



ROUNDTABLE: LANGUAGES, TIMES, AND REVOLUTIONS: CONCEPTUAL HISTORY IN THE IBERIAN ATLANTIC

Author's Response

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First of all, I would like to thank my interlocutors for their interest in my work, and for their kindness in agreeing to participate in this Roundtable. It is a great honour for me to have three such distinguished scholars commenting on my book and offering their criticisms and remarks, which help me to refine and nuance some of its arguments. I also hope that this discussion will enable readers of *The Historical Journal* to get an idea of the content and limits of my book, but above all to raise their interest in recent developments in intellectual history in the wider Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world, developments that go far beyond this modest contribution of mine. I will try to reply as briefly as I can.

I will start with Nicola Miller's remarks, which I find very pertinent. I agree that both the question of the anachronism of categories and that of presentism are two crucial, subterraneously connected points that need to be discussed in depth. As far as categories are concerned, Miller is quite right in suggesting that one of the most delicate phases of any research on the past – even more so if it is historical-conceptual research – is the moment when the historian has to determine which will be the key concepts on which he will concentrate his attention, and the tools he will use to analyse them. And we must be aware that in this choice we have a great deal at stake for the success of our inquiry. Thus, it could be that concepts and categories that from today's perspective are imposed with the force of evidence, when one goes back a few centuries, were not nearly as important. Think, for example, of the category of *politics*, which at the beginning of the eighteenth century was by no means as

relevant and pervasive as it later became, or of *democracy*, which at that same time was just an obscure, discredited, and bookish word.

The essay by David Armitage that Miller mentions is interesting, especially because it correctly distinguishes several kinds of presentisms that are often confused. On the whole, however, it does not seem convincing to me, since it is one thing to state that the past exists only in the present, and quite another to maintain that our knowledge of the past must be subject exclusively to current categorical and ideological constraints. Ontological presentism need not necessarily lead to epistemological and ethical presentism. The latter way of proceeding, in my view deeply flawed, may end up flattening the people of the past, their ideas, values, feelings, and worldviews, in other words, doing just the opposite of the task entrusted to the historian, namely to highlight the strangeness of the past while striving to make it comprehensible to his or her readers. Practitioners of history must be careful not to crush the fading worlds they study under the weight of the steamroller of the present (I am referring here to that ‘enormous condescension of posterity’ that Edward Thompson criticized years ago). This kind of chronocentrism, as I see it, is a systematic error of appreciation that replaces genuine historical knowledge with an activist history, aimed at manipulating the past to reinforce collective identities, legitimize certain institutions, or other similar purposes. Instead of striving to understand the interpretative frameworks of past actors and make them intelligible to our contemporaries, it curtails our knowledge of the past by the axiological yardstick of our present. This does not imply, of course, that we should renounce our own categorical apparatus, nor the epistemic advantages that temporal distance grants us over those who lived in the present the events and processes we study, the continuation of which they could not know. I still think that the heuristic metaphor of the ‘fusion of horizons’ (H.-G. Gadamer) is the safest way between the Scylla of massive presentism and the Charybdis of the extreme de-presentification of the past (antiquarianism), although I have no doubt that the excess that characterizes our age is much more the former than the latter.

For José Ortega y Gasset, one of the missions of history is to make the men of the past credible to us, each of whom should be seen as an *alter ego*, with all the emphasis on the adjective *alter*. ‘With our own lives’, he wrote, ‘we have to understand the lives of others precisely in what they are different and strange to our own.’ There is nothing anachronistic or presentist about the fact that historical research is guided by present-day concerns. Nor does it follow from the substantially correct statement that we must use our experience to interpret the experiences of our ancestors – it would be abusive to call this presentism – that historians must sacrifice their accuracy for the sake of their political or civic ideals, whatever they may be. On the contrary, serious historians must be willing, if their research leads them to conclusions that contradict their ideological positions, to put aside their own opinions and stick to the truth of their findings, without trying to disguise them or force them to fit into a preconceived plot of heroes and villains.

If, as Armitage has hypothesized, there were an ethical code for historians equivalent to the Hippocratic oath, such an oath should include a strong

ethical and deontological commitment to the honest pursuit of truth in all that concerns their research on the people of the past. Without disdaining the commendable civic engagement of historians as citizens, qua historians should aspire to give their due to the dead to a greater extent than to the living. Priority should therefore be given to understanding and explaining the beliefs, often shocking to today's common sense, of those who are no longer with us, not to the interests, values, and preferences of the people who walk the earth today.

In short, I think that it is incumbent upon historians to deal with the historical past, not so much to worry about a 'practical past' (I use this phrase in M. Oakeshott's rather than H. White's sense), which is all too often nothing more than a mirage by which we see the present reflected back into the past, as with 'mythologies of prolepsis' (Q. Skinner) and 'illusions of retroactivity' (G. Canguilhem). The problem is that these mirages are systematically distorting the understanding of past events and processes that activist historians millimetrically fit to the Procrustean bed of their current agendas and subjectivities. And I have no doubt that by depresentifying the past we indirectly contribute to denaturalizing the present, thus showing its contingency – i.e. its constitutive historicity.

I suppose that what has been said so far is enough to make it unnecessary to emphasize that my concern about the absence of a theory of history, although primarily epistemological, also has an ethical root.

Maria Elisa Noronha de Sá basically raises three equally relevant questions. The first takes me back to a now distant conversation with Reinhart Koselleck in Spain. Noronha de Sá asks me to reflect on another hypothetical interview with the German historian, almost two decades later, having concluded the first phase of our work on the Ibero-American historical lexicon with the publication of the *Iberconcepts* 'dictionaries'. Lately, I have remembered that meeting in Madrid, because, on the occasion of Koselleck's centenary, two colleagues (Lucila Svampa and Dorit Krusche) have asked me for some photos to be included in the *Deutsches Literaturarchiv* in Marbach. I have an indelible memory of those days in the company of Reinhart Koselleck and his daughter Katharina, and it would certainly be a pleasure, as well as a miracle, to meet again so many years later. Other than the specific questions that I would now put to him in that imaginary interview from beyond the grave, this thought experiment invites me to think about the transient, fleeting, and contingent nature of the passing of history. Conceptual history too, as Koselleck liked to repeat, glossing J.-M. Chladenius's perspectivism, needs to be periodically updated, for the simple passage of time forces us to 'retranslate' the concepts of the past to make them understandable to present-day sensibilities. So, if I were to start the *Iberconcepts* project from scratch now, my blueprint would most likely not be identical to the one I designed in 2004. I think there would be some differences, although I cannot detail them here. This ties in with my earlier answer to Miller on presentism. Our immediate present, that of 2023, is no longer exactly the (past) present of spring 2005. In between, the world has undergone major changes and our standpoint has shifted. No doubt many of the questions that my colleague Juan Francisco Fuentes

and I asked Koselleck eighteen years ago would now be phrased differently. In any case, I would like to believe that the German historian would be fairly satisfied to see how a tendentially transnational and comparative mode of his cherished *Begriffsgeschichte* has developed and taken root in the Iberophone countries.

When some years ago, at a time when the so-called ‘affective turn’ had not yet taken place in the social sciences, I spoke of the ‘emotionalization’ of concepts, I wanted to draw the attention of researchers to the extraordinary impact that certain strong feelings had on politics and semantics during the period of transition to full modernity. It is obvious that the political concepts we use to describe and manage social reality have different affective colours for different actors, and depending on the sign and intensity of such emotional charges, drives towards certain kinds of actions can vary considerably. Broadly speaking, we know that ‘equality’ does not sound like ‘freedom’, and ‘reform’ has quite different connotations from ‘revolution’. So, studying the ‘emotional valence’ of the use of concepts in context seems necessary if one aspires to properly interpret the historical semantics of modernity. A study that simply analyses the notions of people, equality, freedom, or justice as mere intellectual abstractions, without taking account of their ‘emotional resonances’, would be clearly insufficient. Moreover, ‘emotionalization’ can easily be integrated with the other Koselleckian theorems of the *Sattelzeit*, for, as several authors have shown, a kind of ‘sentimental revolution’ occurred in Europe and America coinciding with the saddle period. And, as Thomas Dixon showed in his book *From passions to emotions*, the very concept of emotion, as a psychological category, was invented in the early nineteenth century.

Political and social metaphors and tropes are also one of my favourite areas of research. Largely along H. Blumenberg’s lines, I am currently working on this topic. My book *Key metaphors for history* is coming out soon. In it, I have tried to show how historiography has been built on a handful of fundamental metaphors that have evolved over the centuries. And this has also led me to become interested in visual culture and what we might call a ‘kinetics of historical times’. In my view, not only is there no opposition or incompatibility between the history of concepts and metaphorology, but a comprehensive historical semantics should encompass all kinds of symbolic elements, including images and visual metaphors.

Eduardo Posada-Carbó has seen very well that in various parts of my book a certain distaste for the history of ideas can be discerned, and he makes a good case for the role of ideas in political life and the validity of studies on intellectual origins and influences. It may well be that I have indeed gone too far in criticizing severely some forms of history of political thought. It is not for nothing that modern intellectual history, whether it be *Begriffsgeschichte* or the so-called Cambridge school, began its career – with Koselleck and Skinner, inter alia – in frontal opposition to certain methodological assumptions of *Ideengeschichte* and the old history of ideas, respectively. This is not to say, of course, that the works of Friedrich Meinecke or Arthur Lovejoy, to mention two outstanding figures, are in any way negligible. On the contrary, they are very valuable, even if some aspects of their methodology seem

obsolete to us today. The same is true of some excellent monographs on the history of ideas applied to Ibero-America, which we continue to read with interest and profit. One need only think of some classic works by Edmundo O’Gorman, Charles Hale, François-Xavier Guerra, Tulio Halperín Donghi, Simon Collier, António Hespanha, or José Murilo de Carvalho. Not forgetting more recent authors such as Iván Jaksic or Posada-Carbó’s own work, and others of the following generation of young academic scholars, many of them linked in one way or another to the *Iberconceptos* network, whose enumeration would be too long. But I insist that all these works, regardless of the fact that, as I say, some of them may seem to us methodologically partially outdated, are undoubtedly essential reading for anyone who approaches the study of the political and intellectual history of the Ibero-American worlds.

In this sense, Posada-Carbó is absolutely right to suggest that it is worth analysing historically the sources from which the actors of the past drew. For example, the political-legal readings in languages other than Spanish – French and English, fundamentally – made by New Granadian independence *próceres* such as Antonio Nariño or Miguel de Pombo, as well as other later liberal ideologues such as Florentino González or Ezequiel Rojas. These readings and texts, by the way, were in a number of cases translated and published by these politicians in their own countries. The study of the ‘influences’ received by these figures is far from being a useless curiosity, and I therefore recognize that such research can shed much light on the intellectual history of the region. I believe, however, that rather than focusing on the extent to which they were faithful or not to the influences they received (be it American federalism, British constitutionalism, or the French Enlightenment and Jacobinism), it is probably more productive to look at how those same politicians and intellectuals filtered and used those foreign readings with an eye to their own agendas, that is, to find the languages and solutions appropriate to the situations they faced and to tackle the problems they had to confront.

Therefore, I insist on approaching the study of political-intellectual history from the perspective of reception, rather than influences. The roots of both words are a good clue to the disparity between the two approaches. While *influence* ultimately refers to the Latin verb *fluere* (to flow) and thus connects with the traditional conception of time flowing like a river, *reception* comes from the verb *recipere* (to take back) which is a special form of *capere* (to grasp). It is clear, therefore, that in the latter case the focus is on the consumer of texts and other cultural products, who is at the same time an autonomous political actor and does not limit himself to being passively influenced by this or that author (for to speak of influences is to refer to a silent form of causality or soft power of the ‘influencers’ over the influenced), but is himself a transforming agent who adapts his readings to his needs and purposes. The shift from influence to reception dissolves some ill-posed problems, such as the false disjunction between Francisco Suárez and Jean-Jacques Rousseau when searching for the ideological ‘origins’ of the Hispanic revolutions. (This is a debate that has caused much ink to flow among specialists in the processes of independence in Spanish America, for while some authors attributed such ideological ‘origins’ to the Spanish tradition of theological-legal thought,

especially to the Second Scholasticism of the school of Salamanca, others emphasized the influence of the French Enlightenment.)

As can be seen, the question of origins is closely linked to that of influences, since this approach presupposes that it is possible to trace back the abundant and ramified river of influences to identify a fountainhead for each political or intellectual movement (for example, for liberalism). And I think we historians have worshipped the 'idol of origins' for too long. It would take a long time to argue why I think this approach is wrong. Suffice it to say that, as Roger Chartier pointed out more than twenty years ago, trying to go back to the 'authentic' original source of any event or movement of a certain complexity condemns the researcher to an endless search for the beginnings, to a sort of *mise en abyme* or infinite regress.