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At a Linguistic and Spatial Crossroads: Areas, Spaces, and Localities as Historical Concepts

A review article focusing on

Steinmetz, Willibald, Michael Freeden & Javier Fernández-Sebastián (eds.). *Conceptual History in the European Space*. European Conceptual History, vol. 1. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2017. 320 pages. ISBN 978-1-78533-482-5.

Mishkova, Diana & Balázs Trencsényi (eds.). *European Regions and Boundaries. A Conceptual History*. European Conceptual History, vol. 3. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books. 2017. 410 pages. ISBN 978-1-78533-584-6.

Juho Saksholm

Conceptual history seems to have gained a small but dedicated following as an approach to writing history.[1] While heated debates about the ‘linguistic turn’ are now thankfully a thing of the past – relevant only to historians of the discipline – the flexibility of conceptual history allows it to maintain a broad historical perspective while simultaneously focusing on the specifics of understanding historical languages. In addition, members of the History of Concepts Group [2] have helped establish the status of conceptual history as a viable historical method by, for instance, organising annual conferences and introductory summer schools, [3] and through publishing the journal *Contributions to the History of Concepts* since 2005.

Reinhart Koselleck’s importance as one of the key authorities on historical theory and methodology also seems to be on the rise; Niklas Olsen’s *History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck* (2012) is one example, as personal biographies of contemporary historians are still quite rare. Though he is also known as editor of the conceptual magnum opus *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (1972), it was perhaps the English publication of *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time* in 1985/2004 that eventually spread Koselleck’s theories concerning historical time to a wider academic audience. For example, one only needs to look at the programme for the History of Concepts Group Conference, held in September 2018 at the University



of Malaga, [4] to note that the emphasis of several sessions was clearly on the ‘temporal’ element of concepts and conceptual change.

Another example of ongoing work for the further acceptance and relevance of conceptual history is the *European Conceptual History* book series, published since 2016 by Berghahn Books and consisting of six volumes at the time of writing. The goal of the series, according to the publisher, is to focus on notable conceptual shifts and developments in European history and thereby “to illuminate a vocabulary that has helped to shape the modern world.” [5] Many volumes in the series are some of the first forays into the history of key concepts like parliamentarism and democracy, and so serve a wide range of scholars that deal with these concepts.

In this review article, I will take a closer look at two of the volumes in the series that focus more on methodology. At the same time as wanting to evaluate their overall contribution to the series, I am also particularly interested in how the edited volumes – as a set of historical methods – represent the state of the art in conceptual history. The two selected volumes not only have a particular methodological emphasis, but they are also recent, and they provide a blueprint for how conceptual history could be practised in the future. Instead of circulating old texts by Koselleck and Skinner, conceptual history ought to be focusing on innovating and renewing the methodology, understood here as maintaining a broad perspective on the historicity of language.

Europe as a conceptual space

Conceptual History in the European Space is the opening volume in the series, and thus it aims to define the role and goals of the entire series. In *The Introduction* written by Willibald Steinmetz and Michael Freeden, the authors envisage how ‘Post-Koselleckian’ conceptual history might be defined (p. 1). Steinmetz and Freeden argue that, rather than adopting a global perspective to the European sphere, a ‘world-regional’ approach will challenge the methodological nationalism of previous history writing without becoming unnecessarily entangled with the added complexities of a global approach (p. 3). Since European political cultures and languages are bound together in many ways, transnational studies can reveal transfers that have previously been invisible in studies that have focused purely on national cases. Steinmetz and Freeden also emphasise the need for new approaches that highlight the importance of understanding the multiplicity and overlapping nature of historical languages (p. 12-16), and a more flexible approach to different historical conceptualisations, instead of simply looking for a fixed set of predetermined concepts (p. 22). All of these methodological innovations are justified, well argued, and appear as a natural progression within the tradition of conceptual history, in other words they subject previous research traditions to critical analysis and further academic scrutiny. As is often the case in historical methodology, Freeden and Steinmetz do not offer an explicit roadmap on how one’s own research should be executed, but then in a field where primary sources and contexts will differ greatly from study to study, such particularism would certainly prove too restrictive. Instead, by problematising implicit assumptions in existing scholarship, Freeden and Steinmetz manage to point out the key weaknesses that can actually be addressed, and which will allow conceptual history to develop further.

The goal of redefining modern conceptual history as a broad and inclusive discipline is also visible in the principal articles of the volume. Rhetorical, temporal, transnational, comparative, and ideological levels of conceptual analysis are all well represented, and each in their own way exemplify the current state of the art in the field of conceptual history. But perhaps the most striking aspect – apart from the list of authors, all of whom have extensive experience in the history of concepts – is the theme of Europe as a world region or ‘space’. Taking into consideration the spatiality of Europe offers the most fundamental challenge to existing traditions, not only within conceptual history but also beyond.

Seeing the European space both as a sphere of fixed national units as well as a field of diverse social identities, backgrounds, and languages opens up a whole new set of methodological choices and dilemmas. This new emphasis on spatiality goes beyond selecting essential national contexts for a more conventional comparative or transnational study, and is even present in those chapters which do not explicitly deal with the European space. Helge Jordheim’s article, *Europe at Different Speeds: Asynchronicities and Multiple Times of European Conceptual History* (p. 47–61) deals with the transnational aspect to the temporal within Europe, while Willibald Steinmetz reinterprets Koselleckian temporal ideas by highlighting the fact there are presently few studies focusing on conceptual transfers and on Europe as a whole in *Multiple Transformations: Temporal Frameworks for a European Conceptual History* (p. 63–95). Meanwhile, Michael Freeden draws attention to particular conceptual approaches that have emphasised the spatial and temporal aspects of intellectual history in *Conceptual History, Ideology and Language* (p. 118–138). Together, these chapters show that modern conceptual history is no longer a narrow field in which only classic political concepts such as democracy and nationalism are discussed.

In *Conceptualizing Modernity in Multi- and Intercultural Spaces; the Case of Central and Eastern Europe* (p. 236–262), Victor Neumann goes one step further to claim that conceptual history is, in fact, predominately transnational and critical of national stereotypes, since it almost inevitably deals with translations and the conceptual transfers these require. Neumann stresses that these translations occur even when concepts are studied in a predominately national context. Jani Marjanen, too, makes a similar point in his article *Transnational Conceptual History, Methodological Nationalism and Europe* (p. 139–174), when he takes the Finnish conceptual lexicon, *Käsitteet Liikkeessä*, as an example of a transnational work that began life as a national project (p. 144). In sum, he suggests that a transnational conceptual history should be able to describe history as being somewhere in between the provincial particularism of national history writing and the ignorant universalism of much of political philosophy (p. 143).

Conceptual historians are easily tempted into seeing their discipline as a golden middle path that treads delicately between the methodological extremes of global and national histories, while at the same time avoiding the perils of an unduly materialist social history or overly philosophical history of ideas; and yet *Conceptual History in the European Space* does offer some welcome self-criticism. Steinmetz and Freeden, already in the book’s *Introduction* for instance, point out that comparing essentialised nation-states with each other is all too often used to measure their progress in ahistorical

terms. Jörn Leonhard follows a similar line of argument in *Conceptual History: the Comparative Dimension* (p. 175–196), criticising narratives that either focus on “the rise of the West”, or omit important differences in concepts that might look similar, but have wholly different meanings in their local contexts. Thus, only a detailed understanding of differences in historical languages can provide a necessary understanding of the past and lessen anachronistic uses of analytical concepts and comparisons that are still based on a teleological understanding of historical time and change.

While Steinmetz, Freedon, and Leonhard all raise important questions regarding the relevance of comparative and transnational approaches, I would argue that the most profound challenge to the essentialist aspects of transnational and comparative history in the volume is provided by the article, *Conceptualizing Spaces Within Europe. The Case of Meso-Regions* (p. 212–235). Written by Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi, two scholars of Eastern and Central European political thought and historiography, the article highlights the importance of regional concepts. While these concepts often provide the premises for transnational studies, the article problematises the way in which ‘meso-regions’, such as the Balkans or Scandinavia, can replace the nation state as uncontested units of historical research.

Mishkova and Trencsényi use examples from the historiography of Central and Eastern Europe to argue that historical reflection on the contested conceptual nature of meso-regions can help relativize the importance of non-national regional units (p. 228). Mishkova and Trencsényi are also explicit about the need for methodologies which combine conceptual history with the so-called ‘spatial turn’ (p. 212) – a set of methodologies that argue for a new understanding of spatiality as a cultural and political construct, rather than simply a natural fact. According to the article, the reason conceptual historians have only relatively recently focused on spatial concepts is because the Koselleckian tradition of *Begriffsgeschichte* (in other words, *Geschitliche Grundbegriffe* and the studies inspired by it) was focused more on the temporal aspects of concepts. Even the notion of Europe, so central to a wide range of political and scientific discourses, remains far too understudied from a conceptual history perspective (p. 216). Mishkova and Trencsényi thus both reassess the relative legitimacy of arguments and traditions in conceptual and transnational history, while at the same time specifically analysing the formation of the *Begriffsgeschichte* tradition.

Regions and Boundaries as Concepts

The article by Diana Mishkova and Balázs Trencsényi in this first volume serves as a good starting point for the second book reviewed here – *European Regions and Boundaries: a Conceptual History* – as they are the editors of this third volume in the European Conceptual History series. This clear connection between the different volumes in the series provides a much needed continuity, emphasising the self-critical nature of the series and at the same time vindicating conceptual history as an ever-evolving field of critical research, and not just a celebration of Koselleck and other great thinkers from the past.

The goal of the *Regions and Boundaries* volume is to analyse ‘how European transnational historical (meso)regions have been, and are being, conceptualized and delimited over time, across different disciplines and academic traditions, in different fields of activity and national/regional contexts’ (*Introduction*, p. 2). To achieve this substantial goal, the book has been divided into two parts: the first, entitled *European Mesoregions*, deals with the definition of cultural, geographical, or political areas larger than a nation state but smaller than Europe; the second, entitled *Disciplinary Traditions of Regionalization*, analyses the ways in which different academic disciplines like history, economics, or literature have then used these regional conceptualisations. The division definitely works, though one is left wondering if there could have been two separate volumes which would have allowed more space on the use of particular mesoregional concepts and further analysis.

Nevertheless, the volume does extensively cover mesoregional concepts with articles on, for instance, *Scandinavia/Norden* (Chapter 2), *Iberia* (Chapter 6), the *Balkans* (Chapter 7), and *Eurasia* (Chapter 10). This breadth is admirable but entails certain challenges: considering that the editors are aiming to focus on conceptual clusters rather than individual concepts (*Introduction*, p. 2), some articles like *The Mediterranean* (Chapter 4) and *Southern Europe* (Chapter 5) would definitely have worked better as a combined article, as these clearly form a cluster of concepts, albeit an admittedly loose one. As Guido Franzinetti points out in Chapter 5, ‘[t]he term “Southern Europe” remains a highly elusive concept, even in comparison with other highly contested regional conceptualisations’ (p. 100). Focusing on how phenomena are conceptualised, as proposed by Steinmetz and Freeden in the introduction to their volume, rather than assuming a fixed set of concepts would have definitely worked here, although this brings its own problems when handling such a wide range of historical primary sources from the last two centuries or more of European history. One can only imagine the amount of time-consuming work this would involve, even if an increasing number of these sources are now available in digital form.

European Regions and Boundaries works perhaps more like a lexicon than a continuous volume, both in terms of its impressive scope, and its close ties to the Koselleckian tradition of writing conceptual history. Indeed, the editors speculate over whether several temporal processes on the European level might be found via the *Sattelzeit* concept so closely associated with *Geschitliche Grundbegriffe* (*Introduction*, p. 9). The Koselleckian approach certainly leads to coherence for each individual article but it also leads to some repetition at the level of the whole volume. The change of focus from north-south to east-west divisions in Europe is repeated several times, and certain individual theories such as Mackinder’s ‘geopolitics of the heartland’ often reoccur (e.g., p. 167, 213–219, 245).

The second part of the volume focuses on the conceptualisations of particular historical agents – mostly academics and policy experts, including the leaders of different international organisations (p. 5). It also focuses almost exclusively on academic debates in subjects such as history, geopolitics, economics, linguistics, literature, and art history. While such debates are a logical starting point for anyone looking at mesoregional conceptualisation, they add a rather strong character of traditional intellectual history to the volume. It is easy to assume that a more micro-level approach

could widen the scope of definitions studied. Looking for definitions of mesoregions in localised contexts could challenge both mainstream and more academic uses of these concepts and offer much needed contextual information about other debates related to them. Again, the challenge is in finding historical primary sources that explicitly deal with mesoregional concepts in the first place; searching for mere mentions is hardly adequate when trying to interpret the meaning of these concepts in contemporary contexts.

Overall, *European Regions and Boundaries* is a useful volume for those interested in different mesoregional concepts and their use in the European context across a range of academic fields. It ambitiously proposes a new way of studying and challenges established conceptualisations of regions that are often taken for granted. At times, it might seem a bit too ambitious; coherently combining regional conceptualisations with different academic sub-genres into one individual volume is a monumental task. One can only imagine the multidisciplinary challenges faced by the editors when working with authors from such diverse academic traditions, backgrounds, and established practices. At times, this diversity can understandably lead to stylistic incoherence.

Conclusions

Some innovative and ambitious research is currently taking place in the field of conceptual history. While not simply limited to the spatial element discussed here, it challenges the essential role of nation states and certain regional concepts as natural units of historical inquiry. Combining the conceptual and transnational elements of history writing does seem to challenge older nation-based methodologies. In broader terms, both volumes encourage scholars to further relativize existing ideas of the past; only with a thorough understanding of historical languages can we dynamically grasp the past in any detail. These volumes should thus be celebrated as precious spaces for innovation, at a time when new methodological perspectives tend to be placed under intense scrutiny by mainstream historical scholarship. They can therefore be recommended to all readers interested in current trends and developments within historical methodology.

These two volumes are hopefully just the beginnings of new and exciting approaches that will inspire innovation and originality and set a new standard in transnational and multidisciplinary research. The study of mesoregional concepts, spatial conceptualisation, and the methodology of studying these phenomena via the different intellectual traditions that use them has only just begun. More work is still needed, but at least the foundations have now been laid. Indeed, several other additional publications to the *European Conceptual History* series [6] are already out, each highlighting a different yet new approach to conceptual history. It would be interesting to review other volumes in the series in a similar fashion, as the conceptual analysis of key concepts like parliamentarism [7], democracy [8], and liberalism [9] are essential in defining future ways of studying conceptual history in the European space.

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[1] See Partti, Kenneth. *Taking the Language of the Past Seriously: The Influence of the Linguistic Turns in Finnish and Swedish History Dissertations, 1970-2010* (forthcoming, 2019), for a historiographical take on the adaptation of conceptual history in the Nordic sphere.

[2] HoCG was founded in 1998 by Kari Palonen and Melvin Richter

[3] Since 2005 these have been organised in Aarhus, Copenhagen, Helsinki, and Mexico City.

[4] <https://www.uma.es/21st-international-conference-history-concepts/info/114350/general-programme/> [cited 22.4.2019].

[5] <https://www.berghahnbooks.com/series/european-conceptual-history>, [cited 25.2.2019].

[6] in addition to the volumes already mentioned in this review article, the series also includes volume 4: Kaldewey David and Schauz Désirée (eds.) 2018. *Basic and Applied Research. The Language of Science Policy in the Twentieth Century*. Berghahn Books.

[7] Ihalainen Pasi, [& Cornelia Ilie & Kari Palonen] (eds.) 2016. *Parliament and Parliamentarism: A Comparative History of a European Concept*. European Conceptual History, vol. 2. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books.

[8] Kurunmäki Jussi, [& Jeppen Nevers & Henke Te Velde] (eds.) 2018. *Democracy in Modern Europe: A Conceptual History*. European Conceptual History, vol. 5. New York & Oxford: Berghahn Books.

[9] Freeden Michael, [& Javier Fernández-Sebastián & Jörn Leonhard] (eds.) 2019 (forthcoming). *In Search of European Liberalisms. Concepts, Languages, Ideologies*. European Conceptual History, vol. 6. Berghahn Books.

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