



The European Spa as a Transnational Public Space and Social Metaphor

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As part of HERA's (Humanities in the European Research Area) fourth joint research programme 'Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe' (2019-2022)

<http://heranet.info/projects/public-spaces-culture-and-integration-in-europe/the-european-spa-as-a-transnational-public-space-and-social-metaphor/>

Abstract

The project **The European Spa as a Transnational Public Space and Social Metaphor** is part of the HERA (Humanities in the European Research Area) funding initiative of the European Union devoted to the topic "Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe". The HERA call defines public spaces as "open domains of human encounters and exchanges", "connected with the exchanges of values and beliefs and with the formation and appropriations of institutions". It invites humanities scholars to identify "how the relations between culture and [European] integration within the context of public space(s) have been modelled".

Within this framework, our project sets out to rethink the spa as a core concept and object of European debate. It investigates how the European spa, with its characteristic institutions such as the *Kurpark*, sanatorium, grand hotel and casino, developed into a transnational public space and functioned as a stage for the negotiation of political, social and cultural issues of European relevance.

Project description

WHY SPAS? CONTEXTS

Starting with the Enlightenment, "rational" ideas about health transformed earlier public bathing traditions. Curing became even more closely related to leisurely entertainment. The practice of "taking the waters", like later developments such as the climatic spa and the seaside resort, cut across political, religious and social boundaries. These spas and resorts were distinguished by the presence of a set of public and semi-public spaces (the institutions mentioned above), enabling the development of less-hierarchical social networks.

Moreover, spas spearheaded the spread of a new consumer culture in Europe, facilitating the exchange of new goods as well as new ideas across geographic and social boundaries. The classic European Spa combined elements of representative aristocratic culture and the

new bourgeois public sphere, as only the salon and the theatre did in the cities. The enclosed and compact “stage” of the spas provides an ideal environment for the study of the intermingling of different groups within the emerging bourgeois societies and of the changing rules of social exchange negotiated in this setting. At the same time, the spa remained a space in which rulers and politicians could meet or do diplomatic deals, from Metternich’s Carlsbad Decrees to Bismarck’s provocation, at Bad Ems, of the French German War of 1870-1.

In its combination of scenic landscape and built environment, the European Spa promoted specific ideals of the sublime, too, spreading across Europe in the shape of French, Austrian or Russian rivieras, Saxon and Norman Switzerlands etc. In geographical terms, the spa represented an extension of urban space into the rural peripheries. Reversely, the splendour of the resorts added an idealised periphery to the mental maps of the inhabitants of the European metropolises.

In the course of the nineteenth century, spa culture and spa politics ceased to be a privilege of the nobility and the upper bourgeoisie. The expansion of the railway and the spread of the welfare state, together with the introduction of paid vacations and health insurance systems in the late 19th and early 20th centuries accelerated democratization. The spa thus served as a temporary meeting space for people representing different classes or nations, ethnic or gender identities, whose paths were otherwise unlikely to cross. Therapy, relaxation, consumption and socializing coalesced and formed the basis of what can be described as “spa culture”. The spa turned into a topos and a metaphor for Europe as a whole, hailed by some as a social utopia and criticized by others as elitist or decadent.

At the same time, the concept of the spa remained remarkably stable over time and space and spawned off-springs like the seaside resort and the climatic spa, manifested by typical expressions of spa architecture and urbanism, communicated through different types of media, from works of art to music and printed texts. The European Spa developed into a space where the issues of the day could be debated without the restrictions present elsewhere in bourgeois societies and emerging nation states.

WHAT ARE OUR RESEARCH INTERESTS? RESEARCH AGENDA

Our research project focuses on three main tasks.

1. We aim to reevaluate the development of spa culture, frequently framed in local or national histories, as a pan-European phenomenon in its own rights.
2. We seek to deepen our comprehension of spa history in the *longue durée*, examining the fate of European spas and European spa culture over the course of the 20th century, under the influence of technical innovations, pervading nationalisms and radical new political and societal ideologies on the left and right.

3. We will analyse the recent use of this European past (or the lack thereof) for the revalorization of the spas as heritage, as they undergo significant transformations in the early 21st century by the demise of the welfare states and the rise of new, individualised forms of wellness cultures.

Hence we ask how long the institution of the spa served as such transnational space, where different nationalities, ethnicities, and social classes met. Or conversely, when specific groups of spa visitors were excluded from the resorts, and for what specific reasons. To this end, we analyse historical records, textual and visual representations of spa culture from the 19th century to the present day in their contemporary contexts, paying particular attention to the amenability of the spa and its institutions to be co-opted as social metaphors (*healthy collective; asylum; refuge; paradise; factory; egalitarian utopia; etc.*).

We work on the hypothesis that the rise of the spas gave birth to a distinct, transnational and enduring spa narrative in European culture, with a set of topical motifs (the taking of the waters; the allegorical meaning of landscapes), discursive elements (the juxtaposition of *eros* and *thanatos*, discipline and leisure; individual and collective body) and narrative styles (i.e., multi-layered time). Examples of this intermedial discourse can be found in travelogues, diaries, novels, films etc., created by authors from Thomas Mann to Dubravka Ugrešić, or directors like Alain Resnais and Nikita Mikhalkov.

We posit an underlying tension between transnationalism and nationalisation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Our hypothesis is that pan-European spa culture changes at this point from circulation of models within the imperial contexts (with Tsar Peter I copying the model and implementing the European Spa in Russia, for example) to the competition of models in the era of contesting ideological systems. Capitalist, communist and fascist systems competed as to their capacities to create the “healthiest society”. Nonetheless, their spa practices retained a degree of synchronicity in the field of emerging body politics (prophylactic medicine; use of spa facilities for the regeneration of the work force). For the late 20th century, by contrast, we witness an individualization of concepts of health and wellness, often delocalised from the network of spa towns and resorts developed in the past.

It is a working hypothesis of the project that the ideological changes and the emergence of mass mobility in the 20th century exacerbated the intrinsic tensions between norm implementation, like the medical regimes at the spas, and norm violation, often in the form of informal sociability and hedonistic consumption. The spa may have lost some of its importance as a space for transnational encounters during the period, but it remained the stage for the implementation of core concepts of European modernity, such as the changing understanding of the individual body and the social collective, new concepts of health and disease, conformity and deviation, work and leisure.

Finally, the project examines the importance of this transnational and pan-European heritage for our contemporary revaluation of spas and spa culture. The European Spa

landscape – in the literal and metaphorical sense – is still accessible to the public. The actual functioning of many resorts, though, is challenged by a multitude of factors, from the demise of the welfare state to changing ideas of the body, of health and well-being, increasingly de-institutionalized, individualized and commodified as “wellness”. Collaborating with our Associate Partners through workshops, publications and exhibitions, we ask what the various issues spas are facing today reveal about shifting conceptions of “spaces of encounter”. Thus, we explore their role in the process of drafting new, or re-drafting old, European identities.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The research design of the project builds on a methodological combination of Jürgen Habermas’ notion of the public sphere and Michel Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia”. These concepts have in the past been positioned as antagonistic with regard to their understanding of power constellations and mechanisms of state regulation. Spa culture as an inherently hybrid phenomenon demands a combined approach. Habermas’ perspective helps sharpen the view for the ongoing negotiations of political, social and cultural issues, like consumer culture, for example. Foucault’s concept of “heterotopia”, by contrast, aids in understanding mechanisms of in- and exclusion as well as the function of “other places” in a given society as a whole. In other words, combining the two approaches will help us to trace and explain the relations between public / private, open / closed, inclusive / exclusive, pleasure / discipline, norm implementation / norm transgression typical for spa culture.

WHO ARE WE? TEAM AND ASSOCIATED PARTNERS

Our project is grounded in the academic expertise of four Principal Investigators, based at the University of Amsterdam (the Netherlands; Christian Noack), Lund University (Sweden; Wiebke Kolbe), Queen Mary University of London (UK; Astrid Köhler) and the Freie Universität Berlin (Germany; Henrike Schmidt), pooling their expertise in social and cultural history and cultural and literary analysis.

Each of the four Principal Investigators contributes to the overall research agenda by working on a sub-project related to her or his academic specialization in (cultural) history or literary studies, respectively.

The joint research agenda of historians in Amsterdam and Lund focuses on

- the development of spa institutions (source, park, Grand Hotel, casino ...) and their geographical spread across Europe, including the emergence of “off-springs” like the seaside resort and the climatic spa.
- the consequences of this spread in terms of political and cultural geographies (centre-periphery relations), developments and emulations of the model over time, and the

competition among the spas for European customers.

- the social opening of the spas, in close relation to the development of societal changes and technical innovations enhancing spatial and social mobility.

With the help of selected case studies, both Principal investigators will zoom in on the function of the spas as seasonal transnational public spaces and stages, detail the principles of in- or exclusion and the negotiations of the issues at the spas. In particular we explore the tensions between the medicalization of the spas versus the role entertainment, sociability and consumption played. In the *longue durée*, we analyse the influence of the welfare state, public health discourses and new ideologies on the perception of bodies and body politics in the spas and resorts.

Established resorts on the borders of emerging nation states in Western Europe, like Spa and Aix-les-Bains will serve as primary case studies for PI Amsterdam, as will the Russian (Caucasian) Spas. PI Lund compares the history of Baden-Baden, Ramlösa in Sweden and the German seaside resort Norderney against the background of broad international research on spas in Europe. A postdoctoral researcher attached to PI Amsterdam in years two and three of the project will conduct additional research in Central European and Italian spas.

PI Amsterdam and PI Lund work collaboratively on the above catalogue of research questions, to cover spa developments from the “golden age” through the twentieth century until the very recent past in a joint volume on European Spa History. The book also explores how European spas might use this history and its transnational dimensions for purposes of self-conception and marketing. It asks how European spas, in a period of re-nationalisation and globalisation, contribute to a new appreciation and revival of their European heritage.

*The joint research agenda of literary scholars and cultural historians in Berlin and London focuses on the European spa as a literary topos in the double sense of the word, i.e. as locus and as motif. Classic novels of European literature are set in health resorts, just to mention Thomas Mann’s famous *Magic Mountain* (1924) or Anton Chekhov’s no less prominent *The Lady with the dog* (1899). The specific attraction of the spa for literary ‘treatments’ stems from its nature as a meeting place, where people of different nationalities, religions and classes cross paths. Consequently, the spa in literature is often used as a social metaphor in a more general sense, as ‘paradise on earth’, a model of the perfect society, or a hideaway from the impositions of everyday life or even a dystopian place for controlling body and soul. Beyond such socio-literary observations the question arises, whether spa literature is characterized by a distinct aesthetic. Moreover, spas are places of writing and reading themselves.*

Spa literature in the understanding of both PIs comprises the following aspects and formats:

- Fictional texts set in the environment of the health resort, describing and problematizing life and social encounters in the spas
- Non- or semi-fictional texts such as travelogues and diaries by (predominantly) writers,

documenting their travels to spa locations

- Non-fictional materials such as spa guides, advertising materials (including websites), shaping popular discourses of spa culture
- Literary texts (mainly novels) favoured by readers for the spa seasons (in so far as this reading canon can be reconstructed from memoirs and diaries)

The joint research will be conducted along the following lines:

- While most of the existing body of academic studies focuses on distinct national literatures or regions, we will map spa literature and spa reading across and between several European locations and cultures. We extend our readings beyond the 'golden age' of spa literature to novels of the 20th and 21st century, which de-colonize its national, imperial or patriarchal narratives and representations.
- We specifically focus on the nature and the potential of the spa as a transnational public space and the societal metaphors ascribed to it. In our work on a joint monograph we will structure our comparative readings around six key concepts: METAPHORS, NETWORKS, FORMS OF PUBLIC, STAGES, TRANSGRESSIONS/TRAUMA, HERITAGE/MEMORY.

Methodologically, we will combine *distant reading* (Franco Moretti) with in-depth case studies and close readings.

In line with the call for proposals on "Public Spaces: Culture and Integration in Europe", the project as a whole aims to "deepen the theoretical and empirical cultural understanding of public spaces in a European context". Thus, our academic exploration of European spas as public spaces and as social metaphors will be embedded in a wider, academic and non-academic network of partners and engage in the co-construction of knowledge..

Our associated partners are:

Balneologische Bibliothek und Quellenmuseum Bad Wildungen, Germany.

<https://www.museum-bad-wildungen.de/quellenmuseum.html>

Faculty of Economics and Tourism at the Juraj Dobrila University Pula, Croatia.

<https://fet.unipu.hr/fet/en>

Hrvatski Muzej Turizma (Croatian Museum of Tourism) in Opatija, Croatia.

<https://www.hrmt.hr>

Muzeum Sopotu in Sopot, Poland.

<http://muzeumsopotu.pl/pl/strona-glowna/>

Royal Pump Room Museum in Harrogate, UK

https://www.harrogate.gov.uk/homepage/52/royal_pump_room_museum

Scientific Committee of the European Historic Thermal Towns Association, Acqui Terme.

<https://ehтта.eu/portal/thermal-atlas/>

Stadtarchiv and Museum Nordseeheilbad Norderney, Germany.

https://www.stadt-norderney.de/stadtarchiv/mn_42885

Stadt Baden-Baden, Stabsstelle Stadtentwicklung und Denkmalpflege und Stadtarchiv.

<https://www.baden-baden.de/buergerservice/service/dienststellen-a-z/stabsstelle-welterbebewerbung-und-stadtgestaltung/>

Together with our partners, we will produce a travelling exhibition, displayed at various spas and spa museums, educational materials and a catalogue of digital sources concerning European spa culture. Moreover, we will combine our fieldwork in the different countries with a “researcher in residence” programme. While conducting our project research in situ at our partners’ spa locations, we will engage in events open to the public such as lectures, ‘pint of science’, guided tours through the museums / spa vicinities, presentation and discussion of spa novels or films.

Together with our public partners, we will conduct a series of project meetings, which will comprise public presentations and academic panels. Please consult our homepage for more details, which will go online in September 2019 (european-spas.eu) and send us an e-mail at schmidth@zedat.fu-berlin.de, if you wish to receive our future newsletter.

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