

Did You Say Europe? Opening Talks

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The opening talks for *A Date with History* were an excellent introduction to an insightful conference. The two lectures delivered by Professors Roger Chartier and Chris Clark were a powerful examination of two case studies in European history, and how they shaped the Europe of today.

Professor Chartier focused on literary history, specifically Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* and other associated works. There was a shrewd reminder that the construction of Europe was as much due to written culture and literature as it was to war, diplomacy and trade. The great literary works of the Early Modern age provoked an unprecedented sense of transnationalism and an exchange of ideas across the continent. When the first edition of *Don Quixote* was published in Castilian Spanish, 400 copies were printed – many of which made their way across the Atlantic to the 'New World'.

One of Professor Chartier's principal arguments was that *Don Quixote* was a European book, transformed by interpretation and adaptation beyond Spain. Derivative editions were published in Valencia, Lisbon, Brussels and Milan. It was swiftly translated into French, German, Italian and English, reflecting its transnational influence in Europe. The first copies arrived in England in 1605 and were deposited in the Bodleian Library. Its popularity in the Anglophone world soon boomed and it was the most popular English-language novel of the 18th Century. This is evidenced in how much *Don Quixote* influenced English drama and literature. Plays such as *Cardenio* served as tributes to Cervantes' epic and entrenched the author's sense of imagination in societies across Europe. As Early Modern Europe became increasingly interconnected through overseas expansion and the mass circulation of literature, novels such as *Don Quixote* came to epitomise the new era.

The construction of a European identity in *Don Quixote* is further developed by Cervantes' references to Christendom and Islam, which are drawn directly from his experience as a young soldier. Cervantes was captured by Ottoman pirates and held in Algiers for five years as a slave before being ransomed. *Don Quixote's* freeing of the galley slaves is a direct reference to this. Throughout history, Spain was one of the main theatres of war between Christianity – the dominant faith in Europe – and Islam, something which crystallised Spain's position as a 'gateway' to Europe. As such, *Don Quixote* can be seen as an explorer on the very fringes of Europe itself, and a map of his travels began to be included in 19th Century editions of the book. The wanderings of *Don Quixote* directly mirror those of the author, who spent years traveling around the Mediterranean, but by extension this also reflects the fluidity of human migration across Europe in the Early Modern era. In conclusion, Professor Chartier argued that this showed how Europe was framed as a transnational community of spectators, writers and travellers by Cervantes, and that the blurring of borders and boundaries in *Don Quixote's* travels is a deliberate technique which reinforces this European transnationalism. In this sense, *Don Quixote* can be seen as the first modern European novel – one which touches on issues which still spark debate in Europe today.

Professor Clark's focus was the geopolitics of the Revolutions of 1848, which were a series of political upheavals that engulfed the whole of Europe during what

had been a relatively peaceful period in the continent's history after the Congress of Vienna in 1815. Professor Clark contends that the 1848 Revolutions were a uniquely European revolution – a 'transcontinental cascade of upheavals'. The revolutions transformed Europe permanently and reinforced this sense of transnationalism which had been forged in the modern era.

Professor Clark argued that the 1848 Revolutions have too often been viewed through the prism of individual revolutionaries such as Garibaldi and Kossuth, or indeed individual countries. The scattered and dispersed nature of the sources and the underdeveloped understanding of international relations in their historical context have resulted in a fragmented body of scholarship. The revolutions were in fact fundamental in reconstructing the balance of power in Europe and introducing new powers to the continent. Otto von Bismarck, the future architect of the German state, found his political influence significantly advanced by the 1848 crisis, as the King of Prussia became increasingly dependent on him and other like-minded conservatives. The 1848 Revolution in the German states and the subsequent Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1 were crucial in the establishment of the German Empire, an event which completely transformed the course of European history.

Conversely, Professor Clark also acknowledged that the chaotic and haphazard nature of the 1848 Revolutions makes it extremely difficult to separate the revolutions from the counter-revolutions. The June Days show that divisions appeared amongst the revolutionaries, with the liberals and the radicals clashing violently. In addition, the lack of coordination beyond national boundaries suggests that the 1848 Revolutions did not necessarily have any pan-European objectives. However, he then highlighted how such a reading of events is highly simplistic. The radical and liberal revolutionaries did in fact create transnational networks where they exchanged communications and ideas, and the revolutionaries were specifically motivated by geopolitical factors. Pope Pius IX enacted liberal reforms and a constitution, fully aware of the turmoil which had seized Europe and the potential threats to the Italian peninsula. Ultimately, Professor Clark argued the period that followed 1848 was one dominated by a 'revolution in government'. Centrist coalitions emerged all over Europe, dominated by liberals who wished to stave off the militancy of working-class socialism. The political structures of Europe were altered irreversibly, and set the scene for a century of competition and conflict.

Modern Europe has been shaped by numerous events, movements, people and cultures. However, the transnational experiences in literary and revolutionary history are without a doubt some of the most significant. The diffusion of ideas through the written word and political upheaval were critical in forging European nations and societies, as well as a sense of shared history and identity across the continent. Europeans continue to invoke these phenomena which serve as poignant reminders that our continent is bound by a common historical experience, and will continue to be bound for the foreseeable future.