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IT TAKES A FINN TO WRITE A CONCEPT HISTORY FOR THE ENGLISH

Pasi Ihalainen (1999): The Discourse of Political Pluralism in Early Eighteenth-Century England: A Conceptual Study with Special Reference to Terminology of Religious Origin. Helsinki, Finnish Historical Society. 375 pages.

The specific aim of this book is to shed light on how members of the political elite in early eighteenth-century England understood the growth of political pluralism. At a more general level, however, it is a contribution to the debate over the secularisation of early modern English society: was secularisation largely complete by 1700, as C. John Sommerville has maintained, or did England remain a 'confessional state' well into the nineteenth century, as Jonathan Clark has claimed – or does the true answer lie somewhere in between? Ihalainen has written a concept history, or *Begriffsgeschichte*, for the years 1700–1750 (from the height of party conflict and religious strife under Queen Anne through to the gradual decline of party during the latter years of the Whig ascendancy), focusing on those concepts that traditionally had religious associations and analysing how their meanings came to be modified or altered during this crucial period of political, religious and intellectual change. The result is an excel-

lent study, one that is admirably well-researched and which offers a number of telling insights into the conceptual world of early eighteenth-century England, not just with regard to when the existence of political pluralism came to be recognised and accepted, but also about the broader issues of secularisation and the rise of the modernity.

It is revealing that it takes a Finn, appropriating a German methodology, to write a concept history for the English. Anglophone scholars have tended to be sceptical about the value of concept histories, preferring instead closely contextualised studies of the history of political ideas which explore the interrelationship between language, thought and action. Thus Quentin Skinner has stated that ‘there can be no histories of concepts as such; there can only be histories of their uses in argument’. (p. 39)¹ The absence of suitable concept histories, however, means that the main work of reference for scholars who need to know the meanings attached to a particular word in the past is the *Oxford English Dictionary*, though as Ihalainen points out, this is a flawed source, since it relies heavily on literary sources and there was often a considerable time lapse between the coining of political neologisms in newspapers and tracts and their entry into literary texts. We clearly need something that is better than the *OED*; yet at the same time we need a way of avoiding the pitfalls associated with traditional *Begriffsgeschichte*. Ihalainen’s study uses several hundred early eighteenth-century texts to examine the language of political pluralism – from contemporary dictionaries, political treatises and pamphlets, periodical literature and sermons, to minor genres of political writing and popular literature and edited manuscript sources such as diaries and correspondence. And rather than studying the history of one concept or a few crucial core concepts, he seeks both to reconstruct entire networks of concepts related to the language of diversity and also to explore how such concepts were used in combination with other words, in order to provide an appropriate contextualisation and to enable him to investigate which concepts remained unchanged, which disappeared, and which replaced those that were displaced. Thus the book examines not only the language of politics, party, and religious heterodoxy, but also associated euphemisms and qualifiers. One can turn to it if one wants to know what meaning the word ‘Whig’, say, or ‘Tory’ (or whatever –

the range of concepts examined is remarkably extensive), had at a given time for particular individuals; one can also find out when word combinations such as 'party-man', 'party-strife', or 'party-champion' (an appendix lists some 104 such combinations) came to be coined. There is a fascinating discussion of the meanings of 'atheism', a term commonly used by polemicists who feared it was on the rise, even though most historians seem convinced that atheism, as such, did not exist at this time. There are also precious insights offered into the changing resonances of words like 'moderation', 'zeal', and 'toleration'.

This book is more than just a dictionary of keywords, however. Ihalainen convincingly shows that Sommerville is wrong to see secularisation as largely complete by 1700. In the early eighteenth century, political pluralism was generally conceptualised through terminology derived from the traditionally dominant religious discourse. However, *pace* Clark, there are marked signs of the secularisation of political vocabulary from the 1720s, and by the 1730s politics and religion tended to be seen as separate (if still interconnected) areas of life. Nevertheless, religious terminology did not lose all its relevance in political argumentation over night (there was no conceptual watershed in this sense) but continued to supply political discourse with useable idioms, even if the context was now more noticeably secular.

There is a great deal to admire about this study. Having said that, the approach is a little heavy-handed (though maybe this is just the impression of a reviewer who has to read the book from cover to cover; most readers will probably dip into it to look for the meanings of particular concepts in which they are interested), and the careful laying of the historiographical and methodological groundwork means that it takes a long time for the book to get going. Moreover, the basic conclusion – that the political world of George II's England was more secular than that of Queen Anne's, and that the 1720s was a crucial decade of transition – will not come as a surprise to many (with the possible exception of Sommerville and Clark, whose views have never been widely accepted). It is perhaps unfortunate that the author chose to start in 1700, rather than with the rise of party conflict in the 1670s and 1680s. Ihalainen does his best to provide the earlier context for his readers by drawing on pre-

existing scholarship, but sometimes he makes erroneous claims about changes in political terminology because of a lack of familiarity with late seventeenth-century sources. Thus he is wrong to state that the 'belittling sense of a statesman belonging to the lower orders was a temporary early eighteenth-century innovation' (pp. 99-100). It dates back at least to the Exclusion Crisis of Charles II's reign: for example, one Tory poem from the early 1680s, bemoaning the rabble-rousing tactics of the Whigs, complained how 'Each Cobler's Statesman grown'.² Nor is it true to say that the terms 'Whig and Tory remained rarely used nicknames' prior to the Revolution of 1688 (p. 229). The nicknames were given wide currency by Roger L'Estrange's highly influential periodical, *The Observer*, which ran from 1681 to 1687, and which in its early years was written as a dialogue between Whig and Tory.

Despite Ihalainen's efforts to develop a methodology that can avoid the types of problems traditionally associated with *Begriffsgeschichte*, he remains vulnerable to the charge that his approach prevents him from paying the type of close attention to historical context that is necessary to understand why particular concepts were attached specific meanings by certain individuals at particular times. Thus to identify that the 1733 edition of Bailey's dictionary defined Tories as those who 'pretended to defend the Anglican Church yet actually wished for the return of a French-supported Catholic monarch' (p. 234) is not by itself enough. Most Tories did not, in fact, wish for the return of a French-supported Catholic monarch. Moreover, most Whig polemicists who claimed they did were fully aware that most Tories were not Jacobites; rather, they were seeking to discredit their political opponents by deliberately misrepresenting the truth. We have to distinguish between meaning and polemic, between a definition and a political argument; simply identifying the meanings attached to various concepts in a variety of different texts does not easily enable us to do that. In other words, scepticism of *Begriffsgeschichte* derives not simply from an Anglophone suspicion of all things foreign (and especially German); there is genuine cause for concern about the problems inherent in the methodology. Having said this, there is no doubt in my mind that Ihalainen's work will be well-received by English historians. It evinces the very highest standards scholarship, makes a significant contribution to historical un-

derstanding, and will provide an essential building block for anyone interested in probing the depths of the political, religious, intellectual and cultural history of the later-Stuart and early-Hanoverian era.

Notes

- 1 Cf. now, however, Skinner's self-characterization in *Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought* vol, 3, 60-73.
- 2 Cited in Tim Harris, *London Crowds in the Reign of Charles II: Propaganda and Politics from the Restoration to the Exclusion Crisis* (Cambridge, 1987), p. 137.