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Transnational Concepts, Transfers and the Challenge of the Peripheries


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The annual international meeting of the History of Political and Social Concepts Group (HPSCG)\(^1\) took place in September 2007 in Istanbul.\(^2\) It was the tenth in a series of conferences that aim primarily at opening the field of conceptual history to new audiences and providing a forum for methodological debates. Thus, they have traditionally assembled scholars from many countries and disciplines, including history, philosophy, politics and the humanities in general.

The background to conceptual history

The HPSCG convened for the first time at the Finnish Institute in London in June 1998 to discuss conceptual changes in European political cultures. Its two organisers, Melvin Richter (New York) and Kari Palonen (Jyväskylä), argued that there is a link between the German tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* and the Cambridge School for the study of political thought. Both research schools have concentrated their attention on the historical trajectory, linguistic articulation and contemporary relevance of concepts. They directly oppose the two axioms that ideas are timeless and that they should function as norms. At the same time, three differences, often overemphasised, kept the two schools apart: a) *Begriffsgeschichte* looks at the *longue durée* of concepts, whereas the Cambridge School concentrates on shorter time spans and sudden conceptual changes; b) Scholars of *Begriffsgeschichte* identify a specific period of time when major conceptual shifts occurred (the *Sattelzeit*, 1750–1850), while Cambridge historians are traditionally oriented towards early modern times; and c) The German school investigates the relationship between language and reality, while the British researches the intentions and the meaning of speech-acts;

According to Richter and Palonen, however, those differences, far from being mutually exclusive, are complementary and together constitute a fruitful ground for further methodological reflections. In recognition of this point of view, the first meeting of the HPSCG featured as guests both the late Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner, mentors of *Begriffsgeschichte* and the Cambridge School respectively. This complementary approach characterises the HPSCG, which claims to be an a-centrist enterprise. It has as a guiding principle the resistance to definitive orders, be they disciplinary, intellectual or national. Thus, it embraces different thematic interests (for example, the concepts of
civilisation, women, modernity, democracy, citizenship, liberalism, nationalism) as well as methodological experiments combining conceptual history with discourse analysis, translation theory, rhetoric and others.


Apart from the annual meetings, one of the main forums for publication has been the Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought, renamed in 2003 as Redescriptions: Yearbook of Political Thought and Conceptual History. However, in 2005 the group launched its own biannual journal Contributions to the History of Concepts, edited by João Feres Júnior (Rio de Janeiro) and Sandro Chignola (Padova). The same year, a summer school for advanced students was organised at the University of Helsinki by Henrik Stenius, with Martin Burke and Jan Ifversen acting as the main lecturers. The summer school initiative has continued, attracting more and more young scholars from all over the world.³

Master narratives and peripheries

The conference under review was the result of an initiative by Jan Ifversen (Aarhus) and Gürcan Koçan (ITU, Istanbul). According to the programmatic statement, it aimed, on the one hand, at continuing the discussions of theoretical, methodological and empirical questions and, on the other, focusing once again specifically on cross-national movements of concepts (see the conferences in Rio, New York and Uppsala). The choice of concepts included religion, civilisation, reform and parliament, which are crucial for understanding the respective processes of democratisation, nationalisation, temporalisation and secularisation. A special section was dedicated to the reception of conceptual history in various countries. So, the 65 participants came mainly from Europe, but also from the United States, Canada, Brazil, South Korea, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt and Israel.

However, it must be stressed that the specific mission of the Istanbul conference was to question “the master narratives and the Western modernisation canon that resulted from these processes”. As the organisers contended, the development of such a canon of values and ideas led to a division of the world between centres and peripheries. In this unequal relation, the centres set the stage and modelled the way to modernity while the peripheries followed their example as latecomers. However, this was in reality a process of transmutation rather than imitation. The peripheries elaborated on and adapted the imported vocabulary to their own cultural frameworks. Thus, the conference encouraged presentations on peripheral challenges posed to canonical concepts and the conflicting strategies of modernisation that resulted from this dynamic juxtaposition.

The development of a canon of European or Western historiography prescribed a “true path” of historical development and a dominant methodology of writing histories, ac-
cording to Antonis Liakos (Athens). The re-
action to this canon has taken three forms: a) 
the adoption of the canon, which caused self-
stigmatisation; b) accommodation, which 
emphasised the peripheries’ contribution to 
the canon; and c) resistance, which signalled 
a straightforward differentiation from it.

In the case of Turkey, for example, the histo-
riography of political and religious concepts 
illustrates very well the tension between cen-
tre and periphery. As Serif Mardin (Sabanci, 
Istanbul) argued, Turkish historiography is 
required to ride “two horses” simultaneous-
ly: Western tradition and Islamic thought. 
The practical implications became apparent 
after the language reform in the late 1920, 
which now requires the conceptual historian to read 
both the Arabic and the Latin alphabet in or-
der to deal with the two respective traditions. 
As a result, the Turkish history of concepts 
has been dominated by a conservative strand, 
since those who study the Arabic script are 
mainly Koranic scholars.

Another excellent paradigm of how the canon 
can be accommodated comes from the Span-
ish-speaking world. The origins of the term 
“liberal/liberalism”, Javier Fernandez Sebasti-
tian (Bilbao) claimed, have wrongly been reg-
istered as British or French. On the contrary, 
that vocabulary first appeared in Spain and 
the newborn Spanish-American republics – the “periphery” – during the early nineteenth 
century. Hence, the whole centre-periphery 
division is simply heuristic and should be re-
placed by a mult centred approach.

Not only the coining of terms, but also their 
reception, shows the existence of autono-
ous traditions that exist parallel to each 
other. The story of the concept of “civilisa-
tion” confirms this, as Pim den Boer (Am-
sterdam) explained. After the birth of its 
modern meaning during the Enlightenment, 
the term travelled and was adapted to dis-
tinct linguistic, educational, cultural and po-
itical traditions. So, by the time of the First 
World War in Germany, ‘civilisation’ had lost 
its reference to education as the latter was 
taken over by the term Kultur. However, be-
fore that, it was almost a synonym of a domi-
nant Western canon. Indeed, during the nine-
teenth century in Korea, ‘civilisation’ was as-
associated with the question of Westernisation. 
According to Young-Sun Ha (Seoul), Korean 
historians and statesmen faced two big chal-
enges. The first was to maintain intellectual 
independence while simultaneously seeking 
a stage of enlightenment similar to the West-
ern world. The second was to achieve harmo-
ny between tradition and modernity. Indeed, 
a clever solution to both problems was intro-
duced with the interpretation of modern in-
ternational law from the angle of traditional Confucian ethics.

Another presumed periphery is the Islamic 
world. In colonial Egypt, a similar strategy of 
incorporation into local traditions was applied 
during the Arab Renaissance. What scholars 
did there, argues Dyala Hamzah (ZMO, Ber-
lin), was to create a linkage between the 
notion of “reform” (a key concept of Islamic 
thought) and public interest (a classical prin-
ciple of utilitarianism). In fact, it seems that 
the tension between ideas produced in the 
centres and in the peripheries has remained 
never-ending. This is evident nowadays in 
the case of “human rights”, another canon 
that has come under the microscope. Recep Şentürk (ISAM, Istanbul) questioned the uni-
versality of the Universal Declaration of Hu-
man Rights, among others, because of the 
asence of many countries from the draft-
ing procedure.

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Parliamentarism and conceptual change

Apart from the existence of the canon that has been generated in the Western centres, such as Britain, France and Germany, among the countries that receive ideas, norms and practices are Greece, Turkey, Spain, Korea, as well as the Islamic world. However, the creation and transfer of concepts as such is a very complicated process that deserves special attention. What kind of forum allows for the breeding of new ideas? And which techniques enable the reinterpretation of old ones?

A valid response to these questions is provided by Kari Palonen (Jyväskylä). The ideal domain for conceptual changes is the parliament, because it offers a perfect forum for debate. In Palonen’s words, “in no other forum the presence of both opposite views to and adversaries of any proposal is so firmly built into the very procedure and mode of functioning than in the parliament.” Its procedural rules, such as the rotation of speakers or the limits on speaking time, guarantee a sound juxtaposition of conflicting perspectives. Indeed, the rhetorical paradigm of speaking pro et contra not only legitimates the existence of opposing points of view, but also lies at the core of a post-Nietzschean theory of knowledge. In other words, objectivity or truth can only result from debate, where two opposed sides accentuate their subjective viewpoints in order to convince each other. Therefore, the parliament as a paradigmatic arena for the “politics of dissensus” enables the creation of new political terms and ideas. In fact, the birth of parliamentarism itself brought about new or reconceptualised old concepts. Thus, Kari Palonen concludes, the traditional focus of European philosophy on consensus and order should be replaced with an emphasis on breaking points and tensions; and, on the practical side, conceptual historians should turn to the use of parliamentary records and the study of parliamentary debates.

This is being realised at the University of Jyväskylä, where a research group on parliamentarism is studying the history of parliamentary procedures and debates from different thematic angles and often from a comparative perspective. However, if one engages in the comparative study of parliamentary debates, a number of methodological problems come up, according to Pasi Ihalainen (Jyväskylä). Differences connected to the practice of parliamentary procedures, rhetorical conventions and recordkeeping affect the understanding of semantic differences. For example, the Swiss parliament has a characteristic up and down dynamic, which Irène Herrmann (Fribourg) calls “parliamentary capillarity”. Indeed, the frequency of referendums undermines the parliament’s potential for rhetorical and conceptual innovation, as demonstrated by the continuous conservative approach to female suffrage until as late as 1971. In addition, despite appearances, Swiss citizens have developed a high degree of political conformism and blind trust in the state. To recapitulate, the parliament offers not only a legitimate research theme for conceptual historians, but also food for methodological reflections.

The state of play of conceptual history

Of course, it goes without saying that scrutinising the theory of history and informing historiography is particularly encouraged among conceptual historians. The three other characteristics of today’s practice of conceptual history, as outlined by Jörn Leonhard (Freiburg), are: a) the collaboration with and incorporation of various subdisciplines of the social sciences
and humanities; b) the tendency for ideological criticism; and c) the emphasis on intellectual and international exchanges.

The diffusion and development of conceptual history is largely due to the work and reception of Reinhart Koselleck. Willibald Steinmetz, holder of Koselleck’s chair in Bielefeld (Germany) and one of his disciples, emphasised the interdisciplinary dimension of his influence on philosophers, theologians, literary scholars and political scientists. Koselleck himself made an early turn towards social history and later towards language. He also anticipated other trends: the pictorial, the visual and metaphoric articulations from his Grundbegriff and institutional relation to Adorno and Habermas respectively. There is no consensus on Koselleck’s scholarly identity as a historian or theorician. Some scholars try to combine him with a Habermasian type of public sphere studies, failing to see the differences in his intellectual and institutional relation to Adorno and Habermas respectively. Therefore, the future of conceptual history in the US might after all rely on the rising interest in the work of Carl Schmitt, claimed Martin Burke (CUNY).

In the United States, from the 1960s the reputation of Koselleck and the GG grew mainly through the works of Carl J. Friedrich at Harvard. In the 1980s, Keith Tribe’s translation into English of Futures Past and later Melvin Richter’s engagement with the history of concepts were a breakthrough for the American reception of conceptual history. Nowadays, there is no consensus on Koselleck’s intellectual scope as a historian or theorician. Some scholars try to combine him with a Habermasian type of public sphere studies, failing to see the differences in his intellectual and institutional relation to Adorno and Habermas respectively. Therefore, the future of conceptual history in the US might after all rely on the rising interest in the work of Carl Schmitt, claimed Martin Burke (CUNY).

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Without doubt, this conference successfully underlined the international scope of conceptual history as a distinct field of research. The next meeting is scheduled to take place in Seoul on 18–19 September 2008. Thematically, it will encompass conceptual histories in Asia, recognising wider cross-national collaboration and experimentation.
NOTES


4. For more information on the discussion group, see http://www.jyu.fi/ytk/laitokset/yfi/en/research/projects/dissensus/parliamentarygroup

5. See the work of his Centre of Excellence in Political Thought and Conceptual Change, http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/PolCon/

6. See the newly founded International Research School in Conceptual History at http://www.concepta-net.org/

7. For more information on the Seoul conference, please consult http://plaza.snu.ac.kr/~inter/deploy/conceptual/