

REVIEW

Margrit Pernau 2008. *Bürger mit Turban. Muslime in Delhi im 19. Jahrhundert.* Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht. XII + 404 pp. ISBN 978-3-525-36843-5

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One of the key issues in conceptual history is whether it is possible to compare concepts in various languages. Reinhart Koselleck argued that comparison of concepts would require a kind of neutral meta language (Koselleck 1991). He referred to the citizen example.

One could add the comparison of *Volk* in German and *folk* in Scandinavian languages, *kansa* in Finnish, *peuple* in French, *populus* in Italian, *demos* in Greek, or *folk* or *people* in English and many other languages. Or bourgeoisie in French and English and *Bürgertum* in German. They all represent very different realities and histories.

However, is Koselleck's resignation in front of what he sees as an impossible undertaking necessary? Could not the disadvantage be turned into an advantage? Is not exactly the different histories represented by the different concepts the source of a rich historical understanding based on comparison of difference? Is the task really to look for the utopian neutral metalanguage? If the task is defined as the search of historical approximations through comparison of different languages and to discern historical moments or processes of conceptual mutations, convergences, divergences, demarcations and/or overlappings comparative conceptual history has a high potential.

Margrit Pernau provides an excellent demonstration of the potential of comparative conceptual history in her path-breaking recent book on the 19th century "Bürgertum" in India. She thus goes beyond the European frame. Her main question is to what extent it makes sense to label certain Muslim groups in Delhi in the 19th century as Bürger.

Delhi was the old capital of the Mughal Empire, the Islamic imperial power of the Indian subcontinent which began in the early 1500s, ruled most of the subcontinent by the late 17th and early 18th centuries, and ended in the mid-19th century after the bloody British crushing of the great revolt in 1857. The last Emperor, whose rule was restricted to the city of Delhi, was imprisoned and exiled to Burma. The British informal empire so far was transformed into formal.

With the failure of the revolt the Mughal nobility lost power. British land reforms reinforced their decline. However, new economic and cultural groups benefited by the changing political framework, in particular the merchants, but also growing number of specialists in the administration, lawyers and medical officers, ascending groups which in Germany would be called *Wirtschafts- und Bildungsbürger*. Like in Germany these entangled groups developed feelings of community and belonging. Religion was in India like in Germany – and in Europe beyond Germany – an important factor in these developments. In India like in Europe economic and political innovations went hand in hand with religious reform orientations focusing on piety. The religious reform orientations were efficient instruments in the demarcation to the old nobility and in the self-identification as a social group. The religiosity of the Muslim *Bürger* was an important instrument in the construction of identity and community. Pernau confutes the secularisation thesis on a declining relationship between modernity and religion. The Delhi localities were modernising communities far from the label of pre-modern.

Pernau's strategy is not to use the German *Bürger* concept as the gauge and then evaluate the Indian case in terms of deviation and deficit from the standard. Neither is her strategy to focus on similar concepts in Hindu like ashraf. She departs from the Bürger concept but expands its meaning through the integration of Indian experiences in terms of similarities and differences. In her own formulation: the *Bürger* is conceivable not only with topper but also with turban. Pernau demonstrates similarities and parallels without ignoring the

obvious differences such as political goals and institutions (e. g. degree of *Rechtstaatlichkeit*) as well as possibilities of political participation. Another important difference is that no proper capitalistic industrial bourgeoisie emerged in Delhi. The point is, however, that she does not interpret these differences in terms of deviations from an assumed Western standard. She responds in a very constructive way to Koselleck's problem about translation and does so by expanding his European horizon.

So far historians have analysed *Bürgertum* and bourgeoisie exclusively as European phenomenon. Since Marx the focus has been on the bourgeoisie as the carrier of a particular Western modernity with little relevance in other parts of the world, which was understood mainly in terms of pre-modern,

The *Bürger* takes on universal proportions in the approach by Margrit Pernau under transgression of its German/European origin. Instead of being just the standard, it becomes a wider term with a high global variety but also with shared features. Pernau indicates with her method that an amendment of, for instance, Chinese or Arabic cases would indeed contain steps towards a global conceptual history transcending the conventional European-centred one.

The focus is not on the language in a narrow lexicographic sense but in the historical context where she maps out detailed patterns of cultural, social, economic and political practices and strategies of cooperation as well as resistance in the meeting between the Indian population and its colonial masters. Pernau connects to recent post-structuralist approaches, which insist on the need to contextualise and examine local environments and their language-games unbridled by over-determining pressures. She insists on the importance of micro-scenarios and the potential of local cultures. At the same time she demonstrates the importance of retaining a view on the global dimension of entanglements, oppositions and reinforcing connections and demarcations.

The term entanglement has over the last decades become fashionable in attempts to transgress the predominating methodological nationalism in social sciences. The term has been particularly frequent in connection to the governance and network language under the overarching globalization narrative where the issue of power more or less disappeared.

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In the approach of Pernau the question of power is central. She indicates the methodological possibility of a new kind of conceptual global history which breaks with inherent structural teleologies and emphasises the preliminaries, the fragility and the openness of social arrangements and institutions under constant negotiation and re-negotiation. Pernau's book lays out the potential of a new kind of social theory based on historicity. The entanglements of the social relations across cultural and political borders are full of power implications; demarcation and resistance is an alternative attitude not less probable than identification.

Bürger mit Turban awarded the 2008 prize for the best habilitation thesis in Germany to Margrit Pernau, which is an indication of a particularly innovative research achievement. The new trend that the book indicates is a social theory with a global dimension which goes beyond the traditional Western centre and discerns more complex interactions and power relationships and which resolutely breaks with the teleology of the globalisation and the modernisation narratives under recognition of the role of human action and responsibility. Macro structures are composed of micro practices and negotiations. However, everything is not context and chance. Certain patterns are discernible in the careful reconstruction of a web that transgresses Europe in new ways. The analysis of context provides meaning. Modernity is not postmodern.