SPECIAL SECTION:
KNOWLEDGE QUESTS IN THE EUROPEAN PERIPHERY

Introduction

A Focus on the History of Concepts

EIRINI GOUDAROULI

University of Athens

ABSTRACT

The special section “Knowledge Quests in the European Periphery” attempts to explore the different ways in which conceptual history’s methodologies could be applied to disciplines with which traditional conceptual historians have not previously engaged, such as the history of science, political economy, Enlightenment studies, postcolonial history, and transnational history. This special section, when read as a whole, opens up a multidisciplinary space in which center-periphery tensions are examined in the context of conceptual transnational exchange. Coming from different geographical places and cultural spaces within the European periphery, the three case studies draw their methodological background from conceptual history and aim to reflect on the center-periphery dichotomy by asking how historians from different historiographical traditions could take advantage of the methods and theories of conceptual history, as well as how conceptual history could take advantage of the coming together of disciplines that traditionally do not communicate with each other.

KEYWORDS

center, circulation of knowledge, Enlightenment, Europe, history of concepts, multidisciplinary, periphery

In September 2014, a panel called “Scientific Concepts in the European Periphery” was presented at the ninth meeting of the Science and Technology in the European Periphery (STEP) group on the topic of “Communicating Science, Technology and Medicine” that took place at the Interuniversity Centre for the History of Science and Technology (CIUHCT) in Lisbon, Portugal. The initial idea of publishing the following articles together arose within the supportive environment of that meeting. The three articles that follow derive their case studies from different historiographical traditions, are focused on different historical contexts, and are addressed to different audiences. However, all three draw their theoretical and methodological innovation from the history of concepts or conceptual history.

Traditionally related to political thinking, conceptual history offers a significant contribution to the methodology and theory of cross-disciplinary history writing. Nowadays, most conceptual history projects promise ambitious, interdisciplinary research, the findings of which aim to contribute to the broadening of the perspectives of the fields concerned. In the context of the German school of thought of Reinhart Koselleck, conceptual history is always more than conceptual history.¹ Without a doubt, this is a very eloquent way of summarizing the scope of conceptual history, mainly because it highlights one of the most important contributions conceptual history makes to the methodology and theory of historiography: multidisciplinary. And yet, conceptual history's research projects are able to break down the boundaries between and among the various branches of historiography and to bridge traditionally distinct research fields.

In brief, conceptual history is not only engaged with theorizing why precise political concepts appear as units that are worthy of special historical analysis² but also concerned with suggesting how one can write about the histories of these concepts. The basic cornerstone of traditional conceptual history, *Begriffsgeschichte*, is grounded in the idea that changes in the political and social conceptual framework occur together with changes in perceptions of time. In addition, the other cornerstone of conceptual history is said to be the theories and methods of the so-called Cambridge School. In this context, research projects influenced by Quentin Skinner are usually focused on short-term processes of conceptual change, and their rhetorical extension, with the aim of bridging contextual, intellectual, and political history. Notably, from the early 1990s onward, there have been attempts to bring the two schools of thought (*Begriffsgeschichte* and the Cambridge School) closer together. Although the so-called fathers of these two schools have strongly pointed out the intellectual obstacles to doing so,³ reconciliation has been reached in the sense that today we can find historical studies that combine the theoretical background and methodological approaches of both.

It is well known that claims of methodological innovation are made in most conceptual history research projects today. This fact arises because of the general interdisciplinary nature of conceptual history. In recent years, a

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1. Kari Palonen, "An Application of Conceptual History to Itself: From Method to Theory in Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte* (1997)," in *Politics and Conceptual Histories: Rhetorical and Temporal Perspectives* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2016), 19–41, here 20.

2. Ibid.

3. For more, see Javier Fernández Sebastián and Juan Francisco Fuentes, "Conceptual History, Memory, and Identity: An Interview with Reinhart Koselleck," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 1 (2006): 99–127; and Javier Fernández Sebastián, "Intellectual History, Liberty and Republicanism: An Interview with Quentin Skinner," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 3 (2007): 103–123.

few studies have discussed the application of conceptual history to disciplines with which traditional conceptual historians have not previously engaged.⁴ This new generation of studies provides great examples of how fruitful the approaches of conceptual history can be when they are put into practice in different disciplines across the humanities. Most importantly, however, this new generation of studies suggests a new direction with regard to the role, weight, and future of conceptual history.

The three articles that follow focus on different historical contexts and seek to highlight different intellectual figures. From the late seventeenth-century Greek-speaking regions of the Ottoman Empire, to eighteenth-century Spain, and nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Finland and Scandinavia, the articles discuss conceptual transfers and semantic changes in the tension of center-periphery, and they emphasize the role of historical actors within this dichotomy. Their analysis is based mainly on concepts, changes in those concepts, and how these changes may enable certain patterns of social action in different ways. By deriving their methodological innovation from conceptual history, all three articles aim to contribute to the methodology of certain sub-fields of history—the history of science, transnational history, the history of political economy, as well as the theory of Enlightenment studies, postcolonial studies, and transnational and transcultural studies.

The three articles deal to a significant degree with the dialectic of language, with concepts, the various uses of which enable social attitudes, and with social attitudes that are crystallized in words that bear a heavy conceptual load. They suggest that conceptual history is an indispensable guide for exploring past social activities in relation to the changing meanings of specific concepts under various sociopolitical circumstances. In this sense, the authors suggest a new path for conceptual history, a historiographical one that may contribute to the broadening of the field of conceptual history itself by including subdisciplines that have not belonged traditionally to the special focus of conceptual history.

The first article, “Conceptual Universalization and the Role of the Peripheries,” combines an actor-oriented discussion of conceptual universalization with a discussion of center-periphery tensions in transnational exchange. By focusing on the historical actors themselves, Stefan Nygård and Johan Strang explore the role of the European peripheries in the complex processes of universal validity and applicability, as well as translations and adaptations of key concepts. For this purpose, they draw attention to the different ways that a few

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4. For example, see the attempts made by a group of historians of technology to bridge the history of science and technology to conceptual history. For more, see Robert Bud, Jennifer K. Alexander, Paul Lucier, Graeme Gooday, and Eric Schatzberg, “Focus: ‘Applied Science,’” *Isis* 103, no. 3 (2012): 518–563.

Finnish and Scandinavian intellectuals in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries understood their own place in a broader translocal space, as well as how self-understanding affected their sociopolitical behavior.

In addition, the authors aim to point out the need not only to reflect on the translocal intellectual space and time but also to understand the complex role of power and hierarchy in both national and international contexts. Nygård and Strang underline the importance of recognizing the implications of the peripheral self-understanding of a few Nordic intellectuals in transnational conceptual and intellectual history by emphasizing the relation between universalism and imperialism, as well as the conceptual transfers that stress this relation. In this sense, the authors argue that acknowledging the active role historical actors in the peripheries played in the process of the transfer, appropriation, and redefinition of conceptual innovations in different local contexts is crucial to furthering our understanding. In suggesting the necessity of the study of the process and dynamics of the universalization of languages and concepts, Nygård and Strang challenge the simplified scheme of a center-periphery dichotomy and eloquently conclude that “the peripheries need the centers as much as the centers need the peripheries.”

The second article, “Translating the Concept of Experiment in the Late Eighteenth Century: From the English Philosophical Context to the Greek-Speaking Regions of the Ottoman Empire,” explores the transfer of the concept of experiment from the seventeenth-century British philosophical context to the eighteenth-century Greek-speaking intellectual one. By bringing together the history of science and conceptual history, Eirini Goudarouli and Dimitris Petakos explore the Greek translation of Benjamin Martin’s natural philosophical work, *The Philosophical Grammar, Being a View of the Present State of Experimented Physiology, Or Natural Philosophy in Four Parts* (1735), translated by Anthimos Gazis in 1799. This article focuses mainly on the different ways Gazis’s translation contributed to the construction of a particular conceptual framework for the appropriation of new knowledge.

Recognizing the historical complexity of the locality, as well as the role historical actors played in it, the authors reflect on the concept of appropriation and on how the universality of concepts, ideas, and practices was established in the periphery. The authors challenge the concept of locality as an intellectual field consisting of passive receivers of the new knowledge coming from the center. In contrast, they aim to shed light on the particular historical circumstances under which certain knowledge patterns gained universal epistemic authority within the periphery. In this context, translation is approached as an exchange that mutually affects the two parts of the act and not simply as a passive reception of ideas, concepts, and practices. In addition, translators are seen as historical actors who may interfere in the process; their practice of translation crucially affects the encounters between different cultures.

Pablo Sánchez León's article, "Science, Customs, and the Modern Subject: From Emulation to Education in the Semantics of Spanish Enlightenment," explores the semantic evolution of a series of conceptual transfers and intellectual innovations relating to customs developed in an attempt to renew the eighteenth-century sociopolitical and intellectual Spanish society that was in decline. The author explores an interdisciplinarity that calls for future exchanges between conceptual history, the history of political economy, and the history of the social and human sciences by highlighting the intellectual context of sciences of wealth and happiness in eighteenth-century Spain and the development of new knowledge generated by self-determined individuals.

The article focuses on the construction of the "individual" of eighteenth-century Spain as a historical actor whose moral requirements and actions assure his private gain. By focusing on the semantic complexities in the rise of the modern sciences in eighteenth-century Spain, the article offers an analysis of the emergence of the modern individual and the citizen. Interestingly, the author argues that the conceptualizations of emulation, education, public opinion, and scientific knowledge during this process were gradually involved in the very first attempts to define the concept of a modern citizen in Spanish history.

The three articles, when read together, open up a multidisciplinary space in which center-periphery tensions are examined in the context of conceptual transnational exchange. Coming from different geographical places and cultural spaces within the European periphery, the three case studies draw their methodological background from conceptual history and aim to reflect on the center-periphery dichotomy.

All the three cases treat the periphery as a geographical space in which active intellectuals have been articulating strategies regarding the appropriation of concepts, ideas, and practices in reference to the complexity of their local hierarchies and tensions. In this context, locality does not appear to be an intellectual field consisting of passive historical subjects who reproduce the ideas received by the centers. The establishment of new concepts, ideas, theories, and practices are appropriated within the local cultural, ideological, and political frameworks and expressed through language that often contains a number of novelties. In addition, the three articles suggest that conceptual history is the appropriate historiographical context for the study of the changing meanings that inform the pursuits of historical actors under various sociopolitical circumstances within the intellectual and geographical context of the periphery.

The publication of the three articles under the same umbrella answers the oft-raised criticism about conceptual history's actual ability to bridge traditionally distinct research fields. According to this criticism, it is trite to maintain that one of the most important elements of conceptual history is the fact that it can act as an interdisciplinary bridge and consequently can offer a more

reflexive and more historical understanding of the past. In contrast, the following articles open up the way to multidisciplinary and bridge disciplines that are usually seen as separate. Last but not least, when the articles are read together, they pose a few common questions. How can historians from different historiographical traditions take advantage of the methods and theories of conceptual history? To what extent can the focus on the ambiguous character of language and the complex process of concept-building provide us with useful historiographical insights concerning our disciplines? How could such insights help us move beyond the obsolete, though deeply entrenched, center-periphery dichotomy? And how can conceptual history take advantage of the coming together of disciplines that traditionally do not communicate with each other?