

THE MODERNITY OF CENTRAL AND SOUTHEASTERN EUROPE FROM THE CONCEPTUAL HISTORY PERSPECTIVE

*Introductory words to the opening of the 3rd International Conference on Conceptual History
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Why have I chosen the topic “Conceptualizing Modernity in Central and South-eastern Europe. Notions, Discourses, Languages”?

Despite negligence to human life, today we are able to better conceptualize time and space, we can more exactly investigate languages and political institutions; we have the information and the necessary theoretical skills to investigate and explain a part of the constant features of historical flow. However, when we talk about the human being, explanations become problematic because the human being is in continuous change, in a *nascimento*, in a continuous process of augmentation, as Giambattista Vico would put it, in the making, which alters its character and behaviour. Consequently, the methods used in the abstract sciences, in mathematics, logics or heraldry cannot be tuned with the understanding of human history. Even the interpretation of history through its conceptualization seems to be far from these. Referring to the time of transition from the Middle Ages to the Modern period, a time of changes mainly, of rethinking priorities in the political and economic life and of extending the role of sciences and technology, we should be concerned by the formation of notions and languages, and respectively by the evolution of social structure. Conceptualization becomes useful for organizing facts and events according to the periods of time, for understanding – even if fragmentarily – mentalities and behaviours. These are a few arguments for which we shall take into account the philosophies that precede modernity, and also the myths and legends that indicate the forms of manifestation of individuals and communities. The fact that elements of magic precede rational thinking has a matter in it and the research of this phenomenon needs to be addressed in a different manner than the approach of a conceptual historian. This contributes to the interpretation of the human being's experiences, feelings and reactions.

Despite its shortcomings, the conceptualization of modernity aims to identify the evolution steps of mankind and to study the languages, the codes and the sets of cultural and civilization values. These elements are not mathematical; therefore they cannot be understood through mathematical logic, or through the game theory or other methods belonging to natural sciences. This is why I think that the interest for a *unitary humanist culture*, with its own instruments of work, becomes fundamental, and thanks to it we will have the possibility to theorize *modernity, postmodernity, modernism and anti-modernism*.

Why the focus on Central and South-Eastern Europe?

Firstly, because this is a region with a less known history and culture. Secondly, because the genesis of modern world encounters here a few peculiarities as compared to other regions in Europe. Thirdly, because there are often stereotypes related to this part of Europe, such as: Dracula land, bloody Balkans, the powder keg of Europe, retrograde region. And finally, because the idea of collective identities based on 19th century approach, of fictive or imagined community or ethnicity, continues to subsist in the above-mentioned area. I am convinced that a recapture of regional history through the 21st century terminology and by using the academic languages will stimulate, on the one hand, the debate of ideas and, on the other, will contribute to the understanding of the socio-political contexts where transitions to modernity happened, offering in the meantime the working hypothesis for gaining an integrated perspective of the history of both parts of Europe.

Why, for the third time, Timisoara is hosting this international meeting of academics and scholars interested in the history of concepts and conceptual history?

Timișoara has a tradition in regional history studies, in social history and in multi- and intercultural studies. It is a city open to experiments, and conceptual history is an experiment both in Romania as well as in other countries of Central and South-Eastern Europe, being different from the history of ideas point of view. In the 2000s, Timisoara was the place where the first studies about the Romanian social-political evolution were elaborated; where the first debates concerning concepts that define collective identities, ethnicity, nation and people were organized; where the plurilingual and multicultural universe of the Banat and Vojvodina were explained. Reinhart Koselleck visited Timisoara and inaugurated the vast field of

interdisciplinary research. Inside the academic life of the same city – Timișoara – the first international doctoral school of conceptual history was established, within the cooperation frame between the West University of Timisoara and the University of Aachen, and the first Centre for Conceptual Studies in Romania.

For all the above, I have to thank for the support of many institutions and individuals. Therefore, I express my gratitude to the Volkswagen Foundation in Germany and to the National Council for Scientific Research in Romania for supporting these projects.

Also, I address my gratitude to the leadership of the West University of Timișoara, for its constant support for the research activities, for ensuring proper infrastructure, for promoting innovative topics.

I would like to thank personally to my colleague, Armin Heinen, of the Aachen University with whom I have successfully cooperated during the past decade, succeeding to promote together a series of studies upon conceptual history and history of concepts in Romania and neighbouring countries and to publish the first volume on Romanian conceptual history.

Also, I would like to add special thanks to my colleagues and friends who joined me in this endeavour and who understood the aims of these scholarly meetings, and the importance of reforms in the historiographies of the region. In this respect, I thank Sorin Antohi, Adrian Cioroianu, Balázs Trencsényi and Constantin Iordachi.

My appreciation goes also to Hans-Erich Bödeker, Reinhart Koselleck's bright disciple, a pre-eminent scholar of whose constant friendship and trust I have enjoyed during these years and whose methodological contributions and theoretical interpretations contributed to each conference of conceptual history organized in Timișoara.

All this led me to believe that there is a valuable academic community in the universities of this region and in Romania implicitly, and that every new conference of conceptual history is a challenge for reflecting upon the local and universal histories, upon the modern past and the recent past.