




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

Learning ‘To Read Again’

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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.

Javier Fernández Sebastián’s latest book is truly a tour de force. While it offers a lucid appraisal of conceptual history, with a focus on the ‘conceptual revolution’ that the Iberian Atlantic underwent during the first half of the nineteenth century, it is also a serious statement on the profession – indeed, ‘no discipline’, as he tells us, can sustain itself ‘if it is not based on a theoretical reflection about its own status as a discipline’ (p. 17). His is an invitation to engage more fully with an approach to history that prizes above all the language of contemporaries to make sense of the past.

Fernández Sebastián’s text partly builds on *Iberconceptos*, his life’s work from which so many of us have learned so much: the monumental collective venture he has led over the last decades. I say ‘partly’ because a glimpse at his publications reveals that his interventions have gone far beyond *Iberconceptos*, positioning him, together with other international colleagues, at the forefront of an agenda that has invigorated the fields of intellectual and political history.¹ This is not to understate the significance and achievements of *Iberconceptos*, whose most visible outcomes are the first massive volume, published in 2009, and the second volume, which appeared in a series of separate books in 2014. While the former covered the words *America/Americans*, *citizen/vecinos*, *constitution*, *federation/federalism*, *history*, *liberal/liberalism*, *public opinion*, *people*, and *republic/republican*; the latter was devoted to *civilization*, *state*, *independence*, *liberty*, *democracy*, *order*, *party/faction*, and *sovereignty* – each

¹ See his edited volume *Political concepts and time, new approaches to conceptual history* (Santander, 2011), and his contribution to Willibald Steinmetz et al., eds., *Writing political history today* (New York, NY, 2013).

of these terms explored in national chapters covering most if not all Ibero-American countries, all preceded by overviews of their historical trajectories.

It is therefore not only fitting that his theoretical reflections are founded on *Iberconceptos* – the documentary evidence for his case is overwhelming. This is ‘practise what you preach’ at its best, as can be seen in the wealth of voices from contemporary documents that provide solid support for his analysis. More than a third of the book is devoted to exploring the Iberian *Sattelzeit*, or the period when the language modernized as the notion of time accelerated. Fernández Sebastián offers two periods for that *Sattelzeit*: a wider time span (1770–1870), and a narrower one (1807–34), ‘the true watershed of that great transition, the ‘specific age of the Iberian revolutions’ (p. 174). (I do wonder if the ‘true watershed’ should be extended until the 1850s–60s – the years when, at least in New Granada, contemporaries felt they were dismantling the last remnants of the colonial edifice?) He does not shy away from the notion of ‘revolution’ applied to the Iberian American world – contemporaries certainly did not. But the ‘conceptual revolution’, he warns us, should not be equated with a ‘process of radical change’; there are no ‘absolute revolutions’ in the ‘domains of language and culture’: the political culture in the Ibero American world changed ‘gradually’ (pp. 247, 250–1). However, some of the abrupt changes brought about by independence were probably more disruptive than in the United States after 1776, and with wider cultural repercussions (p. 124). Fernández Sebastián excels in illustrating with impressive erudition the conceptual transformations experienced in the region, not just their significant semantic changes but also the wider processes that are identified with the *Sattelzeit*: democratization, ideologization, temporalization, and politicization, to which he has added internationalization and emotionalization (p. 73).

No simple proposition comes out of this analysis. Quite rightly, Fernández Sebastián rejects dichotomies that may impede historians from appreciating the inherent hybridity of historical developments: ‘Rupture’ and ‘continuity’, two ‘crude’ opposing categories, seem to ‘exercise a strange fascination among intellectual historians’ (p. 125). ‘Tradition’ versus ‘modernity’ could lead us to a ‘cul-de-sac’ (p. 143). If there was a common political culture shared by Spain, Portugal, and Iberian American countries, this co-existed with national diversification after American independence together with marked local differences (p. 180). Even his own approach is a valuable effort to bridge theories of intellectual history that some authors consider incompatible (p. 75).

Given his inclination to favour hybrid narratives and approaches, and his advocacy of interdisciplinarity, I wonder if we need to dismiss so readily, as he seems to do, the value of the ‘history of ideas’, a practice that he identifies with a traditional intellectual history predominantly interested in ‘genealogy’ and doctrinal affiliation with a particular body of political thought. Intellectual history, he suggests, would benefit ‘if it stops approaching the analysis of thought...in terms of origins and renounces its obsessive search of intellectual influences and causes behind each revolutionary process’ (pp. 388–9). Rather than enquiring about the influence of a Thomas Paine in the independence, he adds as an example, historians should be interested in the use revolutionaries made of his work and other ‘cultural resources’ (p. 390). That intellectual

historians should pay close attention to the consumption and reception of the texts is of course a basic norm. But I find it hard to see the two tasks as contradictory – one does not exclude the other; they may involve different endeavours, with different aims, both equally valid and legitimate.

Consider the translation of the US constitution by the New Granadian Miguel de Pombo, together with the long prologue he wrote for its edition in 1811. Consider also the way Latin American liberals developed their ideas during the first half century of independence, in dialogue with European, US, and other Latin American thinkers. There is no doubt that they used the literature they had at hand strategically (p. 295). There is also no doubt that these were not intellectual processes of simple diffusionism (p. 288) – and Fernández Sebastián is of course right to stress that ‘mixed languages and eclectic solutions abounded’ (p. 241). ‘Discursive cohesion’ was not perhaps the general rule (p. 241). But some contemporaries, and some of great significance (de Pombo, Florentino González, Ezequiel Rojas, José María Samper), made important efforts to articulate a body of thought as their countries experimented with novel institutions, and many of them registered within particular doctrines, to which they also tried to contribute (even if some might have later changed their minds). Understanding how they shaped their own ideas requires an examination of their sources, their ‘influences’ – an exercise I, at least, find worthy of historical enquiry. It is worthy on its own terms – certainly when writing an intellectual biography; but it is also worthy in our attempts at understanding the various political and constitutional trajectories followed by different countries: why some adopted certain institutions and not others, why some undertook more radical or conservative paths than others. But here again, Fernández Sebastián takes a strong position: ideas do not cause revolutions (pp. 288–91); intellectual influences do not have explanatory power (p. 391). Of course, ‘ideas in themselves do not produce revolutions’, but they often were more than mere ‘rhetorical strategies’, books were not just instrumentally used for legitimisation purposes. I am aware that I am not raising novel points here – that these have been the subject of intense debate among intellectual historians, but since these issues receive some special attention in his analysis, perhaps they deserve to be rehearsed again in this panel.

Very far from detracting from the merits of Javier Fernández Sebastián’s work, these observations are the result of a highly stimulating reading. Having myself been concerned with questions of ‘origins’ and ‘influences’, his book certainly motivated a sort of soul-searching exercise. But there was much more to it than that, as one becomes immersed in the richness of conceptual history through the pages of his masterpiece. The historian needs to ‘learn to read again’ (p. 44), he tells us. It is one of the many lessons I take from his new groundbreaking book.