

The Iberian-American Alphabet of Political Modernity

Interview with Javier Fernández Sebastián

Gabriel ENTIN and Jeanne MOISAND

In this interview, Javier Fernández Sebastián presents the ibero-american world as another political powerhouse for modernity during the Revolution Age, thanks to the analysis of the history of concepts in the English and Portuguese speaking Atlantic.

Javier Fernández Sebastián is professor of History of Political Thought at the Universidad del País Vasco (Bilbao). He is the director of the “Iberconceptos” project, which has brought together a large number of European and American scholars in order to research into the history of Iberian-American concepts during the period 1750-1850. We interviewed him on the occasion of the publication of the first volume of the *Diccionario político y social del mundo iberoamericano* [*Political and Social Lexicon of the Iberian American World*]¹.

***La Vie des Idées*: The *Iberconceptos* dictionary is the product of international collaboration between dozens of specialists in Iberian-American history. How and why did you embark upon so ambitious a project?**

Javier Fernández Sebastián: In the mid-nineties, a group of Spanish historians, led by Juan Francisco Fuentes and myself, realised that there was a major problem regarding the study of historical concepts. In manifestly anachronistic fashion, historians tended to take

¹ Javier Fernández Sebastián, dir., *Diccionario político y social del mundo iberoamericano. La era de las revoluciones, 1750-1850*, vol. I, Madrid, Centro de Estudios Políticos y Constitucionales, 2009, 1422 pp.

for granted that the concepts of three or four centuries ago were transparent and could easily be understood from a present-day perspective, as if they had not undergone significant changes. So we thought it necessary to historicise our categories of comprehension of reality. Given that historical agents are only able to see that which has been conceptualised, and that the conceptual lenses through which reality is perceived vary with time, it is essential to historicise concepts. We felt, basically, that, along with a history of facts and events, it was also worthwhile writing the history of the instruments of comprehension of those events. And this led us to conceptual history.

After six years' work, in 2002 we published a first dictionary reflecting the history of a hundred fundamental political concepts in 19th-century Spain, followed in 2008 by a second volume devoted to the 20th century. At the same time, I was participating in other international networks specialised in conceptual history and at different events I began to meet up with various French and Latin American academics: Argentines like Elías Palti or Noemí Goldman, Mexicans like Guillermo Zermeño, Brazilians like João Feres... At different meetings in Paris, Vitoria or Rio de Janeiro, several of us mentioned the possibility of organising an Iberian-American project, in other words, one that would include Latin America, Spain and Portugal. Our starting premise was that concepts are neither pure ideas, nor strictly national, although they do possess a national dimension. Concepts are closely linked to the historical experiences of societies: rather than being those ahistorical, platonic or Cartesian ideas that some imagine them to be, concepts evolve according to political and social change. This has much to do with the way people understand, transform and deal with the worlds in which they live. The continuous interaction between the social-political environment and the intellectual and linguistic plane generates instruments of comprehension which change with time and to which certain key words are connected.

In short: first we arrived at conceptual history, then we applied this new methodology to a specific national setting, the case of Spain. Later, we came to the conclusion that concepts need not be restricted to that mould, but should be studied within the wider framework of a culture, understood here as a particular structure or

constellation of concepts which changes with time. And needless to say, these “cultures” transcend the national. So we decided to focus upon a key period of conceptual change on a transnational scale, from the mid-18th to the mid-19th century. First we chose ten concepts: *history, liberalism, public opinion, nation, citizenship...* and we got to work. This phase concluded with the publication of the first volume of the *Diccionario político y social del mundo iberoamericano* in the era of transition to the modern world. We are now preparing the second volume, which includes the concepts of *civilisation, democracy, state, independence, sovereignty*, etc. As well as completing this second volume, we would like to ensure the continuity of the *Iberconceptos* network (comprising nearly a hundred researchers working in over a dozen countries). To this end, in the next phase we will tackle the study of a series of semantic fields articulated around five axes, namely: *political economics; ethnic classifications and social identities; religion and politics; empire and colony*; and finally a reflection upon the gestation of the *historiographic concepts* that we employ to understand that period of the advent of modernity.

La Vie des Idées: Why does Iberconceptos focus on the period 1750-1850? To what extent do the results suggest the continuity of a shared cultural space, despite the independences?

Javier Fernández Sebastián: This chronological period corresponds *grosso modo* to the lengthy transition from *ancien régime* to political modernity, from the beginning of the Bourbon reforms until the consolidation of the new nations, embracing the crucial moment of the liberal revolutions and the independences. During this period there occurred in the whole region a major conceptual change which justifies our speaking of the advent of modernity. From the point of view of culture and shared space, it is interesting to note a fundamental paradox. Curiously, when, as a consequence of the Monarchic crisis, the emancipation movements resulted in rupture and political divorce between Spain and her political territories, those very years constituted the period when political and religious ties between both shores of the ocean were closer, more intense and more decisive than ever. The dissolution of the empires was without a doubt, in this

sense, an *Atlantic moment*. To begin with, the leaders of independence were highly Europeanised men. In addition, identities at the time were extremely fluid and genuinely Atlantic: there are many figures from the period of independences who regarded themselves as fighters for European and American liberty, not simply as founders of a particular nation, as nationalist historiography has since tended to claim.

Some of the most conspicuous revolutionary Hispanic leaders believed in one way or another that what was happening was a great Atlantic revolution: in this sense, this analytical tool is very effective in order to understand the actors in their own terms. They travelled frequently, be it of their own free will or because they were forced to. Many spent years of exile in London, Paris or Philadelphia. These years of accelerated change produced fascinating characters, whose biographies are near perfect examples of Atlantic identities. Vicente Rocafuerte, for example, was born in Guayaquil in the heart of a Catholic, monarchic Spanish family, and ended his days as an Ecuadorian advocate of tolerance and committed republican (in fact he was President of the brand new Republic of Ecuador). He was also a Member of Parliament in Cadiz, and his being South American did not prevent him from being named Mexican commercial attaché in London. This is but one of many similar cases. National definitions were almost irrelevant at the time, not least because nations did not exist, but were still being forged. Therefore, I believe that paradoxically the phase of independences is a time of cultural integration of the elites, a decidedly Atlantic moment. And the Iberian American revolutions are especially Atlantic, given that it is not possible to understand what happens on the other side of the ocean without understanding what is occurring in Spain and vice versa. Moreover, although the consolidation of national borders naturally resulted in increasing differentiation between modes of conceptualisation, there is no doubt in my mind that certain underlying cultural traits continued to be shared for a considerable length of time.

***La Vie des Idées*: Doesn't the division of the dictionary into countries imply a fragmentation of this Atlantic scope?**

Javier Fernández Sebastián: It certainly handicaps the project. The ideal thing would have been to approach these concepts in all their transnational and transoceanic complexity. One must bear in mind that, before the independences, we are talking about a pre-national world, so there is little sense in projecting the resultant national spaces upon the past. Within current Iberian, Latin American and Latin Americanist historiography, there are very few historians capable of offering a comprehensive historical-conceptual vision of Iberian America as a whole. Given that the academic world is divided by national borders, and historical archives as well, we had little option other than basically organise the project into countries.

***La Vie des Idées:* The dictionary draws from the methodological contributions of different German, English and French schools of conceptual history. Could it run the risk of projecting a stereotyped vision of modernity upon Iberian America, confirming a supposed backwardness?**

Javier Fernández Sebastián: That is a very pertinent question. Indeed, there is a risk of reductionism. There has been a tendency to identify Europe with the West, and the West basically with France, Great Britain and the United States. This had led to the construction of an ideal type of modernity which reflects the experience of a handful of countries. Well, I think it is a serious error mechanically to apply that model to the whole world. The Iberian-American case is a variant of western modernity quite unlike this stereotyped interpretation. I am convinced that not only are there variety of paths towards modernity, as is generally accepted, but that there is in fact a plurality of “modernities”. In this sense, we are not interested in studying the reception of a set of concepts elaborated in the centre in order to be consumed in the periphery, in tune with the traditional diffusionist model. In my opinion, this approach needs to be overcome. How? I think that, instead of thinking in terms of production and circulation of fixed concepts, it is more useful to think in terms of (re)appropriation and re-creation: concepts are not fixed forms of understanding which travel across the Atlantic as if they were goods without undergoing any significant transformation before being consumed overseas.

Heuristically speaking it is considerable more worthwhile attempting to understand the dialectic and the complexity of this kind of transfer of meaning through space and time. Thanks to Jauss's theory of reception, we know for example that "consuming" a text is another way of (re)producing it, reinventing it to adapt it to the needs of the recipient. And it is much more interesting to focus our analysis trying to approach the points of view of the subjects who lived in a certain society and the uses they made of certain notions to deal with their own problems and conflicts, rather than imagining that those people were simply employing a set of prefabricated concepts, produced far from where they lived. That reductionist vision of a *prêt-à-porter* modernity has to be abandoned.

What's more, many historians mistakenly imagine something like a set of traditional, pre-modern concepts, replaced during the revolutions by an alternative set of concepts corresponding to modernity. Conceptual changes, however, tend to glide into view, so that this strictly dichotomous vision, according to which there are two repertoires, the modern and the traditional, incompatible and with practically no point of contact, is something of a caricature. What really happens is that concepts evolve during social and political conflicts, and at any given moment the observer, looking back in time, realises that the range of existing meanings of certain key terms is no longer consistent with the value of those same terms three or four decades earlier. He decides, then, that these are *new* concepts. The order resulting from these semantic transformations is experienced as new, but that does not imply the existence of a kit of modern, univocal concepts, universally applicable. There is no one, single modernity valid everywhere. The mistake is to measure all modernities with just one rule, that of the three or four western countries whose experiences are regarded as canonic. This inevitably leads to judging as anomalies, backwardness and aberrations those aspects which should actually be analysed as differences and particularities of each and every society.

La Vie des Idées: Compared with other Atlantic spaces, what is different or similar about the Hispanic-American space in terms of the production and circulation of modern political concepts?

Javier Fernández Sebastián: From a comparative perspective vis-à-vis the “central” countries to which I alluded in the previous question, the Iberian-American Enlightenment and liberalism reveal several distinctive characteristics. To briefly mention a couple of differences, I would highlight, on the one hand, the greater influence of religion in the domain of politics and, on the other, the lesser influence of individualism in morality and law, in economics and in politics. The process of secularisation, less intense in our societies than in others, unfolded over a much longer period of time, and the Catholic vision of the world deeply informs our political cultures. This imprint is very noticeable in the numerous confessional constitutions in force during much of the 19th century. Also, if we compare the Iberian and the Anglo-American political cultures, there is considerable more presence in the latter of the individual and his rights as the crux of the legal-political system. I believe that in the Iberian-American world, the individual is not so much the centre, or not in the same way as in British or American societies. There may be other differential characteristics, but these two seem to me to define quite clearly the peculiarities of the Iberian-American world in comparison with the western canon.

La Vie des Idées: In Iberconceptos, there seems to be a criticism of the nation-state.

Javier Fernández Sebastián: Rather than a criticism of that idea, there is a questioning of the over-use of national history as if it were the only format, the essential mould for all historiography. For the last two or three centuries, we have naturalised the concept of nation-state, as if the world had always been naturally divided into territorial units of this type. Upon historicising these notions, we realise that in fact the nation-state only developed in relatively recent times, in certain parts of the world and as a result of particular circumstances. For centuries, the most relevant “political” actors were monarchies and empires, churches, kingdoms and provinces, local communities or corporations. And, of course, in that political and conceptual universe it would be a mistake to attribute great protagonism to the individual or to the nation, as we tend to do when we analyse the contemporary world.

Iberconceptos seeks to go beyond nations. We are not claiming that national history is over and done with, but that for certain analyses, and specifically in the field of cultural history and intellectual history, it is very useful to employ another type of lens and acknowledge that there have been political worlds in which the state had nothing like the conceptual density we generally attribute to it, and was not even an important actor. In this sense, between local level and global level, between nations and the world as a whole, there are intermediate steps. One of these steps would be that of the civilisations or great cultures which have much to do with the most widely practised languages and religions. The Iberian-American community is one of these great intermediate units or levels, though it is also true that there are differences between Spanish-American and Portuguese-American areas. In some parts of the Hispanic world, for example, the printing press existed from the 16th century onwards, as did universities, etc., whilst in Brazil, printing did not arrive until 1808, when the court moved from Lisbon to Rio de Janeiro. Nor were there universities: Brazilians who wanted to study went to Coimbra. Another clear difference between Portuguese and Spanish America arose from the respective responses to the crisis of both monarchies in 1807-1808. Whilst, as we know, in the Portuguese case the monarchy was “Americanised” and successfully transferred to Brazil, in Hispanic America, after the failure of Iturbide's ephemeral Mexican Empire, the new states were organised politically as republics.

So, there are differences. The Iberian-American community is not a homogenous world, no more than the West, or the Euro-American world as a whole, but similarities certainly exist at different levels within each of these ‘steps’ or partially overlapping circles. Of course, as is only natural within a group of societies which have shared historical experiences over a long period of time, there is a certain family resemblance about them which does not preclude the presence of differences, sometimes very marked, between one and another. Bear in mind that we are speaking about vast territories, possessed of enormous diversity from every point of view: geographical, ethnic, political or economic.

La Vie des Idées: Do you believe that the history of Spain should be reconsidered from an Iberian-American perspective, and vice versa?

Javier Fernández Sebastián: When I began studying history at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid, in the early 1970s, the history of America was just a subject, or, at most, a speciality. Those who specialised in modern Spanish history, though they were aware of the importance of that vast overseas world connected to the Monarchy, did not study it as an integral part of Spanish history, but rather as if it were a foreign body, a distant and relatively alien addition, historiographically difficult to handle. Fortunately this is now changing; a growing number of historians are aware today that for too long we have been retro-projecting the contemporary idea of nation upon earlier epochs, cutting out from the whole a “peninsular” political history which in fact did not yet constitute an independent unit, because for three centuries the Monarchy was a very complex, pluri-continental and transoceanic political reality. So, without denying the unique status and particular characteristics of the “peninsular” kingdoms, whose position within the whole was by no means totally comparable to that of the extra-peninsular provinces, the Catholic Monarchy should not be understood as one nation exercising its dominion over other nations. The Spanish Monarchy was a very different kind of political entity from the European colonial empires of the 19th century. The complex institutional links between the crown and the viceroalties with the relationship between London and India, for example. In my opinion, it is a mistake to apply to the world of the 16th to 18th centuries the categories used to analyse the relationships between the imperial powers and their colonies in the 19th and 20th centuries.

I believe, all things considered, that is essential to understand those realities in their otherness, not via simplistic interpretations that anachronistically conceptualise the monarchy as a sort of centralised Spanish “national empire”, but rather as a set of territories governed in a complex manner, within a pluralist and jurisdictional culture. All this, within a pre-national, or rather, a-national, world. Nowadays, Spanish historians who are not Americanist tend to take for granted that it is impossible to understand the Hispanic world in the Modern Age without taking into account its American dimension.

And conversely, Latin American and Latin Americanist historians studying the long period prior to the independences are fully aware of all the links with the homeland, as well as the interconnections between the American cities and viceroyalties. Moreover, the so-called “colonial period” should not be understood exclusively as a long phase of preparation for independence, dominated by the hidden conflict between creoles and mainlanders. I feel that this type of teleological interpretation – which emphasises the growing and unavoidable confrontation between colony and homeland – impoverishes our research, and prevents us from appreciating in all its complexity the fact that all the members formed a part of a single polity, albeit one that was internally varied, hierarchical and subjected to multiple asymmetries and tensions. In this sense, I think our understanding of the past might benefit if we abandon the monopoly of that national viewpoint which has so distorted our perception of things.

***La Vie des Idées:* You refer to a current conceptual crisis. Do you regard the *Iberconceptos* project as a means of overcoming this crisis?**

Javier Fernández Sebastián: What researchers choose to study is surely not unrelated to the historical moment in which they live. And it seems clear nowadays that many modern political and social notions are in crisis. Indeed, the majority of the concepts forged two or three centuries ago today strike us as obsolete, or at the very least ineffective when it comes to dealing with the problems of the modern world. Many of these concepts are closely connected with the state framework, with national states, and we obviously live in an increasingly globalised world. Political and social concepts like sovereignty, family and many others are under considerable pressure as a result of the changes in the states of things. So that behind the same words, the objects designated have changed dramatically. Theorists and essayists have employed various metaphors in allusion to conceptual obsolescence. The Spanish philosopher Ortega y Gasset spoke in the 1950s of “cadaverous concepts”, with regard to those inherited words which were not really suitable when referring to things at the time of his writing. Edgar Morin talks of “mots spectres”; sociologists like Ulrich Beck or Anthony Giddens have used, respectively, expressions like *Zombi-Kategorien* or *shell institutions*, moribund, doddering institutions

and concepts, which barely conceal their incapacity to respond to the challenges of today's world. Pierre Rosanvallon has rightly suggested that one of the priorities of philosophy in our time should be the invention of new concepts better adapted to the circumstances and demands of the present. Thus, all the evidence suggests that we are in a transitional phase in which certain concepts are becoming obsolete, and we need to design new instruments in order adequately to lend expression to new realities as they evolve.

Something similar happened at that other transitional moment two or three centuries ago. Then there was also a major conceptual crisis, which accompanied the era of revolutions. Those who experienced that phase of uncertainty often complained that they did not understand why different people used the same terms but with very different meanings and purposes. It was as if language had suddenly broken down, were incapable of fulfilling its function as a means of communication between speakers. For this reason, beyond its purely historiographic interest, studying that other great age of conceptual obsolescence and of the forging of new concepts which shook the Euro-American world two centuries ago may to some extent help to illuminate the problems of the present.

Moreover, it seems opportune to observe that this process of conceptual reconversion did not occur suddenly, in a decade or two, but was spread over a relatively long period. Which brings to mind a heuristic instrument suggested by the German historian Reinhart Koselleck. I refer to *Sattelzeit*, that period between two ages, a time of accelerated transformations, but also quite a lengthy one, given that, for the German-speaking area – and this chronology would be valid by and large for the Hispanic case –, it would last from the mid-18th until the mid-19th century. *Sattelzeit* enables us to consider conceptual shifts and innovations in a more complex way. Instead of regarding change, like the French revolutionaries, as a zero moment when – in barely a decade – the *ancien régime* was brought to an end in one fell swoop and a new world dawned, in our Iberian-American world it is clear that these transformations took considerably longer, and, with more or less intense phases of change, they were staggered over almost a century. Hence the value of this chronological space which we have taken as a reference in our

Iberconceptos project, beginning with the Bourbon reforms and extending well into the 19th century. We have prolonged the period of this second stage of *Iberconceptos* until approximately 1870. We believe that by then that process of conceptual reconversion and transformation of political and social practices which we usually call modernity would be well and truly under way.

More about *Iberconceptos*:

The members of the *Iberconceptos* network have presented their visions and some partial results of their research in various books and numerous articles, dossiers and reports published in diverse specialised journals. These include *Ayer* (n° 53, 2004), *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* (vol. 46, 2004), *Historia Contemporánea* (issues. 27 and 28, 2004), *Revista de Estudios Políticos* (issue 134, 2006), *Alcores* (issues 2, 2006 and 9, 2010), *Historia Constitucional* (issue 7, 2006), *Araucaria* (vol. 17, 2007), *Isegoría* (issue 37, 2007), *Hermès* (issue 49, 2007), *Contributions to the History of Concepts* (issue 4/1, 2007), *Ler Història* (issue 54, 2008), *Jahrbuch für Geschichte Lateinamerikas* (issue 45, 2008), *Bulletin de l'Institut Français d'Études Andines* (vol. 39, issue 1, 2010), *Bicentenario* (vol. 9, issue 1, 2010) and *Historia Mexicana* (issue 239, 2011), amongst others.

<http://www.iberconceptos.net/>

<http://www.historiaintelectual.net/Default.aspx?id=in>

<http://www.javierfsebastian.es/>

Translation by **Mark Hounsell**.

Article published in [Books and Ideas](#), 10 June 2011.

©**booksandideas.net**