

EDITORIAL

THE DYNAMICS OF CONCEPTUAL CHANGE

Several of the contributions in this volume of *Redescriptions* refer to conceptual changes in the political vocabulary. The articles address the semantic changes of certain key political terms: Victoria Crespo's article on the political language in Spanish America at the beginning of the 19th century focuses on 'tyranny' and 'dictatorship', Kia Lindroos' piece on Walter Benjamin discusses 'violence' and 'moment', and 'representation' is the topic of the contributions by Nadia Urbinati and Risto Alapuro. Their articles provide supplementary material to a project which can best be described as an extended and international version of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. Reading these articles, one begins to wonder why some semantic changes took place very swiftly while other political terms seem to be immune to change. What are the hidden dynamics enabling some terms in the political vocabulary to survive unchanged while forcing others to undergo semantic changes or even into extinction? And what makes a new term successful?

Let us take a brief look at some of the current debates on terminological changes. The term 'post-democracy', which is meant to describe striking changes in modern political systems, has recently appeared in the discourse of democratic theory. Democracy performance, democracy deficit, defect democracies – such key-categories of political research of the 1990s – carry, despite all efforts for neutrality, the implicit conception that democracy is still an unsettled normative project. In this view, democracy contains a promise for the future, which must be defended and refined against current and future adversities and dangers. A mere few years later, this democratic

optimism has lost many of its followers. New forms of democratic scepticism have been established and old forms re-established. A new discourse has emerged which is grouped around the term 'post-democracy'. The term offers authors like Colin Crouch, Sheldon Wolin and Jacques Rancière the terminological foil for their criticism of current democracies. Following Colin's thoughts on 'post-democracy', the institutions of parliamentary democracy – periodical elections, election campaigns, party competition, separation of power – are technically intact. Thus a post-democratic system still shares the basic institutional characteristics of a democratic regime and can therefore not be grouped together with pre-democratic societies. Nevertheless, according to Crouch and his school of thought, the old model of legitimacy which derives from the political participation of the citizens does not correspond to the political reality in modern western political systems. The public election campaign has been turned into a spectacle managed by rivalling teams of professional spin doctors. They set the agenda by the selection and subsequent staging of specific themes. Election campaigns are becoming increasingly personalised. Citizens play a passive, silent and often apathetic role, unable to shape the political dispute. Crouch, Wolin, and Rancière draw terminological consequences from their diagnosis: they claim that we are entering the era of 'post-democracy'.

Such critical descriptions are not a new phenomenon. Swan songs have always been loyal companions of both modern and ancient democracies. The claim that the era of *demokratia* is over already asserted itself with the philosophers of Hellenism after the downfall of the Greek polis. Later Hegel, the authors of the Federalist Papers and the Conservative Revolution shared the conviction that democracy was a project of the past which had been overcome once and for all. And today some fundamentalist Islamic authors say that the end of the era of liberal democracy is near.

But how are we supposed to deal with the provision of the new term 'post-democracy'? It is certainly all too easy to criticize real existing democracies as insufficient on the basis of abstract ideals. But alongside this idealistic fallacy exists the complementary extreme of too much normative modesty. When do we reach the point at which an all too generous use of the label 'democracy' becomes a 'realistic fallacy' and when would it really be more appropriate to use the term 'post-democracy' instead? Or, to put the question more generally: How much phenomenological change can a political vocabulary take? When is a terminological change necessary and when is it more

sensible to adapt the semantic of a concept to the changed political circumstances?

Questions like this cannot be answered by normative political theory alone. Questions of terminological change must also be posed empirically and expanded into a historical research agenda: How is it that some political concepts are seen as being so exhausted by some political actors that they no longer attempt to stretch them, but instead feel obligated to come up with different terms to replace them? Are there circumstances in which terminological changes are more probable than semantic adaptations? Is there such thing as an expiration date for political concepts? Are there specific dynamics to which the conceptual change is subject? There is no general theory of conceptual change which provides answers to these questions. However, research in the history of political ideas may provide material which could be helpful in such a theoretical undertaking.

In her article, Victoria Crespo analyzes the shift from the concept of tyranny to the concept of dictatorship following the Spanish American Revolutions of 1810. Crespo illustrates how central the conceptual arsenal of ancient political thought was for the early nineteenth-century generation of independence in Spanish America. Spanish scholastic theology, especially sixteenth-century Jesuit theology, was a central ideological basis for the revolutionary movement in its early stage. The influence of this tradition included both the theories of tyranny and the resistance to it. Jesuit theorists drew almost literally on Aristotle's definition of tyranny as the worst and last form of government, it being the antithesis of monarchy, the best form of rule. Following Plato and Cicero, they depicted the tyrant as a ferocious beast and a cruel and horrific monster. The tyrant is outside the human community and therefore killing him is not only legitimate, but a duty. Any legitimate king is obliged to rule by the 'consent of the city'.

In keeping with this tradition, when Napoleon Bonaparte, the "tyrant of Europe," claimed power in Spanish America, tyranny was viewed as usurpation. The theories of tyranny and the notion of consent were used to justify the establishment of independent provisional governments in order to resist the invaders. The lack of consent became fundamental to the justifications of the Revolution. The argument was initially aimed against Bonaparte, but was later turned against the Spanish provisional authorities as well, when the revolutionaries claimed the sovereignty of the pueblos. This time, the Spanish crown was portrayed as a bloodthirsty monster which had

to be quashed and eradicated from the American soil. According to Crespo, the year 1810 led to an epochal transition from Neoclassicism to Romanticism in the political vocabulary in Spanish America. A new generation of politicians abandoned the Aristotelian imagery and followed Friedrich Schiller and Lord Byron's images and conceptualizations of tyranny, which emphasized the personality of the tyrant as opposed to his extra-human status. As a consequence of this semantic shift, a new term appeared in the political vocabulary: dictatorship. When the term emerged in the Spanish American debates – Crespo dates the very first reference to the regime of the “tropical Robespierre” Francia in Paraguay in 1811 – it was clearly used as a reference to the Roman Republic. Paraguay was founded as a republic with a two-consul executive branch and some other Roman incorporations. In 1814, Francia took over the title of Supreme Dictator of the Republic, which he claimed was in the tradition of Cincinnatus and Sulla. However, unlike the Roman institution, his term in office was not restricted to six months but lasted five years and also included the right to dictate laws. Francia finally became Dictator of the Republic for life and managed to stay in power until his death in 1840, continually using external threats and necessity as justifications for his regime.

In contrast to Paraguay, within the other early Latin American constitutions of the time, dictatorship was not incorporated as a kind of emergency provision. Simon Bolivar, a dictator too on several occasions in Venezuela, was clearly aware of the dangerous potential of this office. When he accepted it, his appointment was extra-legal and he was keen to return his authority to Congress. When, however, emergency governments did emerge as a reaction to the Spanish military mobilisation, the political vocabulary shifted to that of the English republicanism of the seventeenth century, as Crespo illustrates with the case of San Martin, the self-proclaimed “protector of Peru”. San Martin was soon followed by other caudillos of his time in his preference for a Cromwellian term. Crespo argues convincingly that the preference for protector over dictator indicates the beginning of the decline of the term dictatorship with its original Roman connotations in Spanish America. It shifted from its positive and classical republican meaning to a negative one that connoted unchecked and arbitrary rule. Already in the 1820s, dictatorship replaced tyranny as the signifier of authoritarian and illegitimate political rule in Spanish America. This shift in the political vocabulary of Latin America turned out to be a long lasting one – not even the most brutal military

regimes of the 1970s were defined by their critics as tyrannical, but instead retained the title of dictatorship.

What are the reasons for this conceptual change? Crespo briefly mentions two explanations, both of which hint at a more general theory of conceptual change. Firstly, she observes an ideological shift from the traditional Spanish scholastic discourse to a modern liberal-republican discourse which took root in the social dynamics of the revolutionary process in Spanish America as a result of the defeat of Napoleon in Europe. Secondly, Crespo identifies a change in the causal linkage between the territorial form of the state and its political organisation. Following Andrew Arato's characterisation of tyranny as being attached to small city-states (or *pueblo* in Spanish America), she discovers that the concept of dictatorship was redefined in order to be applied to the modern nation-state.

It is fascinating to learn about the speed of the conceptual changes which took place in the Spanish American political vocabulary after the revolutions of 1810. And it is even more fascinating to realize both how quickly the new political vocabulary stabilised and how it still remains valid to this day. How can such disruptions in time be explained? In his article on the construction of the voter in Finland, Risto Alapuro puts particular emphasis on the question of why and how the Finnish political system was able to be suddenly transformed from a corporate system of representation into a unicameral parliament based on universal and equal suffrage for both men and women. In Europe, the scale of this tremendous change was unique. Europe's most conservative estate-based Parliament was essentially superseded over night by the most democratic system of representation in the entire Continent. And contrary to the expectations of those days, Finland's transition to a mass democracy occurred in an orderly fashion and stabilised itself.

Finland was the first European country to successfully construct the modern voter. Following Michel Offerlé, Alapuro depicts the ideal-typical qualities of the modern voter as being a result of a complicated institutional and habitual process of abstractions, in which the citizen becomes increasingly detached from communal ties and becomes able to make an individual choice independent of his or her community. The voter of modern mass democracy does not emerge spontaneously and voting for somebody whom in many cases one has never seen in person is not self-evident. Modern voting systems involve such new practices as the individual vote, the equal weight of votes, the secret ballot, respect for majority rule, and the choice of

a candidate to represent him or herself on the pure basis of a political programme. In the Finnish case, the construction of the voter was a tremendous success. Alapuro cites different sources in which the casting of the ballot was even practiced as a quasi-religious act.

Alapuro lists various factors which were crucial to Finland's radical move toward mass democracy. The main prerequisites were, among others, the Swedish traditions of strong local self-administration, the traditional corporate system at Finland's national level during the time it was part of the Russian Empire, and, last but not least, strong voluntary associations. In addition, public demands for a representative political system were less prone to political disagreement and internal conflict than in other countries, since the Finnish word 'edustaa' conveyed all layers of Pitkin's elaborated world of representation. It conveyed the sense of 'standing for', in the sense of 'acting for', as well as the connotation of authorization and the ensuing responsibility.

There are specific prerequisites for any radical and successful political change. Nevertheless, these necessary conditions alone are not sufficient for political transition. What exactly initiated the dynamic process of regime change? According to Alapuro, the crisis of 1905 can be seen as a 'moment of madness', as Ari Zolberg famously coined the political situations of enthusiasm or exaltation in which anything and everything seems possible. Viewing themselves as liberated from any constraints of time, place and history, political actors in these moments forge new political institutions and identities in an act of creation. Reference to these creative moments of madness is more than a mere reminder of Hannah Arendt's thought on the occasion of her 100th birthday. It is a reminder for anyone who wants to cope with the dynamics of conceptual changes in political vocabularies to take into account the plurality of the temporalisation of politics in the form of regular time-spans, phases of acceleration, or momentum (Kari Palonen).

These moments of madness bear a striking resemblance to Walter Benjamin's reflections on time and political moments, which are discussed in Kia Lindroos' contribution to this volume. For Benjamin, the continuation of history inherently implies catastrophe. But moments of redemption have the potential to interrupt the continuity of history. Benjamin stresses the uniqueness of the moment and repeatedly searches for the possibility to reach the right moment for thinking and for political action – the *kairos*. In the draft of his *Theses on History*, he noted that the conception of revolutionary chance is

inherently present in any given moment – Benjamin’s moment, as Lindroos calls it in the article. It is a moment of politicisation, of new solutions, of new political identities, and of new political vocabularies.

Following the post-democracy-theorists of our days literally, any actualisation of Benjamin’s hope for redemption and *kairos* would clearly be out of touch with the realities of modern political systems. Authors dealing with the post-democratic diagnosis aim at making the reader believe that they no longer regard critical descriptions of modern democracies as a prelude to promising political agendas for reform. “Post-democracy” is their way of articulating their statement that democracy’s golden age is definitely over. However, the polemical prefix ‘post’ indicates not only their democratic melancholy but can be read as a signifier for their hope for a democratic redemption, which shows similarities to Benjamin’s political hopes.

It will be interesting to see whether or not the new term “post-democracy” will ultimately be able to succeed. At first glance, it would appear as though the term has no real chance of surviving the terminological competition. ‘Democracy’ as a term has proven to be extremely flexible and there is no reason that the concept of democracy should not be able to absorb the newest political system changes as well. It is hard to imagine the semantic limits of a concept which has historically proven itself adaptable to the separation of powers, rule of law, representative system and large territorial states from the world of the polis of Greek antiquity until today. Why should the old promises of political participation not be openly be replaced by economic wealth and political stability in the near future?

This speculation brings us back to the causes for conceptual changes in political vocabularies. Political theory requires more knowledge about the reasons for both the conceptual changes and conceptual persistence of political vocabularies. This volume of *Redescriptions* indicates that historically grounded research is an indispensable source for any such general theory of conceptual change. Crespo’s two explanations of why dictatorship replaced tyranny as the signifier of a political order may serve as an example of the contribution of studies on the history of ideas to this project. As already mentioned above, Crespo presents two causes for this terminological change. The first can be seen in the ideological shift from the traditional Spanish scholastic discourse to modern liberal-republican discourse as a consequence of the revolution. Secondly, Crespo identifies a connection between the territorial forms of political units. Whereas tyranny was

attached to small city-states (or pueblo in Spanish America), the concept of dictatorship was redefined to be applied to the modern nation-state.

Both causes are of interest with regard to prospects of the contemporary use of the term 'democracy'. On the ideological level, the main challenge to the liberal-republican discourse can be found in the neo-liberal ideology of radical individuality which is undermining the cultural preconditions for political participation in mass democracies. On the territorial level, the nation-state seems to have been replaced by larger entities with multi-levelled political organisations. We must now turn our attention to answering the question: Which additional components initiate and influence the dynamics of conceptual change?

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