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The Thinning and Deformation of Ethical and Political Concepts in the Era of Globalization

Abstract: In contemporary literature, it is acknowledged as a fact that while we currently find ourselves facing the ‘Era of Globalization’, still very little work has been done to analyze this concept, which rather appears as a *deus ex machina*; as a product of the contemporary crisis, lacking political history and semantic genealogy, wanting nevertheless to become an explanatory wildcard for all present events, both in a positive and negative sense. The initial thesis of this article is that the current concept of globalization is an empty one that has been stripped of its historical content. This emptying is part of the ‘postmodern’ processes of thinning and deformation afflicting ethical-political concepts (freedom, equality, democracy) by depriving them of their ‘modern’ content without endowing any other. Taking this into account, I defend the consequent thesis that the suppression of these concepts’ semantic history implies in turn the eradication of the ethical commitment that they entailed, whose inheritance by contrast should not be renounced. I conclude that there is the need for a socio-political pedagogy that contributes to transmitting ‘responsibility for the concepts’ that are the true shapers of collective identities. Without this responsibility, our ability to adopt any other type of historical, ethical or political responsibility would be impeded. With this proposal, I want to recover in its true ‘universal’—not ‘global’—sense the Leibnizian motto ‘*Theoria cum praxi*’ taken up by the Enlightenment, in which a renewed philosophy of history acts as a bridge between history (memory) and politics (action), endowing both with ethical content.

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Introduction: Globalism, globalization, crisis and conceptual reductionism

The great debate on globalization burgeoned two decades ago with the turn of the century, unifying at least three different phenomena that in the collective imagination converged under the name of ‘global threat’: planetary ecology, free market economy and information technology. I will not delve here into the details of the debate maintained by sociologists Ulrich Beck and Niklas Luhmann (among others) on the global threats that were themed around the so-called ‘risk society’ (Beck 1986; Luhmann 2003). Yet I do want to reiterate a distinction that Beck made between three different concepts that has become somewhat blurred: ‘globality’ (we live in a world in which no country or group can live on the fringes of global society); ‘globalism’ (a conception defending that the world market dislodges or replaces political action); and ‘globalization’ (the processes by virtue of which the sovereign nation states intermingle and interweave through transnational actors). In my opinion: (i) this distinction has become increasingly blurred to the extent that the intuition that different economic, political and cultural forms do not cease to interweave has overlapped with the ideology of world market domination (liberalism and neoliberalism), crystallizing in the idea of an inevitable and impersonal process that will affect the whole planet whether we want it to or not—a process called ‘globalization’; and (ii) in sociological approaches, we have forgotten a perspective that years before the philosophers of ethics Hans Jonas (1979) and Agnes Heller (1988) had shown, aiming to emphasize the indissoluble relationship of individual and collective actions with the degree of responsibility of the actors of these actions, as I have highlighted previously (Roldán 1999). For this reason, we face a globalization that, on the one hand, inherits the deterministic and dehumanized characteristics of the oft-criticized classic idea of ‘progress’—with a component of greater threat by the ‘historical acceleration’ that it introduces (Koselleck 2000)—and that, on the other hand, by adopting such a polysemic character (economic, ecological, political, cultural, etc.), evolves to become an empty concept.

Less than a decade ago, the economic crisis of 2008 further polarized the so-called ‘debate on globalization’—both towards a negative sense of the concept globalization, and towards its identification with its economic content. It seemed, in this way, that there was only one crisis—an economic crisis—and that it was the only and inevitable result of the process of globalization. I have been working (together with some of the colleagues that publish in this collective book) on the analysis of this simplification as the main leader of the project ‘The Philosophical-Moral Prisms of Crises: Towards a New Socio-Political

Pedagogy', and can verify both that we are facing a plurality of crises, and that this phenomenon is not as novel as commonly believed, but rather recurrent throughout history. To take a concrete example of the latter, Leibniz mentions in his writings 'a crisis that ravages Europe', while Koselleck devotes in Heidelberg his doctoral thesis to the subject: *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (1954), referring respectively to a moral and a political crisis. The stereotype of economic crisis has become a pretext that has allowed the creation of apocalyptic political designs with a specific ideological bias undermining the importance of the welfare state. Using the metaphor of a 'prism', our aim was to examine the concept of crisis from several perspectives—philosophical, sociological, historical, juridical, political and ethical—in order to approach the complexity of this phenomena. Therefore, our team brought together sociologists, conceptual historians, philologists, historians and political scientists, from different cultural traditions. The analysis of the above-mentioned issue required a correct diagnosis facilitated by the etymology itself. After all, in addition to 'separation' and 'dispute', 'crisis' also means 'process' and 'justice' in Greek; from 'divide' (*krínein*) comes *kritikós*—the one that discerns or judges—and from there derives the critique or the aptitude to judge.

The etymological background of the concept of 'crisis' has further channeled my latest research towards the objective of tracking both its continuities and ruptures in the history of our concepts. The historical inflections that thinkers like Thomas Kuhn call 'paradigm shifts' are in fact warning us of a semantic renewal concerning certain concepts that compel them to abandon some referents in favor of adopting others. This process always takes place gradually, but we nonetheless become aware of it at a certain moment, in the same way, for instance, that happens with aging: though growing old is a gradual process, there is a moment at which we 'suddenly' notice it, after seeing our image in the mirror. The medical meaning that the concept of 'crisis' also has in Spanish and English (we can say: 'the disease has become critical') seems to me a very adequate complement to explain this phenomenon. In every disease we witness a 'critical' moment that enables the healing of the same if the diagnosis has been successful. Re-directing this metaphor to the issue at hand: we witness a time in which concepts are becoming 'empty' of their previous content, to begin being filled with others (hence the title of this article). As I see it, the ethical-political concepts we use, including the one of globalization, are undergoing a critical period in which, as in a disease, they are losing weight and deforming, so far without finding an articulation that will lead them to be filled with univocal meaning, granting that this would ever be possible. It is precisely in this sense that in recent decades we have witnessed an inflation of 'turns' in philosophical inquiry: the 'linguistic turn', 'contextual turn', 'iconic turn', etc. All this twisting, coupled

with the historical acceleration that we are experiencing, has placed us in a situation of ‘vertigo’ (Böhme 2008), thanks to which we no longer know where we are going.

In moments of loss of balance, it helps to step on firm ground and to hold on to a structure sufficiently anchored such that it does not fall with us. In the definition of the current moment, thinking about ‘perspectives’ (as Leibniz and Ortega y Gasset already advocated) instead of ‘turns’ helps us to find our way to a new conceptual articulation of reality. Different perspectives of the same reality become implemented from an interdisciplinary perspective, involving us in the complexity of the real, which can only be accessed through scientific cooperation, by virtue of the complementarity provided by collective effort. Besides being complex, the concepts are not neutral; rather they transmit certain ethical-political values—something always attempted by established powers (be they political, religious and/or cultural), and which different communities or citizenships try to resist.

In what follows, I will try to show these two movements in two small sections. I will refer to the restorative process of ethical-political concepts within the framework of a new philosophy of history, from an ethical and semantic perspective respectively. I will conclude by pointing to some of the tasks that now lie before the new philosopher of history, in the so-called ‘Era of Globalization’ and on the road to becoming responsible for concepts.

The ‘ethical perspective’ in the face of ‘historical-political prescription’: valuing from history

In his work on the *Begriffsgeschichte* (history of concepts), Reinhart Koselleck evidenced that historical experiences had been leaving their mark on language—one that the historian can trace and try to interpret. However, not insignificantly, the possibility of living such experiences presupposed in turn that the actors of history necessarily had to have certain notions and categories around which they organized their lived experiences, since social reality is linguistically constituted and only what has been previously conceptualized is visible and intelligible to the actors. It is precisely this dialectic between notions and experiences that conceptual history strives to bring to light around its two well-known expressions: ‘space of experiences’ and ‘horizon of expectations’ (Koselleck 1988).

Seen in this way, everything seems to have gone by calmly and smoothly. But actually, far from being objective, exhaustive and common accounts of a society

or people, histories are the subjective, incomplete and partial or biased accounts presented by the established powers with hegemonic pretensions. It becomes not only a ‘conceptual description’ of the past, but also a ‘valuation prescription’ for how the society in question should continue to be. Thus, the ‘collective memory with claims of universality’ attempts to build by the force of semantics a ‘collective identity’ that ultimately is ‘fictitious’. And in each coming back that each individual or group makes to that history—as if it were a trip to Narnia—it can be verified that this alleged universal history was neither so universal nor so all-encompassing, but rather local and biased: the history of the aristocratic, liberal and patriarchal groups (Roldán 2013a) of the most powerful and dominant emerging western cities.

Reinhart Koselleck contemplated in his works what he calls ‘*Sattelzeit*’ (‘saddle period’)—the period from the end of the eighteenth to the beginning of the nineteenth century,¹ in which the same concept of ‘society’ was being forged, and the idea of ‘nation’ was gaining great strength against the more neutral idea of ‘state’ developed in the first modernity. ‘Nationalism’ gained great relevance at this time in Europe, North America and Latin America, becoming the new subject of political life against more federalist and pro-European streams of thought that were reclaiming the ideas of Saint-Pierre, Leibniz, Rousseau and even more cosmopolitan approaches like the Kantian one, to which the reflections of contemporary authors have been returning in an effort to emphasize solidarity among all the peoples of the earth (Habermas 1998, p. 79). Aside from some divergences in focus (on which I will not dwell now), regarding the German perspective of Reinhart Koselleck, authors such as Quentin Skinner (who gives an Anglo-Saxon interpretation), Giuseppe Duso (Italian interpretation), Jacques Guilhaumou (French interpretation) and Javier Fernández Sebastián (Spanish and Ibero-American interpretation, especially for the IBERCONCEPTOS project of 2004) have been unanimous in stressing that political and semantic processes are interwoven in this era to such an extent that when authors speak of history, nation or society, they are referring to the same thing from different perspectives.

Most human groups—comprising both the ‘actors’ of history, and its ‘interpreters’ (historians)—possess and cultivate some kind of relationship with the past, especially with what they imagine is their genealogy, *their own* collective past, as Álvarez Junco (2013) has shown. In this way, history has normally been erected as the discipline that collects and thematizes these collective pasts—although often we forget that the hegemonic powers write and present the typical and the most spread histories, tending to unify them as the stories

1 For my criticism of this periodization, see: Roldán 2013b.

of just one of the many human groups that conform collectivities and to silence the ‘real multiplicity’ of different groups’ voices. These told histories thus constitute what we call a ‘narrow mindset’ that originates from the ‘hegemonic group’ or ‘victor’, forgetting the voices of the ‘defeated’—as Reyes Mate points out (Mate 1991; 2011)—of the marginalized and of the invisibilized, as has been the case of women in all the histories of knowledge (Roldán 2013a), earning mention in political histories only by merit of their social status.

In short: on the one hand, from a false historical unity (Belvedresi 2012), the plurality of collective imaginaries was usurped; on the other hand, a number of dominant political concepts, inheritors of a modern tradition, were imposed as hegemonic, when they were actually an expression of *de facto* powers of the origins of modernity—what I have called in my work the ‘triumphant line of the Enlightenment’ (Roldán 2005; 2012). These concepts were not neutral, but rather transmitters of particular ethical-political values. For centuries, protagonism was entrusted to some concepts of the Enlightenment that nurtured a way of interpreting the meaning of history in a finalistic and deterministic way, leading to a craving for explaining historical events that we call the ‘universal history’ through an all-encompassing, scientific discourse, rendering these concepts predominant: *rationality*, *teleology*, *continuity* and *perfection* (*progress*). At the same time, other elements present in the works of authors of the Enlightenment were relegated. They did not triumph and were hidden for almost two centuries in the ‘blind spot’ (that part that cannot be seen in the rear-view mirror when we are driving) of history—blind spots to which Israel (2010) also refers, but which now, however, begin to break through and lay the foundations for a new philosophy of history doubly concerned with ethics: the one that I want to defend and uphold here.

In other words, alongside these concepts that we may categorized as ‘rigid’, there appears in the origin of modernity another group of ‘flexible’ concepts (Roldán / Navarro 2007) that are instrumental in introducing diversity, gradualism and pragmatism (Ausín 2006) into our reflections. These concepts are none other than those of contingency, freedom (autonomy), equality and tolerance (Roldán 1997)—all of them placed under the umbrella of the broader principle of ‘plurality’, which Leibniz describes from an ontological-gnoseological point of view as ‘perspectivism’ in his *Monadology*, recaptured by Ortega y Gasset as ‘historical perspectivism’.

I aim to show that a philosophy of history with a new conception is possible (Roldán 2005, 2006; Rohbeck 2007, 2014). Ankersmit (1986) coined the expression ‘new philosophy of history’, referring to a new movement that, on the one hand, radically questions the epistemological presuppositions of traditional historiography (especially its ideal of reaching a true account about the past and

its consideration of history as a science) and, on the other hand, proposes new forms of historical writing as an alternative to the traditional ones. From my point of view, this new philosophy of history, in its complexity, plurality, modulation and detail, is not something alien to the enlightened spirit, with its emancipatory breath (Muñoz 2002)—both in its ethical commitment and in its pure narrativity of the contingent. Perhaps these are the genuine roots of an Enlightenment, hidden by the rationalistic and scientific excesses of the triumphant enlightened line, but that nevertheless continue to nourish the new offshoots of historical reflection in our postmodernity with even more radicality (Bloom 2010). It is my contention that it is an urgent task to rehabilitate politics and produce new collective actors, in accordance with concepts such as isogoria and isonomy, including the necessary gender perspectives. The claim for a critical spirit fleshed out with values of the Enlightenment can help us to counterbalance the hegemonic way of thinking, which is riddled with prejudices that prevent independent thinking. Reprioritizing the Enlightenment ideal of republican cosmopolitanism would serve to redirect the dangerous drifts of globalization.

At this point, let me briefly recapitulate: we have considered concepts that represent, so to speak, the ‘negative inheritance’ of the Enlightenment, and a problematic conception of the philosophy of history that focuses on the idea of progress: rationality, teleology, continuity and perfection. These are concepts that, on the other hand, have been weakening and losing their semantic strength to the point of being nothing more than empty terms that, nevertheless, are useful in the description of phenomena, processes and, ultimately, concepts such as globalization. Also, what happened to the other concepts that did not play a leading role at the time, but which we are currently recovering for philosophy of history—the ‘positive inheritance’—such as contingency, freedom, equality or tolerance? Are these concepts not also becoming weaker?

The semantic perspective: sense and objectivity in the narrative margins; towards a new hermeneutical rationality

In addition to the question of the semantic weakening of the concepts that I want to recover for the new philosophy of history, I believe that we can not leave aside in these considerations the other great horse of history: namely, the historical veracity and objectivity that other contemporary theorists qualify (downgrading in this way their pretensions) as ‘*reliable* information about the past’ (White 1999),

leading reflection on the meaning of history into the margins of narrativity. Let's briefly review the development of the problem.

The notion of 'narration' has been introduced into philosophy of history hand in hand with analytic philosophy, filling the central role that 'explanation' had previously played. That is, the narrative structure emerges as an alternative to causal explanation—as an alternative to a scientific historiography. Thus, the philosopher of history seems to have stopped considering conclusively whether history makes sense or, on the contrary, lacks it. That sense, as well as objectivity and historical truth, must be sought in the statements that historians make in their accounts. Is the philosopher of history, once dismissed from her trades as prophet and meteorologist, perhaps being relegated to the role of literary critic? The historian has become only a narrator (for without a narrator there can be no history), losing her role as ἱστωρ (*hístōr*), i.e. as witness of a factual history. Reflections on history exhibit, in turn, a similar narrative structure. Then, the difference between a history—and I say 'a history' because there will be as many histories as narrations of an event will be written—and a philosophy of history cannot be that the latter provides relationships based on detailed findings on facts, while the former does not. If there is any mission of the philosopher of history that is different from that of the historian, this will consist in problematizing the interpretation that the historian suggests of her own account, criticizing her approaches, her references, her omissions—of all things that are reflections of her intentions. In a word, the philosopher of history acquires the status of a 'metanarrator' and her work will be presented as a metanarration.

Historical narration organizes and, at the same time, by applying its selection criteria, interprets. It is not a mere vehicle for the transmission of information, but is instead a procedure for the production of meaning and, therefore, has an explanatory function. As Fina Birulés has pointed out, although Danto's work attributes an explanatory function to narration, we should not forget that history can only be known *from within*; we are subjects historically located at a later time than the events recounted (Birulés 1989, pp. 26–27). Thus, the histories we tell say as much about our past as they do about our present interests; to a certain extent, we are a microcosm of the stories we are able to tell. This is what prompts Habermas to state that Danto brings analytic philosophy to the very threshold of hermeneutics. The historian does not speak from outside; history is not an impersonal reflection. So Danto's work moves away from Hempel's covering law model and gives rise to a possible dialogue between the hermeneutic and analytical traditions, allowing the problematizing of the links between historical understanding and philosophy of action.

The new narrative structure stressing the importance of the present emerges as an alternative to a scientific historiography, though it is condemned to leave

the concepts of truth and objectivity in the very margins of the different narratives. From these margins (this limit), there is the impulse to control different narrators' subjective and particular experiences, narrowing down the sense of their necessarily fragmentary perspectives (Roldán 2005, pp. 175–180).

It is not a question of renouncing the truthfulness and sense in historical narrative—although this unfortunately seems to be the (increasingly widespread) practice in the speeches of our politicians. Should the new philosopher of history renounce the role of 'metanarrator' or 'metahistorian'; of guardian of the veracity of the narrated sense and of historical interpretations of the past (Roldán 2005, p. 176); and of tracing the limits between the literary imagination and historical veracity? It cannot be otherwise if philosophy acquires its 'ethical commitment', which is how it seems to me that we have to interpret Agnes Heller's words in *A Theory of History*—i. e., in favor of giving sense to history and looking for the sense in history:

[D]espite severe criticism of the false consciousness of the philosophy of history, despite all scepticism in regard to its achievement, despite awareness of the dangers inherent in this undertaking, both theoretical and practical [...] one has to repeat with Herder: '*Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*' (a philosophy of history, too, is needed for the education of mankind). (Heller 1982, p. 190)

(Provisional) conclusion: responsibility for concepts of philosophy of history in the 'Era of Globalization'

In concluding these pages, we find that the problem that reappears in the so-called 'Era of Globalization' is not very different from the gap between language and reality opened by the work of Kant at a time when concepts described not only universal abstractions, but also states of things. Koselleck's proposals (like Rawls's in the area of justice) do not depart much from the Kantian orbit. The promoter of conceptual history develops Gadamer's idea of the centrality of language in the articulation of historical experience, but moves away from the Gadamerian influence by highlighting the irreducibility of the second (historical experience) to the first (language). Social factors—the extralinguistic plot—exceed language insofar as the implementation of an action always exceeds its mere enunciation or symbolic representation. Still, an action that is not narrated—orally or in writing—is condemned to ostracism and invisibility: it is *as if* it had

not happened. To narrate is to conceptualize and to conceptualize is, in turn, to structure, interpret and value the contingent.

Everything in the universe is contingent, but history is contingent *par excellence*, insofar as it immediately depends on human action. To narrate an event that is itself contingent means to try to transmit the plurality of the points of view expressed in it, for which a ‘hermeneutical rationality’ is needed that focuses on the grasping of the *part of truth* present in each perspective of reality. The plurality of perspectives will be the best safeguard for an approach to truth, free from prejudice and dogma, which prioritizes none of them. In this approach, however, a commitment will need to be found for avoiding falling into relativism: a commitment that is nothing more than the individual or social group’s ethical responsibility when acting; the political responsibility of every citizen aware of the history of his/her own political concepts (Gómez Ramos 2007), but still willing to review its use and meaning to overcome the inherent fragility of human actions (in the most Arendtian tradition); in short, if we take up the original meaning of politics (understood as ‘conceptual elaboration of experiences’), it is all about taking on responsibility for concepts, since reflection on history calls us to return to ethics—to action. The philosopher of history can no longer devote herself to making terrifying or hopeful predictions of the future, though nor must she renounce making any estimative assessments about it; she cannot announce what it will be, but she can propose *how it should be*—or in any case, *how it should never be* (Roldán 2005, p. 16).

The new philosophy of history has a complex task ahead. It is concerned with, on the one hand, the problems suggested by its historical present, and on the other, directing itself to questioning the received philosophical tradition, knowing that its interpretation is only one more *perspective* that provides an incomplete truth (from its subjectivity and present) in the framework of a *dynamic* history of philosophy. Just as the future cannot be predicted, nor is the past something fixed, closed, finished—a view for which Danto reproached Peirce: “We are always revising our beliefs about the past, and to suppose them ‘fixed’ would be unfaithful to the spirit of historical inquiry” (Danto 1985, p. 145). We are always reviewing our research on the past, which is only intelligible to us in the light of the present and with our eyes on the horizon, since without a future project our concept of humanity would vanish. Therefore, reflection on history does not pursue specialization in a philosophical discourse, but rather advocates *interdisciplinarity*—an interdisciplinarity in which ethics, politics, literature and sociology are perhaps the starring protagonists. It is all about an evolving thinking that is ever more interested in defending a ‘living history’ (with a critical perspective from both an omnivorous past, pluperfect, and a

rickety future) than in elucidating how many degrees far to the starboard side of postmodernity it is.

Ars inveniendi thrives only from *complexity*, just as the crossroads are the best places at which to exchange experiences or knowledge, to enrich ourselves. Human history is, like human life, a ‘complex adaptive system’ that develops by trial and error. But we mustn’t forget that the idea of a ‘continuous increasing complexity’ is a myth (Rivera 2000, p. 29) that demonstrates that the idea of history as progress is false, just as one can not presuppose a ‘natural’ or ‘cultural’ selection that always favors optimal solutions or the best possible ones. History is a collective event, but is also none other than the desires and beliefs that shaped those human actions. In fact, we could affirm that history is a ‘collective by-product’, the result of ‘multiple multi-personal games’, sometimes the collateral effect of what we are doing guided by other ends (Rivera 2000, p. 47).

This new philosophy of history requires, ultimately, a *new rationality*: flexible, gradual and ‘hermeneutically imperfect’. It would be a concept of rationality in the line of that defended by Stephen Toulmin (2003) as situated rationality, which would move away from ‘arrogance of reason’ in an inversely proportional relationship to its approximation to a concept of ‘perspectivism’ à la Leibniz: what Marcelo Dascal (2001) has termed a *blandior ratio*. It would be a rationality that is no longer based on absolute truths, but rather on the graduality of them; i.e., ordered in different steps, ‘modulated’, so that ‘true’ and ‘false’ lose their static and abstract character, but without falling into relativism; in which the values of truth are not only housed in the propositions themselves, but in their ‘intervals’ (as fuzzy calculus defends) or in its ‘intermediate steps’, supported by the relational character of truth, as the ontological and moral point of view of Dewey’s pragmatism holds. It would be a rationality for whose definition we could also borrow from the field of legal logic the concepts of ‘weighting’ and ‘presumption’ (Ausín 2006). It would be an argumentative rationality, in short, that is the recovery of a certain ‘heterodox’ enlightened tradition that we can find in the ‘nuanced’ rationalism of Leibniz, in Marie de Gournay’s discourse on equality; in the one on sympathy by Sophie de Grouchy (excluded from the usual histories of philosophy, as is Marquise de Châtelet’s *Lessons in Physics*), or in Lessing’s concept of tolerance.

A new philosophy of history would not pretend, therefore, to dispute Clio’s favors to history, nor to emulate Cassandra in her prophetic gifts, but more modestly to remind us that we are all moral subjects of a history that, whether we want to recognize it or not, concerns all of us—as Javier Muguerza notes (Roldán 2005, pp. 6–7); a history that does not do or say anything by itself, but always through human beings, who are its actors, narrators and interpreters. No history will ‘tell’ or ‘give us reason’ as the misnamed popular wisdom affirms, regardless

of what we all do (or do not do) and say (or do not say). It is time to abandon the exaggerated victimhood, the perverse age of innocence in which we have fallen asleep, and try to grasp the reins of our destiny—because when the facts go beyond language, the intellectual can not ignore her task: she has to take responsibility for the concepts. We cannot and should not wait with arms crossed hoping that history, like a gracious sea, will return to us the remains of our shipwreck.

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