

Concepts in Focus: Civilization

A series of panels focusing on the concept of civilization were organized in each one of the annual meetings held by the History of Political and Social Concepts Group (HPSCG) in New York (2005), Uppsala (2006) and Istanbul (2007). The guiding idea of such an effort was to stimulate research on what became one of the most successful eighteenth-century neologisms in modern socio-political vocabulary. There has been extensive historical and conceptual research on civilization in German, French and English, but little has been produced on its introduction, translation and usage in other European and non-European languages.

The *terminus ab quo* for the neologism *civilisation* was the English and French eighteenth century, where it appeared embedded in the worldview of the Enlightenment. Since then, the term has been submitted to the most varied uses (and abuses), inside and outside Europe, in processes and projects of education, acculturation, nation-building, imperialism, colonization and war propaganda. The introduction of the concept *civilization* in different languages was often linked to the translation of widely read key texts such as *Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain* (1794) by Condorcet, *Histoire de la civilisation en Europe* (1828) by François Guizot, and *History of Civilization in England* (1856) by Thomas Buckle.

Neologism often appear due to a lack of linguistic tools to deal with novel meanings. Many neologisms are produced by invention and innovation as names for new materials, products and fashions. *Civilization* was rapidly adopted across linguistic borders, in many different languages. We can therefore presume a momentary insufficiency of concepts or, in other words, a transnational conceptual need in speech act and writing that the concept seems to have satisfied.

Particular attention is required in order to understand the specific ideological connotations the concept absorbed in different languages. A transnational concept rarely has exactly the same meanings and identical connotations in different languages. In the panel series on civilization, paper presenters are invited to reflect from a comparative perspective on

the different political and cultural contexts in which the concept was employed. The conceptual analysis of *civilization* must take into account the original vernacular expressions, synonyms and antonyms. As the use of a neologism is often heavily contested by purists and sticklers for correctness in vernacular language, the historian of the concept of civilization has to pay particular attention to the use of old vernacular words that are resignified to envelop new ideas and connotations.

The semantics of the concept *civilization* may differ in different languages not only according to purely linguistic characteristics but also according to educational systems, cultural hegemony and power relations. The concept of civilization functions differently not only in imperial nations and colonies, in centres and peripheries, but also in the army, at school or in church, when used by officers, teachers or missionaries, by oppressors, the oppressed or intermediate groups. Used originally with a predominantly positive meaning in most Western European languages, the concept became loaded with negative meaning and connotations in German language during the First World War. As a result of the war propaganda, in German language *Zivilisation* was even transformed into an asymmetrical counter concept of *Kultur*.

The conceptual histories of civilization in post-colonial settings and also in different non-European languages are of particular interest. In the next HPSCG conference we hope to open up this field of inquiry to contributions of scholars from Korea and other countries of the East and South-Pacific areas. *Contributions to the History of Concepts* is supporting the publication of a selection of papers presented in the civilization panel series. In the present issue there are pieces dealing with the cases of the Netherlands and Italy, while the next issue will feature articles on Spain, France and Brazil.

Pim den Boer