

What is Europe?

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On 9th June, leading historians from France and the UK were invited by the French Embassy and the Institut français du Royaume-Uni to York to participate in an exciting and novel collaborative enterprise. Entitled 'A Date with History', this discussion panel series placed a region which occupies a central position in our collective consciousness and – especially with the election of Emmanuel Macron as President of France and the upcoming Brexit negotiations – news cycle within a broader historical context. This of course necessarily entails a deeper and more focused consideration of the various issues that surround identities in Europe. Chaired by Professor Peter Mandler, from the University of Cambridge, the second panel of the event sought to answer the question: What is Europe? Joining him were Professor Stuart Carroll, from the University of York; Dr Jean-François Dunyach, from the Université Paris-Sorbonne; Dr Jean-Frédéric Schaub, from the Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales (EHESS); and Dr Astrid Swenson, from Brunel University London. Together, they scrutinised the historical implications of what it means to be 'European'.

Professor Stuart Carroll began with a deliberation on the comparative history of violence from the 18th century to the present in relation to the idea of 'civilisation', covering the institutional and sociocultural forces that have shaped patterns of violent action on both a structural and individual level. Treating violence as a historically significant category of analysis, Carroll turned to quantitative indicators of violence such as data on homicide rates to explode the myth of European 'civilisation' as a process whereby violence was 'tamed' by the emerging institutions of the state, whose imposition of external social control was apparently internalised to become a part of 'civilised' socialisation. Carroll maintained that new interpretive methods and frameworks that reconsider what constitutes violence are needed to move beyond these inadequate theories. And on this note, he proposed the conception of 'society' as an explanation of historical trends in violent action, in that it enabled the problematisation of violence as a disruptive force in the emotional field of social relations which breached the boundary between public and private.

Jean-Frédéric Schaub added to this by discussing Europe's colonial past and how we cannot think about Europe without thinking of its past colonial atrocities including the transatlantic slave trade truly qualifying itself as a crime against humanity. Major problems occur when we cannot unpick Europe without its colonial past. Countries within Europe experienced similarities as well as huge differences for example population management with the case of the gypsies being a prominent example. This pushed merchants, judges and noblemen to prioritise certain social groups based on their racial heritage. In early modern times, European countries have share the experience of the repatriation of the political legitimacy much before the birth of nation states. His research focuses on the processes of change in the political structures of Western Europe in modern times, based on the cases of the Iberian countries. The starting point of the whole of the works will have been the criticism of political historiography, as it is the pioneering conduct by António Manuel Hespanha. Interestingly, Jean-François Dunyach discussed Enlightenment (an experience in which notions attach to other macro notions) and how a cause known as Europe began to emerge in the 17th century and asked the question if Europe was a result of

demise. In which one can certainly argue that it is, following the constant intra-continental wars. He also asked the question of which language enlightenment was in considering the vast amount of languages spoken on the continent. His research combines and contrasts British, European and American history as to study more about political theory in the 19th Century.

Dr Astrid Swenson followed by considering how cultural heritage fits into broader discussions about European identity. Fundamentally, the notion of heritage deals with the ways in which individuals and societies relate to the past through interaction with both the physical and abstract memory of their living culture, and so involves the movement of knowledge across time and space to fit into broader ideas about sense of belonging or place. As such, preservation of the past has the potential to function as an agent of both competition and collaboration; as the basis for both exclusive and inclusive identities; and, as the foundation of both national and transnational enterprises. Swenson reconciled this asymmetry by narrating the move from destructive nationalism to integration in the context of post-war preservation policies. These were institutionalised at a transnational level in the form of UNESCO and European Heritage Days, for example, to 'Europeanise' a previously fractured socio-political landscape and promote peaceful relations within Europe.

To return to the central question of this discussion panel – What is Europe? – a common theme which seemed to emerge from the speeches given was the implication that Europe is more than just a physical landmass, or a collection of culturally diverse nation-states. Rather, it is an abstraction, an idea and concept, which shapes the worldview of Britons, Frenchmen, and Germans alike. Being 'European' denotes a state of mind and mode of thought which is quite often taken for granted in the context of today's politics of division and resurgent nationalism. Each of the speakers featured in this panel approached the idea of Europe and its place in our collective imagination from a uniquely thought-provoking perspective. Together, their interdisciplinary and comparative viewpoints deepened our understanding, and more importantly, our appreciation of the multi-faceted entity that is Europe.