ON THE THESIS OF THE ESSENTIAL CONTESTABILITY OF CONCEPTS, AND 19TH CENTURY LATIN AMERICAN INTELLECTUAL HISTORY

Elías J. Palti

> The change that has come over this branch of historiography in the past two decades may be characterized as a movement away from emphasizing history of thought) and even more sharply, 'of ideas') toward emphasizing something rather different, for which 'history of speech' or 'history of discourse', if not unproblematic or irreproachable, may be the best terminology so far found.
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> J.G.A. Pocock (*Virtue, Commerce, and History*)

Recently, Terence Ball discussed the thesis of the essential contestability of concepts (see Connolly 1983). Following Nietzsche's maxim that "only that which has no history is definable", the holders of that thesis affirm that the meaning of the main concepts of ethical, political and scientific discourses cannot be established once and forever, that "there are not, and there cannot be, common shared criteria to decide on the meaning of 'art' in aesthetics or 'democracy' or 'equality' in politics" (Ball 2002, 21). As Ball states, such a thesis would become specially attractive to historians, since it permits them not only to account for conceptual change, but also in a normatively neutral fashion: from this perspective, no political theory could be said to be superior to any other. In fact, as Ball confesses, he himself shared that thesis for a long time, until he started to discover its shortcomings (cf. Ball and Pocock 1988, 1-12).

First, that thesis, he says, entails a methodological fallacy: from a contingent fact (that concepts have been historically contested), it

draws a universal law about the nature of concepts. Second, it has, furthermore, negative ethical consequences, since, if the sense of fundamental political concepts could not be established, if everyone could interpret them in one's own manner, the idea of community would become inconceivable.

> If the concepts constitutive of political discourse, and therefore of political life, are indeed *essentially* contested, then there can of course be no common moral language of civic lexicon; hence no communication; hence no community —indeed, no *hope of* establishing and maintaining a civic community or commonwell. If the thesis of essential contestability were true, then political discourse —and therefore political life itself— would be well-nigh impossible, and for exactly the same reasons that civility and the civic life is impossible in Hobbes' imaginary and solipsistic state of nature: each individual is a monad, radically disconnected from all other individuals insofar as each speaks, as it were, a private language of his own devising. Because the concepts comprising these individual languages cannot be translated or otherwise understood, each speaker is perforce a stranger and an enemy to every other (Ball 2002, 24).

Lastly, says Ball, the above-mentioned thesis has authoritarian connotations. Should disagreements regarding the meaning of concepts such as "power," "freedom," "justice," etc., arise, mutual understanding could be achieved only through two means: conversion or coercion; "and presumably those who cannot be converted must be coerced (excluded, silenced, ridiculed, ignored, etc.)" (Ball 2002, 23).

Ball indeed raises a fundamental point, though the form in which he formulates it is not completely appropriate. It is clear that the assertion that the thesis of the essential contestability of concepts leads to a kind of solipsism, thus rendering any form of community impossible, is exaggerated, and, ultimately mistaken. What this thesis indicates is the impossibility for a community to constitute itself as an organic whole, that is, a fully integrated and homogeneous one. As Pocock affirms, every relatively complex society comprises a plurality of political codes or languages (see Pocock 1991, 1-36). The point is that the thesis of the essential contestability of concepts does not exclude the possibility of establishing the meaning of political concepts. It does affirm, however, that this can be done only within the frameworks of a particular political or linguistic community (cf. Fish 1980).

Thus formulated, disagreements on that thesis lose their insurmountable character. Certainly, Ball does not ignore the fact that

concepts change their meaning according to the context of their utterance. It would be simplistic to see his argument as claiming for a return to the kind of ahistorical perspectives proper of the history of ideas. The point here at stake lies elsewhere: whether the diverse types of discourse from which concepts take their differential meanings are mutually translatable. Koselleck's statements on the issue actually leave it open to different interpretations. As we know, he distinguishes two incommensurable conceptual horizons, separated by the *Sattelzeit*. Communication between them is not feasible in an immediate fashion. Recovering the meaning of concepts from earlier times demands an arduous work of exegesis; albeit this does not necessarily render it impossible. Ultimately, it would not be difficult to find a workable solution among the contending parties, a middle ground between the two extremes of plain continuity – radical incommensurability.

Yet, the core of the dispute is here missed. The eventuality of the mutual untranslatability of concepts remains a weak expression for indefinability. Ball is indeed right when he states that the thesis of the essential contestability of concepts implicitly has a stronger premise, which is the one that he does reject. It affirms that the meaning of concepts can certainly be established, but this can be done not only in an inevitably partial manner —that is, within the context of a particular language— but also in an always-precarious fashion. And this is so not merely because of externally generated causes referable to the historical context in which ideas eventually appear, but due to reasons that are intrinsic ("essential") to political languages as such. Sandro Chignola`s (2003) article reviewing the recent development of Italian intellectual history illustrates the point.

Chignola distinguishes two stages in it. The first one was centered around Pierangelo Schiera and the *Italo-German Institute* of Trento, which, in the seventies, renewed the approaches to constitutional history (see Schiera 1970). The interpretative model the authors of this school elaborated, following Hintze's steps,[1] sought to recover the ancillary role of linguistic dimension in the forging of political relationships, thus showing the need of historicizing concepts in order to achieve a more precise re-construction of the modern political-constitutional experience.

The second historiographical current Chignola distinguishes is associated with the work of the "Research Group of Modern Political Concepts," directed by Giuseppe Duso at the Institute of Philosophy at Padua University. This current would move beyond the former

one by re-formulating the very object of conceptual history (see Duso 1999a and 1999b). According to it, the comprehension of the sense of modern political categories entails more than a work of tracing long genealogies of concepts, analyzing the different meanings they eventually got, and historicizing their uses. It involves a work of "criticism and deconstruction." As Chignola says, "if modern political concepts have a historicity of their own," then "the discussion regarding them and their intrinsically aporetical nature can be re-opened" (Chignola 2003, 35).

As we see, these two currents agree on the temporality of concepts. Yet, they premise on the basis of very different views of it. In the first view, the idea that the meaning of concepts cannot be established in a definite manner springs from the rejection of the evolutionary assumptions implicit in the old history of ideas. This first phase in the temporalization concepts thus seeks to reveal that the changes concepts undergo through time cannot be held to follow any preestablished pattern, addressed to the realization of a final goal: the illumination of the true definition of that concept. However, the indefinability of concepts is still associated in it to factors of a strictly empirical nature. It indicates a factual condition, a circumstantial happening. Nothing prevents them, in principle, to stabilize their semantic content. From this perspective, if nobody had intended to question the meaning of a given political category, it could have remained untouched forever. There is nothing *intrinsic to concepts* allowing us to announce or understand why their established definitions eventually become unstable and finally collapse. Historicity is here both inevitable and contingent. Concepts certainly change over time, but historicity is not a constitutive dimension in them. To put in Ball's term, they are always contested, but this does not mean that they are *essentially* contestable.

The development of a stronger perspective regarding the temporality of concepts implied the relocation of the source of contingency, moving it from the external context to the bosom of intellectual history itself. Thus posed, the contention changes its nature (ultimately, the core of the disagreement between these two schools refers to the definition itself of their disagreement). According to this latter view, the fact that concepts cannot fix their meaning is, in effect, not a merely empirical corroboration; it refers to an inherent condition in them. It indicates that their semantic content is never self-integrated, rationally and logically articulated. The one who best defined this perspective was Hans Blumenberg, when he discussed the theory of

secularization (Palti 1997). For Blumenberg, what modernity inherited from the old eschatologies is not any given series of ideal contents which were then merely translated into a secular key, but, essentially, a void. Christian world views would no longer provide answers to a question —the one on the ultimate sense of the world— before which modernity could not remain indifferent. Lastly, the diverse modern political languages are as many different attempts to meaningfully fill up that void, to seize, to turn intelligible, to make sense of, and, thereby, bearable, a world that, having lost every transcendental dimension, cannot help confronting what is unthinkable for them: the radical contingency ("irrationality") of the foundations of every secular order; in sum, the "essential contestability" of the core categories of all modern ethical or political discourse.

This implies that, even in the improbable —and, in the long run, plainly impossible— case that a given concept did not mutate its meaning, it were not ever contested, it would always remain contestable, by nature. We find here a different interpretation of Nietzsche´s maxim: it is not that concepts cannot be defined in a definite manner because they change their meaning, but the other way around, they change their meaning because they cannot be defined in a definite manner. Yet, to comprehend why every meaning fixation is constitutively precarious, we must recreate an entire semantic field; that is, we must move beyond a history of *concepts* in the direction of a history of *political languages*. Reconstructing a political language entails not only the tracing of how the meaning of concepts has changed over time, but also, and fundamentally, what prevents them from achieving their semantic completion.

This is, more precisely, what Pierre Rosanvallon calls "a conceptual history of politics". As he affirms in his 2003 inaugural lecture at the *Collége de France,* the formalist views which see modern political systems of thought as self-contained and logically articulated wholes hide a normative impulse that dislocates historical objects to place them within a system of ethico-political coordinates. And, by doing so, these views miss the "very thing" of politics, which is its aporetical nature. Ball's argument is a good example of the normative drives underlying the weak perspectives of the temporality of political concepts. Rosanvallon's idea of a "conceptual history of politics" implies the reversal of his view. It is not really the impossibility of fixing the meaning of fundamental political concepts that renders politics impossible, but rather the other way around. If the meaning of concepts such as freedom, justice, democracy, and so on, could be established

in an objective manner, politics would *ipso facto* lose sense. In such a case, the resolution of public affairs should be trusted to experts; there would be no room for differences in opinions, but only those who *know* the "true" definitions of those concepts, and those who *ignore* them.

The point, in Rosanvallon's words, is "not to try to solve the enigma [of the modern political regime of government] by imposing on it a normativity, as if a pure science of language or law could show men the rational solution to which they must adjust themselves," but rather to consider "its problematic nature […] in order to understand its concrete functioning" (Rosanvallon 2003, 41-42). This view radically re-defines the approaches to politico-intellectual history. As he says:

> The aim is no longer to banally oppose the universe of practices to that of norms. It is a matter of premising on the constitutive antinomies of politics, the character of which becomes exposed only in the course of history (Rosanvallon 2003, 43).

We find here, briefly stated, a second formulation of the nature of the disagreement. While one school places the source of the stain of temporality tainting concepts in the inevitable gap between norms and actual practices, for the other school this results from constitutive antinomies of politics. The external source of temporality (the gap between norms and practices) ultimately refers back to (making manifest) that form of temporality which is nested at the interior of conceptual formations. Thus posed, the contention no longer relates to differences placed on a same level of reality, which, therefore, could be formulated in more-or-less terms. There is no middle ground here available. In sum, the two trends observed by Chignola in Italian intellectual history illustrate a typical oscillation in the discipline. While the former leads it to border with the old tradition of history of ideas,[2] the latter translates the entire field to a completely new terrain, thus opening the horizon to what should more properly be called the history of *political languages*.

As Ball's contention clearly shows, behind the former perspective we may observe the persistence in the historical profession of the kind of normative inspirations proper to the typically philosophical approaches to past beliefs. Some examples taken from Latin American intellectual history illustrate the consequences this normative drive has in historical research. Lastly, as we will see, it leads to reducing past controversies regarding the meaning of political concepts to

merely a series of regrettable misunderstandings of the sense of modern politics, thus preventing us from grasping the dilemmatic nature of the issues with which past people had to deal with.

Guerra's historiographical revolution and its limits

In the context of Latin American historiography, the work of François-Xavier marks a milestone. He played a crucial role in the re-appraisal of the analysis of language as a key for the comprehension of historical processes, thus helping to rescue local intellectual history from the stagnation in which the old school of history of "ideas" led by Leopoldo Zea had immersed the discipline. In his classical work *Modernidad e independencias*, this more attentive approach to the symbolic dimension and the public uses of language allowed him to radically re-formulate views regarding the crisis of independence.

First, Guerra breaks with the model of the "ideological influences." What triggered the cultural mutation he analyzes was not the reading of foreign books, but the series of transformations that objectively altered the conditions of enunciation of discourses. As he remarks, the coincidence between Latin America and France at the level of political languages "is not related to a matter of fashion or influences – although they existed too – but, basically, the outcome of a shared logic which results from their common birth to modern politics [the so-called "modernity of rupture"]" (Guerra 1993, 370). Thus Guerra discloses the presence of an *internal* link between both levels of reality (the discursive and the extra-discursive). The "context" here is no longer seen as merely a kind an external stage for the action of "ideas," it becomes an inherent dimension in discourses, determining the logic of its articulation from their inside. And this leads to the second displacement that Guerra introduced in Latin American historiography of Independence.

Second, he connects conceptual transformations with changes at the level of political practices, which were intimately associated to the emergence of new ambits of sociability and political subjects. The massive semantic displacements produced in a short period of time make sense in the light of the new means and *loci* for their articulation, which did not pre-date political crisis but were a result of it, thus giving form to an incipient "public sphere."

Third, the above-mentioned remark allows Guerra to overcome the deeply rooted dualism between Spanish traditionalism and Latin American liberalism. As he clearly shows, this was one single revolu-

tionary process comprising the whole Spanish Empire and having its generative nucleus in the very Iberian Peninsula, which was, in fact, the most directly impacted by the crisis of the monarchical system.

Fourth, this perspective re-defines our perspective of the modes of inscription of Latin American Wars of Independence in the context of the so-called "Age of Democratic Revolutions," and the peculiarities of Hispanic modernization (which Guerra includes under the label of "modernity of rupture"). Its distinguishing feature, which is even more noticeable in the colonies, less directly affected by the transformations introduced in Cadiz, is its peculiar combination of political modernity and social archaism. This becomes apparent in the hybridism of political languages, which superimpose modern cultural references with categories and values that clearly refer to traditional imaginaries.

In this last point lies the most problematical aspect of Guerra´s approach. Following a very different path, he thus gets his own version of the *Sattelzeit*, which coincides, in its fundamental points, with Koselleck's. Nevertheless, in Guerra's case, this concept results into a dichotomous perspective that opposes modernity and tradition as if they were two clearly delimited and internally homogeneous wholes, thus placing his view in the same line of the formalist perspectives Rosanvallon criticizes.

Basically, such an opposition poses two problems. First, it has the implicit assumption that there was only one fundamental conceptual mutation in Western intellectual history, which took place at the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth centuries, and separated "tradition" form "modernity." This plainly discards the possibility of any subsequent conceptual rupture. Thus, all the conceptual formations that appeared after this rupture are grouped together under one single label: "modern." In this fashion, thie view collapses conceptual formations which are too heterogeneous and diverse to be comprehesible under one common category. The second, and even more serious problem, is a consequence of the former. Insofar as modernity and tradition appear as perfectly coherent and mutually opposed wholes, contradictions in intellectual history necessarily must express a kind of conceptual asynchrony, the accidental superimposition of elements corresponding to two different historical ages. Everything that departs from the postulated model of modern thinking (whatever it is supposed to be) should be interpreted as an expression of the resilience of traditionalist imaginaries which stubbornly resist disappearing (thus generating all types of hybrid intellectual formations and conceptual pathologies).[3]

Lastly, Guerra's perspective rests on a methodological fallacy: turning a historical opposition into a logical one. To put it in Koselleck's words, in his view the two terms, modernity and tradition, appear as asymmetrical counter concepts, one of which is defined by opposition to the other as its negative counterface. If considered as designating concrete historical periods, these two terms do not exclude the presence of many other ones. This is no longer so when they are understood as counter concepts, like, for example, the opposition between democracy and authoritarianism. In this case, all that which is not modern is, by definition, traditional, and the other way around. The two terms exhaust the conceivable universe of politics. They thereby lose their character as historical ages and become kinds of transhistorical principles, which allegedly cross through the entire local intellectual history and explain all its vicissitudes to the present.

We obtain here the core of Guerra's interpretive pattern. According to him, what the Latin American elite failed to understand is not the supposedly eternal meaning of the idea of democracy —Guerra no longer accepts the existence of eternal definitions—, but indeed the true meaning of "modern democracy". This is also the point in which Guerra's perspective becomes enlightening of broader theoretical dilemmas, which are not specific to Latin American intellectual history, but refer to the discipline as such. Behind the above mentioned methodological fallacy, we can see the effects of the persistence of underlying normative impulses. These are not incompatible with the idea of the temporality of concepts; yet, in order to make room for substantive ethical invocations, this idea must remain ambiguous. On the one hand, concepts are seen as contingent in the sense that their meaning changes over time, and, as a consequence, ideas from a given epoch could not be transposed to a different one. However, on the other hand, concepts are not conceived as truly contingent in the sense that, when considered in their own terms, they appear as self-contained and self-consistent, that is, as logically —not historically— articulated.

Although this latter assumption does not necessarily follow from Koselleck's definition of *Sattelzeit*, it is not a wholly arbitrary interpretation of it. Actually, that definition makes room for different views in this regard. This latter assumption becomes incompatible with the idea of the temporality of concepts only within the frameworks of one of the interpretations of this notion. As Chignola shows for the Italian case, it is a subsequent development in the contemporary tra-

jectory of conceptual history; it marks a second phase, which entails the further work of "criticism and deconstruction". Lastly, insofar as we see conceptual horizons as self-integrated and self-consistent, the relapse into the normative views proper to philosophical approaches is inevitable; disagreements on the meaning of the categories present in them will necessarily appear as the expressions of misunderstanding, not a constitutive dimension in them.

As my own research on the Mexican case tries to demonstrate, historical agents eventually gained a clear awareness of the limitations of the interpretative model that attributes the contingency and mutability of conceptual formations to the "external historical context" of their application. Although initially, they indeed embraced the topic of the ill-preparedness of local societies for modern democracy as a key to explain the crisis that erupted after the break of the colonial tie, as long as the crisis deepened, they would eventually discover, with perplexity, contradictions which could not be simply attributed to the persistence of traditionalist patterns inherited from the Colony. Modern political categories will then reveal their intrinsic aporias.

Transcendence and immanence in liberal thought

Pocock's definition of the "Machiavellian moment" provides the basis for the comprehension of an internal link between time and conceptual history. As he states:

> The "Machiavellian moment" […] is a name for the moment in conceptualized time in which the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events, conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability (Pocock 1975, viii).

Pocock thereby associates the rising of classical republicanism with the emergence of the idea of contingency in history (*fortune*). We thus obtain one fundamental key to discern ideas from languages. The "republican language" actually cannot be defined according to any definite set of ideas or principles. According to Pocock, it basically consists of the definition of a problem. Lastly, the "Machiavellian moment" indicates a contradiction: the attempt to realize universal (transcendental) values by secular, finite means (the republic), which are therefore subjected to corruption.[4] To put it in another way, it

marks the moment of the irruption of temporality in political discourse, the point in which political thinking faces the evidence of the contingency all secular institutional arrangements.

The application of the above-mentioned concept to the case of Latin America permits us to understand better the vicissitudes of local thinking in the nineteenth century. Yet, conversely, the analysis of the local case raises more general questions regarding our modes of approaching intellectual history. As I intended to demonstrate in my work, *The Invention of Legitimacy* (Palti 2005), the history of nineteenth-century Mexican political thinking reveals new fundamental aspects in what Pocock calls the process of inscription of temporality in the political discourse of an age (the inrush of an element which is strange to its immanent logic and dislocates it from within). As we will see, Pocock's definition of the "Machiavellian moment" collapses and hides crucial differences in the ways of conceiving the character and the source of the contingency that threatens the stability of every secular, institutional order. In fact, as our case study shows, the Machiavellian moment is only one of the possible forms of conceiving of it, marking merely a first stage in the dislocation of the liberal-republican vocabulary (which we will distinguish from the classical republican analyzed by Pocock).

Something that Pocock does not mention is that the —typically classical republican— contradiction between transcendent, universal values (the only ones which could, in an Ancient Regime society, justify the existence of a community) and immanent, finite means, would become solved, in principle, when, with liberalism, the ideal of the realization of universal values was abandoned, to relocate the legitimacy of political systems in the will of their members; that is, when both means and aims became secularized. Such a conceptual displacement thus expanded the realm of *politics* to comprise the field of values and norms as well. These no longer appeared as merely given (transcendent, universal) and became the products of collective, willingly taken, decisions. However, with the immanentization of the concepts of "goodness" (their relocation on the subjective-political field) another form of historicity emerged, one which led beyond the "Machiavellian moment." Once all instance of transcendence was lost, the liberal-republican idea would reveal an aporia intrinsic to its own concept, paving the way for an immanently generated type of temporality. Contingency would no longer result from the blows of irrational facts which threaten the given institutional order from outside it — *fortune* — but from its own inherent contradictions. In effect,

the climate of increasing antagonism that broke out in Mexico immediately following Independence would end up revealing the residue of contingency (irrationality) that is present in the very foundations of every post-traditional institutional order (deprived of transcendental guarantees). Temporality (historicity) would then move from external context to concept itself; it would break its seclusion into the world to penetrate the realm of values.

The critical question that the rapid succession of "pronunciamientos" (uprisings) raised was how to establish limits to the use of the *legitimate right of insurrection or of resistance to oppression* (as Alfonso Noriega remarks, "the issue of the resistance to oppression or the right to insurrection impassioned [Mexican] enlightened liberals") (Noriega 1993, I: 136). In the last instance, the right to insurrection undermined the objectivity of institutional order, turning the evaluation of its legitimacy into a subjective matter, which was destructive of it. The need for setting limits to the use of that right thus appeared as pressing; however, as soon became clear, to achieve this in Mexico would become increasingly difficult. The categorization of insurrection under the figure of "crime of opinion" reveals the difficulties of typifying it as a crime. In fact, such a right was at the basis of every republican regime, distinguishing it from the old despotism; and, ultimately, it was at the very origin of Mexico as an independent nation (which was born, we should not forget, out of a revolution). And here we have the aspect in which the analysis of the Mexican case forces us to depart from Pocock's view.

In what we can call (following Ernesto Laclau's expression) (see Laclau 1990) a "logic of contingency" (another way of referring to what Pocock called the inrush of temporality in political thinking), the "Machiavellian" is merely the first moment. In it, historicity still appears as external to norms. Within its framework, the problems the republic faced (perdurability, viability, etc.) appeared yet as springing from causes of an empirical nature, referable to the ambit of its concrete, practical realization. As a matter of fact, the "Machiavellian moment" still hinges on the basis of the Platonic opposition between form (*morphē*) and matter (*hyle*) (which is the one underlying Machiavelli's antinomy between *virtú* and *fortuna*). Temporality results from the corruptibility of created matter. Forms (ideas) are, instead, atemporal, eternal. In the last instance, classical republicanism is undetachable from theocentrical world views.

Insofar as the liberal-republican concept of Law preserves an instance of transcendence (the Truth of constitutional norms), we can

speak of a "Machiavellian moment" in it. The validity of norms is not questioned yet, but only their applicability to particular contexts, like the Latin American one. However, as stated above, in nineteenth-century Mexico this would be only a first stage in the problematization of such a concept. This process would eventually cross through three successive phases or moments, which are, in turn, separated by three events, each marking inflection points in local political history and determined further thresholds in the erosion of the concept of legitimacy.

The first of these events is the *Motín de la Acordada* (1828), which for the first time broke the institutional basis of the republican regime that had been established four years earlier, in 1824, and ended in 1836 with the sanction of the *Seven Constitutional Laws*. This is, more specifically, the "Age of Mora." It indicates the "Machiavellian moment" in the history of Mexican political thinking. The rupture of the institutional order in 1828, and the succession of uprisings that followed, would render it impossible to distinguish a legitimate government from an illegitimate one (and, as a consequence, to decide about the justice or injustice of uprisings). As Mora concluded by the end of his political career, the issue had already become undecidable in Mexico: at that point, it was clear that, for the government, the insurgents would always and inevitably be subversive of the legitimately established order; and, conversely, for the rebels, the government would always be the one that had violated the constitutional charter, which they allegedly intended to restore. And there was no objective basis on which to solve the question. Nevertheless, this still did not raise doubts regarding the presence of objectively valid criteria to decide, in principle, the point. Contingency refers here only to the applicability of such norms to particular contexts or circumstances. Historicity appears, then, as still secluded to the level of what in legal thinking is called *adjudicatio* (the attribution of a general norm to a particular case).

The following moment starts with the revision of the constitutional charter and the end of the *First Federal Republic*. From 1836 on, the *inherent* impossibility for the liberal-republican concept to establish limits to the use of the legitimate right to insurrection would become increasingly clear. As the speaker of the centralist forces, Francisco Manuel Sánchez de Tagle, stated,

> Who and in what way the arbiter of the existence of the mentioned requirements should be is the bottom line ["*Hasta Aquí*"] of this matter; the

point that no one has resolved […] Blackstone says: "so, why do you ask me for rules, if the very essence of revolution is to have none?" Everybody, in the end, is lost in the world of ambiguities and leaves us in the dark (Sánchez de Tagle 1835, 21).

The right to insurrection appears, thus, as the Other of Law; that which lies beyond its reach. The impossibility to establish valid criteria to regulate the use of the right to insurrection is now exposed as the limit intrinsic to Law (in fact, no constitution can regulate its own violation). This realization marks a new stage in the process of inscription of temporality in liberal-republican concept: at that point, undecidability transcends the merely empirical ambit to become lodged within the very concept of Law. It marks a new threshold, a second moment in the inrush of temporality in political thinking.

The progressive disintegration of the Mexican political system would push this process even one stage further. This third moment is the expression on the field of discourses of the complete decomposition of Mexican political system after the military occupation of the country by the American forces in 1847. This event cast into doubt the very entity of Mexico as a nation, opening, in actual fact, the perspective of its complete territorial dismemberment. In such a rather tragic context, the conservative leader, Lucas Alamán, would unveil the aporetic core on which the entire liberal-republican concept stands (see Palti 1998b).

As Alamán states, the right to insurrection is, indeed, the denial of the Law, but, at the same time, it constitutes its premise. Lastly, it is in the exercise of that right, destructive of every institutional order, that the sovereign character of the citizens becomes actualized, and, therefore, that lays the basis on which the republican regime of government founds its legitimacy. Alamán thus exposed the fundamental contradiction residing at the core of the modern concept of *citizenship*. In order to constitute a legal order and thus to be effectively sovereign, the citizen must resign the exercise of the right to insurrection; otherwise, we are still in a state of nature. Yet, if s/he resigns that right, s/he *ipso facto* ceases to be sovereign, which, not only is a terminological contradiction, but also, in this fashion, s/he would deprive of its basis of legitimacy a system founded on a now no-longer-existing sovereignty (with which we are also led back to a state of nature). To sum up, the liberal-republican system presupposes the permanent exercise of the very same right that makes it impossible. The right to insurrection appears as simultaneously destructive and foundational

of the liberal-republican concept of Law; it negates Law, yet, it is at its basis, it represents, in short, its "constitutive Other."

At this third moment, Alamán and the conservatives would force the Mexican elite to confront what was unthinkable within the frameworks of liberal-republican thought: the radical contingency and undecidability of the foundations of every post-traditional institutional order. The notion of *legitimacy* would not be merely unfeasible in Mexico —an anomaly which could be explained as the expression of some "local peculiarity"—; *it would be exposed as simply meaningless, illusory.*[5]

We can now go back to Ball's view. He is certainly right when he affirms that the observation of historical changes in the meaning of concepts, or the fact that they have been eventually refuted, does not allow us to draw the conclusion that they are essentially contestable. The point at stake here does not relate the series of the actual, historical changes in the meaning of concepts, which has been hitherto the central concern of historian of concepts. The issue of *contestability* is not a matter that can be solved merely through the verification of historical transformations contingently produced in the meaning of political concepts (an intellectual procedure which, as Ball states, entails a methodological fallacy, that is, an illegitimate leap from the empirical to the normative or ontological levels). It raises the question on how these transformations are possible. And this places reflection on a previous level of interrogation. The search for what Chignola calls that form of historicity immanent in discourses —making them fully historical entities, thoroughly contingent symbolic formations—, and not merely an accidental by-product of "social history" (to put it in Koselleck's terminology), re-addresses our focus to a second-order dimension of symbolic reality, which is what we designate as *political languages*: the conditions for the production-dislocation of discourses.

Conclusion: History of ideas, history of concepts, and history of political languages

Ultimately, the topic of the temporality of discourses previously entails a more fundamental —but symptomatically missed in current methodological debates— interrogation: what a political language is, how to identify it, how it differs from an ideological system. Although we cannot exhaust in this paper all aspects here involved, in

these final pages I want to briefly underline the fundamental features that identify political languages and distinguish them from systems of ideas.

1) Political languages are not mere sets of ideas or concepts. Hence historians' repeated corroboration that political languages stubbornly challenge all definition, that their content cannot be established in unequivocal terms. This is so not because concepts change their meaning over time. It simply reveals the fact that political languages do not consist of *statements* (contents of discourse), which could be listed, but of a characteristic *form* of producing them. This means that they are *semantically undetermined* (as we intuitively know, in any given language, we can affirm something and also its opposite). Ultimately, political languages send us back to second order level of symbolic reality, the modes of the production of concepts. To put it in Jesús Mosterín's terms, a political language is composed of *conceptors* (concepts of concepts) (see Mosterín 1984).[6] To make a history of the political languages we need, then, to transcend the surface of discourse, the level of its semantic contents (the "ideas" contained in them), and to penetrate the argumentative apparatus which underlies it, that is, the particular ways or formal principles of their articulation.

2) The previous point permits us to discern contents of discourse from underlying political languages. The former refers to the semantic level: the latter, to the syntactic one, the formal devices or modes of production of discourses. From this perspective, speaking of a "liberal language" has no sense, if we understand it in strictly ideological terms: one can be liberal (or conservative) in many different manners. As a matter of fact, the same political statements can eventually respond to very different conceptual matrixes; and, conversely, in one and the same vocabulary we can formulate very different and even opposite political programs. Continuities on the surface level of ideas can thus hide discontinuities in their underlying political languages, and the other way around (hence, as we saw, what matters is not simply to understand what an author said, but to penetrate the instance of his/her explicit statements and gain access to the formal argumentative structure which underlies them). And this leads us to our second point. Political languages actually cross through the entire ideological spectrum. Unlike "ideas," they are not subjective attributes, but objective entities; they articulate "discourse networks" making the public confrontation of ideas among the actors possible. This implies an even more radical reversal of traditional approaches to intellectual history.

Historians of ideas seek to establish the fundamental concepts defining each particular current of thought and to horizontally trace their evolution over time (as if they were self-contained wholes, independently generated and only *a posteriori* juxtaposed). Political languages, instead, cannot be discovered except by vertically cutting through the different ideologies. These now become relevant only insofar as they reveal, in their mutual interaction, the set of shared premises on which the public discourse of an epoch hinged, and how these premises shifted over time. Thus, to make a history of the political languages we need, as we said, to transcend the textual surface of discourses and to gain access to the argumentative apparatus which underlies and identifies each kind of discursivity; but, to do so, we must reconstruct *contexts of debate*. What matters here is not merely to observe how individual political actors changed their ideas, but how the system of their relative positions became eventually re-articulated, that is, to move beyond the alterations in individual discourses and to trace the displacements in the coordinates determining the modes of their public articulation. And these displacements are revealed only in the mutual opposition among contending views.

3) Recreating *contexts of debate* does not imply, however, moving beyond the level of discourses. Political languages transcend the opposition between "text" and "context" in which the history of ideas was entrapped.[7] A political language becomes such only insofar as it includes within it the conditions of its own enunciation. This leads us, again, beyond the semantic realm, which was the sole object of the history of ideas. This time, we must add to it the consideration of the *pragmatic* dimension of discourses (*who* speaks, to whom s/he speaks, *in which* social context — power relations — s/he speaks, which were the quintessentially *rhetorical* questions defining the positionality of discourses — the so-called "circumstances"),[8] that is, we must try to find the ways in which the context of utterance is inscribed within the ambit of discourses, becoming an integral part of them. To sum up so far: to make a history of the political languages we need to transcend the instance of the explicit contents of discourse and to penetrate the argumentative apparatus which underlies it in order to identify its given form of discursivity. To do so, as we saw, we must reconstruct contexts of debate. And this can be achieved not by moving beyond the linguistic medium *but only by recovering the linguistic traces in the very discourses of the context of their enunciation*.

Basically, the first three points are aimed at overcoming the insufficiencies of the history of ideas, revealing them as a result of a crude

view of language, which reduces it to its merely semantic instance. The new intellectual history should try, instead, to address its attention simultaneously to the three linguistic dimensions: the semantic, the syntactic, and the pragmatic. We can say, schematically, that a radically new approach to intellectual history (the shift from "ideas" to "languages") emerges from the joint action of the three schools which currently dominate the field, each one of which has emphasized and renewed our perspectives, of one of these dimensions (the German school of *Begriffsgeschichte*, for semantics; the "Cambridge school", for pragmatics; the new French conceptual history of politics, for syntactics).[9] When we combine their respective insights, we obtain the most crucial aspect distinguishing political languages from systems of ideas, which forms the specific topic of this present paper: the former, unlike the latter, are fully historically entities, thoroughly contingent symbolic formations. And this must be interpreted in a double sense. These two senses are, respectively, the objects of the two final remarks.

4) Political languages determine a principle of temporal irreversibility that is intrinsic to them (and not merely something that comes to them from without, i.e., the external context of their application), which is unfolded simultaneously in two directions, forward and backward. Thus, we must add to Skinner´s "mythology of the prolepsis" (the search for the retrospective significance of a work, an intellectual procedure which presupposes the presence of a kind of a *telos* implicit in it and which becomes revealed only in the course of time) an opposite form of mythology. We can call it "mythology of the retrolepsis," that is, to think that we can simply bring old languages back to life, to a time in which the soil of premises and assumptions on which they were based (which include views of nature, ideas of temporality, and so on) has definitively collapsed. As Koselleck showed in relation with the *Sattelzeit*, having trespassed a given threshold of historicity, a plain return to the past is no longer possible. That explains why, for example, to currently speak of a classical republican language (which, as we saw, was undetachable from theocentric world views) is plainly anachronical. Lastly, it means giving the name of "language" to what is still conceived in terms of "systems of ideas" (which are atemporal, by definition; ideas may eventually appear —or not— in a given context, but they themselves are not really historical objects). Thus, to make a history of political languages we need not only to transcend the textual surface of discourses and to penetrate the argumentative apparatus which underlies each form

of political language, trying to reconstruct *contexts of debate* by tracing within discourses the linguistic vestiges of the context of their enunciation, but also, and fundamentally, to identify those thresholds which determine their inner historicity, those instances which provide languages an immanent principle of temporal irreversibility, rendering impossible either prospective or retrospective projections (cfr. Palti 2004).

5) Finally, the second aspect making political languages contingent, historical formations, thus distinguishing them from all "systems of ideas," leads us to what we can call the principle of constitutive incompleteness of modern political languages. They, unlike "ideal types," are never logically integrated and self-consistent entities. As we have seen, what lies at their center is the void left by the dislocation of ancient cosmologies. That is why no modern political category is able to establish its meaning; that all of them can eventually be "contested," and not simply shift their meanings. Semantic changes (new definitions of concepts) cannot destabilize a given form of political discourse unless they make manifest its inherent blindspots, the meaningful void lying at its center.[10]

To sum up, to make a history of political languages does not suffice to transcend the textual surface of discourses and to penetrate the argumentative apparatus which underlies each form of political language, trying to reconstruct *contexts of debate*, by tracing within discourses the linguistic marks of the context of their enunciation. Not even is sufficient with discovering the thresholds determining their historicity providing discourses an immanent principle of temporal irreversibility. We also need, fundamentally, to understand how temporality erupts in political thinking, how precise historical circumstances eventually make manifest the aporias which are intrinsic to a given type of discourse and dislocate it. Ultimately, here there lies the true object behind the profound, albeit mostly unnoticed, theoretical revolution which, as Pocock remarked in the quotation serving as the epigraph of this paper, our discipline has been undergoing in the last decades.

NOTES

* I thank Kari Palonen and the reviewers of *Redescriptions* for very helpful comments to a draft of this paper.

1. Schiera's book, *Otto Hintze* (Schiera 1974), was crucial for the diffusion in Italy of Hintze's historical ideas.

2. A good example of the spontaneous convergence between this form of conceiving of conceptual history and the tradition of history of ideas is Irmline Veit-Brause's article that appeared at the sixth issue of the *History of Concepts Newsletter*, in which, after underlining that the distinguishing feature of history of concepts is its interdisciplinary nature, cites as an example the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, edited by Philip P. Wiener, which actually is the most remarkable realization of the historiographical project propelled by Arthur Lovejoy and his school (see Veit-Brause 2003, 8-13).

3. We refer here to the manner in which the typico-ideal approaches are interpreted in this particular context, which is not necessarily Weber's view.

4. "The republic or Aristotelian polis, as that concept emerged in the civic humanist thought of the fifteenth century," affirms Pocock, "was at once universal, in the sense that existed to realize for its citizens all the values which men were capable of realizing in life, and particular, in the sense that it was finite and located in space and time" (Pocock 1975, 3).

5. "In this whole period", asserted Mora, "the questions that commanded the most attention and that were heatedly discussed in the periodicals were those of *legitimacy*. These questions, seditious by nature, since never has there existed in the world a government over whose titles one could not cast more or less well-founded doubts, were peculiar in that the defenders of General Guerrero were the first to proclaim the nullity of the acts which elevated him to the presidency, against the supporters of the Alamán Administration who maintained their legitimacy by force. But only he who has not seen revolutions can admire such inconsistencies; six months earlier, the language of the parties was the opposite" [Mora, "Revista política" (1837), in *Obras sueltas*, 26].

6. The Spanish epistemologist Mosterín is a member of the so-called "Berlin Circle," led by Wolfgang Stegmüller. This group elaborated the so-called "non-statement view" of scientific theories, which crucially reformulated Kuhn's notion of "paradigm," thus giving a new impulse to epistemological studies. Our view of political languages is partly indebted to its insights.

7. As Pocock showed, the opposition between "texts" and "context," proper to the history of "ideas," encircled it into a vicious cycle. "The slogan," says Pocock, "that ideas ought to be studied in their social and political context is, it seems to me, in danger of becoming a shibboleth; too many of those who pronounce it assume, often unconsciously, that they already know what the relations between ideas and social reality are, and this can lead to much coarse and uncritical thinking. Most commonly it takes the form of a rather crudely correspondence theory; the ideas under study are assumed to be characteristic of some faction, group, class, or type to which the thinker allegedly belonged, and it is explained how the ideas express the interests, hopes, fears, or rationalizations characteristic of that group. The danger here is that of arguing in circle. It is in fact often very difficult to identify without ambiguity the social membership of an individual, still harder that of an idea—consciousness being the contradictory thing it is—and one tends to buttress the assumptions one is making about the social position of the thinker with assumptions one is making about the social significance of his ideas, and then to repeat the procedure in reverse by a thoroughly deplorable perversion of critical method" (Pocock 1989, 105).

8. The systematization of *circumstances* was one of the main achievements of medieval rhetorical treatises. They extracted from Cicero and the classics and defined a given set of relationships among the factors of a discourse—*circumstances*—and referred to them by means of specific questions: *quis* (who), *quid* (what), *cur* (why), *ubi*, (where), *quando* (when), *quemadmodum* (how), and *quibus adminiculs* (in which way). They indicated a fundamental linguistic dimension, which, in pre-modern times, was immediately evident (we must recall that, in the Old Regime what was said and how it was said

was dependent on the social categories of the participants and the particular situation in which the communicative exchange took place). With modernity, in which the sole invocation of an impersonal Truth legitimated the public use of words, these *circumstances*, tended to fade away from discourse, or, rather, to appear in an non-explicit manner.

9. For a comparative approach between the Cambridge school and the German school of *Begriffgeschichte*, see Richter 1990 and Palonen 2004.

10. And this is a rather exceptional happening. Such a phenomenon normally expresses situations of deep political or social crisis. As José Luis Villacañas remarks, the assumption of the consistency of the norm is at the center of the notion of legitimacy: "Legitimacy, as a set of allegedly valid beliefs, demands a conscious representation of the normative patterns which are accepted and held as valid by a given society or group. The thesis would say that legitimacy must have a reflexive dimension, accepted by both those who govern and those who are governed, and that it is thanks to that shared belief that political order becomes actualized from the point of view of social praxis" (Villacañas, 2003, 91). We must add that this belief is precisely the one a historian cannot share —or, at least, provisionally to bracket— if s/he intends to write a political history which is more than merely the narration that the very community could eventually provide of itself, that is, not to plainly endorse the series of idealizations permitting that community to perceive itself as such.

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