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# Answering the call: the history of political and social concepts in English<sup>☆</sup>

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The first editor of the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), James Murray, delighted to tell the story of a dream in which he had overheard his great lexicographical predecessor, Samuel Johnson, in conversation with James Boswell, his biographer: ‘Johnson was speaking of his Dictionary and Boswell, in an impish mood asked, “What would you say, Sir, if you were told that in a hundred years’ time a bigger and better dictionary than yours would be compiled by a Whig?” Johnson grunted. “A Dissenter?” Johnson stirred in his chair. “A Scotsman?” Johnson began, “Sir ...” but Boswell persisted — “and that the University of Oxford would publish it”. “Sir”, thundered Johnson, “in order to be facetious it is not necessary to be indecent” [1].

One wonders what James Murray would have said if he were told that a hundred years after the beginning of his own monumental enterprise, a dictionary of political and social concepts would have been compiled by a team of social historians, most of them Germans, and that when published it would comprise almost half as many volumes as the OED itself. The question is not facetious, nor is it impertinent. As Melvin Richter has pointed out, in the concluding chapter of his *History of Political and Social Concepts*, “By the Sufferance of Wise Men”: A Call for a History of Political and Social Concepts in English’, the very existence of the OED is often given as one of the reasons why the anglophone world does not need its own *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (GG) [2,3]; its proponents argue that the OED’s coverage is so complete, and that its lexicographical principles are so congenial to historians, that it will do duty as an English GG for all foreseeable purposes.

Murray would no doubt have been pleased by these plaudits, as he would surely have been intrigued by the GG. Like the OED, the GG has been a collective and collaborative enterprise, superintended by scholars with a commanding historical research programme; each was based on ‘historical principles’, and each relied heavily on the use of quotations as the basis for its entries. However, both were products of their times and places, and of the particular research agendas on which they were

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based. German historical principles underlay the OED's research programme, which employed the historical philology of Francis Passow, whose plan for a Greek dictionary had earlier been adopted by Liddell and Scott for their Greek *Lexicon* [4,5].<sup>1</sup> This may have marked a break with the prevailing practices of English lexicography (many of which traced their origins back to the etymological fallacies of the radical, Horne Tooke), but in other ways the OED was utterly characteristic of its time and place in Victorian Britain. Like the *Dictionary of National Biography*, the *Victoria County History* or the National Portrait Gallery, the OED is one of the monuments of late nineteenth-century British historicism. As the philologist F.J. Furnivall put it, when requesting contributors to the first stage of the dictionary, "We have set ourselves to form a National Portrait Gallery, not only of the worthies, but of all the members, of the race of English words which is to form the dominant speech of the world".<sup>2</sup> Despite Furnivall's metaphors of "race" and "dominan[ce]", it is surely going too far to see the OED as an instrument of High Victorian imperialism, an "empire of words" in itself (as John Willinsky has put it) [6]; however, the philological and historical theories which inspired the OED, and which inform it to this day even after two waves of revision, put it at a decisive distance from the concerns of contemporary conceptual history.

The OED does not always provide a reliable guide to neologism, word-use or context, nor can it serve the needs of conceptual historians since it so closely identifies meanings with words; it is also methodologically disabled from capturing the history of concepts which are not encapsulated within single terms [2, pp. 148–151]. The arbitrariness of the OED's citation patterns has often been remarked, and the peak periods for those citations — the 1590s, the 1650s, the 1880s, and the 1970s — are an optical illusion, created by thickets of citations from Spenser's *Færie Queene* (1596), Blount's *Glossographia* (1656–1674), the *Encyclopædia Britannica* in the 1880s, and the journal *Nature* in 1970s; they are therefore not an accurate indication of the rate of onomastic change, still less of political innovation [6, p. 195, fig. 12.1; 7]. Antedating the OED's first citations is one of the great parlour-games of the English-speaking world, but it remains little more than a game unless it is linked to a systematic search for patterns of neologism, such as that pursued by Koselleck and his collaborators. The latest contribution to the antedating game, an earnest study of word-usage in the massive collection of visual satires in the British Museum, offers mostly trivial examples of earlier datings for terms such as "mobster" and "tennis-match". However, it does reveal some notable patterns, such as a rash of terms qualified by "state-" ("state-appointment", "state-arrest", "state-auction", "state-barges", "state-bed", "state-carriage", "state-cavalry", "state-coachman", "state-criminals", "state-physicians", etc.) in the period between the French Revolution and the 1832 Reform Act [8]. This is all evidence, perhaps, that Britain experienced own *Sattelzeit* in this period, during the era of Economical Reform, counter-Revolution and the polemic against

<sup>1</sup> On the dominance of German philology see J.W. Burrow's work [5].

<sup>2</sup> F.J. Furnivall, 9 November 1862, quoted in Murray, Caught in the Web of Words, 137.

“Old Corruption” [9–11].<sup>3</sup> It was certainly in this period — stretching back even to the 1770s — that Britons became more concerned about the politicisation of the English language: there was a rash of lexicography, the first calls came for a British equivalent of the Academie Française to standardise vocabulary, and the neologism “neologism” entered the language. All of these developments took place at a time when “linguistic fluidity interacted creatively with social changes, both promoting a new vocabulary and conceptual framework for the analysis of society itself” [12–15].

This impression can also be confirmed by noting the efflorescences of “isms” in English (as in other European languages). Such coinages had clustered earlier in the sixteenth century, where they tended to denote heresy, as they sprang from the mouths of the self-designated orthodox. In the early nineteenth century, they “no longer automatically denigrated, as well as designated” such terms as “individualism”, “socialism”, “communism”, “conservatism”, “liberalism”, “romanticism”, and “nationalism”, though they could still carry opprobrium, and with it enduring historical distortions, as in the case of “absolutism”, for example [16,17]. Whether this was the only period of such rapid neologism in British history has hardly been investigated; certainly, the striking absence from the OED’s bibliography of the more than twenty thousand mid-seventeenth-century tracts collected by the Presbyterian bookseller George Thomason greatly reduces its utility as a tool for charting linguistic change during the 1640s and 1650s, for instance.<sup>4</sup>

The citations in the OED, fascinating and often reliable though they are, are in the end illustrative rather than evidentiary. The early compilers of the dictionary were forced to write their own definitions, based on the patterns revealed by the citations sent in by readers, but such haphazard inductivism could hardly guarantee adequate coverage of the complexity of political and social concepts. There is an important contrast here between the method of the OED and of the German lexica like the GG which may have deeper intellectual roots and more rigorous methodological programmes. The difference in method between the two projects is similar to, and may be partly derived from, the difference between common-law and civil-law traditions. In the former, the principle of *stare decisis* determines the legal authority of precedent, just as a dictionary like the OED relies heavily for etymology, prior usage, and the evidence of citation for its multilayered definitions of words; in the latter, abstract principle and the systematicity of legal science demand the harmonisation of anomalies, the search for informing patterns, and the necessity of tracing determinative filiations and interconnections between the central terms used to describe and conduct social and political life [18].

<sup>3</sup> On the idea of a British *Sattelzeit*, compare [10] with [11] in which 1828–1832 was the precise watershed for the English ‘ancien regime’.

<sup>4</sup> *Catalogue of the Pamphlets, Books, Newspapers, and Manuscripts ... Collected by George Thomason, 1640–1661*, 2 vols. (London, 1908); for a balanced assessment of the so-called ‘explosion’ of print in the mid-17th century see N. Smith, *Literature and Revolution in England, 1640–1660* (New Haven, 1994), and compare C. Jouhaud, *Mazarinades: la Fronde des mots* (Paris, 1985) on the contemporaneous French ‘explosion’.

The driving force behind the initial stages of the OED was Herbert Coleridge, a Chancery barrister (though, curiously, the OED skimps Chancery English, one of the most powerful forces for the standardisation of English usage in the fifteenth century) [6, pp. 178–179; 19]. The lack of an anglophone equivalent for the GG has even been attributed partly to the shared lack of legal training among English-speaking historians (especially intellectual historians) [20]. It would hardly be fair to overestimate the resilience or the parochiality of the common-law mind, but it would equally be foolish to underestimate its shaping force on anglophone political culture [21]. The anglophone world is after all — with the exceptions of Scotland, Louisiana, South Africa, Québec and St Lucia — defined formally by being the common-law world. This very fact may partly account for the lack of any systematic attempt to write conceptual histories in the German mould, because the common-law world did not experience the rash of codification and legal revisionism which took place through the civil-law world during the *Sattelzeit*, with decisive consequences for its social and political vocabulary [22].

The difference between the two overarching traditions could ensure that a history like the GG will never be written in the anglophone world, so ingrained are the habits of thought associated with the common law among historicists in all fields. It is of course no coincidence that the two greatest anglophone exponents of systematising political vocabulary, who satirised “insignificant Speech” on the one hand and deplored “terrorist language” on the other, were those two great enemies of the common law, Thomas Hobbes and Jeremy Bentham [23–26]. It is also no accident that the most elaborate attempt to systematise English vocabulary, Roget’s *Thesaurus* (1852), sprang from Benthamite soil. Peter Mark Roget was a protege of Bentham’s disciple, Sir Samuel Romilly, and briefly collaborated with Bentham himself on a design for a prototype refrigerator [27]. Though the *Thesaurus* registered Roget’s ambivalent memories of that collaboration, fifty years on, in its denunciation of those “modern writers” (among them, presumably, Bentham himself) who “have indulged a habit or arbitrarily fabricating new words and a new-fangled phraseology”, Roget did declare that his aim in compiling his synonymy had been “to obtain the greatest amount of practical utility” [28]. The *Thesaurus* has remained the culmination of the great eighteenth-century tradition of synonymies to which Richter has directed our attention as sources of political and social vocabulary [2, pp. 155–156; 29–31]: in its Benthamite organisation, according to abstract ideas rather than meanings or usage, it represents the victory of system over history, and deduction over induction, in the history of anglophone lexicography. Roget even hoped that it would be the first step towards creating a Universal Language, to bring about “a golden age of union and harmony among the several nations and races of mankind’ by removing the impediments created by linguistic diversity” [28, p. xxxvi].

The desire to write a history of political and social concepts in English-speaking societies to parallel the GG, or even the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich* [32], may be as noble in conception but unachievable in actuality as Roget’s dream of a universal language. Richter has outlined, and effectively refuted, three potential objections to such a project already: that it smacks of a discredited German idealism (a vulgar travesty of the philosophy of history behind projects like

the GG); that equivalent lexicons, like the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas* [33], already exist (though here the objection is less well-sustained since these reference works, when combined with individual studies of anglophone concepts, may supply the needs of readers just as well); and that the OED would be a sufficient substitute for all practical purposes [2, pp. 144–148]. One advantage of the OED, however, is the fact that it, like Roget's *Thesaurus*, does not simply treat "political and social concepts" Indeed, one major criticism of the GG, and also the *Handbuch*, is its arbitrary definition of what constitutes a relevant concept for the purposes of the lexicon itself: as Keith Tribe has tartly remarked, 'An "historical concept" is ... definable as a concept selected by the editors for inclusion in GG' [20, p. 183]. Most striking is the absence of gender, or its equivalent, not only as a concept or constellation of concepts, but also as a tool for analysing other concepts. If gender is not a "political and social concept", it might be asked, what is? And if such a fundamental signifier of difference and interrelation is omitted from the GG, how defensible is the historical research programme upon which it was based? [34,35].

The contemporary historiographical trinity of race, class, and gender may suggest some of the enormous obstacles which would lie in the way of any attempt to construct an anglophone equivalent of the GG. This can be illustrated from three recent and fundamental studies of these concepts, Ivan Hannaford's *Race* (1996), Dror Wahrman's *Imagining the Middle Class* (1995), and Tom Laqueur's *Making Sex* (1990) [36–38]. Hannaford shows that race cannot be considered outside the context of political and social vocabulary, precisely because the resilience of classical definition of politics prevented the emergence of the modern concept of race until the late seventeenth century at the earliest. Equally revealingly, Wahrman shows the context of political contestation in late eighteenth-century Britain within which it became possible — intermittently, contingently, and far from inevitably — to see society as divided into more than two classes, with various kinds of political valence being placed upon that class represented for the first time as being in the "middle" [39]. Laqueur's story is equally one of incipient difference, but in the creation of a "two-sex" model of human beings out of the one-sex model of Aristotelian biology, accompanied by the mapping of that two-sex model of physiology onto the more enduring conceptions of the two genders. These three studies, among many, reveal in their different ways the importance of epistemic ruptures in conceptual history, the constitutive force of often highly contingent contestation, and the relationships between science, epistemology, and social categories.

Conceptual history must be catholic in its choice of concepts, alert to contingency and contestation, and open to the widest possible range of sources in its search for the often multiple overlapping histories of political and social concepts. With such capacities, it might stand as the necessary bridge between an anglophone, analytical strain of intellectual history, attentive above all to intentions and contexts, and the broader field of the study of ideologies, as Michael Freeden has recently argued [40]. Yet this confluence would be of more importance to political theory than to history. When historians in the anglophone world first took a linguistic turn, in the 1960s and 1970s, it was analytical, Austinian and Wittgensteinian [41]. More recently, social historians have taken a French linguistic turn [42–44], but few have followed the

German fork to follow the different hermeneutic path trodden by Dilthey and Gadamer [45–47]. In this sense, the moment for the GG to make its contribution to anglophone historiography may already have passed, just as the failure of Ball, Hanson and Farr's collection *Political Innovation and Conceptual Change* (1989) to inspire imitative studies may be symptomatic of either an opportunity lost, or a moment missed, as both social and intellectual historians have taken other turns, and followed other interests [48].

The hope of achieving an equivalent for the GG which could cover the necessary range of materials for Britain and Ireland (which have their own wealth of nations, and hence political cultures, whether anglophone, Latinate, or Gaelic-speaking), let alone for the United States, Canada, and Australasia, is daunting indeed: an estimated 20–80 million people speak English as a first language, and 150–300 million more as a second, mostly in communities where the political and social vocabulary of the anglophone world is normative, if not unchallenged [49]. The complexity of the studies by Hannaford, Wahrman and Laqueur (none of whom treats anglophone materials alone, and necessarily) is one index of the difficulty inherent in such a project. The divide between civilian and common-law traditions renders the transferability of the German model dubious, especially in the absence of anything approaching a *Sattelzeit* outside the Constitutional period in North American history. The resistance or, less politely, the indifference of anglophone historians towards German hermeneutic models may continue to prevent any academic assimilation of the research programmes behind the GG and its sibling lexicons. The existence of the OED, and other lexicons, will continue to discourage publishers, if not researchers. Indeed, the very existence of the GG itself will provide further discouragement, insofar as it already contains histories of anglophone political and social concepts (such as the GG's entry "Economic Liberalism", which begins with Misselden, passes to Hume and Smith via the Physiocrats, before going on to the reception of Smith and Manchester School in Germany) [50]. What would be of greatest value to anglophone historians — fewer and fewer of whom speak or even read German — are translations of selected entries from the GG, to provide an inspiration for their own studies as well as a primer in the methods of the German school.<sup>5</sup> However, regarding the ambition to produce a comparable history of political and social concepts in English, one would have to paraphrase Dr. Johnson: though it could perhaps be done well, one would be surprised to see it done at all.

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