, in addition to class feature (associated with politics), political culture also has historical and inheritance characteristics in its birth, existence, and development.

Political culture has a great function for society, especially in political life. Because political culture contributes to the adjustment of socio-political relations, building people's belief in the chosen ideal values. In addition, political culture also contributes to raising the experience and taste in political practice into a rule of reciprocity in politics and raising people to political creativity and sensitivity to new things in politics. treatment, increasing political sensitivity. It directly promotes the process of political socialization, so that the masses become familiar with political activities and participate in the political process. Political culture directly brings politics to life and exists due to the interplay of factors such as beliefs, traditional values, noble ideas (ideal) and political means, norms, and methods. organization and operation of political power.

Overall, political culture is a part of culture that arises in political life and becomes a part of cultural studies as well as political studies. Like culture and politics, political culture is distinctly class and social. Political culture from the most core part is political ideologies, through the process of socialization as well as with the history of human development, political culture gradually becomes a category, an adjustment like it is now. It includes *ideological factors*, *beliefs*, *value systems* and *political actions* of individuals, classes, interest groups and the whole society towards the realization of political-state power in an unbiased manner in the most effective way to satisfy the interests of political actors.

## 2. Establishment of modern European political culture

Europe consists of 48 countries. If divided by geographical area, Europe is divided into 5 regions: Northern Europe, Western Europe, Central Europe, Southern Europe, Eastern and Southern Europe. After the Second World War, during the Cold War (which lasted more than 40 years), Europe was divided into two, in which Western Europe was used to refer to the remaining capitalist countries. Eastern Europe refers to the countries that follow the socialist regime. When the Cold War ended in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, the socialist system had completely collapsed in the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, the countries under the socialist regime have gradually transformed into a capitalist regime. Currently, the European integration process is taking place more and more strongly, the European Union (EU) expanded and increased the number of members to 28. If based on geopolitical and geographical criteria, the division of Europe into Eastern Europe and Western Europe proved more reasonable. Eastern Europe consists of countries whose political backgrounds have changed from communism to parliamentary democracy and whose inhabitants are predominantly Roman orthodox. Western Europe consists of countries with a tradition of parliamentary government and a population that is both Roman

<sup>3</sup> Vietnam's Institution of Journalism and Propaganda (1999), *Giáo trình chính trị học đại cương*, National Politics Publication, Hanoi, p.229.

<sup>4</sup> Nguyễn Văn Huyền (2005), "Văn hóa và văn hóa chính trị từ cách tiếp cận của triết học chính trị Macxit", *Tạp chí Triết học*, no.5 (168), pp. 54-55.

<sup>5</sup> Phạm Ngọc Quang (1995), *Văn hóa chính trị và việc bồi dưỡng đội ngũ cán bộ lãnh đạo ở nước ta hiện nay*, National Politics Publication, Hanoi, p. 27.

Catholic and Protestant. Eastern Europe is united under the *Commonwealth of Independent States* (CIS) as the nucleus of Russia. Western Europe gradually becomes a bloc under a common roof of the European.<sup>6</sup>

European history is a long and complicated process with many major socio-political events. Unlike countries in the East, for a long time, the power of the church dominated the power of the State. It was the conservative ideas of the church that inhibited the development of science, Europe immersed in the so-called Medieval Times. In all the previous history of the Middle Ages, no other form of ideology was found but religion and theology. Moreover, the feudal system and the tenacity of the lords have inhibited the development of the economy, especially the commercial industry.

Modern Western European political culture is a bourgeois political culture, so it can be affirmed that its birth originates from the birth and establishment of capitalism as well as the capitalist mode of production across the entire region. New political ideas can only arise when the capitalist mode of production is born and grows up in the feudal system along with the industrial revolution.<sup>7</sup>

The first bourgeois revolution broke out in the Netherlands at the beginning of the sixteenth century, followed by the English bourgeois revolution of the seventeenth century, and the French bourgeois revolution of the eighteenth century, leading to the gradual establishment of capitalism on a European scale. Western Europe has undergone great changes in terms of economy, society, politics, and ideology. These are very important premises for the birth of a new political culture in Western Europe - a bourgeois political culture.

*In terms of economics*, it is a remarkable development thanks to the industrial revolution - human labor is gradually replaced by machines with increased efficiency many times over. The increasing amount of wealth created has contributed to improving people's lives and creating a premise for the accumulation of great capital. Along with the industrial revolution, the capitalist mode of production replaced the feudal mode of production, leading to the great development of productive forces and science and technology. At the same time, private ownership of the main means of production was established. The strong development in economy, especially in trade, has improved people's material life, and at the same time created a new style and lifestyle: industrial style.

Therefore, it can be affirmed that economic development has created material conditions for a new politics and political culture.

*In terms of society*, there were many changes, the bourgeoisie gradually replaced the feudal aristocracy in power, and the working class gradually became the main productive force in society. Besides the old social contradictions (feudal - peasants), many new conflicts appeared, especially the bourgeois - worker conflicts. In the society of Western European countries gradually appeared many classes with conflicting interests. At the same time, the lives of all classes of life were gradually improved both physically and mentally. When the public's awareness was higher, the old way of governing could not be applied: tyranny, authoritarianism, and the use of violence. In order to stabilize society and enhance the effectiveness of state management, the bourgeoisie had no choice but to use flexible measures. Conflicts and antagonisms in both interests and ideas must be resolved based on negotiation and compromise between classes. Therefore, the masses were facilitated to participate in politics through themselves (election) or their representatives (parties, social organizations, trade unions, genders, etc.) This is the social basis for the birth of a new political culture based on more democratic and equal criteria.

*In terms of politics*, after a long time immersed in the Medieval Times under the collusion between world power and theocracy, Western Europe had drastic changes under the Renaissance - humanitarian ideas appeared as a premise for advanced political thought movements. Martin Luther (1483 - 1546) started the *religious revolution* with the act of putting 95 new theses on the door of the Wittenberg church in Saxony on October 31, 1517, this act started a social, economic, and intellectual revolution and within a generation after 1517, dozens of sects emerged including the Church of England, the Church of Calvin, the denominations of re-baptism, etc.<sup>8</sup> Christianity was divided, Protestantism flourished. England, Scotland, the Netherlands, North and East Germany and Northern Europe were under Protestant influence. There were Protestant minorities in Ireland, France, some of their lands in Hasburg.<sup>9</sup> Along with great social, economic, political, cultural and religious changes, new trends of political thought emerged in Western Europe. It was a movement of bourgeois-democratic political thought and an ideology that is opposed to the ideology of bourgeois democracy - utopian socialism and later Marxism - Leninism. In terms of bourgeois democratic political ideology, there were typical names such as Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, etc. The bourgeois democratic political ideology had been continuously inherited, supplemented and become the core ideology in modern Western European political culture. The concepts of *civil society*, *rule of law*, *bourgeois democracy* became the main axis of Western political culture. Western political systems operate around that axis.<sup>10</sup> Up to now, most Western European countries follow a parliamentary democracy, but the monarchy is still a representative democracy (in the UK case - the power of the monarch is only symbolic). In a representative

<sup>6</sup> Lương Văn Kế (2007), *Thế giới đa chiều*, World Publication, Hanoi, p. 471

<sup>7</sup> Vietnam's institute of national politics (1994), *Đề cương bài giảng Chính trị học*, National politics publication, Hanoi, p. 39.

<sup>8</sup> Brinton C., Wolff R., Christopher J. (2004), *Văn minh phương Tây*, Culture and Information Publication, Hanoi, p. 341.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 365.

<sup>10</sup> Phạm Ngọc Quang (1995), *Văn hóa chính trị và việc bồi dưỡng đội ngũ cán bộ lãnh đạo ở nước ta hiện nay*, National Politics Publication, Hanoi, p. 46.

democracy, the principle of separation of powers (restraint and balance) is thoroughly respected: a clear division between legislative, executive and judiciary powers. State power is shared among three main systems, parties, and interest groups; all have the opportunity to participate in the political process through elections (multi-party). Any party or coalition in a multi-party electoral system that wants to gain power and stay in power needs to gain the support of the masses (through elections, referendums). Therefore, the state government system must always pay attention to two things: *first*, it must ensure effective management; *second*, it is necessary to ensure care for the population through the system of social security, health care, and good education. In addition to the people's expectations, trust in the government is also able to participate in the political process.

Western Europe has a special feature compared to many other regions of the world, which is the similarity between countries. That similarity stems from the following four reasons:

- Influenced by Greek Civilization
- Use the Latin alphabet
- Influenced by Christianity
- A long time ruled by the Roman Empire

The above similarity is the basis, a solid foundation for the process of *unifying* Western Europe in particular and Europe in general. The process of *unification* began in 1952 with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) - the foundation for the European Union. In 1958, the European single market was born with European Economic Community. European countries are moving towards building a *supranational* institution - cooperating and sharing all issues from economy and currency to society, politics, and security under the European Union (EU).

Thus, the transformations of the bourgeois revolution and the industrial revolution taking place in Western European society have become important bases for the birth of a new political culture - a bourgeois political culture. The state power was gradually separated from the church power, leading to great ideological liberation. Moreover, the strong development of economy and science has created conditions not only for the material life but also for the spirit of the masses. Western Europe has moved from a decentralized feudalism to a bourgeoisie and with it a new political culture has emerged.

### 3. Main features of European political culture

Modern Western European political culture - bourgeois political culture is the result of a historical process associated with political, social, economic, and ideological developments and changes. In its development history, Western Europe experienced three types of political culture as follows.<sup>11</sup>

- *Premodern parochial culture*: the people only accept their local church/religious cultural context without any conception of the entire political scene of the society
- *Dependent political culture*: the people create relations with the political system, but only establish them on the output-structures; that is, they passively receive the distribution of power from the top down
- *Participative political culture*: the people's conceptions of the political system are established based on both output and input structures, that is, they participate actively in political life

According to the above division, the modern Western European political culture is the political culture of engagement - the active participation of the people in political life, or in other words, the interaction between the macrostructure (political system, country) and the microstructure (individual, group of people) are very clear.

The main features of Western European political culture have been pointed out by Luong Van Ke:<sup>12</sup>

- The rule of law and civil society are the highest principles of politics
- Private property is the principle of democracy
- Direct democracy and human rights (individuals) are respected
- Freedom of the individual, freedom of speech, and freedom of business are the principles of democracy
- Mode of decentralization of power or maximum decentralization
- Democracy is based on a system of diverse political parties
- Class antagonism and class dictatorship are replaced by compromise and cooperation.
- Economic development is associated with the all-people social welfare regime for the country to regulate
- Political regional integration and linkage is a mainstream trend and a model for the world

The above features can be analyzed on the following levels of *individual*, *social*, *state* and *transnational*.

<sup>11</sup> Luong Văn Kế, *Thế giới đa chiều*, World Publication, Hanoi, 2007, pp. 483 - 484.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

At the individual level, human rights and direct democracy are respected. All citizens enjoy basic freedoms (freedom of speech, establishment, joining political parties, etc.), so they always actively participate in political life.

At the social level, social welfare is always guaranteed at a high level, conflicts of classes and interest groups tend to be resolved by compromise and cooperation.

At the institutional level, the system of state agencies is organized on the basis of the principle of thorough separation of powers, the executive, legislative and judicial powers are built according to the mechanism of restraint and balance, thus avoiding the abuse of power, authoritarianism and tyranny. Private ownership is always recognized and guaranteed by the state. Moreover. In the power structure of the state, very few parties have absolute dominance, so coalitions often appear. The state becomes the representative of many classes and interest groups in society, leading to greater interest in the interests of the masses and the necessary political stability based on the multi-party electoral system.

At the transnational level, although Western Europe has many differences in terms of ethnicity, language and religion, overcoming all of them, the countries in the region have gradually moved towards building a common institution – The European Union is a prime example. Western Europe is moving towards becoming a *Super-State*. This brings a lot of benefits to countries in the region.

Modern (Western) European democratic politics is increasingly demonstrating its political cultural superiority.<sup>13</sup> Thus, modern democracy is the central factor creating the characteristics of Western European political culture.

The political and cultural characteristics of Western Europe based on the above-mentioned classifications reflect the level of democracy of the State regime. Based on formal democratic standards, the countries of Western Europe can be classified as solid democracies. There are five criteria of democracy:<sup>14</sup>

- The election of high-ranking offices shall be conducted by free and fair elections.
- Political parties are allowed to operate and compete equally in elections.
- The policy-making process should be transparent, and officials held personally accountable.
- Citizens must be assured of their civil and political rights.
- The judicial branch must have power independent of the legislative and judicial branches in a system of separation of powers.

However, the above five criteria are not complete because each ethnic group, country and region has its own characteristics and there is no single state regime that meets all criteria. But taken as a whole, the countries of Western Europe are the closest to solid democracy. That is, elections are always conducted freely and fairly, and political parties in a multi-party electoral system are allowed to operate and compete equally in elections. Civil rights are always guaranteed at the highest level - the people's freedom in doing business, participating in socio-professional organizations, participating in political parties and interest groups. In particular, the principle of separation of powers is always thoroughly respected in the construction and organization of the state power apparatus.

### Conclusion

Europe is a region with many similarities in culture, politics, society as well as having the same historical periods (both invaded and ruled by the Roman empire, influenced by the Christianity and religious reform movements, etc.) The above similarities have created similarities in political culture such as the public's interest in politics, the values that democracy creates, how to behave towards policies, etc. In the modern European society created by bourgeois democracy, people enjoy the increasing freedom, equality, and justice, and they are given more opportunities to participate in the political process both input and output. Europe has been conducting a vigorous process of *unification* with the aim of creating a new Europe with more strength, stability, and development. In that unification process, in addition to the economic-political linkage, there is also the linkage and exchange of cultural values. Basically, the process of European integration has many advantages due to similarities in political regimes, religions, ethnicities, cultures. Countries are in good faith removing their complexes and sacrificing their own interests to work together towards a common Europe in which the interests of each individual, ethnic and nation remain guaranteed.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p.484.

<sup>14</sup> Lương Văn Kế (2007), “Chính trị học so sánh và đặc trưng của loại hình khu vực chính trị châu Âu”, *Tạp chí Nghiên cứu châu Âu*, no. 5 (80), p. 52.

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