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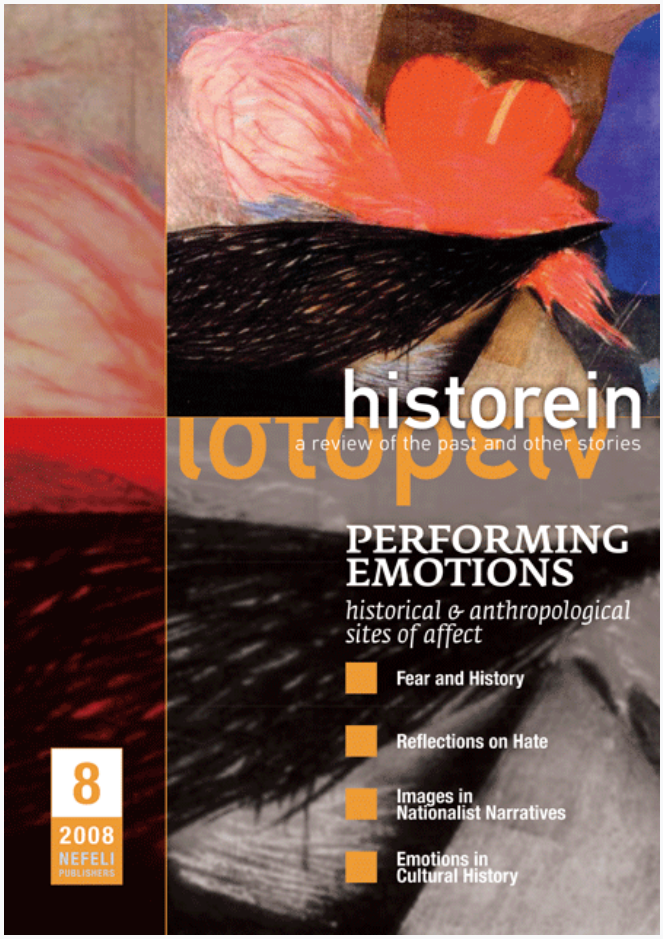

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Transnational Concepts, Transfers and the Challenge of the Peripheries

Annual Conference of the History of Political and Social Concepts Group, Istanbul, 30 August–2 September 2007

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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.

Since 1998, each conference has focused on different topics: Social Controversies in Political Language (1999, Saint-Cloud), Concepts of Democracy (2000, Copenhagen), Rhetoric and Conceptual Change (2001, Tampere), Comparative Perspectives (2002, Amsterdam), Concepts in the Spanish and Ibero-American World (2003, Bilbao), Transatlantic Dialogues (2004, Rio de Janeiro), Translation (2005, New York), Crossroads: Writing Conceptual Histories beyond the Nation-State (2006, Uppsala). Keynote speakers have been, among others, Terence Ball, Lucian Hölscher, Janet Coleman, Hans Joas and Jürgen Kocka.

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 Jen 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 reaction 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 historiography of political and religious concepts illustrates very well the tension between centre and periphery. As Serif Mardin (Sabancı, Istanbul) argued, Turkish historiography is required to ride "two horses" simultaneously: 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 order 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 Spanish-speaking world. The origins of the term "liberal/liberalism", Javier Fernandez Sebastian (Bilbao) claimed, have wrongly been registered 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 replaced by a multicentred approach.

Not only the coining of terms, but also their reception, shows the existence of autonomous traditions that exist parallel to each other. The story of the concept of "civilisation" confirms this, as Pim den Boer (Amsterdam) explained. After the birth of its modern meaning during the Enlightenment, the term travelled and was adapted to distinct linguistic, educational, cultural and political 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, before that, it was almost a synonym of a dominant Western canon. Indeed, during the nineteenth century in Korea, 'civilisation' was associated with the question of Westernisation. According to Young-Sun Ha (Seoul), Korean historians and statesmen faced two big challenges. The first was to maintain intellectual independence while simultaneously seeking a stage of enlightenment similar to the Western world. The second was to achieve harmony between tradition and modernity. Indeed, a clever solution to both problems was introduced with the interpretation of modern international 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, Berlin), was to create a linkage between the notion of "reform" (a key concept of Islamic thought) and public interest (a classical principle 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 universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, among others, because of the absence of many countries from the drafting procedure.

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.[4] 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 recapitalise, 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 research on political culture and on narratives of the past. For the compilation of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (*GG*), Koselleck recruited dozens of young scholars, although today's generation of political researchers consider him old-fashioned. His main critics, Rolf Reichardt and Dietrich Busse, claim that the term *Begriff* does not take into consideration the practical uses of language. Another critic, Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, wrongly assumes that he excluded visual and metaphoric articulations from his theory of language. Koselleck was open to his critics, whom he invited to publish in the series *Sprache und Geschichte*.

Since the 1960s, the reception of *Begriffsgeschichte* in other countries has taken different orientations. For example, in Sweden Björn Wittrock has combined Koselleck's methodology with social theory. In Finland, a stronghold of conceptual history, the main representatives are, on the one hand, Kari Palonen, who links it with political theory and the work of Quentin Skinner,[5] and, on the other, Henrik Stenius (Helsinki).[6]

In Spain, Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise* appeared in translation as early as 1965, during Franco's conservative regime, as Luis Fernández (Bilbao) explained. Today, three different receptions exist there, from philosopher Faustino Oncina Coves (Valencia) to historians Javier Fernández Sebastián (Bilbao) and Juan Francisco Fuentes (Complutense, Madrid). In France, conceptual historians like Marcel Gauchet and Pierre Rosanvallon do not refer to Koselleck's work at all, Alexandre Escudier (Sciences Po, Paris) claimed. However, his work was introduced to the French audience by Raymond Monnier already in 1966. Paul Ricoeur also wrote about him but mainly to criticise his theory as utopian and conservative.

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 scholarly identity as a historian or theoretician. Some scholars try to combine him with a Habermasean 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).

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.[7] Thematically, it will encompass conceptual histories in Asia, recognising wider cross-national collaboration and experimentation.

NOTES

1 The HPSCG website is at: http://www.jyu.fi/yhtfil/hpscg (accessed 12 July 2008).

2 For more information on the Istanbul conference, see http://www.itb.itu.edu.tr/anchorage (accessed 12 July 2008).

3 For details on the Helsinki summer school, see: http://www.helsinki.fi/summerschool/courses/6 (accessed 12 July 2008).

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

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/deplo/conceptual/