

REMAPPING CENTRE AND PERIPHERY ASYMMETRICAL ENCOUNTERS IN
EUROPEAN AND GLOBAL CONTEXT, 1500-2000

23-24 June 2016

Conference Report

The timing could not be more apposite. Reflecting on historical mechanisms of cultural and intellectual exchange between centers and peripheries on the day of the EU referendum, with Britain on the cusp of a historical – to say the least – decision, which may, among other things, relegate one of the world's largest economies into the periphery of the European area, is, in itself, a particularly compelling decision. This premise made the UCL Centre for Transnational History's conference, organized together with the HERA project *Asymmetrical Encounters*, based at UCL and the University of Utrecht, all the more interesting. Axel Körner kicked things off with a quotation from Vincenzo Gioberti's 1851 book *Del Rinnovamento Civile d'Italia*, labelling England "an oceanic island in the periphery of Europe", adding greater *gravitas* to the context of the event. Divided into four sections, the conference did not disappoint and proceeded, with remarkable clarity and focus, to challenge hierarchies of centers and peripheries, investigating the asymmetrical and multi-directional nature of intellectual encounters. Furthermore, it provided useful methodological indications as to how to go about the study of these exchanges, as well as plenty of historical examples illustrating dynamics of knowledge and commodities in motion across different spatial contexts.

The first panel, aptly entitled *Concepts* and chaired by Jesper Verhof (Utrecht), investigated how a transnational approach can help making sense of the asymmetries between center and periphery: as pointed out by Jaap Verheul (Utrecht), a logical first step is the establishment of a framework of reference and the adoption of a vocabulary and array of concepts well-suited to describe the social construction of reference cultures, as well as their role as places of cultural encounter and exchange. The importance of a precise conceptual framework was further emphasized by Jan Ifversen (Aarhus), who, drawing extensively upon Koselleck's theory of basic concepts, illustrated how complex and multi-faceted the concepts of margin and marginality are, and how their understanding is crucial in order to make sense of the asymmetries between center and periphery. Marta Petrusiewicz (Calabria), then, proceeded to further challenge this figurative geography via the historical example of a "modernity project" being implemented in peripheral regions of Europe during the XIX century, represented by the proliferation of land-based modernizing efforts, in plan antithesis to the "Manchester paradigm" of progress via industrialization.

The second panel, chaired by Tessa Hauswedell (UCL) focusing on the notion of *Globalising Peripheries*, sought to understand the origin of global asymmetries, and to explain the nature of the ever-changing hierarchies over time and space. Michael North (Greifswald) explained how the modernizing commercial enterprises of the Russian empire, namely "one of peripheries" paved the way for the emergence of grave economic and social disparities between the center and the fringes of its trading network. Subsequently, Harry Stopes (UCL) provided an account of the role of local élites in Manchester and Lille in articulating a global identity, in opposition to canonical verdicts depicting them as peripheral urban centers. Lastly, Pim Huijnen (Utrecht) explained how historical research can greatly benefit from computational linguistics techniques, specifically the use of n-grams analysis. Looking at the presence and recurrence of specific expressions within an archive of digitized Dutch newspapers, Huijnen argued in favour of the possibility of tracing the genealogy of the Dutch public discourse connected with the Netherlands' perception of America across several decades, drawing attention to cultural shifts and significant political and socio-economic events.

The first day of the conference ended with the Annual Lecture of the Centre for Transnational History, given, this year, by Nicola Miller (UCL), who focused on the transnational exchange of knowledge between Latin American regions and Europe. Looking at XIX century drawing schools and engineering expertise, Miller argued that, contrary to traditional verdicts on the region, “it was not a matter of expertise that was lacking in Latin America; rather, it was undervalued”, underlining, on the one hand, how the XIX century witnessed the growth of “a national knowledge as separate from local or trans-, or inter-national” know-how, and the importance, on the other, of transnational connections for the purpose of education and auto-didacticism. Miller could, then, object to “the idea that the construction of knowledge entailed nothing more than the passive assimilation of European knowledge” and, champion, on the other, the notion of “localized transnationalism” between Latin America and Europe. In his reply, Peter Burke (Cambridge) contextualized the findings of Miller in a wider sociology of knowledge.

The second day of the conference followed a pattern similar to the first. The first panel of the day, *Translating Religions*, chaired by Miri Rubin (QMUL), sought to understand how religious beliefs are translated into different cultures. Avi Lifschitz (UCL) focused on Voltaire’s 1756 universal history of cultures and religions, the *Essay sur les mœurs et l’esprit des nations*: the omission of any discussion concerned with the Biblical narrative caused commentators to envisage an atheistic or anti-religious vein characterizing the text. Based on Voltaire’s idea that all people share a common “religious instinct”, however, Lifschitz argued that Voltaire’s essay ought to be slotted in a precise historical context and seen in relation to other Enlightenment modes of writing universal histories. In this sense, Voltaire had much in common with many of his more orthodox contemporaries. The following paper, presented by Zoltán Biedermann, traced the history of a Sri Lankan prince who travelled to Lisbon in the XVII century and ultimately founded a church with annexed convent. This story was plotted against the background of Portuguese imperial expansion, raising questions concerning the asymmetry of its global system and the ideological goals of the church.

As the conference was coming to an end, the last panel, *Knowledge and Commodities in Motion*, chaired by Margot Finn (UCL), sought to investigate how changing spatial contexts affect the meaning of goods and ideas. Hermione Giffard (Utrecht) analyzed the trans-nationality of consumption, looking at how, in the case of Unilever and Heineken, the asymmetry of power between center and periphery was reversed by consumption, insofar as the spatial fringes of the market ultimately proved to be extremely influential for business strategies implemented by the companies. Moritz von Brescius’ (Konstanz) paper, instead, investigated rubber plantations between the 1880s and 1918, positing particular emphasis on the socio-economic contexts cementing rubber trade as part of a global market and on the emergence a “global rubber science”, featuring a transnational exchange of expertise and knowledge. Lastly, Lily Chang (UCL) examined the evolution of a legal statute introduced in China during WWII, particularly investigating the possibility of adopting it as a prism for investigating the mechanics of law-making under wartime conditions.

In the meantime, Britain had decided to leave the European Union, giving the conference’s opening an almost prophetic edge. Is the United Kingdom really about to become a periphery of Europe, as Gioberti’s quotation had hinted at the beginning of the two-day event? Only time will tell, but, for the time being, the organizers, the speakers and the audience will be happy to know that the relation of a periphery to a center is not a straightforward and easy one.