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Undermining Methodological Nationalism

Histoire croisée of Concepts as Transnational History

Jani Marjanen

The need for conceptualizing phenomena that transgress national borders is readily apparent in current academic endeavors. This need involves empirical objects of study as well as perspectives that researchers themselves employ. The richness of expressions targeting inter- and transnational processes has met with a great deal of confusion, to say the least, but it is also indicative of the current momentum for coining new expressions and concepts that enhance our understanding of the conditions of life today that are to a lesser degree bound to nation-states. In fact, dealing with this momentum ought to be seen as a communal challenge for all scholarly disciplines that study society. Ulrich Beck and Nathan Sznaider (2006) argue that the analytical concepts, materials and methods that are used daily in scholarly work are bound to nation-state contexts and that new concepts, materials and methods are needed for the analysis of today's increasingly globalized world. It is, however, evident that the need for conceptualizing transnational processes is just as essential for historically-oriented studies.

In the following pages, I will join in the discussion of the global and transnational in history writing by focusing on the *histoire croisée* approach as a possible inspiration for conceptual history in general and for the challenges of doing transnational conceptual history in particular. Rather than inventing new analytical concepts for the analysis of past phenomena not confined to the nation-state, I will stress the importance of identifying past border-crossing activity in the study of uses of concepts.

As an approach, Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann (2006, 2004, 2002) have recently introduced *histoire croisée* as a further development of comparative history as well as transfer studies. These authors portray *histoire croisée* as an approach that analyzes not only interconnectedness in history, but also how this interconnectedness generates meaning in different contexts (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 32, 49).

Conceptual transfers are not just about crossing nation-state borders. Historically, we can identify transfers between cultures, linguistic communities, political cultures, nation-states, different political languages, scholarly disciplines, associations and so on. To use a general analytical term, we might want to talk about different communicative spaces. Here, however, attention is mostly paid to crossings between nation-states, not owing to the lack of other examples, but because the *histoire croisée* approach is seen as a way of addressing the problem of national confinement or, as Ulrich Beck and Nathan Sznaider (2006) would put it, »methodological nationalism«. I will start by discussing how recent conceptual-history initiatives and the *histoire croisée* approach do in fact respond to the challenge of national confinement and then move on to discuss the potential of the *histoire croisée* of concepts.

I will argue that the *histoire croisée* approach not only contains valuable insight that should be taken into account while doing conceptual history transnationally, but is actually exceptionally well suited for the study of historical uses of concepts. When we examine historical imports, innovations or translations regarding concepts, we in fact look at how past actors constructed transnational contexts (that is, during periods we can talk of nations) for their use of concepts (see Kettunen 2006, 2001; Kurunmäki forthcoming). In such cases, transnational history is not only an analytical label for the scope of the study, but it also corresponds to the experiences of the actors studied (cf. Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 43). What I call the *histoire croisée* of concepts could work both as a complementary approach and as an alternative to traditional cross-border comparisons that dominate international studies in conceptual history. It could help in bringing forward insights that have gone unnoticed by traditional cross-border comparisons, and it could also challenge interpretations by adding new perspectives to the study of historical phenomena.

Conceptual History beyond the Nation-State

Since the launch of the monumental *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* project in the 1960s, conceptual history has attracted adherents all over the world. The variations of the Koselleckian *Begriffsgeschichte* are numerous, depending on how one categorizes the more or less eclectic usage of Koselleckian and

other ideas in conducting conceptual history-oriented studies. Even though a scholarly consensus hardly exists on what conceptual history is or what it should be (and fortunately so), there is to a certain extent a general understanding of conceptual history as an approach that looks upon the historical usage of concepts as both something that reflects historical development as well as triggers historical innovation. To put it vaguely, conceptual history-oriented studies draw from Koselleckian *Begriffsgeschichte*, blending it with quite a few other theoretical influences, often from contextualism *à la* Quentin Skinner (see Koselleck 1972; Skinner 1989; Richter 1995; Hampsher-Monk, Tilmans/van Vree 1998).

In terms of conceptual history, there are two rather obvious difficulties in transgressing the confinement to national boundaries. First, the tradition of conceptual history is bound to language. This has meant a focus on linguistic communities, and although linguistic communities have not been defined through nation-state borders, the important role of national languages in nation-building processes has evidently contributed to a focus on national history. Processes of nation building have often more or less coincided with the politicization and temporalization of concepts, as discussed by Reinhart Koselleck (1972). Second, in examining the use of concepts, a very close reading of the sources has often been employed. The texts have been analyzed from the point of view of the public they address, for example, (the learned strata of) a national public. References to actors from abroad have, of course, been noted, but the possible and perhaps secondary transnational communicative spaces have, in general terms, not received much attention. Thus, when the crossings of national borders in history have been noted, they have often been portrayed as separate entities, that is, in terms of »our nation« and »abroad«. Here, it needs to be pointed out that a focus on national histories is not equivalent to nationalist history writing. Also, the point is not to undermine nation-states and nationalism as objects of research, but rather to emphasize the importance of including transnational processes in the analysis.

People working with so-called national conceptual history projects have certainly been aware of the burdens of writing national histories. To take one example, the most prominent conceptual history-oriented book in Finnish, *Käsitteet liikkeessä. Suomalaisen poliittisen kulttuurin käsitehistoria* (Concepts in Motion: The Conceptual History of Finnish Political Culture), ends with a separate chapter by Kari Palonen (2003a), which discusses the need for analyzing how European political concepts were contested in the

peripheral Finnish society. Palonen (2003a: 569; see also 2003b) states that the authors of the book have attempted to avoid the traps of the kind of national history writing that identifies itself with a nation-state, in this case Finland. He presents as a general principle of the research team that the authors were to regard Finland as a foreign country with which they, however, were familiar. Following Reinhart Koselleck (1972: XIX), Palonen (2003a: 569–570, 2005: 35–37) refers to the Brechtian figure of *Verfremdungseffekt* and stresses the need to distance oneself from present-day vocabulary when studying uses of past expressions. The *Verfremdungseffekt* in conceptual history has a dual character. It is directed towards the present-day familiarity with language, but also towards the national identification connected to the language. In Palonen's way of presenting *Verfremdungseffekt* the emphasis, perhaps more so than in Koselleck, is on avoiding attachment to the national grand narrative.

In general, cross-border comparisons have been presented as answers to the criticism of a national focus in research. In historical research, in which the baggage of constructing glorious national histories is immanent, this way of reasoning is well represented. The idea that a study that compares two or more nation-states actually could underpin the naturalization of nation-states as units of research is often not acknowledged. Simply put, it is often argued that a study concerned with one nation-state might contribute to a national(istic) paradigm, whereas a cross-border comparison is free of such vices (see e.g. Lorenz 1999; Fredrickson 1995; Grew 1980). I do not want to argue that there are not great benefits in trying to analyze similarities and differences between nation-states by doing cross-border comparisons. Rather, bearing in mind Kari Palonen's demand for *Verfremdungseffekt* when working with national contexts, I want to stress that national confinement can be overcome while working within national contexts and consequently is not automatically overcome when applying an international approach. In fact, there is, to my mind, a need to develop alternative and complementary approaches to cross-border comparisons that are suited to identifying and analyzing transnational historical processes.

Since the launch of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, quite a few cross-border comparisons with an explicit conceptual history orientation have been carried out (e.g., Koselleck et al. 1991; Leonhard 2001; Ihalainen 2005; Götz 2001; Palonen 2006). A number of larger collaborative projects are also underway (see e.g., Hölscher 2003; Tilmans 2006; den Boer 2005;

Feres Júnior 2005). The great importance of these contributions and plans to the field of conceptual history is clear, but it is evident that the research field is just opening up. The chief model for carrying out comparisons is the international comparison.[1] However, translations (e.g., Richter 2005), transfers (e.g., Lindberg 2006) and intercrossings (e.g., Leonhard 2005) have been brought to the fore in the analysis of transnational processes. Cross-border comparisons in the field of conceptual history have encountered some criticism. Tilmans (2006: 53), for instance, points out that »it is necessary to go beyond the comparison of various national patterns of conceptual development and to attempt to study the process of international interaction in the development of concepts«. Closest to the arguments presented in this text are Jörn Leonhard's (2005: 8). He maintains that the

»aim should be to overcome isolated, that is national histories of concepts by a focus on cultural transfer and semantic interaction between political languages, a *histoire croisée* which reflects the synchronic variations of the past«.

Histoire croisée as an Approach

Histoire croisée is relatively new as a label for a scholarly approach. Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann have recently, and in a programmatic way, presented *histoire croisée* as an approach, differing not only from comparative history at large, but also from transfer studies (Werner/Zimmermann 2006, 2004, 2002).

An English translation for the term *histoire croisée* has not yet been introduced. Also, most of the references are to French and German scholarly debates. This is perhaps symptomatic. Questions of entanglement and relations are very much *à la mode* in French, German and other, even more peripheral cultures during a hegemonic period of the Anglo-American culture and the English language.

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1 Kari Palonen's The Struggle with Time (2006) constitutes an interesting exception. Although it is an explicitly comparative effort, relying on mostly German, French and British material, Palonen distances himself from comparing the different languages or political cultures or identifying transnational developments, but rather analyzes each text through nine partly overlapping topoi.

Werner and Zimmermann place *histoire croisée* among the approaches that examine the relations between different »historically constituted formations«. But they want to distinguish it as an approach by emphasizing the analysis not only of interconnectedness in history, but also how this interconnectedness generates meaning in different contexts. They present *histoire croisée* as a step forward from comparative efforts, in which, they argue, the process of defining units of comparison (often nation-states) and treating them as equal comparable units pose a problem. Nevertheless, *histoire croisée* is also, according to Werner and Zimmermann, a step forward from transfer studies, in which connections and relations are emphasized, but in which the back-and-forth negotiations in influences are not really addressed. Thus, *histoire croisée* strives to go beyond the notion of cultural influence and a simple reception of culture. Also, Werner and Zimmermann distance their approach from other approaches recently given the labels entangled history, shared history and connected history. Finally, the approach »raises the question of its own historicity through a threefold process of historicization: through the object, the categories of analysis, and the relationships between researcher and object« (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 32–33).

From the outsider's point of view it is clear that the *histoire croisée* approach, as formulated by Werner and Zimmermann, is closer to the tradition of transfer studies *à la* Michel Espagne than to comparative history. One might even claim that it is not even fruitful to talk about comparative history as a single scholarly tradition. Werner and Zimmermann's way of distancing themselves from both transfer studies and comparative history can be seen as a rhetorical move. Much of the debate about comparative history and its problems has, in France at least, revolved around a juxtaposition of comparativists on the one hand and transfer study scholars on the other (see Ther 2003). In distancing themselves from both »sides«, Werner and Zimmermann (2006: 32) present *histoire croisée* as an approach that »offers new leads to getting beyond the stalemate in the debate between comparativists and transfer specialists«. Consequently, Werner and Zimmermann criticize both approaches in list form.

In regard to comparative history, five particular problems are pointed out (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 34–35): (1) The problem of assuming that the observer is in an external position in relation to the compared objects. This relates, of course, to the discussion of the need for a metalanguage that would enable just comparisons of the use of concepts in

different linguistic communities (see e.g., Koselleck et al. 1991: 21–22; Leonhard 2001: 81–85). (2) The problem in scales of comparison. Since all units of comparison are historically constituted (nation-states, regions, civilizations, cities, etc.) the units cannot be assumed to be in parity. Thus, comparisons are at all times asymmetrical. (3) The problem of defining the object of comparison when dealing with »historically-constituted categories«. Regardless of whether the study concerns college students or the private–public distinction, it is »necessary to pay attention to their [the categories] historicity, as well as to the traces left by such historicity on their characteristics and their contemporary usages«. (4) While historicizing objects and units of study, the relation between diachronic and synchronic aspects of the study might cause a problem. On the one hand, the »comparative approach assumes a synchronic cross-section«, that is, historical development is in a way frozen in time. On the other hand, when diachronic histories are constructed for the purpose of comparison, the units of study are isolated, causing a loss in the synchronic richness of the story. (5) The interaction among the objects of comparison poses problems for comparisons dealing with at least seemingly separate units of study. If dealing with literature, advertising or concepts, for instance, it is clear that the objects interact and influence each other in a reciprocal way and thus create a need for refinement in analysis (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 34–35).

Points one to three are by all means relevant critiques of the comparative method and something each comparativist should take into account, but in all fairness it should not be assumed that the comparative method, as such, features all of these problems. Werner and Zimmermann rightly stress the importance of added reflexivity regarding the historicity of the object, scale of comparison, units of study and the position of the observer as a way of overcoming these problems. This is relevant for all comparisons of culturally-constituted objects. However, in the analysis of past uses of concepts, the culturally-constituted element is rather self-evident. In traditional social history, perhaps the primary target of Werner and Zimmermann's reform program, this aspect has perhaps been more neglected.

Points four and five require further discussion from the point of view of conceptual history. The question of diachronic and synchronic analysis in conceptual history has received a great deal of attention, most famously in Reinhart Koselleck's (1972) *»Einleitung«* in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (see

also Richter 1995: 124–142). For Koselleck, the synchronic analysis comes first. Only after this analysis can diachronic histories be constructed (Koselleck 1972; cf. Ihalainen 2005). In *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* the idea of a *Sattelzeit*, a period between 1750 and 1850 during which many of the key concepts acquired their modern meanings in the German language (Koselleck 1972: XIV–XIX; Richter 1995: 36–39), functions as a common hypothesis for all articles in the encyclopedia and is thus also a common point for diachronic comparison for all the clusters of concepts that are analyzed. When comparing diachronic histories of concepts in different languages, especially when dealing with cross-national comparisons, the difficulty lies in including not only the synchronic analysis of speech acts, but also the arenas of the utterances and conceptual transfers. In relation to what Werner and Zimmermann claim, the diachronic analysis has to be frozen in time in order to carry out the comparison.

This leads to point five in the criticism by Werner and Zimmermann. Interaction between the compared objects poses a problem, especially if we construct diachronic histories that are to be compared. Again, it would be unfair to claim that cross-cultural interaction has been entirely overlooked by scholars working with cross-border comparative conceptual history. However, it is worth stressing that the ideal scientific comparison, namely one in which the compared objects are not in any kind of relation, is practically non-existent when studying cultural phenomena. For conceptual change in the past, cross-cultural impulses have been of great relevance. Here, the challenge lies in identifying and analyzing cases of cross-cultural influences and thus presenting transnational historical accounts in order to complement the perhaps more international historical accounts achieved by comparative history.

Point five in Werner and Zimmermann critique is familiar also to the critique put forward by »transfer specialists«, often associated with Michel Espagne (1999). Werner and Zimmermann, however, present their approach as a further development of both comparative history and transfer studies. They criticize transfer studies for having four particular blind spots in analyzing cross-national transfers. (1) The frames of reference should not be fixed. The transfers should not be seen as processes with fixed points of departure and points of arrival. The points of departure and arrival are often national contexts, which are taken for granted. (2) This leads to an »invariability of the categories of analysis«. The activities involved in the transfer process, such as translation, are »apprehended

through concepts elaborated within national traditions«. (Again, this bears a resemblance to the debate on meta-languages in conceptual history.) (3) There is a risk of a »reflexivity deficit« in terms of the national units analyzed. Although the »initial purpose of a transfer study was to show that borders were permeable in order to undermine the myth of the homogeneity of national units« and thus to focus on transfers between the national contexts, the national contexts are »through a sort of boomerang effect« reintroduced as the primary categories of analysis. (4) Finally, the question of reciprocity and reversibility has been overlooked. For transfer studies the focus has been put on the introduction, transmission and reception of the research object. The logic of interaction, unforeseen consequences and intercrossings has been widely unacknowledged (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 36–37).

The blind spots that Werner and Zimmermann point out have to do with reflecting on the relationship of the observer, the object and the contexts in which the object is studied. The emphasis is correct, but to claim that the identified blind spots »are structural problems that affect all areas of research into transfers« (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 36) is unfair. However, point four in particular seems to be a largely overlooked factor. In a conceptual history setting, the focal point has often been on the reception of concepts in different contexts, leaving reciprocity undiscussed. There are, of course, a number of exceptions, and I will return to these in due course, in discussing the particularities of doing what might be called the *histoire croisée* of concepts.

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As pointed out, the *histoire croisée* approach looks at change on three different levels: the level of the object, the context in which the objects are studied and the observer's relationship to them both. Looking at the object (the use of concepts) and historicizing this usage is a basic prerequisite of comparative conceptual history. However, historicizing the contexts within which the use of concepts occurs is something that has been discussed to a lesser degree. (There are, of course, important exceptions to this, and I will return to these below.) When moving towards a comparative perspective, we may easily fall into what Werner and Zimmermann (2006: 47) call

»convenient and lazy usage of context«, leaving the »languages« or national contexts that we study unhistoricized. However, »the definition of the context is not the prerogative of the researcher«; it needs to correspond with the historical experiences of the actors who are studied.

The *histoire croisée* approach includes a critique that bears similarities to the recent discussion of methodological nationalism. Werner and Zimmermann do not, however, refer to this discussion. In general, they seem to avoid focusing exclusively on cross-border comparisons and relations crossing only national borders. Thereby, they underline that *histoire croisée* as an approach is also relevant in studies in which the units of study do not have to coincide with national contexts. This way, they also present their approach as applicable to periods during which the nation-state has not been the dominant way of geopolitically organizing the world. These authors do, however, participate in the discussion about nation-states as units of study by including a standard note on globalization as a prerequisite for new ways of conveying the world (Werner/Zimmermann 2006: 30). Although the program of *histoire croisée* has not concentrated solely on issues of nation-states and nationalism, the reception of the program has clearly focused on these questions (see e.g. Kocka 2003; Kaelble 2006; Wehler 2006).

In present-day scholarly discourse on globalization and the nation-state, it is often claimed that the nation-state is no longer a self-evident principal unit of study. Whether this is true, is, of course, contestable (see e.g., Wehler 2006; Mann 2006). However, the statement has a strong normative element attached. At the very core of this normative movement is Ulrich Beck's plea to move beyond methodological nationalism. Together with Nathan Sznaider he has in a rather programmatic way, laid out an agenda for what he and Sznaider call »cosmopolitanism«. Although they acknowledge the contestability of cosmopolitanism as a term, they argue that there are three undisputed features of cosmopolitanism as an intellectual movement. First, the members of the movement engage in a shared critique of methodological nationalism. Second, the members share the view that during the first decades of the twenty-first century, the world will continue to change so drastically that there is good reason to label it an age of cosmopolitanism. Consequently, the third feature is a shared view that a »methodological cosmopolitanism« is needed to understand the age of cosmopolitanism (Beck/Sznaider 2006a: 1–3; 2006b; also Beck 2002, 2000).

According to Beck and Sznaider (2006: 3),

»[m]ethodological nationalism takes the following premises for granted: it equates societies with nation-state societies and sees states and their governments as the primary focus of social-scientific analysis. It assumes that humanity is naturally divided into a limited number of nations, which organize themselves internally as nation-states and externally set boundaries to distinguish themselves from other nation-states. And it goes further: this outer delimitation as well as the competition between nation-states represents the most fundamental category of political organization«.

Furthermore, Beck and Sznaider claim that their critique of methodological nationalism is not to be understood as an attempt to declare the nation-state dead. Rather, »as all the research shows«, they claim that nation-states will continue to thrive or will be transformed into »transnational states«. The point of their critique is oriented towards the practices of research: »national organization as a structuring principle of societal and political action can no longer serve as the orienting reference point for the social scientific observer« (Beck/Sznaider 2006: 4).

Corresponding to the claim of a continuous life for nation-states, methodological cosmopolitanism does not mean shutting one's eyes to re-nationalization or re-ethnification of minds, for example. In fact, these have »to be analyzed within a cosmopolitan frame of reference«, as Beck and Sznaider put it. The opposite, however, is not possible. The trap of methodological nationalism often leaves cosmopolitan processes unidentified and strengthens national epistemologies. Empirically overcoming methodological nationalism is extremely difficult, since statistics and other gathered data are almost exclusively national (Beck/Sznaider 2006: 5). In passing, Beck and Sznaider (2006: 6) also put forward a critique of cross-border comparisons. From methodological cosmopolitanism, they claim, it follows that it is not »possible to distinguish clearly between the national and the international, nor, correspondingly, to make a convincing contrast between homogenous units«.

It is especially noteworthy in the cosmopolitan agenda of Beck and Sznaider that they sense crucial changes in the ways we are now experiencing everyday processes. In their words, »the twenty-first century is becoming an age of cosmopolitanism« (Beck/Sznaider 2006: 3). This shift in our experiences is their starting point, but for historically-oriented studies, I argue, a complementary perspective is needed. Also, the periodization by Beck and Sznaider (2006: 3) into historical periods of cosmopolitanism

and nation-state dominance is overly simplified (see Mann 2006; Chernilo 2006, 2007). There are great differences in the importance of the nation-state at certain periods of time depending on whether we deal with economic, political or social phenomena (or concepts).

For historically-oriented studies, the problem lies not only in confinement to national borders, but also in nationalist histories. Therefore, undermining methodological nationalism is not only a question of adapting to the role of the nation-state in a particular period of time (e.g., the claimed cosmopolitan period of today), but also, if we follow the vocabulary of Beck and Sznaider, employing a cosmopolitan perspective on all periods. The aim is thus to undermine not only methodological nationalism, but also nationalistic history writing and to see these as interwoven phenomena.

Similar views have been put forward in the discussion revolving around methodological nationalism. Andreas Wimmer and Nina Glick Schiller (2002: 302) suggest that perhaps »it was more difficult to see the world in three dimensions when the sun stood at its zenith. In the evening, shadows grow and allow us to perceive the environment in clearer contours.« Thus, this new perspective allows us to see »how transnational the modern world has always been, even in the high days when the nation-state bounded and bundled most social processes«. They categorize methodological nationalism in a different way, suggesting three interwoven types of methodological nationalism: the ignorant, the naturalized, and the territorially limited. To the ignorant category Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002: 302–305) relegate much of classic social theory, claiming that especially classic theory of modernity »has a blind spot when it comes to understanding the rise of nation-states«. According to them, much of social theory simply excludes nationalism. The naturalized variant of methodological nationalism is typically represented in the study of international relations, in which the nation-states have, largely speaking, been seen as the adequate units of study. The question of why the object of study is an *inter*national one is seldom asked. Similar nation-state relations characterized by self-evidence are dominant in economics as well as in history and anthropology. This also holds true for many attempts to overcome the nation-state confinement, such as the dependency theory, which, according to Wimmer and Glick Schiller, led to studying cross-national economic systems as exploitation and domination between nation-states. The third variant in the account by Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002: 305–307) is the one that

probably first comes to mind when reading the critique by Beck and Sznaider, namely the way of describing and analyzing processes from within a national framework. It also connects to the Giddensian notion of »container society«. Typical examples are nation building processes that are often presented from a »within« perspective, but could easily be studied from a transnational perspective.

This sort of criticism is formulated by Daniel Chernilo (2006: 11–13, 2007: 17) who claims that Beck's arguments »on the current dissolution of nation-states are backed up by exaggerating the alleged solidity of the nation-state's recent past«. He wonders whether »a methodologically nationalistic social science was able to provide an accurate account of the nation-state even during the first age of modernity«. In examining Beck's historical perceptions of the nation-state, Chernilo (2007) diversifies the image of social theory as a particularly methodologically nationalistic tradition. Chernilo (2006: 12) even states that Beck's perception of the role of the nation-state in the past is misrepresenting and thus »contributes to the reinforcement of a methodologically nationalistic view of nation-states«.

In taking the project of undermining methodological nationalism seriously, one needs to stress, just as Wimmer and Glick Schiller do, that the challenge lies not just in a change in the object of study, but also in employing a perspective that can identify and analyze transnational processes and experiences. A reflexive approach *à la histoire croisée* is in this sense both a complementary and an alternative approach to cross-border comparisons. It helps on the one hand to identify and analyze transnational processes in question, processes that have remained blind spots for methodologically nationalistic research. In doing so, however, it relies heavily on data brought forward by cross-border comparative history. As Jürgen Kocka (2003: 42, 44) has put it, both the traditional *histoire comparée* and the more historically-oriented *histoire croisée* are needed. On the other hand, the change in perspective is bound to bring alternative results to the fore and thus challenge interpretations that have relied on methodologically nationalistic grounds.

Particularities of the *histoire croisée* of Concepts

The study of conceptual history is bound to language. Languages and linguistic development are not bound to the nation-state, but in many cases in which concepts are contested, the surroundings are national, albeit influences and models are often derived from other countries, sometimes within the linguistic community, and other regions. Often, the contexts in which concepts are redefined or redescribed are perceived as national, even though other ways of perceiving the contexts are available and perfectly legitimate. The aim here has been to put forward the *histoire croisée* approach as a possible answer to the critique of methodological nationalism. It is important to stress that the aim should not be to ignore nation-states in analysis, but rather to look at other complementary perspectives. It cannot be claimed that the focus should be put entirely on intercrossings in history; rather, such intercrossings should be seen as (transnational) moments in which national and other traditions meet. In many cases these are instances in which these traditions are actually compared in history.

These are questions that conceptual historians have discussed more thoroughly in terms of linguistic communities rather than national political cultures. It has been self-evident for any work with a cross-border conceptual history angle that relations between linguistic communities should be put into perspective. First, the relationship of European languages to Latin and Greek has been discussed, but also the question of the role of a particular language in particular nation-building processes is usually considered (think, for example, of German in Germany, French in Switzerland or Finnish in Finland) (see e.g., Hölscher 2003).

Here, I want to list some aspects of dealing with the nation-state in doing conceptual history transnationally. Since this account is very much inspired by the *histoire croisée* initiative, it may be read as an attempt to imagine some of the directions that the *histoire croisée* of concepts ought to follow. However, the suggestions are not entirely in accordance with Werner and Zimmermann's strict program of *histoire croisée*. I will mostly discuss the need to focus on the contexts in which particular concepts have been or are used and the connotations to other contexts, be they other national contexts, languages, or spheres of life, embedded in the use of concepts. This is done by presenting three examples in which scholars have discussed

concepts that »travel«. A fourth example stems from my own empirical research.

(1) Regardless of whether we are interrogating conceptual travel between national contexts or other spaces of communication, the *concepts are more or less bound to semantic fields* (cf. Koselleck 1972). In the absence of a meta-language through which we could ideally compare the use of concepts in different contexts, I would like to suggest following the travels of concepts as a way of identifying how concepts are acclimatized to new semantic fields. Conceptual travels can be seen as moments in which tensions in their semantic fields are brought forward. This way, the semantic fields in question can be related to each other and the »travel« can be used as a basis for comparison. However, semantic fields are not to be regarded as static; they are as much in flux as the concepts themselves.

Mieke Bal's work, *Travelling Concepts in the Humanities: A Rough Guide* (2002), focuses on concepts that »travel« between academic disciplines. Bal's insights stem from setting up interdisciplinary projects. She advocates a focus on concepts, in particular concepts that have a history of »traveling«, as a way to enhance multidisciplinary dialogue and research. For her this is an open-ended complement to rigid, single-discipline methodological traditions.

Without going more into Bal's general argument, I would like to present her reflections on how concepts travel. Leaning on the work of Isabelle Stengers, Bal distinguishes between two types of »propagation« of words and concepts across disciplinary borders, namely diffusion and epidemic propagation. Diffusion she characterizes as the more common occurrence. This is when concepts become *à la mode* in scholarly discourse and are used in new scholarly contexts and, due to sloppy use, lose their analytical precision. In Bal's vocabulary they lose what made them concepts in the first place and become mere words. Propagation signifies when concepts »travel« to other scholarly contexts and contribute to that tradition as concepts, enabling a grasp of the phenomena that are studied. This does not mean that the use of the concepts is the same in the new disciplinary context, but rather is adapted so that it can be employed in the new discipline. To a certain extent the concepts that travel force the receiving tradition to adapt to its new ingredient (Bal 2002: 32–39).

In Bal's terminology traveling concepts move across disciplinary boundaries, but in doing so, they also travel in meaning, adapting to and

provoking the semantic fields they enter. Bal's approach is quite pragmatic. In order to make analytical concepts travel so that they will not lose their analytical power, the focus needs to be put on the concepts themselves and on taking distance from the tradition of one's discipline. In Bal's case, however, natural languages are not discussed. In terms of scholarly concepts traveling, much of the traveling is from one multilingual scholarly context with English as the dominant language to another multilingual scholarly context. It has to be added that, although English is the *lingua franca* of scholarly work, the travels between natural languages are also an apparent factor. When traveling into several natural languages, concepts adapt not only to the scholarly tradition, but also to the natural language. Consequently, the logic of travels to other natural languages differs from English–English travels.

The metaphor of »traveling concepts« has also been used in discussions of cross-cultural settings (Harbsmeier 2007). However, the metaphor of »traveling concepts« is potentially problematic when dealing with cross-cultural settings. Following the criticism that Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann have made of transfer studies, it could be argued that the metaphor »traveling« implies that there is a static point of departure, a static point of arrival and a concept that travels without being subject to change.[2] Christoph Harbsmeier (2007), for instance, puts it this way in his otherwise insightful discussion of the hegemony of English concepts in the analysis of Chinese pasts. However, it would be false to argue that the problem is inherent in the metaphor. Certainly, if we think of human travels, we can easily discern cases of travels both in space and meaning in the manner that Mieke Bal suggests.

(2) *Often concepts that travel have unforeseen consequences for the semantic fields they enter.* Consider an example from the field of law. If European integration has created a momentum for the humanities and social sciences to launch European-level projects, European integration has had the same effect among legal scholars, but the political and practical pressures on the field have been much greater. Consequently, the study of how legal concepts travel between different legal traditions is topical. Gunther Teubner (1998) has discussed this issue in a highly interesting manner, both from the perspectives of *histoire croisée* and conceptual history. Teubner's starting point is

2 I am indebted to Hans Erich Bödeker for this thought.

the legal discussion about whether legal cultures are converging or diverging due to the current need to regulate an increasingly globalized world. He singles out legal scholars Pierre Legrand, Alan Watson and William Ewald as important contributors to this debate, but claims that a conceptually more refined analysis is needed (Teubner 1998: 17).

Teubner uses the example of the introduction of the continental law concept of good faith (*bona fides*) into the common law tradition. In the legal discourse, such traveling concepts have been labeled »legal transplants«. Teubner, however, is critical of the transplant metaphor. The notion of a legal transplant either being rejected by an immune reaction of a legal tradition or becoming a transplant that interacts with other elements in the legal organism is, in Teubner's account, a false dichotomy. He argues that the phrase »legal irritant« is more accurate than »legal transplant« because »[l]egal institutions cannot be easily moved from one context to the other, like the ›transfer‹ of a part from one machine into the other« (Teubner 1998: 12). The transplant metaphor suggests that, once the transfer is carried out, a transplant will function in the new environment in a way similar to the original. Teubner disagrees, and suggests, not unlike Werner and Zimmermann, that the phenomenon should be seen as a more complex process:

> »[W]hen a foreign rule is imposed on a domestic culture […] it works as a fundamental irritation which triggers a whole series of new and unexpected events […] It is an outside noise which creates wild perturbations in the interplay of discourses within these arrangements and forces them to reconstruct internally not only their own rules but to reconstruct from scratch the alien element itself« (Teubner 1998: 12).

Teubner maintains that »legal irritants«, to use his vocabulary, cannot be domesticated as such, but rather have complex consequences for large chunks of the legal system to which the irritants have been introduced.

The similarities to Werner and Zimmermann's program are evident, although Teubner does not explicate a similar emphasis on reflexivity. The role of the nation-state is seemingly important in the legal discussion on irritants. It is clear that it is on the national level that these irritants have to be addressed, but the impulses for regulation have their origins in transnational or international processes. However, Teubner's irritant model is likewise aimed at evolving an analysis of simple transfers to a more complex interconnected model.

It seems to me that the more definition-sensitive use of technical legal vocabulary binds legal concepts tightly to respective semantic fields in the legal sphere. In the case of political and social concepts in general, in which sloppier uses dominate, the degree of connectedness is perhaps not as high, and thus the logic of irritability is to a certain degree different. Teubner's example should nonetheless underline the fact that in looking at the cross-cultural travels of concepts, identifying how the concepts »fundamentally irritate« the dynamics of the semantic fields in which they are introduced remains a fruitful field of study.

(3) *Transnational concepts bear connotations to other cultures. These can be used as leads in constructing cases for comparisons.* Among conceptual historians, Jörn Leonhard is one of the few to subscribe to, or at least to be inspired by, the rhetoric of *histoire croisée*. He especially emphasizes context-bound usage of concepts: »Political concepts are not the same in different countries. Different contexts, different mental dispositions are reflected in apparently equal concepts.« Here, Leonhard warns about the trap of »semantic nominalism«, that is, equating political concepts with a shared etymological history, but different context-specific (e.g., national political culture) properties (Leonhard 2004: 20; see also Leonhard 2005, 2001). This corresponds well to the problem of defining historically constituted objects of comparison in the above-presented critique by Werner and Zimmermann. Leonhard's work on liberal languages concentrates on translations and influences between cultures and gives a historical example of the complicated process of concepts that are transferred to other political cultures and then, to use Teubner's vocabulary, irritate.

Translation practices of liberalism are for him a way of showing the influences from other countries, but are at the same time clear indicators of how in the long run the concepts gain full force only after integration into a national political language. For example, the translations of the French *idées liberales* were contributions to the language of liberalism in English during the immediate post–French Revolution period. *Idées liberales* had, however, quite different connotations than did the English »pre-political« language of liberalism. The translations (occurrences in English) in the aftermath of the French Revolution at first imitated French usage. Only later, by the 1830s, did the translations lose their connotations to French use and were integrated into the political language of English. It was only

at this time that the rhetoric of liberalism could gain its full force in English political life (Leonhard 2004).

Leonhard's work illustrates how connotations to other cultures are present in everyday key concepts. If we look at a given period during which we can talk of nations, we can identify transnational fields of study, not only in identifying concepts that traveled, but also in examining how connotations to other cultures have been present in the use of certain concepts. In fact, these connotations constitute transnational contexts for the concepts in question. Following the *histoire croisée* initiative and Leonhard's work, we can use these connotations as a basis for comparative conceptual histories in which the relations between the studied units are included in the comparison.

(4) *The logic of conceptual travel, irritation and connotations to other cultures are different, depending on the geopolitical self-understanding in the setting concerned.* Conceptual adaptation and innovation vary depending on whether the actors feel that they are contributing to discussions at the core or perceive themselves as taking part in a peripheral discussion. We can and ought to identify past understandings of center-periphery relations that are embedded in the use of concepts. The core is most often covered, whereas the periphery is ignored. However, in analyzing conceptual travel on a European level, taking peripheral examples and experiences into account is not only a question of taking everybody into account, but it is also a methodological advantage. This way, another kind of logic of reconceptualizing concepts contributes to our understanding of how concepts travel.[3]

For a peripheral example, I turn to nineteenth-century Finland. After the Swedish-Russian War (1808–1809), the remaining Finnish parts of the Swedish realm became part of the Russian Empire and formed a, to a large extent, self-governing Grand Duchy. In this era of Napoleonic Wars in Europe, much of the administration in Finland was reorganized. This also created a demand for importing ideas and concepts in order to find new administrative practices. My own work on a semi-administrative body, the

3 I write »on European level«, not to disregard the global level, in which peripheral examples and experiences are, of course, also a methodological advantage. However, analyzing conceptual travel on a global level demands a more sophisticated analysis of different cores of political language and their interaction, which is beyond the scope of this text. The argument of including the peripheries is, however, inspired by the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty (e.g. 1992).

Finnish Economic Society (*Finska Hushållningssällskapet*), and the political vocabulary that was introduced within the society shows the pattern of European influences very clearly. Swedish organizations were the foremost models raised in discussions on organizational reform. References to Swedish organizations were, however, presented cautiously by officials, who felt that referring to practices of the previous »motherland« would not be appreciated by the Russian government. Whereas Swedish examples in reform rhetoric were sensitive, Danish or British examples were neither politically sensitive nor frequent, and one gets the impression that they were not founded on particularly thorough knowledge (see Zilliacus 2003–2006). On the level of concepts we can see this geopolitical pattern in the use of »society«, but also in the patriotic language of »patriotism«, »citizen« and »public opinion«. These concepts were filtered through their use in Sweden. Here, we must be careful not to over-emphasize Finland and Sweden as separate entities. There were strong connections in terms of heritage in political culture and the Swedish language; nonetheless, since 1809 the political language was at least to a certain extent re-negotiated in a Finnish setting.

In analyzing Finnish nineteenth-century texts, one cannot escape the sense that discussions of everyday topical issues were conducted in a peripheral setting. The making of Finnish nineteenth-century political culture was a process of reception, translation and adaptation. This process is hardly surprising, given that the Finnish language became a written language in a proper sense only during the nineteenth century. Translating important literary works into Finnish, for example, was seen in the mid-nineteenth century as an important civilizing project, but at the same time it was perceived to be a threat to the originality of the Finnish language. Knowledge of foreign discussions was considered important, thereby creating transnational settings for political discussions in Finland. There were, however, virtually no attempts on a larger, perhaps European, level to take part in the topical discussions of the time (see Palonen 2003; Palonen/Kanerva 1987; Stenius 2007; Paloposki 2004).

If Jörn Leonhard's study of liberal languages shows that »liberal« had to be stripped from its connotations to France before it could gain its full political potential in Britain, the logic of adaptation in a northern peripheral country like Finland was quite different. When »liberal« in English was freed from its French connotations it became, in effect, a universal concept in English usage. It could be used to describe any political culture, without

any connotation to a particular setting. For Finnish political language in the nineteenth century, however, connotations to other cultures were omnipresent.[4]

It needs to be pointed out that center and periphery, as figures of thought, are often connected with studies not concerned with cultural processes, for example, Johan Galtung's studies, but perhaps most famously the World-Systems Theory by Immanuel Wallerstein and his co-theoreticians. The idea of employing a center-periphery angle in the analysis of conceptual travels might therefore appear as misplacement of materialistic analytical language. However, my suggestion does not include such a heuristic notion of center and periphery. Rather, the focus should be on identifying and analyzing past experiences of being at the core or on the periphery, not placing an ahistorical center-periphery grid on the world.

My claim is that looking at conceptual travel from a center-periphery perspective presents us with historical experiences that might otherwise go unnoticed. This connects to an important movement within history writing, namely, studies subscribing to the rhetoric of »multiple modernities«, »provincializing Europe«, »subaltern studies« and so forth. These intellectual movements share the criticism of a simple notion of modernity as a universal process that is ultimately derived from core European experiences (see Chakrabarty 1992; Chatterjee 2006; Davis 2006; Lee 2006). A *histoire croisée* of concepts could contribute to this movement not only by studying the transfers of concepts from the cores to the peripheries, but also by taking seriously the contestation and larger influence of the transferred concepts on the peripheries. The importance of this research strategy does not lie in an emancipatory manifestation of the peripheries (»we are important, too!«), but rather in making the past comparisons to the cores visible and hence telling a different kind of story about modernity (cf. Kettunen 2001: 213–269, 2006; see also Ther 2003; Kurunmäki forthcoming; Lorenz 1999). Particularly interesting cases to be studied would be instances in the past when political agents in a particular periphery turn towards another periphery in search of stimuli for introducing a certain practice, concept or idea.[5] To my mind, this is not only an important aspect

4 I owe the thought of English universalism vs. Finnish impossibility to think in a universalistic way to Henrik Stenius. He has described Finnish political culture as a ›translation culture‹.

5 This thought stems from discussions with Henrik Stenius.

in terms of western and non-western cultures, but is also a matter for different European regions.

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