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JAVIER FERNÁNDEZ SEBASTIÁN (ed.)

Political Concepts and Time. New Approaches to Conceptual History

Cantabria University Press, Mc Graw-Hill, Interamericana de España, Santander, 2011, 442 pp.

The innovative valorization of the results obtained by linguistics and sociology, the priority granted to the analysis and interpretation of historical, philosophical and literary texts, the problematizations and work hypotheses regarding cultural-political thought and social realities, all these aspects derive from the methods promoted by Reinhart Koselleck's impressive oeuvre. The most recent volume related to this field of study is *Political Concepts and Time. New Approaches to Conceptual History*. The book demonstrates the broadness, profundity and usefulness of conceptual history and the history of concepts for contemporary humanist and socio-political sciences. Initiated and edited by Javier Fernández Sebastián, professor of the history of political thought at the University of Bilbao, the above-mentioned volume significantly contributes to the renewal of research methods by offering a collection of studies written by some of the best-known contemporary historians and political analysts who are top-notch promoters and continuators of Koselleck's theoretical construction.

The volume is structured in three parts, including thirteen studies and two annexes. Part 1 is dedicated to the relation of conceptual history and kindred disciplines; Part 2 focuses on the temporalization of experiences and concepts; Part 3 deals with historical semantics and modern time. The annexes comprise, on one hand, a commemorative speech in memory of Reinhart Koselleck due to Professor Christian Meyer from Munich and, on the other hand, a project for a European conceptual history proposed by a group of historians, political analysts and philosophers from various European and American universities who have dedicated their work over the last decades to undertaking research and promoting

the history of concepts and conceptual history as a new method to assess the past, social events and political thought. *Political Concepts and Time* includes contributions by Javier Fernández Sebastián (Bilbao), Hans-Erich Bödeker (Göttingen), Pim dem Boer (Amsterdam), Elías José Palti (Quilmes and Buenos Aires), Michael Freeden (Oxford), Peter Burke (Cambridge), Giuseppe Duso (Padua), Alexandre Escudier (Paris), João Ferez Júnior (Rio de Janeiro), Jacques Guilhaumou (Lyon), Jorn Leonhard (Jena), Kari Palonen (Jyväskylä), Faustino Oncina Coves (Berlin).

The book is the result of the fertile cooperation among a group of researchers from adjoined areas of study who nonetheless represent different academic traditions and research styles. The common denominators connecting all the contributions include a shared theoretical grounding, their interest in languages understood as social phenomena which transcend time, their attraction to the culture and symbology of politics, their concern for the metamorphosis of the historical horizon (Javier Fernández Sebastián, "Introduction. The Relevance of Conceptual History", p. 6). Not limiting themselves to the study of history understood in its classical sense, the authors discuss the culture of the present and, in particular, working methods in the fields of socio-human sciences. Their studies aim to foster historical clarification, to decode key-concepts, to analyze and define the type of political thought specific to the various stages of modernization.

Some authors consider that *Begriffsgeschichte* does not only represent a theory of history, but also a theory of politics understood as an activity. In this sense, conceptual history not only highlights "the role of politics for history, but also the fact that the former can offer an adequate framework for political thought". Indeed,

from his earliest writings, Koselleck's historiography and fundamental theses regarding the course of Europe and Germany from the age of the Enlightenment until the present era also "included a certain vision of politics" (Kari Palonen, "Contingency, Political Theory and Conceptual History", p. 179). According to other authors, Koselleck's theory regarding the divergence between experience and expectations could be broadened because, from a formal point of view, "expectations" always comprise two essentially heterogeneous elements, namely "predictive-cognitive" and "normative-expectative" aspects. "Predictive-cognitive" aspects claim that they express reality by historicizing scientific methods, revealing and bringing to one's consciousness structures coming from the past and looking towards a near future; "normative-expectative" aspects refer to religious-dogmatic or secularizing-philosophical expectations dependent on time as well as to cultures and representations of redemption and justice (Alexandre Escudier, "Temporalization and Political Modernity: A Tentative Systematization of the Work of Reinhart Koselleck", pp. 131-177).

The book's attempt to systematize the evolution of the semantics of modern politics is particularly praiseworthy and fosters the possibility to understand the diversity of theses which complement those thought by Koselleck on the margin of democratization, politicization and ideologization. As to the strategies of de-ideologization, we can either speak of national or communitarian-linguistic strategies transferred from one era to another, or we can discuss fundamentalist strategies which might look similar throughout Europe, but actually acquire specific meanings function of various regions' languages, cultures and religious traditions.

Political Concepts and Time maps post-Koselleck scholarly emphases on the history of experiences which are analyzed from a comparative perspective. The volume simultaneously probes the semantic transformations which occur during periods of transition. Under the

circumstances, special attention is vested upon the three dimensions of historical experiences highlighted by Koselleck and represented by the polarities internal vs. external, top vs. bottom, earlier vs. later periods of time. "There can be no articulation or communication of expectations in the absence of a reservoir of prior experiences concentrated in concepts, arguments and languages of political and social discourses" (Jörn Leonhard, "Language, Experience and Translation: Towards a Comparative Dimension", p. 266). Henceforth derives the need to lay emphasis on the transmission of legacies which took up the form of translation or importation of concepts from one language into another during the era in which modern states were being forged. In this sense, Jörn Leonhard explains concepts such as liberal, liberal idea, liberal constitution, nation, regime, etc. in order to indicate semantic differences between the French and German languages.

References to *Begriffsgeschichte* stimulate a vast and unfinished debate on the concept's place and role as an analytical and critical-interpretive model within humanist and socio-political sciences. Beyond the multitude of existent hypotheses, it is worth noting that in the past *Begriffsgeschichte* used to be seen as a history of theory and the history of theory itself was deemed to be *Begriffsgeschichte*. According to Hans-Erich Bödeker, one of the most rigorous connoisseurs of Koselleck's oeuvre, *Begriffsgeschichte* is not only a history of concepts, but also a history of the relationship of these concepts with words and objects. Bödeker's observation is just and heeds Koselleck's remark according to which we can speak of the existence of a concept only when the meanings of individual terms referring to the same object are combined and explained in a manner which goes beyond their referential function within a given context.

Begriffsgeschichte is simultaneously a synchronic and diachronic interpretation of particular linguistic signs. It unveils a diverse array of meanings and historical movements seen from the perspective of

events, contexts and "long durations" of history. It is synchronic because its analysis "implies the historical-critical study of the semantics specific to a certain period of time and its extra-linguistic context". It is diachronic because "it sequentially reconstructs meanings associated to the concept throughout time". *Begriffsgeschichte* deals with the examination and understanding of historical processes, it focuses upon the contexts in which acts of knowledge and interpretation are developed, and on their conceptualization (Hans-Erich Bödeker, "*Begriffsgeschichte* as the History of Theory. The History of Theory as *Begriffsgeschichte*: An Essay", pp. 19-45; cf. pp. 23-25, 38). Certainly, such preoccupations primarily derive from a history of historiography, an idea minutely developed and explained in Bödeker's essay. It is no less true that in the case of Koselleck we deal with his own theory of history, the topics he studied benefiting from numerous and original hypotheses. Consequently, what is at stake is a theory of the historical time grounded upon past socio-political and cultural realities. Put differently, without eluding words, historical or political facts and events as well as purely speculative attempts should also be investigated.

Since the study of the evolution of a single concept does not automatically entail understanding its modifications throughout time, several authors explore a concept's interaction with other concepts that support it, give it strength, contradict it or interfere with it. There are differences between the present-day meaning we ascribe to a concept and the goal of conceptual analysis, namely tracing the multiple meanings of a concept. *Political Concepts and Time* comprises chapters discussing topics, subject-matters or problematic issues which are either related to or derived from *Begriffsgeschichte*. The volume also includes chapters in which authors offer more nuanced analyses or develop their own critical position in relation to the history of concepts and conceptual history. Among such essays, one counts those

exploring the complex and controversial concept of ideology (Michael Freeden); metaphorology and the analysis of semantic changes (Elías José Palti); iconography and memory (Faustino Oncina); comparative history (Pim dem Boer, Jorn Leonhard); cultural history (Peter Burke); the concept of power (Giuseppe Dusso).

Michael Freeden, for instance, underlines the various categories for understanding the concept of *ideology* and invokes the amalgam of commentaries on its margin. He discusses the possibility of such a concept to enrich the field of conceptual history, once the evolution of its meanings becomes known. The main political trait of ideologies has become an inevitable feature of the competitive struggle for the control of political languages; this actually means that a lot of orientations co-exist within one given location at a certain moment in time. This kind of investigations should be given special attention not only within the circles of philosophers and political analysts, but also within the circles of historians. Whether they are drawn or not to concepts and conceptual history, historians can benefit from useful explanations which can be subsequently applied in the scientific narration of facts or in the problematization of the past (Michael Freeden, "*Ideology and Conceptual History: The Interrelationship between Method and Meaning*", pp. 73-103; cf. pp. 73-75, 78, 96).

Comparative history also provides a productive method of research. In this sense, Pim dem Boer concentrates on the exceptional domestic and international career of the famous lexicon *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (GG); he describes conceptual history from the perspective of older and newer national projects of conceptual history. After assessing the role of plurilinguism and transnational concepts, Pim dem Boer points to the reasons for which *Begriffsgeschichte* has become a research area generating significant changes in point of historical and socio-political studies. He notes that national projects of this kind are important for the demystification of history, for the positioning of historiography under

the sign of interdisciplinarity and especially for overcoming nationalist approaches that dominated works written over the past centuries. The success of the new German paradigm – due to Koselleck's creative vision – has had echoes in the Netherlands, France, Finland, Spain, the U.S. as well as in the academic environments of Eastern Europe (in Romania, Russia, Hungary, Bulgaria¹). Comparing the merits of various schools, the historian from Amsterdam concludes that even though from a quantitative and methodological point of view the GG project was more advanced than others, one should not ignore the numerous and highly specialized case studies carried out by other institutes such as the French laboratories from Saint Cloud (Pim dem Boer, "National Cultures, Transnational Concepts: *Begriffsgeschichte* Beyond Conceptual Nationalism", pp. 205-223).

For other authors, the core-question to address refers to the benefits that socio-political sciences can draw from the basic theories of conceptual history. Conscious of the widespread reception of Reinhart Koselleck's writings in non-German historiographical environments, João Ferez Júnior focuses upon their reception within the circles of political theoreticians. He brings forth two examples which he considers to represent highly relevant exceptions: the oeuvres of Melvin Richter and Kari Palonen. His study shows that the two scholars decisively contributed to the comparative and complementary

understanding of scientific works resulting from the sophisticated philosophy proposed by *Begriffsgeschichte* and by the methodologies of the Cambridge School. The goal of the author is to identify the specific manner in which one can use the theoretical apparatus of *Begriffsgeschichte* and to see if it can play a role in forging normative political theories.

João Ferez Júnior proposes a critical-rational analysis which challenges Koselleck's theory and narration of history, the meta-concepts of the *Sattelzeit* family or the ruptures between the space of experience and the horizon of expectations. "There is no single reason why we should believe that all societies have become modern by passing through a *Sattelzeit* or that this latter concept represents at once the beginning and the end." This is a point of view which deserves further reflection. The author spotlights the existence of cultural and modernization differences from one geographical space to another and, on this basis, he formulates his reserve towards the interpretive grids proposed by Koselleck. As to the temporalization, ideologization, democratization and politicization of concepts sustained by Koselleck, Júnior considers all these to represent nothing more than mere work hypotheses (João Ferez Júnior, "With an Eye on Future Research: The Theoretical Layers of Conceptual History", pp. 223-240).

In fact, not only the extra-European spaces invoked by the scholar from Rio de Janeiro ask for the necessity to delineate the diverse array of semantic processes, but also the regions of Europe itself, namely the comparative outlook one could draw on Southern and Northern Europe or on Eastern and Western Europe. For instance, there are sufficient arguments which prove that one cannot always identify similarities between the meanings of German and French concepts, on one hand, and the meanings of concepts from East-Central, South-Eastern, or Mediterranean Europe, on the other hand. This state of the matter does not necessarily entail the existence of parallel languages, nor does it mean

¹ Jointly with Armin Heinen, professor at the University of Aachen, I founded in Timișoara an International Doctoral School of Conceptual History, which bears the name of Reinhart Koselleck, and a Center for the Study of Conceptual History within the University of Timișoara. We have also edited a collective volume of conceptual history including contributors from various European and American universities. See Victor NEUMANN, Armin HEINEN, *Istoria României prin concepte. Perspective alternative asupra limbajelor social-politice*, Polirom, Iași, 2010.

that we should ignore the difficulty of communication or the lack of a *sensus communis* characterizing the cultural and socio-political languages of Europe. Or, hardly ever, if at all, does Koselleck's oeuvre spotlight social experiences and a mode of thinking receptive to continuities. Given this, we should not ignore the perspective opened by Fernand Braudel's concept of *la longue durée*. The French scholar's theoretical innovation and contribution are firmly grounded in serious historical research and refer to multiple European geographical and cultural spaces. I strongly believe that by admitting the methodological complementarity of the two cited scholars, we can manage to offer a more nuanced and objective exploration of the time of the European and extra-European modernity.

Without doubt, the exaggerated reliance on metaphors such as *Sattelzeit* – challenged by João Ferez Júnior – or *Zeitschichten* can sometimes give rise to confusions in point of understanding and interpreting the past. Though both concepts are used with credible results and similar meanings in several Western cultures and they have created modern political languages in various world regions, one shouldn't use generalizations when analyzing the notional and conceptual transfers from one language to another. The mechanical application of interpretive grids and methodological innovations equates with failing to take into consideration the context in which the events under analysis emerged. Whatever might be the concept under examination, one cannot ignore the semantic transformations fostered by geography, culture and society. Despite the borrowings of fundamental notions and concepts – I refer here to those that stimulated socio-political modernization –, geographic, linguistic and cultural diversities have played the dominant role in either conserving or creating languages and messages with different meanings.

Additionally, using as points of departure several drawbacks from the history of concepts, Elías José Palti believes that we can only know the past if we also

take into consideration non-conceptual forms, metaphors and myths which draw a symbolical configuration of reality. In his view, the history of concepts cannot progress by only using its own terms, he therefore paves the way for Hans Blumenberg's project concerning "a history of non-conceptuality" (Elías José Palti, "From Ideas to Concepts to Metaphors: The German Tradition of Intellectual History and the Complex Fabric of Language", pp. 45-72). The time of modernization was not the same for all the countries of Europe, even less so for universal history, though an accelerated pace of thought and political life existed. Most often, transitions to modernity lasted for a long time and were accompanied by specific features which can be accounted for thanks to the very different meanings ascribed to concepts and languages (see the example of the concept revolution in the Hispanic world, and the transformations expressed by political languages in Javier Fernández Sebastián's study, "Riding the Devil's Steed". Politics and Historical Acceleration in an Age of Revolution", pp. 369-401).

Interpretive approximations are insufficient for the comprehension of paradigmatic changes. The discrepancies existing between different social structures or between the various sets of values characterizing the diverse national communities that co-exist within the borders of various states, the excessive focus on specificities, the predominance of nationalism or the ignorance given to immediate vicinities represent topics of interest that have widely proliferated in scholarly works to the detriment of a necessary parallel attempt to simultaneously analyze similitudes. (In this sense, it would be particularly worth discussing "the ego paradigm and its socio-historical horizons" developed in Jacques Guilhaumou's study, "The Temporality of Historical Forms of Individualization in Modern Times", pp. 345-369). Consequently, drawing upon the relevant observations and new work hypotheses offered by João Ferez Júnior, Elías José Palti and Javier

Fernández Sebastián, it is important to always keep in mind that, as scholars, we are free to choose the most adequate research methods to apply to particular case studies function of the context, time, historical and socio-political processes we examine. We thereby have the opportunity to decode those ambiguities resulting from the slow movement of mankind and from the reflexes inherited from pre-modern times which, in spite of apparent metamorphoses, have deeply insinuated themselves in the languages and behavior of the modern world².

Political Concepts and Time comprises excellent analyses of political concepts, historiographical interrogations and original contributions regarding the reception and multiple meanings of Reinhart Koselleck's theoretical oeuvre, including plausible answers to the challenges launched by the famous scholar. The volume particularly highlights the importance of problematizing time and concepts, especially political concepts. Present-day historians look back upon their work methods and criticize those that have become obsolete. Meanwhile, their major aim is to better and more accurately understand the worlds of the past by formulating alternative theories and points of view, and by foregrounding the necessity to periodically rewrite history function of the ever-changing accumulations of historiography, political examinations, philosophical theories and the level of knowledge of one's contemporaries.

Political Concepts and Time proposes innovative scientific approaches which will become important reference points for many scholars from the humanist and socio-political fields. As the editor asserts, specialists from the fields of hermeneutics, cultural history, translation studies, metaphorology, law, sociology, discourse analysis, or cognitive sciences can highly benefit from familiarizing themselves with conceptual history. The reverse is equally true – historians of concepts can enrich their own perspective of the past and present once they valorize the results of the above-mentioned specialists. The exceptional value of concepts derives from the act of interpreting their multiple meanings. That is the case because they often tend to "secretly transcend literal and metaphorical boundaries". Their relevance is visible in all the fields of knowledge and in all social milieus (Javier Fernández Sebastián, "Introduction, The Relevance of Conceptual History", p. 4).

Political Concepts and Time represents a seminal work, ever more so because the majority of its pages draw upon pluri- and interdisciplinary research efforts. The book is the result of the editor's long-lasting and sustained effort to bring together contributors from various universities, cultures and world areas. The indisputable merit for this exceptional scientific new publication is undoubtedly due to professor Javier Fernández Sebastián who, on one hand, wisely selected, structured, and edited this exemplary collection of texts function of the major ideas and thought-provoking themes initiated by Koselleck's thought and oeuvre, and on the other hand, foregrounded the diversity of meanings that can be ascribed to conceptual history – an endeavor which is particularly relevant in view of the progress of knowledge.

VICTOR NEUMANN

² Victor NEUMANN, "Istoriceskoto vreme b cvacianjata na Brodel i Koselek. Cravnumelno razslejgane (Le temps historique: une perspective comparative entre Braudel et Koselleck/Die historische Zeit in den Auffassungen von Braudel und Koselleck. Vergleichsbetrachtung)", in *Okolo Rainhart Koselek. Istoricesko Vreme u temporalnost*, Sofia, 2003, pp. 444-459.