



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

Theory of History, Epistemic Transformations, and Presentism

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Historia conceptual en el Atlántico ibérico: lenguajes, tiempos, revoluciones, By Javier Fernández Sebastián. Madrid: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2021. Pp. 571. ISBN 9788437508122.

This remarkable book is an outcome of many years of reflection on conceptual history by one of its leading exponents, who through the magnificent *Iberconceptos* project has explored the scope for thinking about the life of ideas ‘beyond Bielefeld (Koselleck) and Cambridge (Skinner)’. Fernández Sebastián here offers a master class in what conceptual history can be in the hands of a seasoned practitioner who is both rigorous and imaginative, not to mention formidably well read in the historiographies of Iberian America, Europe, and the United States. Many historians would have been content with that, but Fernández Sebastián’s ambitions go a great deal further. His work on the conceptual history of the Iberian independence revolutions leads him to urge historians to take seriously the *theorizing* of history, not of History in a Hegelian sense, but as an intellectual discipline. This would require scrutiny of historical practice beyond discussions of method (which, he suggests, all too easily reduces to technique) to a far deeper level of reflexivity about historical consciousness. The author engagingly reveals, tucked away in a footnote, his hope that the book might persuade readers who think they are not interested in theory of history to think again.

Great care has gone into the structure of the book. It reminded me, in this sense (only!) of Cortázar’s novel *Rayuela* (*Hopscotch*): you could – and probably should – read the chapters in several different sequences. There would be at least four versions of the text. The first is a conceptual history of the

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revolutions in the Iberian Americas, which Fernández Sebastián dates from 1808 to c. 1840, and where he makes the case that these events constituted ‘an epistemic revolution’ as well as (perhaps even more so than) a political one (p. 94). One of the book’s great strengths is that it brings together time and language, drawing on Gadamer, when the historical and the linguistic are usually treated separately. The second text-within-a-text is a contribution to debates about the understanding of modernity, which he characterizes as an era of multiplying traditions, to be analysed as ‘elective’ (rather than invented) traditions, thereby reintroducing agency to the question of why some ideas, customs, or practices are continued whilst others are not. If ever there was a book to show the sheer folly of excluding or marginalizing the histories of Spain, Portugal, and Latin America from thinking about the modern world, then this is it. The third strand to Fernández Sebastián’s text is a historical account of conceptual history itself, critically reflecting upon its emergence and consolidation in the second half of the twentieth century, its contribution to historical understanding, and how it might now be taken forward in light of criticisms. The fourth is an essay making the case for a theory of historical practice, as outlined above. These four historical endeavours are explicitly designed to resonate with each other, inviting the reader to find their own harmonies and counterpoints. In the short space available here, my comments and questions relate to two themes: categories and presentism.

One of Fernández Sebastián’s most compelling arguments, from my perspective as a historian of knowledge, is that deep epistemic transformations entail not only changes in concepts but also changes in the ways that new concepts are produced. Various questions arise here about the problem of selection, which is of course inherent in any historian’s choice of subject matter but which is perhaps particularly problematic when trying to determine ‘key’ concepts. Fernández Sebastián makes the case, very effectively, against the retrospective application of present-day concepts or of current understandings of them. I would add that there are also important points to make about how historians apply contemporary *categories*, particularly when they are selecting concepts. To give an example: how do historians determine what constitutes a *political* concept? I have suggested elsewhere, applying Geoffrey Lloyd’s term ‘ideals of inquiry’ to refer to the common ground that made debate possible in a society, that nature and its constituents, especially the land, played that role in the half-century after independence in Spanish America. It follows that concepts of nature became politicized to the extent that identifying their multiple and changing meanings is a crucial key to understanding political conflict. Similar evidence exists for education policy as a proxy for broader debates about power. There are good reasons to be wary of assuming that the past political was a category with the same contents (even if differently understood) as the present political. Historians need to subject their categories to the same degree of critical scrutiny as they have already applied to concepts, methods, and sources, especially those trained in institutions where ‘European’ ways of analysing the world have been taken for granted.

One of the main contributions of conceptual history, argues Fernández Sebastián, has been to remind historians how difficult it is to disenchant our own concepts. In his reckoning of the dangers of presentism, he also makes a deft statement of the case against the wilful abuse of history in current culture wars, when the past is looted for broken images that can be thrown together to shore up present-day prejudices. I fully agree that it is crucial for professional historians to keep making these arguments. Yet I cannot help wondering if there is more to be said about presentism in relation to theory of history, particularly in light of recent discussions such as the *Past & Present* 'Viewpoint' of 2017 or David Armitage's article, 'In defense of presentism' (in D. M. McMahon, ed., *History and human flourishing*, Oxford, 2022). Armitage argues that a professional commitment to avoiding anachronism has come at too high a price, namely a failure 'to think hard enough about what should be the central concern of our discipline: time'. He urges historians to recognize that 'our reconstruction of the history can only take place in the present, just as our imagination of events to come occurs in the here and now' and therefore the responsible choice is to accept 'a presentism that is both epistemological and ontological'. Some of the contributors to the *Past & Present* discussion agree, at least to some extent, and come close to Fernández Sebastián in their emphasis on critical historical consciousness.

One especially relevant contribution is the response to François Hartog's *Regimes of historicity* (trans. 2015) by Steve Smith, in which he specifies how the history of twentieth-century China does not fit the Western schema of transition in 1989 from modernist focus on the future to contemporary absorption in the present. As mainstream historians focus more on the questions of ethics and political responsibility that have long been debated in the fields of Marxist, feminist, queer, and postcolonial history, it is all the more important that these debates are not constrained by paradigms, categories, and preconceptions of the hegemonic Euro-American academy. One such paradigm is the positivist model of history moving through stages, which persists despite widespread rejection of the idea of 'progress'. What conceptual history seems particularly well suited to show is the extent to which varying conceptions of time could and did co-exist, and the extent to which the choices made were framed not as 'either/or' (the great Western epistemological divide) but, as intellectuals from Latin America (and from other parts of the world) have put it, as 'and, and'. In this context, I would like to ask Professor Fernández Sebastián if his concern about the lack of a theory of history is primarily ontological, epistemological, or ethical? At the same time, I reiterate my enthusiastic appreciation of his marvellous polyphonic book, which has stimulated my thinking about many aspects of the interpretation of history.