

A Step Forward

Contributions to the History of Concepts has now completed two years of existence. Its history has been closely tied to the annual meetings of the History of Political and Social Concepts Group (HPSCG). Talks about evolving from the HPSCG's Newsletter to an academic periodical publication began in Bilbao, in 2003. The following year, at the 7th International Conference on the History of Concepts, which took place in Rio de Janeiro, we designed a plan to create a new journal that would serve as a conduit for researchers working with conceptual history, as well as for scholars interested in other related fields, such as intellectual history, the history of political thought, the history of ideas, etc. After a great deal of ground work, the journal was finally launched in 2005, both in digital and paper format, with an elegant graphic design and a host of excellent texts by distinguished scholars in the fields of conceptual history, intellectual history, and the history of political thought, such as Quentin Skinner, Melvin Richter, Kari Palonen, and Robert Darnton. The response from the international academic community was immediate and very encouraging. Since then positive feedback from a growing audience worldwide has been constantly on the rise.

We already knew, based on the accumulated experience of the HPSCG, that the audiences that were receiving conceptual history outside Germany belonged to diverse academic environments, with different research traditions and substantive interests. The HPSCG itself is a product of, as well as an agent in, this reception process. The subtitle of the HPSCG's founding conference, "A Planning Meeting for Co-operation between Scholars and Research Projects," says much about the spirit that has animated the group until this day. In fact, a brief examination of the program of the London conference and of all annual conferences that followed, as well as of the literary corpus produced since then by HPSCG members and associates, shows a constant engagement with the idea of methodological conversation with other historiographical disciplines. The most important interlocutor has been the Cambridge School approach to the history of

political thought and language, for obvious reasons. First, because this approach has acquired a much deserved prominence in English-speaking academic milieus engaged in the historical study of political thought. Second, because the now canonical texts of the Cambridge School have also been very well received by scholars writing in languages other than English. Thus, in the process of being translated into other languages and being practiced by people from different nationalities, conceptual history naturally encountered the Cambridge School approach. And finally, this dialogue has been made possible due to fundamental methodological affinities, such as the focus on language, historicism, and contextualism.

But this was not the only encounter taking place in the international reception of conceptual history. In fact, as several articles in this journal have attested, this process of reception gave rise to a variety of different disciplinary encounters, following the idiosyncrasies of each national context or local academic milieu. And conceptual history seems to be specially fit for establishing a diverse set of dialogues given its complex theoretical architecture. For, if on the one hand it looks to language as a key subject-matter, on the other it is also concerned with the social history as a necessary element for studying conceptual change. In practical terms, conceptual history is capable of establishing a very fruitful dialogue with political philosophy and legal studies, as in the case of Italian scholars, as well as with the intellectual traditions of political theory and political history, as in France. These are just two examples of a very productive process of international reception.

During the last HPSCG meeting in Uppsala, Sweden, we decided to take a major step further, accepting a proposal made by Brill to take over the commercial operation of *Contributions*. From now on *Contributions* will count on the professional expertise of this prestigious academic publisher. This will help us improve distribution, subscriptions, advertising, indexing, and the overall quality of our journal. By becoming a Brill publication, *Contributions* will be more readily available in the catalogues of libraries all over the English-speaking world and beyond, both in printed paper and in digital format. Moreover, separate articles in the journal shall become accessible for anybody with an Internet connection (at www.brill.nl/chco), anywhere in the world.

In order to live up to the importance of this occasion, we strove to put together a great issue. Fortunately, we had the luxury to be able to count again on contributions from three key authors in conceptual history and

related fields: Melvin Richter, Kari Palonen, and Quentin Skinner. In his text, Richter applies the methodology of conceptual history to study the history of the concept of despotism in eighteenth-century France. In a clear fashion, he shows that contestation and semantic differentiation evolved hand in hand, and that each redescription and reappropriation had to be worked out by agents against the grain of the concept's previous semantic load. However, according to the author, the multiplication of rhetorical usages did not stop the concept of despotism from decisively contributing to the delegitimization and fall of the French monarchy. In sum, Richter's article not only confirms Koselleck's theory of key-concepts more clearly than several single-concept essays that preceded it, but also demonstrates that conceptual history, with its vocation for diachronic analysis, can be perfectly combined with the contextual study of rhetorical redescriptions.

Palonen presents the reader with a most creative piece, in which he applies the conceptual opposition between liberty and dependence, proposed by Skinner, to the study of arguments pro and contra electoral reforms, the extension of suffrage, and parliamentary representation. Among other things, he shows that both liberty and dependence played a central role in arguments advocating the inclusion or exclusion of voters and parliamentary representatives, in a variety of historical situations. We also counted on the generosity of Quentin Skinner and Javier Fernández Sebastián, who allowed us to publish a very informative and inspired interview they conducted in Madrid, in March 2006. The questions formulated by Sebastián are extremely sensitive and relevant, and Skinner's insightful answers throw light on a score of subjects of key interest to scholars dealing with the historical study of political thought. Skinner speaks about his intellectual trajectory since "Meaning and Understanding," the way his strong call for methodological change has been received, and also the delicate relation between the intellectual's scholarly activity and his or her intervention in public debates. Prompted by Sebastián he also discusses the possibility of combining his method to that of conceptual history, assuming a potentially polemical position in regard to the discipline as practiced by Koselleck and his followers.

There is also an interesting article by Jens Borchert examining the immensely influential translation into English of Max Weber's *Politik als Beruf* by Hans H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. Borchert argues that the choices made by these translators ended up having profound consequences on the way the

work of Weber was understood in the English-speaking academia and also on the possibilities of empirical analysis opened up by Weber's political sociology. Also on the topic of translation—a booming area of interest among present-day conceptual historians—Lázló Kontler writes a very informative piece that strives to show how translation studies might contribute to intellectual history and studies of reception. Through the analysis of a myriad of sources, he argues that the notion that translation is conditioned by the contextual and domestic concerns affecting the political and social “location” of the translator—rather than an imperative to be faithful to the source—is not a post-modern insight. On the contrary, it was already present in early-modern theoretical treatises on translation and related topics.

I would like to thank everybody who has contributed to the success of this journal, chiefly the editorial crew, the editorial board, the members of the HPSCG, and my colleagues at IUPERJ, who have lent much needed institutional support to this enterprise.

Have an enjoyable read!

João Feres Júnior
IUPERJ, Brazil
jferes@iuperj.br