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Toward a comparatist horizon in conceptual history

Conceptual history in the European space, edited by Willibald Steinmetz, Michael Freeden and Javier Fernández-Sebastián, New York and Oxford, Berghahn Books, 2017, 320 pp., \$120.00/£85.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-78533-482-5

Once a German offshoot of the vast field of the history of ideas, conceptual history is now a well-established discipline with growing ranks of scholars from all over the world and from an array of research areas in the humanities and the social sciences. The book reviewed here is the latest, and, perhaps, most momentous of the collective volumes that have accounted for new research horizons, or interrogated old ones, in conceptual history in this decade. According to Willibald Steinmetz and Michael Freeden, it is ‘the lead volume to an ambitious series of volumes on conceptual histories in Europe’ (1). Although neither found in the title nor frequently repeated in the book, the plural is actually a good choice because it highlights the comparatist ethos of the book and the entire project. In this respect, this volume is not singular in the landscape of recent publications in conceptual history¹; but *Conceptual History in the European Space* is above all a highly programmatic book that brings together some of today’s most prolific and influential conceptual historians who offer a theoretical foundation to the comparatist horizon in conceptual history.

The introduction, featuring the subtitle ‘Conceptual History: Challenges, Conundrums, Complexities’, deserves special attention, because it is a kind of disciplinary soul-searching into the core principles and most widespread practices of conceptual history. More specifically, this document reevaluates the foundational contributions of Reinhart Koselleck’s *Begriffsgeschichte* in light of the comparatist nature of this ambitious transnational research project and highlights some new directions, approaches, and methodologies for the discipline at large. In an era of deep mistrust of Eurocentric grand narratives like ‘modernity’ or ‘Enlightenment’ and increased awareness of the divisive forces at work within Europe itself, some of the ‘challenges’ and ‘conundrums’ discussed here pose serious threats to key aspects of Koselleck’s theory and practice, which still dominate conceptual history. For example, Koselleck’s metaphor of the *Sattelzeit* (literally, ‘saddle-time’), designating the age when a new understanding of historical time and many of the fundamental concepts that define modern polities emerged and became established in the German lexicon between 1750 and 1850, has been adopted as valuable common ground for comparatist approaches.² However, other conceptual historians have found the *Sattelzeit* hypothesis deeply problematic for individual national projects.³ The authors of the introduction have found an elegant solution to this problem by turning attention away from periodization and focusing on Koselleck’s seminal analysis of the accelerated processes of semantic change in this historical period, i.e. phenomena such as the ‘temporalization’ (as seen in the emergence of concepts like ‘progress’ and ‘development’), politicization, ideologization, and democratization of concepts. These phenomena transcend the borders of German-speaking nations, as well as the limited time span of the *Sattelzeit*. According to Steinmetz and Freeden, ‘rupture, replacement, distortion’, and the nationalization of sociopolitical language in Europe’s

¹Similar projects include *A Global Conceptual History of Asia 1860–1940* edited by Hagen Schulz-Forberg (London, 2014), *Doing Conceptual History in Africa* edited by Axel Fleisch and Rhiannon Stephens (New York and Oxford, 2016), and *Global Conceptual History: A Reader* edited by Margrit Pernau and Dominic Sachsenmaier (London, 2016). Moreover, in the European Conceptual History series, *Conceptual History in the European Space* is preceded by *Parliament and Parliamentarism: A Comparative History of a European Concept*, edited by Pasi Ihalainen, Cornelia Ilie and Kari Palonen (New York and Oxford, 2016).

²See the IBERCONCEPTOS project directed by Javier Fernández-Sebastián (www.iberconceptos.net).

³Pim den Boer, ‘National Concepts, Transnational Concepts: *Begriffsgeschichte* Beyond Conceptual Nationalism’, in *Political Concepts and Time. New Approaches to Conceptual History*, ed. J. Fernández-Sebastián (Santander: Cantabria University Press, 2011), 210.

peripheral regions or in countries with a history of occupation by foreign powers are other modalities of conceptual change that deserve as much attention as those investigated by Koselleck (6). The contributions by Henrik Stenius, Helge Jordheim, Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi, and, of course, Steinmetz himself, follow this direction. Furthermore, the focus on ‘vernacularization’ allows the contributors to this and future volumes in the series to broaden conceptual history’s ‘traditional’ focus on modernity so as to account for a much longer period, from the Middle Ages to the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, by heeding the challenges posed by phenomena such as globalization, anglicization, and, one might add, the digitalization of the public sphere. However, this exciting idea seems to be launched programmatically, as inspirational for future projects, because, with the exception of Mishkova and Trencsényi’s study of the conceptualization of regions in European history from the 1850s to the 1990s, all of the contributions to this volume remain focused on the *Sattelzeit* or some slightly modified version of it.

In addition to the problem of periodization, the *Sattelzeit* points to an even greater obstacle for comparatist and transnational projects in conceptual history, namely, language. Translations and concept transfers from a foreign language and even from older varieties of the same language are especially difficult to apply to and account for in conceptual history because they rarely transplant new notions onto an allegedly virgin semantic landscape. More often than not, translations involve adaptations or ‘naturalizations’ of borrowed concepts within the target language, a process that emphasizes the cultural and historical particularities of the ‘source’ text as well. Furthermore, historians must also re-translate the findings of semantic analysis into today’s lingua franca or into a language that all the other historians understand. That is why Koselleck himself was sceptical of comparative historical semantics and maintained that a ‘metalanguage’ was needed to mediate between conceptual worlds.⁴ Rather than adopting an overoptimistic attitude by simply equating Koselleck’s ‘metalanguage’ with Latin, Greek, and the Judeo-Christian tradition, the contributors to this volume seem to acknowledge the aporetic nature of the problem and highlight not only the challenges, but also the opportunities opened up by this imperfect, incomplete, but highly dynamic translatability of concepts. For example, Jörn Leonhard calls for an increased awareness of the relational dimension of comparative history in general and conceptual history in particular. His solution, which he previously expounded in an interdisciplinary volume on translation, political philosophy and conceptual history, is to account for the processes of transfer and entanglement over longer periods in an attempt to determine the moments when translations actually contribute to the emergence of new concepts and semantic change.⁵ Here Leonhard illustrates this approach with a quantitative analysis of the successive translations and modifications of ‘liberalism’ and ‘liberality’ from French into German, Italian, and English in the nineteenth century (183–7). In another chapter, László Kontler argues that comparative conceptual history could become more receptive to recent research in translation studies, especially to topics such as the agency of translators and the broad cultural significance of everything they overlook, leave out, or rewrite from the source text (203).

Another major step in the direction of comparatist conceptual history signalled in the introduction and developed in some of the contributions is manifest in the shift of focus toward synchronicity, the performativity of concepts, conceptual morphology, and the study of interrelationships among concepts. This is not in itself a departure from Koselleck’s practice of conceptual history, although his work clearly indicates a preference for diachronic analyses. Comparatist purposes notwithstanding, a possible explanation for the turn to synchronicity is the attempt to address one of the most problematic aspects of the otherwise impressive methodological apparatus of conceptual history, namely the contingent nature of the historian’s choice of concepts and contexts. Why study

⁴R. Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, trans. Todd Presner and Others (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 217; J. Fernández-Sebastián and Juan Francisco Fuentes, ‘Conceptual History, Memory, and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck’, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 1 (2006): 111.

⁵J. Leonhard, ‘Translation as Cultural Transfer and Semantic Interaction: European Variations of *Liberal* Between 1800 and 1830’, in *Why Concepts Matter: Translating Social and Political Thought*, ed. Martin Burke and Melvin Richter (Leiden: Brill, 2012), 95–7.

one concept and not another? Which weight to give to different diachronic and synchronic constituents of the semantic field of a concept? Ultimately, as Koselleck noted, historians ‘dispose’ of history ‘by writing it up’,⁶ and that is true even for conceptual historians, who intervene on texts at the semantic level, selecting those groups of meaning that activate or inhibit a concept. However, even a conceptual historian’s most persuasive choices can hardly go uncontested, because ambiguity is a fundamental characteristic of concepts.⁷ In one of the last sections of the introduction, ‘Conceptualizing Concepts’, Steinmetz and Freeden reflect on the sources of conceptual indeterminacy, namely, the internal polysemy of concepts and their embedment within cultural contexts by reevaluating the fundamental Koselleckian notions of semantic field and conceptual interdependence in light of the challenges posed by writing a conceptual history of Europe. The ideas expressed here echo Freeden’s impressive work on the disciplinary overlap between ideology studies and conceptual history, and bring forward his model of conceptual morphology and the method based on the ‘micro-analysis of conceptual structure’, which he presented and illustrated elsewhere.⁸ With respect to conceptual interdependence, Steinmetz and Freeden conclude that conceptual historians who wish to move beyond studying concepts in isolation (something Koselleck warned against, but quite common in conceptual history) might benefit from approaching the interconnections among concepts as cases of intertwinement rather than entanglement, because ‘their micro-structure ensures overlap, the sharing of ideational elements, with other concepts’ (26). The editors’ recommendation to pay more attention to networks or clusters of concepts and to what holds them together, namely, the subcomponents of their semantic fields, bespeaks a concern with increasing the methodological diligence and accuracy of conceptual historical analyses. In the same vein, Steinmetz and Freeden call for a more thorough integration of the onomasiological approach, which, unlike the dominant semasiological one, which starts from words that designate the concepts of interest, starts from phenomena or historical problems and looks for relevant terms used by historical agents to explain these phenomena. This recommendation is reiterated by Javier Fernández-Sebastián in the concluding chapter and to a large extent heeded by Jani Marjanen, Victor Neumann, and Henrik Stenius in their contributions.

Finally, a few words are in order about Michael Freeden’s essay in this volume; it is a weighty piece of what might be called a post-Koselleckian methodology of conceptual history, in which Freeden argues for the mutual benefits of conceptual history joining hands with ideology studies. The crux of Freeden’s thesis is his poststructuralist understanding of language and the subsequent realization that, in as much as social and political concepts are signified by words, they are subject to such central features of language as ambiguity, indeterminacy, and inconclusiveness and thus make impossible the conceptual historians’ tasks of affixing meanings and reconstructing intentionality. With a nod to Ricoeur’s notion of ‘surplus of meaning’, Freeden draws attention to the dimension of unintentionality in concepts, a dimension that can be accounted for by studying the ways in which ideologies attempt to impose semantic control on political language. In other words, the essential contestability of concepts or their semantic fluidity can be acknowledged and more thoroughly dealt with in conceptual history by recourse to the study of the most recognizable device of ideologies: semantic decontestation. This approach and Freeden’s ensuing exploration of the advantages of the study of ideologies and concepts for inter and intra-cultural comparisons make this study especially interesting for literary historians, comparative literature scholars, and for all critics of the historicist denomination. If the task of (comparatist) conceptual historians may now seem even more daunting, an increased awareness of the indeterminacy and contingency of language will at least contribute to greater reflexivity in the field of conceptual history. As Javier Fernandez Sebastian writes in the concluding chapter, the ‘historicization

⁶R. Koselleck, *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 193.


⁷*Ibid.*, 85.

⁸M. Freeden, ‘Ideology and Conceptual History: The Interrelationship between Method and Meaning’, in *Political Concepts and Time* (see note 2), 76.

and cross-analysis of the constellations of concepts and categories through which we perceive the world favour a much more distanced and critical vision of our own conceptual lenses and filters' (294).

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