

Toward a Transnational History of Political Concepts in the Iberian-American World: A Brief Account of an Ongoing Project (*Iberconceptos*)

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The subject of this paper is to briefly present a research project currently in progress entitled *Iberconceptos*, which has been in motion, under my guidance, for the last two years. This is a project that fits perfectly into a conference of this kind as, on the one hand, it aims to explore a crossroads between political cultures either side of the Atlantic and on the other, it proposes writing the history of concepts, in such a way that it goes beyond the Nation-State.

In this brief exposition, I will just give a summary of the project’s origins, aims, hypotheses and methodology, and will describe those involved and the organisation that we ourselves established.

The Project’s Origins, Approach and Participants

Although its distant origins can be found in our previous experience in Spain, where we have been working on a programme of research and publication on conceptual history for over a decade, the project was prepared two years ago in Brazil. During the 7th HPSCG Annual Conference in Rio de Janeiro in July 2004, a small group of Spanish/Portuguese-speaking European and American scholars decided to set up the *Iberian-American Network of Political-Conceptual and Intellectual History*, which constitutes a regional subgroup belonging to the HPSCG. One of the network’s fundamental aims, apart from promoting debates on various matters related to intellectual history (as we have been doing through the “Iberoideas” virtual forum at: <http://foroiberoideas.cervantesvirtual.com/>), was to favour academic relations and to encourage joint projects between Latin American researchers and those from the Iberian Peninsula (Portugal and Spain).

Until now, over sixty researchers have taken part in the project, divided into nine teams working on the following countries: Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, México, Peru, Portugal, Spain and Venezuela. An International Committee for Coordination

made up of nine members (one for each team) has provided organisational support. There are also researchers of other nationalities, including a number of scholars belonging to universities and research centres in France, Germany and the United States. We all work in coordination on ten conceptual items that we consider fundamental to the origins of modern politics: *America/Americans; citizen; Constitution; federation/federalism; history; liberal/liberalism; nation; public opinion; people; Republic/Republicans*. Our aim is to analyse how a vocabulary, though considerably common to the Atlantic world, and according to the particular political and social circumstances of each area and country, historically presents varieties that at times contrast the practices, categories and institutions of political life from one place to another. All in all, we strive to show what the differences and similarities are in each of these Euro-American, continental, regional and national experiences and traditions, by means of studying the semantic history of a handful of key concepts in different contexts. (Theoretically, nothing would impede the examination of nuances at a level below that of Nation-State either, that is, at a local or provincial level, or even a study of cultural exchange between sometimes quite distant cities. However, we renounce that task on the grounds of project operability because it is already rather complex as it is without going into such a detailed analysis).

The organisational design of the project considers the junction between a vertical axis (the countries) and a horizontal one (the concepts), so that a comparative approach is thus made possible. From there, in most cases, each of the national coordinators is responsible for transversely coordinating a specific concept.

The choice of the ten basic socio-political, identity concepts we are working on in this first phase (2004-2007) was carried out by consensus, although it was not easy to reach agreement. The selection process brought to light some of the difficulties we are now coming across, as it demonstrated that the relative importance of this or that concept was certainly not the same in one society as in another in the same historical period. Such difficulties, or to be more precise, the difference in significance and chronology as regards some basic notions from one national area to another, turn out to be intellectually stimulating however, as it tells us that it is necessary to search for satisfactory explanations for the unevenness. Anyway, the differences do have to be examined from a double angle, adding preferably a diachronic perspective of cultural transfers to the synchronic analysis of concepts.

Our chronological reference period stretches from the middle of the 18th century

to the middle of the 19th, and therefore coincides *grosso modo* with the height of the Enlightenment and, above all, with the great revolutionary cycle beginning on both sides of the Hispanic-Portuguese Atlantic with the crisis of the two Iberian monarchies in 1808. As from this turning point, which seriously affects the whole Iberian-American world, the critical phase of a rapid change begins, giving way to a new conceptual universe associated with a range of unprecedented political experiences, prospects and realities. We are talking about a vast political, conceptual and constitutional laboratory which, in our opinion, has not attracted the attention it deserved, not only for its huge territorial and human scope but also for the relative precociousness with which it evolves (alongside the North American and French revolutionary experiences). As regards the Spanish empire, while in the metropolis an intermittent process of liberal Revolution was begun with the Constitution of Cadiz (1812) –one which would not finally triumph until the mid-1830s-, in Hispanic America the crucial phase of crisis (1810-1825) would last for one and a half decades of revolutions and wars of independence. This is when the new republics were born in the whole subcontinent, from Mexico to the River Plate, resulting in the breaking up of Imperial Spain. However, the course of the kingdom of Portugal and Brazil was quite different: the royal family moved to Rio de Janeiro in 1808 and the fact that, as a result of the ephemeral victory of the liberal Revolution in the old metropolis in 1820, Don Pedro was proclaimed constitutional Emperor of Brazil (1822). This is a very interesting counterpoint between the two Iberian empires.

In short, one of the main objectives of our project is to highlight the coincidences and contrasts, similarities and differences between the various ways of understanding the ten basic concepts studied in each one of our nine “countries” or geopolitical frameworks of study throughout the major transition lasting from 1750/1770 to 1850/1870. And, above all, we aim to interpret such similarities and differences in the light of the particular varying contexts and circumstances of each place.

Hypotheses and Methodology

Our starting hypotheses are the following:

1. At the turn of the 19th century a major mutation took place in the lexical-semantic universe which supported political institutions and practices in the Hispanic-Portuguese Atlantic. The whole symbolic framework which made sense of the customs,

regulations and institutions controlling collective life were subjected to a profound extensive renovation. This great political-conceptual earthquake, which reached a considerable part of the western world in many ways, was accompanied by a new experience of history in many places. The change is clearly perceptible in the two Iberian countries and their overseas dominions at the beginning of the 1800s, a time when the principal political agents experienced the unknown feeling of History's availability; History was beginning to be conceived as a guide-concept of modernity.

2. So as to adequately gauge such political and linguistic changes and the interrelation between both types of change, the historian must try to get as close as possible to the way in which men of the past saw the world. This entails trying to understand the unavoidable rhetorical dimension of politics –which is pragmatically built up day by day in specific socio-cultural contexts, so as to respond to the most urgent challenges of political life-, but without scorning the temporary internal profundity of the notions such agents used (that is, in Koselleckian terms, the semantic layers of fundamental concepts and the variable balance that language users established between accumulated experience horizons of expectation associated with each concept). This triple approach –cultural, pragmatic and semantic- seems especially suitable for the case of the Hispanic revolutions. In fact, as opposed to the French model (where the revolution was accompanied by an unusual will for rupture and radical substitution of one symbolic universe for another), there seems to have been a high degree of survival and readjustment of several of the Old Regime's cultural, discursive and institutional elements, thus producing greater continuity between the old order and the new post revolutionary societies.

3. This deep conceptual transformation, which can be clearly detected in the analysis of discourses, was accompanied by important changes in the sphere of identities, thus shaping new collective agents. Certain concepts with a strong identity potential especially referring to territorial, social, political or ideological ownership of the individuals –*American, Spaniard, Mexican, Portuguese, Creole, individual, citizen, insurgent, liberal, patriot, republican* and so on- would in fact be at the foundations of the emergence of the new agents that were going to play an important role in modern politics over the following decades in the various Iberian-American spaces.

4. Our final hypothesis points towards the fact that a comparative study of the concepts of the Iberian-American world needs to bear in mind both the common substratum of a political culture that, to a certain extent, had been shared for three

centuries, and the sometimes deeply-set contextual differences explaining the increasing diversification of the social use and significance attributed to concepts. These concepts did not have a fixed meaning for one word -nation, people, constitution, representation, public opinion, etc.– and they did not cover identical realities and did not arouse the same expectations among the political and intellectual elites of all territories. We assume that this diversification grew with the processes of emancipation and creation of the new independent Republics and States in the former Spanish and Portuguese America; but this is naturally a hypothesis that will have to be proved.

It is clear from this listing of the main hypotheses that we have introduced some considerations of a methodological nature. In fact, a lot can be said about the methodology used. First of all, it is necessary to recognise the fact that the members of the nine participating national groups do not all have the same level of knowledge and skills in this sphere (for example, there are more consolidated teams that have been developing independent national projects for some time, while there are others made up *ex profeso* so as to be incorporated in *Iberconceptos*). Nevertheless, without scorning the contributions of our own academic tradition, –we will just say that in the case of Spain, for example, certain studies on historical lexicography published during the last few decades have come in very useful– we are trying to combine some basic assumptions of *Begriffsgeschichte* with the so-called school of Cambridge, which has been very influential in a number of Latin-American research centres taking part in *Iberconceptos*. Although its two intellectual leaders, Reinhart Koselleck and Quentin Skinner, are sceptical about the possibility of the respective methods being compatible, we do share the efforts Melvin Richter y Kari Palonen, among others, to bring the positions of both schools closer together and we claim that the two perspectives could, to a certain point, be complimentary. Furthermore, for various reasons that cannot be explained here, we believe that the historical study of political concepts and discourses in the Iberian-American community are an ideal ground for an attempt to jointly apply both the Skinner and Koselleck methods, without discarding the inclusion of other valuable contributions and proposals in the conceptual history, intellectual history or linguistic history of politics in doing so; for example, the lines of such well-known French authors as P. Rosanvallon, L. Jaume or J. Guilhaumou–. In a few words, our position on questions of method is considerably eclectic and a priori we discard no tradition or category of analysis that could prove useful and heuristically productive.

In any case, the questionnaires we prepared to facilitate the comparison or “comparability” of the resulting texts insist on the need for each author, when describing the history of each concept within the given space-time coordinates and always bearing in mind the shared cultural substratum, to combine three axes or levels of analysis: lexicographic, semantic and rhetorical (and naturally, the methodological tools for dealing with each one of these levels could come from different schools). The irreplaceable function of the questionnaire is to provide all the researchers with common guidelines so that all the papers quiz the sources on the basis of a few shared questions, thus making an ulterior comparison between them possible.

One of the most problematic features of the project concerns its “comparative” dimension. In fact, this shared or “cross” perspective –perhaps it would be better to simply talk about an “Atlantic history of concepts”- recommends that each researcher is capable of doubting his/her own origins in order to adopt a neutral, “meta-national”, point of view. Now, as we are so accustomed to focusing on objects from a national viewpoint, this stumbling block is hard to avoid. Fortunately, it seems that in this case the concepts and speech can, by nature, be quite easily thought of as transnational historical objects. This is particularly the case if we take into account that during the initial decades of the period studied, while the colonial era lasted, the Iberian-American world was still a composite of towns and cities, families, trades and corporations, grouped into kingdoms, viceroyalties, audiences or general captaincies, which in turn were grouped together so as to form two major political bodies: the Spanish and Portuguese monarchies. This was a pre-national world in which the far-reaching movement of writings, journals and printed matter of all kinds meant that today it is almost impossible to separate the peninsular sources and those of each space in the Americas. From this point of view, the challenge this project presents all participating researchers with consists of having a look at the situation two centuries ago, in order to try to understand, from the somewhat post-national world we live in today, another historical moment of transition through the history of concepts. That period, which saw the transformation of a pre-national order into an emerging world of Nation-States, was significantly different from that of today. This process of institutionalisation quite likely encouraged a greater semantic diversification consisting of the growing “nationalisation” of political concepts in this case. This would thus produce a currently well-known paradox (let us think of the “glocalisation” notion, used by U. Beck and R. Dahrendorf, among others) of the advance of exchanges and the globalising process

possibly being accompanied by a reinforcement of local identities and frameworks of comprehension at the expense of the more universal ones.

The complex dialectics between the nationalisation and internationalisation of concepts may be better understood if we think in terms of a more and more unified agenda of common problems which can be given an array of solutions, according to the country, region and civilisation. From this perspective, the differences could not be sought for without losing sight of the similarities. And it is therefore foreseeable that one of the results of the Project will be the questioning of the exaggerated “exceptionalist” visions of some national histories that have frequently taken pleasure in stressing their particular “peculiarities” and singularities which make one country’s evolution clearly different from its neighbours’.

On the other hand, the excessive emphasis on the modernity of the new conceptualisation of politics could lead to a methodological mistake it is better to avoid. This consists of accepting a categorical dichotomy between an old political vocabulary (corporative and based on privilege) and the other modern (constitutional, individualist and legally egalitarian), which will have hastily arrived to replace the former after the revolution. On the contrary, by studying conceptual change (and here Kosselleck’s suggestions are of great use), what seems to have been usual was overlapping, fading of significance, sliding of meanings and partial displacements. In short, limited and gradual renovation.

Concluding Remarks

The First Seminar on Comparative Conceptual History of the Iberian-American World, which brought the nine coordinators together in April 2006, enabled us to finish shaping the project outlines, to discuss and compare the first texts, to plan the Congress to be held in Madrid next year in September and to design a table of contents with the results of the collective work carried out in the first phase.

The *Iberconceptos* project will not end in 2007, however. This is a long-term programme and, with the backing of our sponsors (among whom it is fair to acknowledge that the first was the Santander Bank University Programme), we have the determined will to carry on. As regards the next triennium of 2008-2010, our new venture will be to concentrate on the comparative historical research into political

discourses, which focused on the following ten concepts during the period of 1750-1870: *Civilisation, Democracy, State, Independence, Freedom, Order, Party/Faction, Fatherland/Patriot/Patriotism, Revolution and Sovereignty*.

Therefore, if everything goes according to plan, the project's final objective will be to complete a *Comparative Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Iberian-America* step by step; a reference work, somewhere between history, linguistics and social science, and one that our libraries are lacking. Recognizing that the cases are not precisely the same, it is hoped that with time it could fulfil an analogical function in our Spanish-Portuguese-speaking milieu, such as that of the monumental German-speaking *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* by Brunner, Conze and Koselleck.

Among the immediate aims of this dictionary, one of the most important will be that of avoiding an error which was unfortunately common among historians working on the 19th and 20th centuries, political scientists and other scholars of the social sciences. Many of them tended to anachronically interpret and assess the concepts and experiences of past historical agents from the current guidelines of political and social life. Moreover, at a time when the very categories of historical analysis are undergoing a process of critical revision, we think that our comparative conceptual history can contribute to this debate by clarifying the senses that the agents of the past gave to expressions like liberalism, nation, republicanism, constitution, etc. These senses do not always fit the normative concepts that, under the same names, political and traditional intellectual historiography and political science have been projecting and imposing on these agents from the outside.

The situation is particularly favourable at a moment approaching the bicentenary celebrations of independence in the new Iberian-American republics and the Liberal Revolution in Spain, a historical cycle that chronologically corresponds to a moment of maximum lexical-semantic innovation. Therefore, we hope that our contribution –which like all historical analyses deserving such a name, does not lack importance in the light of present problems- can attract the interest of institutions and individuals beyond the narrow circles of professional historians.

In order to confront much of historiography's customary tendency to shut itself within the limits of national histories, our project explicitly assumes a transatlantic and Euro-American focus. We start from the basis that the Iberian-American world –that is,

the countries of Latin America and the two Iberian nations as a whole- forms part of an even broader cultural area. I am referring to the bi-continental framework of intelligibility that François-Xavier Guerra used to call “Euro-America”. This broad perspective is compatible with the recognition of the considerable internal differences and contrasts existing between cultural traditions and regional areas, which is why the historical cross-examination of such differences is fundamental for illuminating the ensemble as a whole. In any case, as far as we know, there are still very few projects of transcontinental or even simply continental scope in progress around the world. And it is apparently very hard to overcome the difficulties derived from the plurality of languages over all –even more so than those related to the lack of synchrony between the historical experiences of different societies- (this is why the much repeated proposal for a comparative historical Dictionary of European political concepts has never managed to get off the ground). With the way things are, as a colleague said to me the other day, our project represents, “a major step in taking the History of Concepts beyond national projects”. It would be desirable if other research groups soon began similar studies in comparative history with reference to other linguistic and cultural areas of considerable scope. Maybe then it would be possible to think, at an ulterior stage, of creating a global mosaic of comparative conceptual history –or relational history- capable of giving an account of the most important socio-cultural interactions and intercrossings from a conceptual point of view; one that takes a small number of basic concepts as units for analysis and, as a framework for its study, half way between the national level and the extensive world horizon, those cultural macro-complexes that we usually call civilisations.