The Europe of Concepts:
A Transnational Approach

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What is Europe? What does it mean to be European? Questions like these are not easily answered. Historical concepts do not allow themselves to be trapped by simple definitions. Europe is an elusive notion, much more cultural than geographical: plural, changing and controversial. Not without reason has the European identity been erratically forged over several centuries, in contrast to more or less distant cultural realities, perceived as non-European.

From the perspective that interests us here, we could describe Europeanness as a constellation of concepts and categories that historically have molded European civilisation. An intangible heritage of such cherished values and principles as liberty and democracy, humanity or tolerance, but also such basic notions as society, individual, state, history, philosophy, law, politics or economics; all of these underpin the disciplines which today tend to be grouped under the rubric of humanities and social sciences. (Leaving to one side natural sciences, although semantic transfers between different areas of knowledge often circumvent interdisciplinary barriers: think of transversal cognitive tools, valid for science and the arts, such as evolution, representation, crisis, function, process, generation, system or structure).

If we concentrate on fundamental social and political concepts, we are speaking of blurred, polysemic and disputed concepts, always open to rhetorical redescription, at odds with the clarity and precision of formal languages proper to analytical philosophy; crucial concepts, however, due to their capacity to shape the experiences of individuals and groups, and to design and construct the future; impure, evaluative concepts, inseparable from the practices with which they are associated, tinted with a thousand tones and nuances according to the moments and the pragmatics of particular situations. And if it is true that, as the poet Leopardi observed two centuries ago, we Europeans share a sociopolitical *piccola lingua* comprising several dozen "Europeanisms" – terms with Greek and Latin roots present with slight variations in almost all the languages of the continent –, the meanings of these key words vary considerably depending on the speakers, languages, moments in time, countries and circumstances. Thus, for instance, it would be a serious mistake to presume that the syntagms *koinonia politike*, *societas civilis*, *sociedad civil*, *civil society*, *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* or *société civile* refer at all times to the same thing. And the existence of a similar term in almost all European languages to designate the Enlightenment, liberalism, citizenship, public opinion, etc, certainly does not mean that this shared lexicon refers to identical meanings or to equivalent historical experiences or expectations.

To clarify the misunderstandings that might arise from these pan-European vocabularies, observe and compare the diverse patterns and speeds of semantic change in the different political-cultural areas of the continent, historically analyse the conceptual transfers, hybridisations, adaptations, translations, convergences and divergences between them, chart the varied conceptualisations with which successive generations of Europeans in very different contexts have responded to similar challenges, are some of the objectives of the European Conceptual History Project. This is an ambitious project which a group of European scholars has spent years attempting to start up and which only now, with the publication of the first books in the series *European Conceptual History*, is beginning to bear its first fruit (among them the forthcoming methodological volume *Conceptual History in the European Space*). To this end it has been necessary to leave aside academic preconceptions and transcend national frameworks in the interest of a genuinely transnational approach to the history of social and political concepts. A "de-centred" approach that contemplates Europe as one of several regions, capable of dialoguing with other similar research programmes all over the planet – such as *Iberconceptos* or the projects on basic concepts in India and the Far East – with a view to the gradual construction of a global conceptual history.

One of the greatest challenges facing the project lies in how difficult it is for researchers to distance themselves from their own cognitive toolkit, from that misleading "common sense" that leads us to believe that our conceptual system – one of many possible systems – reflects the world "as it is". For the fundamental concepts which guide us are like

lenses, naturalised and normally invisible, through which we perceive and classify the world, in which we see only that which has previously been conceptualised.

In these times of major transformations and accelerated conceptual obsolescence, whilst Europe is proving to be incapable of rethinking itself (which is itself a conceptual difficulty) and we see a return of the old demons and divisive instincts, it seems more opportune than ever to advance with a project such as this. Those of us participating in it, historians and professionals of social sciences, wish to contribute to the public debate in the best way we can: accomplishing to the best of our abilities our task of clarifying and historicising the vocabularies of politics and culture. Our commitment to a new transnational conceptual history seeks to return something of their historical complexity to the multiple, zigzagging and often discordant paths of European civilisation. Showing amongst other things the extent to which certain conceptual networks are inextricably interwoven with the construction of Europe, but also with the most dramatic and destructive periods of its history.