Ideologies, Clifford Geertz once remarked, are cognitive maps “of problematic social reality.” The semantic variations of political and social key concepts in particular contexts represent, like a map, different historical landscapes, based on specific experiences of the past and expectations of the future. Maps imply travel, and travelling in the landscape of ideologies implies contact between speakers, the transfer of interpretative knowledge and hence the semantic transformation of concepts as they are used in arguments. All these elements underline the importance of translational processes for any understanding of semantic change. Every translation involves a conceptual movement between the translatable and the translated, and indeed translation can be described not only as a metaphor, but as a method of semantic analysis. From this perspective, translations have both a diachronic and a synchronic dimension: they stand behind conceptual changes over time, from past past to past present, but they also represent the synchronic export and import of concepts and of their semantic structure between languages and vocabularies, thus reflecting the transfer of hermeneutic knowledge needed to articulate them in discourse.

A comparative history of concepts brings together both dimensions of translation by stressing the diachronic change over time and the synchronic variations of semantic structures. The former points to translations in one national language community, the other to contact and translation within and between different national languages. If taken together, the
comparison not only focuses on isolated conceptual histories, but also on processes of semantic transfer and interaction as well as on conceptual overlap.

Two hermeneutical problems are involved here, which the semantics of *liberal/liberalism* can help to illustrate. First, many comparative studies still tend to equate the meaning of the ideological semantics of *liberalism* in different countries, as if it meant basically a similar canon of ideas, movements, or parties. They do not take into consideration the distinct contemporary meanings of *liberal* in different historical contexts. The neglect of this semantic aspect results in a trap of semantic nominalism, i.e. the unconsidered transfer of a concept’s semantics from the contemporary political language of one country to the political discourse of another. This implicit equation of contemporary meanings in different contexts conceals an important focus of experiences and expectations, in other words the possibility of replacing the category of universal European liberalism with a spectrum of distinct histories of contemporary meanings of *liberal*. This is in contrast to a traditional history of ideas approach which would point to the singular of *European liberalism*, quasi “distilled” from the realm of ideas to which *liberalism* could be applied *avant la lettre*, i.e. before the concept actually existed in contemporary political discourse. Yet the semantics of political concepts are not the same in different countries. Different contexts point to the problem of how distinct experiences of the past and past expectations of the future were translated into distinct political and social discourses, and how that process was stimulated by the import, export, and translation of foreign concepts and their semantic fields. In other words, it is not possible to sum up the meaning of French *libéralisme*, German *Liberalismus*, Italian *liberalismo* and English *liberalism* in a universal concept of *European Liberalism*. Behind linguistically “equal” or “similar” words lie essentially different experiences, interests and expectations.

Second, there is what may be called a translational circle. The results of a comparative semantic analysis need to be re-translated into a language. Theoretically a researcher in such a situation would need a meta-language in order to avoid this problem of *Rückübersetzung*, such as a meta-theory.

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