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# The Essential Tension in the History of Concepts. A Review Essay

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FAUSTINO ONCINA COVES (ed.): *Tradición e innovación en la historia intelectual. Métodos historiográficos*, Biblioteca Nueva, Madrid, 2013, 237 pages.<sup>1</sup>

## Review

The book edited by Professor Faustino Oncina (Universidad de Valencia), entitled *Tradition and Innovation in Intellectual History. Historiographical Methods*, illustrates, in my opinion, the tension within the history of concepts and, by extension, within contemporary intellectual history. In this respect, this collective volume might be considered a significant contribution to contemporary conceptual history and intellectual history for a Spanish-language audience.<sup>2</sup> The book originated from an eponymous conference held in late 2012 at the Universidad de Valencia. The conference took place within the context of the research project »Towards a Comprehensive Conceptual History: Philosophical and Cultural Turns« (FFI2011-24473), in collaboration with the Zentrum für Literatur- und Kulturforschung Berlin (ZfL). Considered as a whole, the book shows a double tension between conceptual and intellectual history with a great variety of approaches, propositions, authors and issues.

The volume opens with an introduction by the editor, entitled »Conceptual History, Anything more than a Method?«. It provides an overview of the state of the art in conceptual history, describing its limits and methodological possibilities as well as its relevance for a new theory of modernity. Faustino Oncina undertakes an exhaustive review of different modes of conceptual history, from the classical contributions of the German and British traditions to the »constellations« method and philosophical conceptual history. Complementarily, in the first chapter, entitled »Interdisciplinary Conceptual History«, Ernst Müller (ZfL) examines contemporary trends in research on the history of concepts, which revolves around six main axes: the renewal of the systematic and historical grounds of conceptual history; the increasing interna-

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1 Hereafter, I shall refer to this book by the abbreviation »*TeI*«. All translations are mine.

2 See also the Spanish volume edited by Javier Fernández Sebastián and Gonzalo Capellán de Miguel: *Conceptos políticos, tiempo e historia: nuevos enfoques en historia conceptual*, Santander/Madrid 2013.

tionalization of Koselleck's approach; the embodiment of current political and social issues in the history of concepts; the lexicographical-metaphorological approach; and case studies on scientific culture and interdisciplinary cultural studies. To these six trends a seventh should be added that aims at reconciling them all: the interdisciplinary conceptual history program promoted by the ZfL. Müller presents »interdisciplinary concepts« as the »main or fundamental concepts employed in many disciplines, and therefore in many cultures, and whose semantics are not limited to such discipline nor fully controlled« (*TeI*, p. 45). This approach allows a revision of the traditional ways of organizing knowledge and introduces the concept of »*Wissen*«, which advocates a new perspective on processes of cultural transfers.

Javier Fernández Sebastián's (Universidad del País Vasco) and Giovanna Pinna's (Università degli Studi del Molise) contributions both examine historiographical methodologies currently being employed in the field. In the chapter »*Ex innovatio traditio / Ex traditio innovatio. Continuity and Discontinuity in Intellectual History*«, Fernández Sebastián undertakes a methodological inquiry on the dichotomy tradition/innovation, which is further specified in the pair continuity/rupture. The author provides an analysis of the conceptual and rhetorical transformations associated with historical change and the requirement to legitimate relations to the past and to the future. Thus, traditions are presented as kinds of artefacts arranged in the present to make sense of how innovations emerge. Innovations need to retrospectively establish their own tradition, but at the same time tradition is itself a precondition for innovation. Hence the double Latin formula suggested by the author: from innovation to tradition, from tradition to innovation. In the chapter entitled »Biographical Turn? On the Return of Biography as Historical Method«, Professor Giovanna Pinna produces a detailed study of contemporary philosophical historiography, particularly the so-called »philosophical biography«, a type of historiography that »seems to seek in the reality of the existence of an individual the concrete data from which to build new hermeneutical perspectives« (*TeI*, p. 199). Pinna addresses the topics and models in this new biographical research wave, reviewing recent books on the lives and thinking of authors as diverse as Kant, Hegel, Fichte, Dilthey and Wittgenstein, among others.

The chapters by Falko Schmieder (ZfL) and Juan de Dios Partal Bares (Universidad de Valencia) specifically focus on Koselleck's works. Schmieder's chapter, entitled »Ways of Thinking about Temporalization and its Historical Transformation. A Discussion with Reinhart Koselleck«, develops a philosophical analysis of Koselleck's concept of »temporalization« [*Verzeitlichung*]. The author discusses the various historical dimensions of this concept throughout Koselleck's work, its systematic function within the theory and methodology of conceptual history, as well as its inherent limitations and possibilities for improvement, especially in relation to interdisciplinary conceptual history as it is promoted by the ZfL. Professor Juan de Dios Partal Bares, in his chapter »Koselleck's Conceptual History and Ancient History«, takes up Koselleck's conceptual history from the point of view of his contributions to the study of the Greek world. Koselleck's analysis of the ancient world is »a piece of conceptual history in its classical sense« (*TeI*, p. 208), which the author of the chapter ultimately examines in relation to the historian Christian Meier's works.

The contributions by professors Tomás Gil (Technische Universität Berlin), Enrique F. Bocado Crespo (Universidad de Sevilla), Johannes Rohbeck (Technische Universität Dresden) and Ives Radrizzani (Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften) can be considered chapters on conceptual clarifications and/or the analysis of theoretical and systematic nature. In »Negative Effects of Conceptual Innovations«, Tomás Gil suggests a realistic understanding of the concepts, according to which »the concepts show and organize reality« (*TeI*, p. 76). From this point of view, conceptual innovations »make new ways of seeing what is already known possible. They provide new access to reality« (*TeI*, p. 76). However, not all the effects of conceptual innovations are advantageous. In order to illustrate this point, Gil discusses »substance«, »causation« and »supervenience« as three examples that »when they were set out within certain theoret-

ical frameworks these specific concepts became problematic« (*TeI*, p. 76). In the chapter »The Dogma of the Illocutionary Intentions«, Enrique F. Bocardo Crespo analyses illocutionary acts, especially through the notion of »illocutionary force« and in relation to the contributions of E. H. Gombrich, Q. Skinner and T. S. Kuhn. In his chapter »Action and History«, Johannes Rohbeck advocates the distinction between »sense of action« and »sense of interpretation« [*sentido de la interpretación*], which serves as a basis for his review of historiography, philosophy of history and pragmatics. His analysis aims to show that »the methodologies of science and the methodologies of the philosophy of history assume certain conceptions of human actions and they are conditioned by them« (*TeI*, p. 96); moreover, »the employed patterns of understanding include models of crystallized action« (*TeI*, p. 96). Thus, the author claims that »the action is not just a given fact of historiography, but it already has its own historical sense that is transformed in the historiography and in the philosophy of history« (*TeI*, p. 96). Ives Radrizzani's chapter, »Inquiries on the Status of the History of Philosophy«, focuses on the study of the relationships between history and philosophy. The author claims that philosophy is irreducible to history and is marked by a radical ahistoricity. In his opinion, the historicity of the concepts should be attributed to the history of applied philosophy.

The chapters by Professors Ángel Prior Olmos (Universidad de Murcia), Antonio Lastra (Universidad de Valencia / Director of *La Torre del Virrey. Revista de Estudios Culturales*), Gaetano Rametta (Università di Padova) and Karina P. Trilles Calvo (Universidad de Castilla La Mancha) investigate how Hannah Arendt's, Leo Strauss', Michel Foucault's and Aby Warburg's works, respectively, contribute to intellectual history and the history of concepts. In the chapter »History, Concepts and Experience in Hannah Arendt«, Ángel Prior outlines the controversial reception of Arendt's work by I. Berlin, E. Hobsbawm and E. Voegelin. Arendt's contribution to the intellectual history and history of concepts pertains specifically to the experience of totalitarianism and its relation to history, an experience that Arendt considered an »enlightening event« (*TeI*, p. 107). Prior demonstrates how totalitarianism's disruptive nature required new categories of historical analysis, which were ultimately specified in the notion of »world alienation« and its further meaning for the history of ideas. Antonio Lastra, in »Micrology: Leo Strauss and the History of Philosophy«, focuses on some terminological problems in Strauss' thought and their implications for the history of philosophy, which includes not only the reception of classical philosophy in the medieval Islamic and Jewish worlds but also its reception by Western authors as different from each other as Kant, Adorno, Benjamin or Derrida. A further contribution by Gaetano Rametta, entitled »Theory of Speech and Archeology: A Reading of Foucault from a Historical-Conceptual Point of View«, shows how »Foucault's thought can provide useful tools, even today, for a historical-conceptual reconstruction of the intellectual events that have determined the formation of modern Europe« (*TeI*, p. 142). In this respect, the author outlines a comparison between Foucault's archaeological practice and conceptual history. Finally, Karina P. Trilles Calvo, in the chapter »The Pictorial, Iconic or Visual Turn in the History of Thought: The Warburg Case«, shows the relevance and meaning of Warburg's achievements for a contemporary history of thought, fully in line with Boehm's »iconic turn« [*ikonische Wendung*] and Mitchell's »pictorial turn«.

The volume concludes with two chapters that might be described as »historical semantics«. In the first one, entitled »The Poet Gottfried Benn Visits the Doric World (but he Leaves it Soon)«, Salvador Mas investigates the process of Nazi appropriation of antiquity in the case of Gottfried Benn's literature and essays, a remarkable example of a »fascist image of antiquity [...] as an aesthetic phenomenon« (*TeI*, p. 216). In the end, Elena Cantarino, in the chapter »Genius of History to Understand and to Write. Nature and Method of History in the Spanish Baroque«, explores the relationship between history, politics and the interest in the Spanish baroque, where humanist historiography and its values were transformed into a pragmatic and exemplary baroque historiography.

## Reflective Essay

In light of this diverse and expansive content in the collective volume, further questions arise: Is contemporary intellectual history already a new discipline in the field of humanities and social sciences? How does the process of producing new disciplines work in the humanities? Is conceptual history transforming into a discipline at this very moment? Does the book edited by Faustino Oncina contribute to the transformation of conceptual history into a discipline? I would like to examine these questions via an essayistic reflection on the essential tension in the history of concepts as a critical response to *Tel.*

In this respect, it is interesting to recall the striking presence of Thomas S. Kuhn in the German conceptual history, especially for its second generation of scholars. Certainly, Kuhn was a foreign body –*Fremdkörper*– within the *Begriffsgeschichte*, thus, he can be taken to be both an »indicator« and a »factor« of change (to use Koselleck's terminology) in this historiographical methodology. For instance, in the letter of invitation, dated June 1982, to participate in the twelfth *Poetik und Hermeneutik* symposium, Reinhart Herzog and Reinhart Koselleck suggested a historiographical topic for the symposium, including keywords – »Stichworte« – such as the »epochal threshold« and »paradigm shift« [»Epochenschwelle« und »Paradigmenwechsel«].<sup>3</sup> While these terms were explicitly attributed to Blumenberg and Kuhn, the letter as well noted that »others« had also dealt with these very issues. Among those »others«, Koselleck himself should be taken into account. In 1979 he published, *Vergangene Zukunft – Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*, in which he introduces his famous epochal distinction between »space of experience« and »horizon of expectation«.<sup>4</sup> The twelfth colloquium of *Poetik und Hermeneutik* was finally published under the title *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewusstsein* [Epochal Threshold and Consciousness of Epoch],<sup>5</sup> and stands as an emblematic case of »hybridization« between concepts and metaphors.<sup>6</sup> However, the discrete propagation of Kuhnian semantics in the *Poetik und Hermeneutik* colloquium and in the *Begriffsgeschichte* cannot be taken as entirely accidental. Quite the contrary, one may claim that Kuhnian semantics play a role in the production of conceptual history. Its importance also has a lot to do with the *Philosophische Rundschau*, a journal founded in 1953 and edited by Hans-Georg Gadamer and Helmut Kuhn<sup>7</sup> that publishes critical reviews to this day. Through the mediation of the publisher Mohr Verlag, Blumenberg was invited to collaborate with the journal. In 1958 Blumenberg wrote to the editorial board of the *Philosophische Rundschau* to request Arthur Lovejoy's book *The Great Chain of Being* [1936] and Thomas S. Kuhn's *The Copernican Revolution: Planetary Astronomy in the Development of Western Thought* [1957] to review them for the journal.<sup>8</sup> Thus, it is not surprising that some years later, in his advisory work for Suhrkamp Verlag from 1966 to 1968, Blumenberg suggested the translation and publication of Kuhn's book *The Structure*

3 Reinhart Herzog and Reinhart Koselleck, letter of invitation, June 1982 (Deutsches Literaturarchiv Marbach). Further details in A. Fragio, »Das Überleben der Übergänge: la supervivencia de los tránsitos: nuevos paradigmas de análisis de la obra de Hans Blumenberg«, in: Alberto Fragio/Diego Giordano: *Hans Blumenberg: Nuovi paradigmi d'analisi*, Roma 2010, pp. 27–44, republished in Alberto Fragio: *Destrucción, cosmos, metáfora. Ensayos sobre Hans Blumenberg*, Milano 2013, pp. 11–45.

4 There is much to be said on this topic, as well as on the friendship between Blumenberg and Koselleck. See, for example, Timo Pankakoski: »Reoccupying Secularization: Schmitt and Koselleck on Blumenberg's Challenge«, *History and Theory* 52 (2013) 2, pp. 214–45.

5 Reinhart Herzog/Reinhart Koselleck (eds.): *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewusstsein* (=Poetik und Hermeneutik; no. 12), München 1987.

6 »Während das Beschreibungsmodell Kosellecks vom Auseinandertreten von Erfahrung und Erwartung (insbesondere in der Applikation auf die Neuzeit) nicht in Frage gestellt wurde, in manchen Vorlagen auch Anwendung fand, wurden Blumenbergs Exemplifizierungen epochaler Umbesetzungsvorgänge mehrfach bestritten, bezeichnenderweise vornehmlich am Fall der Metapher von der »Epochenschwelle« und ihrer begrifflichen Implikate (Barner; Jauss), während Kuhns Thesen zum Paradigmenwechsel (ausser bei Haverkamp) kaum Beachtung fanden«. Ibid., p. VIII. In addition to the term »threshold« it may be helpful to also note the metaphorical nature of »paradigms«. On the latter, see Alberto Fragio: »Descubrir la emergencia, disolver la revolución: el cambio científico a través de sus metáforas«, *Revista de Filosofía* 32 (2007) 1, pp. 33–45.

7 We should not mistake Helmut Kuhn (Universität München) for Thomas S. Kuhn. Helmut Kuhn was one of the editors, together with Franz Wiedmann, of the proceedings of 6th and 7th *Deutscher Kongress für Philosophie* in Munich in 1960 and 1962, respectively. See also the collected volume published on the occasion of Helmut Kuhn's 65th birthday and edited by Franz Wiedmann.

8 Blumenberg's contribution to this journal effectively included four reviews: 1) »Marginalien zur theologischen Logik Rudolf Bultmanns« [1954/55]; 2) »Helmo Dolch: Kausalität im Verständnis des Theologen und der Begründer neuzeitlicher Physik« [1955]; 3) »Epochenschwelle und Rezeption« [1957/58]; and 4) »Die Vorbereitung der Neuzeit« [1962]. Some years later in the *Philosophische Rundschau*, Gadamer published an important review of Blumenberg's *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*: Hans-Georg Gadamer, »Die Legitimität der Neuzeit« [1968], pp. 201–9.



of *Scientific Revolutions*,<sup>9</sup> originally published in 1962, two years after Blumenberg's own *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie*.<sup>10</sup> Within this framework, the »Kuhnian singularity« reveals itself as belonging to historical and philosophical interests that converge in the history of concepts. The similarities between the problems addressed by Kuhn and by some of the main promoters of *Begriffsgeschichte* are remarkable, for example, the lexicographical and terminological issues,<sup>11</sup> the studies of epochal change, the analysis of historical experience formation, and attempts to develop a philosophy of history. Kuhn's early work provided a counter image to the European historiographical and theoretical programs, which is why this American historian of science referred to a complex friend-enemy dialectic in the German context. At the twelfth symposium of *Poetik und Hermeneutik*, all this resulted in the aforementioned notion of a »paradigm shift«, a sort of »interdisciplinary metaphor« together with the »epochal threshold«, within the framework of the new *Geisteswissenschaften*.

For my argument it is important to note that in 1959 Kuhn introduced the »essential tension« as a metaphor of scientific change during a conference held at the University of Utah, under the title »The Essential Tension: Tradition and Innovation in Scientific Research«. <sup>12</sup> At this conference, Kuhn presented some key anticipatory ideas that would appear in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, published a few years later. Kuhn claimed that »only investigations firmly rooted in the contemporary scientific tradition are likely to break that tradition and give rise to a new one. That is why I speak of an »essential tension« implicit in scientific research«. <sup>13</sup> The metaphor of »essential tension« and its breaking of traditions are closely related to the metaphors of scientific revolutions. The »essential tension« combined the physical sciences, in which Kuhn was educated,<sup>14</sup> with a metaphysical *impetus* that would eventually permeate all his work and allow his theory on the structure of the history of science to develop along the lines of his well-known typology: normal science – crisis – revolution – new period of normal science.<sup>15</sup> However, it is instructive to remark that Kuhn modified his earlier approach. By adopting an evolutionary epistemology, Kuhn was able to establish a new image of both scientific change and the historical processes behind transformations of knowledge.<sup>16</sup> Kuhn described his new position as a nuanced »post-Darwinian Kantianism«. <sup>17</sup> This evolutionary view, in line with other authors such as Popper, Campbell, and Toulmin, was only roughly sketched by Kuhn in a few of his later works and apparently forms the core of his

9 Further details in Fragio: »Überleben der Übergänge« (note 3).

10 A comparison of these two books in A. Fragio: »Descubrir la emergencia, disolver la revolución: el cambio científico a través de sus metáforas«, *Revista de Filosofía* 32 (2007) 1, pp. 33–45.

11 For instance, one of the problems addressed by Blumenberg in his *Paradigmen zu einer Metaphorologie* is the failure of the Cartesian methodological ideal to obtain an accurate terminology that could then reach a definitively valid conceptual stage over time. According to Blumenberg, should this goal ever be achieved, then it would be meaningless and unjustifiable to undertake a history of concepts, since the perfect correspondence between words and things would eliminate any form of conceptual historicity. Meanwhile, Kuhn confronted the question whether it is possible to design a neutral language in order to express the terminology of past scientific traditions, a question that leads precisely to the epistemological problem of incommensurability.

12 Reprinted from C. W. Taylor (ed.): *The Third (1959) University of Utah Research Conference on the Identification of Scientific Talent*, Salt Lake City 1959, pp. 162–174, in: Thomas S. Kuhn: *The Essential Tension. Selected Studies in Scientific Tradition and Change*, Chicago/London 1977, pp. 225–239.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 227. Kuhn also made reference to the »textbook paradigms«, see pp. 230–233. According to Herzog and Koselleck, »Traditionsbildung in der Epoche chronischer Innovation [kann] gerade auch als permanente Krise erlebt werden«, Herzog/Koselleck: *Epochenschwelle und Epochenbewußtsein* (note 5), p. X.

14 Kuhn described himself as »an ex-physicist now working in the history of science«, Kuhn: *Essential Tension* (note 12), p. 225.

15 Koselleck himself introduced a series of dynamic and mechanical metaphors in order to express the experience of historical time, for instance, the metaphors of »strata«, »acceleration« and »retardation«. The latter has also survived in Gumbrecht's »Langsame Gegenwart« [slow present], see *Lento presente. Sintomatológica y hermenéutica*, Madrid 2010 (Spanish translation of a selection of essays). In *Dimensionen und Grenzen der Begriffsgeschichte* (München 2006), Gumbrecht employed the metaphor of the »Pyramiden des Geistes«, and the metaphors of the stratum in the form of sediment: »Was sollen wir heute anfangen mit den in Pyramidenferne gerückten Sedimenten unserer intellektuellen Jugend?«, *ibid.*, p. 9.

16 Further details in Jouni-Matti Kuukkanen: »Revolution as Evolution. The Concept of Evolution in Kuhn's Philosophy«, in: Vasso Kindi/Theodore Arabatzis (eds.): *Kuhn's The Structure of Scientific Revolutions Revisited*, London, 2012, pp. 134–52.

17 Thomas S. Kuhn: *The Road Since Structure. Philosophical Essays, 1970–1993, with an Autobiographical Interview*, Chicago/London, 2002, p. 104. In the p. 207: »The view toward which I grope would also be Kantian, but without ›things in themselves‹ and with categories of the mind which could change with time as the accommodation of language and experience proceeded. A view of that sort need not, I think, make the world less real.«

forthcoming posthumous book *The Plurality of Worlds: An Evolutionary Theory of Scientific Development*.<sup>18</sup> The new Kuhnian conceptual framework was also closely related to a change in metaphors, i.e., to the evolutionary metaphor par excellence: the Darwinian tree of species. The main issue was now to explain the emergence of scientific disciplines in the evolutionary tree of knowledge. Thus, Kuhn coined a new metaphor, the »speciation of disciplines«: »Revolutions, which produce new divisions between fields in scientific development, are much like episodes of speciation in biological evolution. The biological parallel to revolutionary change is not mutation, as I thought for many years, but speciation«.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, »I take them [the crises] to be the crucial symptoms of the speciation-like process through which new disciplines emerge«.<sup>20</sup> »Speciation« as a metaphor of scientific change also includes a »pattern of development by proliferation [that] raises the problem [...] what is the process by which proliferation and lexical change take place, and to what extent can it be said to be governed by rational considerations?«.<sup>21</sup> Indeed, the speciation of disciplines fragments science. But it also allows knowledge to grow,<sup>22</sup> since it provides new tools and a detailed treatment of numerous topics. The speciation of disciplines also results in the emergence of new communities and institutions. Thus, it might be claimed that through the transformation of Kuhnian semantics and metaphors, the speciation of disciplines provides a resolution to the essential tension between tradition and innovation.

In this respect, the book edited by Professor Faustino Oncina, *Tradition and Innovation in Intellectual History*, could be considered as illustrating the essential tension within the history of concepts and contemporary intellectual history, since it is precisely in the multiplicity of methodologies that we recognize the book's main argument. It is not a manual for regular science, whose epistemological unity is meant to correspond to the unity of the discipline, but rather it shows a pattern of development by proliferation, a feature of disciplinary speciation and a condition for the emergence of new forms of knowledge. I may then suggest, in short, that against the monumental and inert metaphor of the »pyramids of the spirit«, the »tree of conceptual history« continues to grow and flourish.

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18 Thomas S. Kuhn: *The Plurality of Worlds: An Evolutionary Theory of Scientific Development*, ed. by James Conant and John Haugeland, Chicago (forthcoming). However, many Kuhn scholars do not expect major new insights from this book.

19 Kuhn: *Road Since Structure* (note 17), p. 98.

20 Ibid., p. 100.

21 Thomas S. Kuhn: »Afterwords«, in: Paul Horwich (ed.): *World Changes. Thomas Kuhn and the Nature of Science*, Cambridge, MA, 1993, pp. 311–41, here p. 337.

22 Kuhn: *Road Since Structure* (note 17), p. 100: »It is by these divisions [...] that knowledge grows«.

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