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## Subversive Concepts: Empires and Beyond

“The worst thing one can do with words,” George Orwell once wrote, “is to surrender to them.” One must “let the meaning choose the word, and not the other way,” to use language for “expressing and not for concealing or preventing thought,” he continued (1953, 169). For centuries, social movements “let the meaning to choose the words” and actively sought new categories to grasp the world. They also expressed the desire for a new world but often surrendered to words when imagining it. Medieval heretics, French revolutionaries, and various socialist movements on the fringes of the Russian Empire one hundred years later, as well as groups like nationalist urban reformers, Muslim modernizers, and democratic antisuffragists—all had to face fossilized concepts that they attempted to question and modify, actively reappropriating them to forge new configurations. They also inherited the existing language and other sign systems, which cannot be modified at will without the risk of losing the capacity to communicate. To paraphrase Karl Marx’s nutshell definition of historical agency, people make use of their concepts but they do not do so as they please; they do not do so under self-selected circumstances but, rather, under the already-existing circumstances given and transmitted in language and social relations.

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taneously, a juxtaposition of bottom-up agency against elite actors does not do justice to the reality of multidirectional transfers across hierarchies. Concepts wandered across social structures, in space, and between languages and cultures. Such transfers happen in the multidimensional space of differences, where any given position is relationally dependent on others and embedded in various disparities of power. One may describe this dynamic by borrowing the notion of intersectionality from feminist studies, where it is used to understand how aspects of a person's social and political identities combine to create different modes of discrimination and privilege. The perspective is also the characteristic of the empire as a complex political space composed of different and unequal positions.

These positions could be actively questioned and reconfigured by the actors. Concepts used challenged the multidimensional political space where they appeared by forging identifications and challenging modes of possible political action and hierarchies coded in speech. To grasp the operation of concepts within such multidimensional and unequally patterned spaces of an empire, we propose a toolkit of approaches present in various proportions in the contributions to this volume.

While bottom-up movements widely reshaped the political vernacular, academicians long restricted their studies to elite discourses. In recent decades, and after several subsequent methodological turns, the (widely understood) history of ideas passed through a profound transformation; as a result, the discipline in its current form differs highly from the one established in the 1930s by such scholars as Arthur O. Lovejoy and George H. Sabine (Lovejoy [1937] 1964; Sabine [1938] 1961). Generally, the history of ideas has gradually become less elitist and more transnational and contextual. Objects of scrutiny (be they ideas, discourses, concepts, and the like, depending on the perspective) are conceived as created in definite social situations. In this vein, when mapping out the methodological interventions into the field, one may stumble upon the social history of political ideas, the materiality of ideas, the people's history of ideas, and, finally, new imperial history.

The first approach, the social history of political ideas, is prevalent within the French academia landscape, where it is known as *histoire sociale des idées politiques* (often referred to as HSIP). It has a strict sociological bent, and the meaning of ideas is seen as grounded in the characteristic of a social group that produces and absorbs them. Its representatives are social scientists rather than historians and they focus, for instance, on modes of producing ideas (including the living conditions of authors and intellectuals), relations within the market of ideas

and communication contexts (i.e., the functioning of publishing houses, editorial boards, journals, think tanks, and the like), social settings of the consumers of ideas, and, finally, the institutionalization of ideas (Matonti 2012; Rioufreyt 2019). Arnault Skornicki and Jérôme Tournadre-Plancq stress that political ideas never exist beyond usages and utterances, which, in turn, are historically situated and depend on the strategies of the actors who seize them (2015, 4). Nonetheless, this does not mean a retreat to old-guard Marxist materialism. The simplified scheme of inferring ideas from economic relations would lead to the neglect of the symbolic and social contexts typical of a given epoch (Smadja 2016, 112). However, the materiality of ideas as a research method is, here, a useful supplement.

The neo-materialist approaches focus on media by which ideas may travel through national or linguistic borders and different social groups or strata. Concentration on these elements, in turn, mitigates the role of authors who produce ideas: They are perceived not as autonomous creators but, rather, as figures situated within entangled networks of co-production. From this perspective, the agency of publishers, translators, editors, designers, booksellers, librarians, and, finally, readers is of crucial importance, as they are regarded as creative actors involved in the co-production of the meaning of given texts and ideas (Carreira da Silva and Brito Vieira 2019). The HSIP and the materiality of ideas as research methods should not be confused with (but can be supplemented by) the people's history of ideas.

This heterogeneous set of perspectives reflects on historical phenomena that escape the more traditional approaches. It may offer insights into the conceptual and ideological micro-cosmos of subaltern groups like indigenous people of the world, slaves, peasants, and proletarians of various stocks (Bonin and Dupuis-Déri 2019, 293–300). Here, there is the biggest challenge, as it is evident that subalterns often did not use scripts to communicate their ideas. Even if they did, they had little or no access to the institutions for producing texts and, in effect, for speaking on their behalf in a way preserved for us. What is at stake in different variations of the people's history of ideas is a search for a new type of source through which subalterns of the past may not only speak but also be heard.

For this reason, students of people's history of ideas are sensitive to channels of expression such as songs, woodcuts, proverbs, religious practices, and many others (Scott 1990). They also read between the lines of texts produced by other groups, looking for slips of the tongue and mediated traces left by the subaltern populations. In any case, their ideas

and thoughts appear to be a collective work rather than an individual effort and are often slotted between elite discourses in both their production and their transmission.

In addition to such a crudely put-vertical transfer, what has gained much attention in the last decades is the horizontal transfer between cultural and language contexts. Various approaches interested in the comparison, transfer, translation, and hybridic cross-fertilization of concepts came to the fore. This diversity is, however, to be studied, according to the intersectional raster, neither denying various forms of asymmetry and inequality nor reducible to any single hierarchy of domination. The multidimensional contestations researched in this volume, in a nutshell, can be summarized by a notion of “imperial situation(s).” In this respect, many of the studies presented here subscribe to the decentralized and situational approach in numerous cases called new imperial history while advancing studies of political language in use. New imperial history offers “a multidimensional view of social, political, and cultural actors, and of the spaces in which they function” (Gerasimov et al. 2005, 54). The “focus on the imperial situation of complex societies and multilayered, irregular diversity” (Mogilner 2014, 25) helps to study multiple, relational, and unequal public spheres where subversive concepts were adapted, contested, and uttered. The empire is here understood as an analytical category grasping multidirectional flows in a non-homogeneous space of dependence, characterized by multi-ethnicity and hybridity, sprinkled with domination and fractured by resistance in a joint effort to make the rapidly and asynchronously changing world one’s own.

Thus, subversive concepts within imperial spaces are concepts used with conscious performative content questioning the existing multi-modal and multi-directional disparities of power or unintentionally modifying those relationships.

Because the non-elite groups are now in focus, new questions emerge regarding conceptual change dynamics across the imperial social spectrum. How did new conceptual innovations impact broader populations and what channels were used to transmit them? What does a circuit leading from conceptual innovators, via second-hand dealers of ideas, newspapers, and rank and file party functionaries, to “end users” look like? Is it a one-way street, and if not, how can we conceptualize—and research—bottom-up transfers and various feedback loops between actors in such tiered public spheres? How are transfers and translations strategically used and abused in such contexts? Finally, how were asymmetric imperial situations negotiated and how could various groups being sub-

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altern along one line of division strive for domination along other lines or against other groups? The authors of contributions collected in the issue, searching for possible answers to similar questions, offer insights into diverged geographical areas and linguistic spaces, focusing on social situations in which habits concerning public performance and relationships to other actors and the world were broken and communicative practices questioned the most fundamental assumptions about the participants of the situation, contributing to what Benjamin Arditi called the “polemicization of the commonplace” (Arditi and Valentine 1999). The articles gathered below are attempts to research subversive concepts which modified various imperial situations in their social, cultural, and material contexts.

The main block of texts touches upon different situations on the fringes of the Russian Empire. Luka Nakhutsrishvili, in his extensive essay, develops a situational understanding of imperial domination and excavates peasants’ autonomous initiative from between the lines of evidence left by various hegemonic actors, be it the Russian state or Georgian revolutionary intelligentsia. Risto Turunen sheds light on various forms of public activity and socially embedded practices of subversive horizontal communication such as writing and reading handwritten newspapers by Finnish workers, housemaids, and the rural proletariat. Analysing these vernacular publics, he claims that the concept of socialism had multiple meanings in the discourse produced by low social strata, always carrying a potential for re-subjectification. Such a gesture could also be performed by the explicit renegotiating of hierarchies and categories of social-self description, as Kamil Śmiechowski demonstrates. Wielding the toolkit that urban studies offers, he analyses the redefinitions of the concept of *mieszkaństwo* (or, broadly, urban society) in Russian Poland in 1905–1914. He also shows the double edge of such self-assertion, often directed not only against the state authority but also against other social or ethnic groups. Nadezhda Tikhonova likewise focuses on the press, examining the crucial Muslim newspaper in the late Russian Empire. She scrutinizes its careful tactical bilingualism to show how breaking the habits of mind served to remold intergroup identifications and visions of community.

Beyond the Russian Empire, Hugo Bonin questions the cliché that British antisuffragists in the early twentieth century were reactionaries, spelling out the democratic foundations of their convictions. Jakub Kowalewski, in his paper, sheds new light on the history of the Hussite Revolution, focusing on the transfigurations of spacetime related to the concept of Tabor. Using Husserl’s and Althusser’s theories, the author

explains how the heretical movement produced its subversive, spatialized concepts, by which Hussites could go beyond the Catholic and feudal moulds.

Tracing the dynamic of subversive concepts and the creativity of actors from the past, these studies show how doing things with words challenges situations around us. So, read through to speak out.

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