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The National Academic Unconscious in Question

History of Concepts, Historical Semantics, Critical Sociology of Lexical Usage within the Social Sciences

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A few years ago, together with Franz Schultheis, of the University of Saint-Gallen and coordinator of the social sciences network ESSE, we chose to study the international circulation of the categories and concepts that are in use in European social sciences. With the publication of the Dictionnaire des concepts nomades *('Dictionary of nomadic concepts'), that includes only a small number of quite lengthy entries, what we tried to propose were not ready-made solutions, or vademecums for the comparative academic, but a series of questions, or rather the means to ask crucial questions for anyone who practises history, political science, history of economic ideas, or comparative sociology. We did so with two considerations in mind: one political, and the other academic, both of which I will evoke in turn in this paper.*

1. The political and academic stakes of a collective project

For about at least a decade now, partly as a result of bibliometrics that was massively introduced in the recruitment and review of academics, research strands, and universities, the great European higher education institutions and research centres, notably in French-speaking countries, have adopted in increasing numbers incitation mechanisms for translation into English notably in the practice of History and the social sciences.

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These mechanisms take a great variety of forms from one academic institution to another or from one country to another: Switzerland finding itself in a completely different linguistic situation altogether than France, for instance. There, a series of heterogeneous measures of incitement can be found:

- Regulatory obligations: when universities ask their doctoral students, for instance, to provide for each thesis a summary of a few hundred or thousand words, or to establish a list of keywords for the work in English, often quite misleading for the reader who discovers therein nothing but over-the-leg translations (to which I will return);

- Editorial positions from certain academic journals that seek to improve their own ranking, and the public financial incentives that go with it, by asking that each article submitted be accompanied by a summary in English;

- Incitement measures like those found in Swiss universities that deliver courses in English academic writing and offer specific sources of funding to translate some of the texts that are published by their academic staff in English-language journals or collected volumes;

- Deliberate policies in all but name that have a considerable impact nonetheless, whether they are enabling or marketing strategies for research programs in big universities—that do not want to use anything but an English that has now become the language of the programs of excellence—or the concrete selection of the big research projects financed by the Framework Programme of the European Commission that are not de facto designed for the native English speakers but more favourable to the construction of objects and problems that are specifically those of English-speaking universities. So, for instance, during the opening to the humanities of the invitation to tender for the European FPRD (Framework Programme for Research and Development), for the first time, the program that came ahead of the lengthy selection procedure was a network piloted from Italy—Cliohres—that was chosen for its very open architecture. Its aim was to elaborate a European history of Europe, following the speech from the former (once removed) French president of the republic on the 'common

European home', and not merely a collection of national histories put side by side or a history of the idea of Europe as it had been the case for a long time. In its own words, "it aims at achieving and disseminating greater understanding of both the actual histories and the self-representations of the past current in Europe today, highlighting both diversities and connections and explaining the context of their development"[1]. Taking this point into account, the international board had placed this project ahead because it assembled in a totally equitable manner, on paper, 180 academics from 31 different partner countries: each country contributed to the network only a strictly equivalent number of academics and doctoral students: two academics and two doctoral students for Germany, but also two and two for Malta and Cyprus, Iceland or Lithuania. In order that all these researchers could understand each other, the network management committee dedicated an important part of the budget, measured in the millions of Euros (above four), to the automatic translation of articles and collections into what in the end would be the only working language of choice: English[2] .
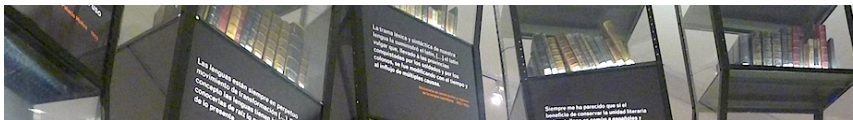

My intention here is not to debate the merits and impact that bibliometrics or the competition between institutions, teams or academics for funding or the practice of research exercises has had. These are now very familiar to us[3]: the breathlessness of research projects seeking to benefit from the windfall effects of short term funding patterns; the usurpation by peer-review committees of academic journals, often based on reciprocal friendships or the recommendation of mandarins, or recruiting bodies, of responsibilities that are by right those

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[1] See http://www.cliohres.net/.

[2] The web site (consulted on June 15, 2013) mentions 16 doctoral dissertations that can be downloaded: only four of them are not in English.

[3] Laurent Ségalat, *La science à bout de souffle?* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 2009).

of the academic community as a whole; the access to academic journal denied to the youngest or more atypical researchers and so on. Rather it is my intention to denounce the contradictions that the tipping of the scales in favour of English for part of the academic outputs encourages, for the practice of history and the social sciences in general and for a European history in particular. To go back to the telling example, in my view, of this European network and its choice to publish exclusively (or almost so) in English, on paper or in downloadable PDF format, one can only be amazed at how in the end it amounts, with the best intentions and sometimes at the hand of academics seasoned in comparative semantics, to considering that the European languages, or those that are spoken in Europe, are not an appropriate fulcrum for understanding the history of Europe, but constitute in fact an obstacle that needs to be overcome without delay thanks to a *lingua franca* (international academic English) that belongs to everyone and no-one. Never mind then how the very societies concerned defined themselves; how the social groups named or described themselves or fought each other within the different national contexts; or how ideologies tightly bound to particular uses of language and very precise lexica developed: all of which can be subsumed or overcome by a proper use of translation. We can regret, moreover, that no thought was given to the lexical uses or the construction of a common dictionary as one of the aims of this project that would account for its (English) translation strategy.
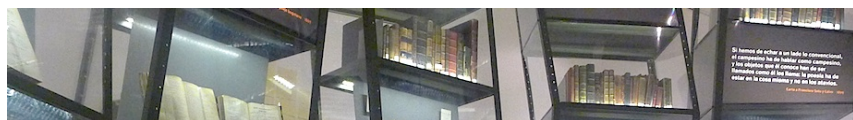
2. An example: the "Lexicographia-neologica Gallica" (1801) by William Dupré

Let me illustrate my point with an example taken from the volume of the

Dictionnaire des concepts nomades that has already been published[1], that got straight to the point and shown what makes it at once comparable but also distinct from previous enterprises such as those of Koselleck and Conze, Raymond Williams or Barbara Cassin[2].

In 1801 was published in London a work of a particular genre by William Dupré, at once a crossing between a bilingual French-English dictionary, a political treatise and a journal destined to the curious. Its title? *Lexicographia-neologica Gallica*, containing words of new creation not to be found in any French and English vocabulary hitherto published, including those added to the language by the French Revolution, the whole forming a remembrance of the French Revolution. Just as others before him, like Pierre-Nicolas Chantreau who had published as early as 1790 a *Dictionnaire nationale et anecdotique*[3] destined to show how the transition from the corrupt and moribund Old Régime to a new type of political system had modified language and invented new words and upended the meaning of some existing words such as 'citizen' or 'aristocrat', William Dupré therefore considered the Revolution to be an event that was indissolubly historical and linguistic. It was, in his estimation, just as events unfolded, a moment where language and the uses of language transformed themselves in order to continue to appropriately describe the world and what goes on within it, so as to remain a privileged instrument of political action and adapt themselves to the new conditions that validated statements: "this Revolution, a phenomenon in politics not to be paralleled in the history of

[1] *Dictionnaire des concepts nomades en sciences humaines* (Paris: Métailié, 2010). For more information, see http://www.olivierchristin.com/concepts-nomades/ with the downloadable introduction of the *Dictionnaire.*

[2] Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck, eds., *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland* (Stuttgart: Ernst Klett Verlag, 1972-1997); Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, Fontana Communications Series (London: Collins, 1976; New York: Oxford University Press, 1984²); Barbara Cassin, ed., *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies. Dictionnaire des intraduisibles* (Paris: Seuil-Le Robert, 2004).

[3] Pierre-Nicolas Chantreau, *Dictionnaire national et anecdotique, pour servir à l'intelligence des mots dont notre langue s'est enrichie depuis la révolution, et à la nouvelle signification qu'ont reçue quelques anciens mots* (Politicopolis: Au marchands de nouveautés [sic], [1790]); *Dictionnaire national et anecdotique*, ed. Agnès Steuckardt (Limoges: Lambert, 2008). On it, see Jacques Guilhaumou, *Discours et événement. L'histoire langagière des concepts* (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2006).

mankind, has in its progress wrought a change in the language of the country"[1]. The linguistic break-up was so tied up with the singular course of 18th-century French politics that it justified the publication of a new English-French dictionary exclusively devoted to this new language, to the institutions and specific actors that it designated: to write this dictionary, to describe the linguistic revolution in the very language of the Revolution, therefore, is nothing short for Dupré than writing for the curious, the newspaper readers and travellers, the history of the Revolution itself.

Dupré's example would be anecdotal if it did not raise questions in the end and presented challenges that are still ours and are at the heart of the *Nomadic Concepts* project: first, the commitment for the historical and social sciences to take into account the historicity of language or, to be precise, of languages that evolve, change, and are transmitted and change precisely as they are transmitted through the agency of those who speak and speak themselves, write, and say, with more or less authority to do so, what it is to write and speak properly. And with it the commitment to consider as an historical object, or through the sociology of knowledge, the historical forms of the fetishism of correctness, of the recurrent re-invention of an idealized state of a language that any new usage would corrupt, the conventional deploring of innovations, neologisms, imports from foreign languages that can be found in all times, with the same arguments and the same accents, like when the French grammarians of the Renaissance would curse the Italianisms at court and amongst courtiers. Spelling competitions in vogue in 1980s France (with a long dictation exercise that was read out by a famous anchorman that took place within the halls of the Sorbonne), policies of systematic gallicization of new terms from English in the name of the preservation of an idealized national idiom (often through Canadian translations), the prestige that is still associated today with editorial and national enterprises such as the *Larousse* dictionary, or the *Petit Robert*, each new editions of which are announced every year at the 8 o'clock evening news, as if it was an important event that testified of the perpetuation of these illusions, in which the refusal of history takes a formative role.

In a short interview that was published in 2007, Quentin Skinner reminded us that concepts have merely a history and not a perennial definition, an eternal

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[1] Chantreau, *Dictionnaire national et anecdotique*, p. XI.

content, a fixed perimeter: they are history itself, in fact, and more precisely the history of the struggle to say what to speak means, what words mean and who can use them; they are geological sediments of history and almost archaeological layers that can reveal its states: "As Nietzsche says in a wonderful phrase, the concepts we have inherited—and the interpretations we place upon those concepts—are just frozen conflicts, the outcomes of ideological debate. We just get the views of the winners, so that historians always have to engage in an act of retrieval, trying to recover wider and missing structures of debate"[1]. This was the first aim of the *Dictionnaire des concepts nomades*, not so remote in the end from the aims that were those of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*: to retrieve, behind the history of certain concepts chosen not systematically but for the representativeness of the enquiry they permitted, precise historical conflicts and to write their social history, and to try and bring to light who had been their protagonists and what were the stakes that were at play historically. In the case of the concept of *laïcité* that was picked for the *Dictionnaire des concepts nomades*, for instance, traditional historiography tends to universalize it and to recognize it everywhere, even in the absence of such a term or politics that would make it its slogan or their watchword, or to naturalize it and to consider it native to a specific country. The comparison between two countries where historically the concept was forged and forged in turn political and sociological choices—France at the end of the nineteenth and Turkey at the turn of the twentieth century, until the beginning of the Kemalist revolution—permitted to avoid that double pitfall and to highlight the political, sociological, linguistic, historical conditions at play in the emergence of this term and what its agents were.

It was indeed to follow in William Dupré's footsteps in 1801, to "catch words as they rise (…) into use"[2], but with the intention not to catch the first occurrence of a term, to describe its first received meanings from a corpus more or less wide, but rather to understand what 'into use' means in giving the expression all its berth, and not just its linguistic context.

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[1] Emmanuelle Tricoire, Jacques Lévy, "Quentin Skinner: 'Concepts only have histories'", *EspacesTemps.net*, Laboratory, 23.11.2007 (http://www.espacestemps.net/en/articles/quentin-skinner-ldquoconcepts-only-have-historiesrdquo-en/)
[2] Chantreau, *Dictionnaire national et anecdotique*, p. X.

There is the another idea, in Dupré's *Lexicographia-neologica Gallica*, decisive of course for an academic who is today steeped in a research environment that is strongly internationalized and this time takes us away from the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* that had given itself the ambition of thinking the historical critique of the lexicon of history together with a reflexion on the birth of the modern world in the Germanic sphere. For William Dupré, indeed, the question of the historicity of language and its participation in the transformation of the social world raised immediate problems of translation: how to convey to strangers what was taking place in revolutionary France and expressed itself in this new language? How to explain ideas, political realities, and social organizations in another language, to those who do not know them? Dupré had therefore to justify his rapid and imposing enterprise of translation of neologisms and semantic inflexions of the French Revolution thanks to two arguments. First, by the fact that French was the dominant international language, an idiom that was as familiar to the English as English itself, and that it was therefore not possible to ignore the rapid changes that affected it, if only from the point of view of literary curiosity or entertainment. Secondly, by the fact, even more importantly, that without this new dictionary the public whom he was addressing, that of newspaper readers, ran the risk of not understanding anything at all about what was going on in France because 'until now we have relied mainly on English neologisms, barely comprehensible for the great majority of English readers'.

It is therefore on practice (the international circulation of the French language, the habit of forging neologisms to translate neologisms or terms that were poorly understood by the translator) and more to the point the usage (the translation of news, reading of newspapers) that Dupré founded and legitimated his own translation enterprise, in pointing out from the outset the particular difficulties that were raised by the some word registers, locutions, expressions that could not accommodate ordinary or commonly received translations, either because they were radically new, or because they did not circulate anywhere else than in the specific and absolutely singular context of revolutionary France: designation of social groups (*aristocratie*, *Tiers*, *Affameurs*), key notions of the new political lexicon (*Terreur*, *Egalité*), or revolutionary institutions (*Assignat*, *Assemblées*, *Comités...*).

The end result is baffling. Certain entries provide the opportunity to briefly describe institutions, social groups, patriotic songs or clubs. Others, however,

stick at first sight to strictly lexicological considerations and attempt to provide very basic explanations (even accompanied sometimes with quotes in French) of the chosen terms and expressions. But even in the latter case, what strikes the reader is Dupré's embarrassment, his inability to clearly choose a format and a principle of equivalency: sayings, chorus lines, songs, proper nouns used as a political designation (*Brissotins*) are found alongside isolated terms. Mainly, entries oscillate between literal translations (aristocracy, equality, immigration), and periphrases without translations (for *Affameurs* for instance) and uses of French terms without English equivalents.

Everything takes place then as if awareness of the singularity, that the political and the linguistic event that the Revolution constituted, led Dupré to a form of double bind: it is improper to use neologisms but translation is not satisfactory. Notwithstanding we have to admit that this confusion is still found in the social sciences or in history today, and that the works of historical semantics or discourse analysis do not always dispel them decisively. It is this admission that is at the origin of a series of workshops and conferences that provided the raw material for the *Dictionnaire des concepts nomades* and with it the desire not to provide a European dictionary of concepts in the social sciences, or to contribute to a normalization of usage by giving systematic translations, like those provided for example by the trilingual *Dictionnaire Historique de la Suisse*, but to understand what the historical conditions of circulation and, more to the point, non-circulation of terms and concepts had been. And through this to try to understand the conceptual or lexicological legacy that we carry around with us more or less consciously and that makes us choose one object of inquiry, one perspective, or a method as legitimate by opposition to another. For instance, why does a French researcher in religious history will spontaneously hear 'confession' in the sense of the sacrament of confession rather than a written doctrinal corpus that delineated the faith of a Church, in the way that a German colleague would for instance? Or, to take another example, why will another French-speaking and more specifically French researcher tend to associate the (geographical) idea of province to that of provincialism—in other words a social, artistic, or political connotation synonymous with what is second-rate, relatively mediocre or archaic—forgetting perhaps that this association is only meaningful for him but not for a German, a Swiss, an Italian or for someone from the 17th century?
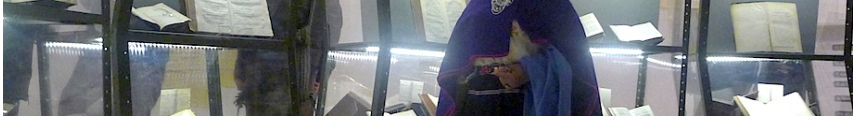
3. Academic unconscious in print: the "Greenwood Dictionary of World History"

Comparative, cross-cultural, or connected practices of history, in spite of what distinguishes them from each other, have evolved for a generation now on the basis of the faith in the heuristic and critical virtues of confrontation, translation and the elaboration of equivalencies—for instance when Daniel Roche, the French specialist of the Enlightenment, translated the German *Bildungs-bürgertum* as *bourgeoisie de talents*. In order to free ourselves from what Pierre Bourdieu called, in an article published in 2000, the 'academic unconscious', namely "the collection of cognitive structures (...) that is attributable to specifically scholarly experiences and which is therefore mostly common to all the products of the same—national—scholarly system or, in a more specific form, to all the members of the same discipline"[1]. This collection of internalized, arbitrary and quasi naturalized frames of mind makes us take for granted or hold as important a particular subject, concern, or distinction at the expense of another, such as the distinction between the capital city and the province for a twenty-first century French person. Never mind the fact that such frames of mind were explicitly inculcated in us by the system: they proceed all the same from a structural inculcation, from the immersion of social agents in a structured universe like a university or an academic field where they are shared alongside the same worldviews and principles of division of the world. In order to move away from them a dual work of historical objectification, that implies at once the history of the formation of those frames of mind, and to bring into focus the role of the one who outlines this very history and how he or she can be situated in the academic world.

[1] Pierre Bourdieu, "L'inconscient d'école", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales,* 135(2000): 3-5.

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Many historical works and more to the point textbooks that pretend to offer students, the general public or specialists from other disciplines, a general introduction to history are wide of the mark, of course, and all the while protesting of wanting to move away from writing history from a strictly national perspective, they express, under the guise of a global or decentralized history, the strongest academic unconscious, redoubled with an a-critical use of translation[1].

I would like to illustrate my point with a concrete example of a national academic unconscious and the severe methodological illusions to which this linguistic levelling can lead to.

Never before have dictionaries of the social sciences been more numerous at least in the French and English-speaking editorial landscape: dictionaries of history, historiography or historiographical concepts, dictionaries of political science, sociology or religious science, dictionaries of utopias or religious facts, biographical dictionaries (De Gaulle, Napoleon). Never, however, in spite of the commercial success and genuine theoretical sophistication of some of them, have they been more remote from the standard objective they set themselves: to offer an objectified and critical review, not only of the state of knowledge, but also of the conceptual and linguistic tools that participated in its very elaboration. This seems particularly true of certain publications destined to the general public that do not shy away from stating that they want to deal with the history of the world in a few hundred pages or in any case offer a balanced and reliable general introduction while they in fact, with the best intentions in mind, only reproduce the state of play between different disciplines, academics, and national spheres.

We can take as a good example, but others come to mind, the *Greenwood Dictionary of World History* published for a broad public in London and in the United States in 2006, under the editorship of John Butt, a mediaevalist who shortly before had published a history of everyday life at the time of Charle-

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[1] This is specially the case with key words or concepts like 'laïcité' / 'secularism', 'communauté' / 'community', 'libéral' / 'liberal'. See Williams, *Keywords*. See also the interesting case of the false translation in French political theory of Machiavelli's *arte dello stato*, where 'art de l'État' was wrongly preferred to 'métier de l'État': Jean-Louis Fournel, Jean-Claude Zancarini, "Les enjeux de la traduction. Traduire les penseurs politiques florentins de l'époque des guerres d'Italie", *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 145(2002): 84-94.

magne¹. One of its entries in particular, of crucial importance, is worth being quoted here in full:

DEMOCRACY. From the Greek for 'rule by the people' (*demos*). Greek democracy, first established in Athens in 508 B.C.E. by Cleisthenes, was a true democracy of direct participation. Each citizen had equal rights to sit in the assembly, and all decisions were made by the assembly and considered to have been made by the people. With English democracy in the form of parliamentary government and since the founding of the United States and the French Revolution, democracy has spread around the world, mainly in the form of representative governments (republics) where citizens vote for representatives who make the decisions².

Although the *Dictionary* makes no claim to be made for social scientists, it is still difficult to imagine a better introduction to the some of the aspects of academic unconscious of European scholars and editors than this brief entry in the dictionary. Almost everything is there: the obvious omission—as if the question was not even worth asking—of the necessity to remind the reader that only a small fraction of the population participated in this Athenian 'true democracy' and that women, wops and slaves were excluded; the confusion between sitting, deliberating, voting and making a decision, that seem here to be perfectly co-terminous operations (who among us has never sat in an assembly without daring of having the right to speak? or without having the feeling to be there only to ratify a decision that had already been made?); the invention of a fabulous and prestigious genealogy that makes 17th-century England (and slightly less the United States or France) the direct heir of the Greece of Clisthenes and Pericles; the confusion between representation and republic (according to which the forms of direct democracy still current in Switzerland today are not republican, for example), which would at least require an explanation; the naive belief, so reassuring in these times of globalization, that the West did not merely export its missionaries and soldiers but also democracy, which now spreads everywhere in the world (regrettable acts of local resistance notwithstanding).

¹ The *Dictionary* is also on-line (`http://books.google.it/books?id=uYjbHeAOINYC`); it claims to be "an indispensable, handy, and easy to use A-to-Z first-stop ready-reference resource", and thus not a research instrument .
² John J. Butt, *The Greenwood Dictionary of World History* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2006), *s.v.* "Democracy".

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It is not my intention here to review in detail all the silences, biases and manifest mistakes found in this article: I simply want to use this here as an opportunity to reflect on the devastating effects of approximate lexical usage and the tendency amongst historians to be duped by translations that perpetuate similes between contexts that are nonetheless completely different. It is in the end a factory for producing the historical academic unconscious that this article reveals, with its mixture of placid anachronism and happy ethnocentrism, the inner workings of which it is necessary to denounce.

The history of the democratic political practices in Europe has a respectable past and has brought to our attention, with good cause, some privileged objects: the history of the majority vote, notably the important work of Otto von Gierke at the end of the 19th century, and his analysis of the evolution of the forms of collective political decision-making; the history of representative institutions in the Middle Ages and in the early modern period, with this lancing question of the possible lineage between the Estates General, *Parlements*, Estates, Cortes and other Diets with the assemblies that emerged after the 17th and 18th-century revolutions, a tradition that is illustrated by a long list of international conferences that took place as early as the 1960s; and, of course, the history of Republicanism or the Republican idea, notably with Quentin Skinner and Martin van Gelderen[1]. It is those traditions in particular that the article of the *Greenwood Dictionary* seems to merge and ignore at the same time, in making lexical choices that are neither those of the academic community nor of the historical agents, neither elite nor indigenous therefore, and that are in the end misleading.

4. Three historiographical traditions

I will therefore return to the three historiographical traditions or the three great historiographical stakes that I just mentioned, and try to see if it is possible to get out of the unconscious at work here and to attempt a true historicizing of the categories of analysis.

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[1] Martin van Gelderen, Quentin Skinner, eds., *Republicanism: A Shared European Heritage*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2002).

1. Many specialists such as Léo Moulin or Otto von Gierke for instance have generously described the long road taken by the forms of collective decision-making, gradually leading from the reign of the unanimous decision in the election of the Germanic kings or the pontiffs, in the High Middle Ages, for example, to the triumph of the majority decision that consecrated the right for the minority vote to exist, to express itself, to be counted and by the same token to count. In this long history, the decisive moment was generally placed in the 12th-13th centuries when rules conditioning the election of Popes changed and new institutions appeared—universities, communes, confraternities—that established precisely as one of their governing principle the validity of decisions made by all for the *major et sanior pars.* Considered to be a *persona ficta*, the institution could express a will that did not subsume the wills of all its members: the need for unanimity thus vanished, to the benefit of forms of decision-making that only one part of its members endorsed, that nonetheless vouched for the entire institution. But the formulas remained ambiguous, as we can see in the works of Léo Moulin: what was understood by *sanior pars* and how could it be determined? Was it necessary to count the votes or weigh them and to give to each a different weight? What to do if the *sanior pars* was not the *major pars*? It is in the end only little by little that the definition of the part that could make a decision that would be valid for the whole became simpler to become the majority, in the purely arithmetic sense that we more or less accept today.

It is possible then to see that linear history, the kind of triumphal march towards parliamentarian democracy that the *Greenwood Dictionary* tries to outline, is meaningless, or rather that it is an imaginary history, without any connection with the real practices of the societies of the past, that principally fulfils the function of celebration[1].

In order to gauge whether it is really a question of translation and national academic unconscious that are at cause here, it is necessary to return to the lexical uses of the middle Ages and mostly of the Old Regime. It is enough indeed to return to the French dictionaries of the Old Régime or to the great encyclopaedias of the 17th and 18th centuries to see that the terms 'vote', 'majority' or 'suf-

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[1]   See Marcel Detienne, "Des pratiques d'assemblée aux formes du politique. Pour un comparatisme expérimental et constructif entre historiens et anthropologues", in Marcel Detienne, ed., *Qui veut prendre la parole?* (Paris: Seuil, 2003), 13-30.

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frage' do not feature at all, or that they simply did not mean what we might have thought they meant at first sight. 'Vote' does not feature much in the French language before being imported from the English at the end of the eighteenth century to designate the process by which one publishes publically or secretly one's opinion or one's choice in matters submitted to the approbation of a community or a body. The men of the early modern period therefore used different terms that carried completely different connotations within them: *opiner*—for instance suggests that the process was mainly one of acquiescence, in the way that the magistrates and the bishops everywhere were introduced to the approbation of the people, who had no choice—rather than expressing one's voice or suffrage. Same thing for 'majority', that can be found of course, but either as a legal term—for example when talking about the majority of the kings of France at the age of 13—or more commonly associated with the idea of *saniority*: *major et sanior pars*, the largest and healthier part of the population or the members of a group that make a decision that by the same token goes for all. Certain authors from the end of the middle Ages or the early modern period deemed these two terms to be equivalent: in their estimation, the majority is often the healthier, saner, part and this definition in the end corresponds to the practice of collective decision-making that was the most widespread. The oldest, the most renowned, those with most titles give their opinion first and set the tone for the decision that the more modest must follow. So in 1531, when the city of Ulm in the Empire, decided to put to the vote of 2,000 merchants, citizens, artisans, and traders whether or not they wanted to adopt the Protestant Reformation, the vote began with the wealthiest and better trades and progressively descended the ladder of prestige. Once the majority was reached, Charles V was informed of the decision of the town, while the other trades continued to express their opinion that in any case no longer counted. To sit, participate, give an opinion (or *opiner*) did not necessarily mean to contribute to the decision making, and history can provide an infinity of examples of devices that were implemented to minimize the power of assemblies and those who sat in them: right to veto, vote by colleges (like in the French Estates General before 1789 or in the imperial Diets) that conferred enormous weight to the suffrage of a small group, alongside the pre-selection of those who had the right to be elected and who consequently needed the patronage of their predecessors, etc.

In some cases, however, it was the numbers that carried the decision and this

long before the eighteenth century indeed. But to designate the decisive weight of the greater number, early modern men—at least those that spoke French— did not call it the majority and did not consider it to be a constituted group or the identifiable and stable part of an assembly as we do today: they spoke generally of plurality, plurality of votes or 'of the greater number'. In the villages of early 1530s Switzerland, for instance, when it was necessary to choose locally between Catholicism and Protestantism, it was decided to fall back on the plurality of suffrages and these procedures were simply called the 'plus': the inhabitants were assembled in the village square or in the church and everyone was asked in turn what his choice was. But as we can see, this plurality did not trouble itself with the exact difference that would mean that such a part would carry the rest, distinct from a majority that implies a one vote difference: it was enough to be the most numerous or seem to be[1].

In choosing 'vote', a term that is originally linked specifically to England, and in considering it to be universal, taken for granted and as an equivalent to 'participation' of the 'citizens' to the public thing, in 'equal' weight of each of them to the 'decision' of the 'people', the *Greenwood Dictionary* lets itself, voluntarily, be duped by words: it muddies the waters and does not facilitate the understanding of what the democratic experience was in practice, what secret ballots—that the first English Republic excluded, by the way—changed, the Universal Suffrage and the parliamentary system that emerged in the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, or even women's vote. It effectively amounts to ignorance because of problems of translation.
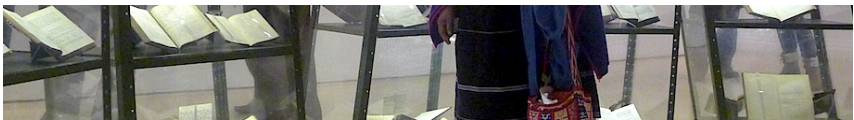
2. The history in the *longue durée* of the 'representative institutions' was for a long time the privilege of the legal historians until the 1960s when it became

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[1] Olivier Christin, "Communauté, conscience, confession. L'épreuve du choix confessionnel au XVIe siècle en Suisse romande", in Jacques Ehrenfreund, Pierre Gisel, eds., *Religieux, société civile, politique. Enjeux et debats historiques et contemporains* (Lausanne: Éditions Antipodes, 2012), 17-30.

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one of the meeting places between them and historians of political ideas and the specialists of social history that were interested, for instance, in the social conditions of the recruitment of delegates to the Estates General, of Parlementarians or lawyers in the service of the princes and cities in the Holy Roman Empire. It has also recently been the focus of interest for ceremonialists that found political rituals in the societies of the Old Régime and their forms of negotiation between sovereign and their subjects that were, by nature, asymmetrical. It is not to this renewal that the article of the Greenwood refers to, however, and I want to return to it once more: the author is happy to conclude in the last few lines that democracy 'mainly' takes the shape of representative government, itself synonymous with 'republic'. I will return to this later. Rather I want to concentrate on the definition that the author gives of a representative regime immediately after this initial statement: a regime is representative when 'citizens vote for representatives who then make the decisions'.

Here again the specialist of the early modern period can only be befuddled by the distinction between 'vote' and 'decision-making' and also by the exclusively English use of the term 'representative' that play here both the role of substantive (those elected) and qualification (the parliamentary government, the representative institutions). And this play on words has heavy consequences, anecdotal or not. Is it necessary, for instance, to cease considering Italy as a democratic regime because some of its senators are nominated for life and not elected, and to see in the president of the *Consiglio*, Mario Monti in this case, a dictator? But mostly, contrary to what it seems to do, the dictionary impedes the understanding of the transition from Old Régime institutions to the *parlements*, between the nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries, around the question of representation and representativeness. We know, for example, that the representative institutions of the Old Régime certainly did not represent the populations and the territories even less: their representativeness bore no concern for equity or justice, and even less for statistics. The French *parlements* were tribunals, composed of magistrates that owned their charge; the delegates to the Estates General were all elected (and not called up personally as the nobles were), granted, but according to lengthy procedures that in the end privileged the elite and the urban notables; the territories represented in the imperial Diets did not have access to a voice and some had to share the right to consent or to decide. In any case, the matters discussed were so technical that it was

wiser for many territories or cities not to sit at them in person, but to be represented by professional lawyers, even if it meant splitting the cost incurred for the employment of those very sought after specialists; and to retell a familiar story, such an expert could well have to plea for a bishopric, in the morning, and for the prince with which it was in conflict, in the afternoon. The delegates of the representative institutions of the Old Régime represented the territories and its peoples like a lawyer represents his client today: they stood for one city, one principality or one province, made up their *sanior pars*, and defended their interests all the while defending their own social standing.

So something did change in the course of the eighteenth century, and more clearly with the American and French revolutions, where the questions of representativeness and equity were couched in terms that we are familiar with now, for example in the American choice of bicameralism to represent at once the population (in Congress) and the territories (in the Senate) and in the adoption of a specific internal architecture—the hemicycle—that must reflect the conflict of interests between groups or parties and the kind of political debates that should take place in the different chambers or assemblies[1]. It is this shift between one idea of representation and political justice to another, and everything that had to be put in place in between to accomplish it; amounting to centuries of debate and political struggle; that is missed out in the *Greenwood Dictionary* when it chooses a univocal expression—representative—to summarize it.

3. What seems most striking, however, in the short text from the *Dictionary of World History*, is the parallel that it establishes between representative governments and republics. We now understand that this identification is the result of a long history but that it was not necessarily the case at the beginning. The Athens of Clisthenes was indeed a direct democracy where citizens sat in the assemblies themselves, but the dictionary is performing a dangerous summersault between Athens and 17th-century England in order to fully claim the idea of republic as a kind of privilege of the West that would have been exported to other countries subsequently. Moreover it remains silent on everything that could contradict this fabulous genealogy and creates a shortcut between the political systems of England and France in the eighteenth and nineteenth cen-

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[1] Jean-Philippe Heurtin, "Architectures morales de l'Assemblée nationale", *Politix,* 7(1994) 109-140.

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turies and Antiquity.

Once again, the dictionary falls down on its promises of a global history through its lexical choices and only offers an Anglo-Saxon vision of world history. Some of the singular historical experiments that gave republicanism its particular strength in Europe and without which the rupture of the revolutions was simply unthinkable are simply left out—maybe for lack of space—but no less incomprehensible for all that. The Republics of the Italian communes in the Middle Ages, where the modern majority decision-making process was invented and where the discourse of the *Res Publica* and the virtue that founded it take its roots; the Protestant United Provinces in rebellion against their Spanish sovereign that formulated perhaps the most clearly the right to depose a king and by the same token what constituted the sovereignty of the people; or once more the strange political organization of the Swiss cantons and their allies that facilitated the coexistence of territories with divergent interests and more to the point totally opposed religious choices: none of them were built as a representative political system. We can nonetheless see them[1] as the crucible of Republican thought and as models that were continuously evoked and studied, sometimes to absolutely reject them, as was the case for Venice, for example, by the very same political thinkers who played a central role in the revolutions of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The *Greenwood Dictionary* did not deserve such scrutiny perhaps, if it was not for the fact that it is almost an ideal-type, in summarizing abruptly and clumsily what other texts, at once more ambitious and informed, say more insidiously. In it can be found the echo of some of the academic unconscious that Pierre Bourdieu mentioned in the article that I quote in the introduction, namely: the fascination for the quest for origins and with it the temptation to construct impossible genealogies and imaginary filiations that make the Bayeux tapestry the origins of modern media, a few pages from the pen of isolated 16th-century thinkers the origins of the idea of toleration, the struggles between factions the origins of modern political life; the uncontrolled interchange between native lexicon and those of the historical sciences, where anachronistic notions are applied to the past and new meanings are attributed to ancient terms; the

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[1] With the famous book by John Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment. Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P. 1975).

persistence of ethnocentrism under the adornment of global history, in spite of Subaltern Studies and the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty… It is, however, by no means the only dictionary to combine the globalization of categories of analysis that are strongly marked by national histories, to compare in wide brushstrokes and exalt the West. I cannot resist, here, from quoting the *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* (1968):

"The term democracy indicates both a set of ideals and a political system—a feature it shares with the terms communism and socialism. 'Democracy' is harder to pin down, however, than either 'socialism' or 'communism'; for while the latter labels have found in Marxism an ideological matrix, or at least a point of reference, democracy has never become identified with a specific doctrinal source—it is rather a by-product of the entire development of Western civilization. No wonder, therefore, that the more 'democracy' has come to be a universally accepted honorific term, the more it has undergone verbal stretching and has become the loosest label of its kind. Not every political system claims to be a socialist system, but even communist systems claim to be democracies"[1].
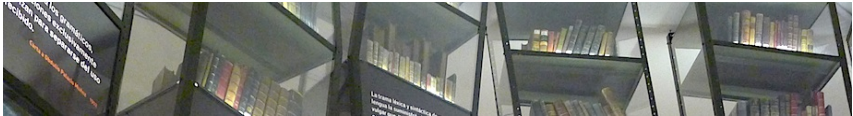
5. Conclusion: De-trivializing the trivial through comparativism

The first volume of the *Dictionary of the nomadic concepts* had no intention of being exhaustive or normative, no more than it had the ambition to contribute to the homogenization of lexical usage in the European social sciences. It sought rather to contribute to the understanding of what happened when certain concepts or terms, specific to modern and contemporary societies, were translated

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[1] *International Encyclopedia of Social Sciences*, ed. David Stills (New York: Macmillan 1968), *s.v.* "Democracy".

(for instance the idea of *provincialisme*) or came in through the back door (for instance when *direction* or *gouvernement* was replaced by governance, *services publiques* by public utilities). It also hoped to combat the illusion that the generalized transfer to English will resolve all the problems and will contribute to found more objective approaches, less marked by the history of the different academic constellations, distinct scholarly traditions or disciplines. And to speak trivially, it simply sought to introduce the traceability of conceptual and lexical usage, in the same way that we now say of food products: where does this term come from? From which historical moment and from which agents? Why was it extended to different contexts than those where it was born, for example, at what point was the expression *Ancien Régime* used for other countries than pre-revolutionary France?

But as we are now preparing a second volume of the *Dictionnaire des concepts*, Franz Schultheis and myself are now more than before in the position to measure the drawbacks of this first enterprise—which has nothing to do with the small number of its entries—and the efforts that remain to be made to make this approach a truly liberating critical tool, capable of freeing us from the intellectual routines that have become so familiar that we can no longer see them, and to invite us to wonder once more at what seems to us so obvious that it no longer requires an explanation[1] .

A few steps seem to us to be indispensable to the pursuing of this collective project in the long term:

- First of all, and this is so obvious that I feel it all the more strongly, the opening to the non-European world, that is poorly represented in the first volume, where only one entry out of four concerned the colonial and post-colonial context, and very few researchers, with the exception of two Mexican colleagues, from the non-European academic world. And it would not altogether be unfounded to consider, in spite of its estranging objectives, de-trivializing the trivial, that the *Dictionary* reproduced a hierarchy of objects and academic questions that are very Eurocentric. Upon reflexion, it seems to me necessary to work, from now on, on a truly

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[1] See the reviews of the first volume, both accessible on-line, by Javier Fernandez Sebastian (`http://www.laviedesidees.fr/Sebastian-Javier-Fernandez.html`) and Sophie Roux (`http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11873-012-0193-4`).

decentralized *Dictionary*, and seek to exclude all parochial points of view, or at least to demonstrate each time why this point of view, this way of building objects and questions, was chosen and not another.

- Second, a greater rigour in the determination of what constituted an entry or not: not for the sake of comprehensiveness—illusory and pointless in my view, it seems rather more interesting to built a methodology rather than produce entries—but because it seems necessary to be able to determine exactly why an expression, a word, or a neologism, can be promoted to the rank of concept. What happens, at a given moment, to make a term into a concept or a category of thought? And how does the same term or category of thought is lifted from everyday use, that of the social agents, and launched into the academic sphere, in what circumstances and to what effect? We could here multiply the number of recent examples, like that of Gender/*Genre*, the fortunes of which in the social sciences has been at once meteoric and very recent, very broad and extremely controversial.

- Finally the format. The first volume had chosen an alphabetical organization, deliberately rejecting groupings by theme that would suggest the existence of meta-concepts. But this was dodging the issue, rather than resolve it, and it is obvious that certain concepts, without being synonymous or distributing themselves hierarchically, share the same space in the social and historical sciences and in the public sphere, whether for good or ill, as it is the case for race and people, citizenship and civic duty, multiculturalism and communitarianism. And it is around this notion of conceptual clouds or kinship that we aim to work from now on.

I will stop here the list of what needs to be done, or not done—as it could potentially be endless.

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"Viaje al fondo de Cuervo. Exposición Biblioteca Nacional 2012", A. Martín (`http://www.flickr.com/photos/alemartin/9366069092/`). The exhibition (Bogotà, 2012) was devoted to the personal library of the lexicographer Rufino José Cuervo (Diccionario de construcción y régimen de la lengua castellana, 1886).