

The Architecture of Concepts: The Historical Formation of Human Rights, by Peter de Bolla, New York: Fordham University Press, 2013, 298 pp., \$35.00 paperback, ISBN: 9780823254392

Book Review by Scott Nicholas Romaniuk¹

Abstract: *How do concepts come to be? And, in particular, how current conceptions of international human rights are built upon a particular conceptual architecture? Peter de Bolla, author of *The Architecture of Concepts: The Historical Formation of Human Rights*, addresses these questions in incremental steps, building on what scholars currently understand when it comes to concepts more generally. The methodology is based on the use of the Eighteenth Century Collection Online (ECCO) digital archives predominantly, with the aim of constructing data-dependent descriptions of conceptual architectures. The author, thus, looks at conceptual networks and the extensive relationships found within them so as to direct researchers in conducting future plotting of connectivities within networks. The opening chapter looks at concepts as a way of thinking. Concepts are treated as a metaphorical “subway or tube maps project into multiple dimensions.” The author then focuses on the eighteenth century and its printed materials. The use of large data allows the author to extrapolate matters of language spanning large communities. The following chapters combine the issue of creating conceptual dispositions with poignant debates about rights that pervaded the First Continental Congress during the 1770s, while repositioning the items of inquiry, mentioned previously, by challenging the assumption of the origin(s) of human rights.*

Keywords: *conceptualisation, conceptual networks, human rights*

“Where do ideas come from?” The question inherently possesses the ability to offshoot a massive range of follow-up questions and inquiries delving into a deep abyss of formulation and conceptualisation. The three distinct aims of Peter de Bolla’s *The Architecture of Concepts* are cultivated by this very basic question. De Bolla addresses this spacious question through a very well defined and applied methodology based on the use of the Eighteenth Century Collection Online (ECCO) digital archives predominantly but among others with the aim of “constructing data-dependent descriptions of conceptual architectures” (p. 7). Frequencies of word usage as “singular terms” and as “concatenations in phrases” are yielded from what was surely a tedious process of measuring the dispersion of concepts “across the culture at large” (pp. 7-8). De Bolla’s study is not only concerned with the formation of concepts; he also

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assesses how conceptual forms come to be. Thus de Bolla looks at conceptual networks and the extensive relationships found within them so as to direct researchers in conducting future plotting of connectivities within networks. The study design, as quickly becomes apparent, provides distinct vantage points from which subsequent studies may be undertaken.

The book's five chapters represent incremental steps in building on what scholars currently *understand* when it comes to concepts more generally. Its primary aims (including the construction of a useful methodology to facilitate future research) are guided by the author's interest in human rights. "My argument outlines," as stated by de Bolla, "how current conceptions of international human rights are built upon a particular conceptual architecture that has deep roots in the Enlightenment" (p. 2). Initially, the idea of this study would probably suggest that de Bolla engages specifically with discourse. This is not the case. Lending itself to a Foucauldian culture, exploration is undertaken beneath the level of discourse. By theorizing words, phrases, sentences, and statements, de Bolla introduces readers to the "conceptual turn" considered overlooked for too long.

The first chapter looks at concepts as a way of thinking. Concepts are treated as a metaphorical "subway or tube maps project into multiple dimensions" (p. 4). Concepts and how we treat them have much to do with the lives of ordinary people, ideas across culture, and explanations that can be found within and across societies. One such time period dealing with all of these elements is projected throughout the second chapter. De Bolla focuses his analytical lens on the eighteenth century and its printed materials. Handling this period through the use of large data allows the author to extrapolate *matters* of language spanning large communities. Although it would prove extremely difficult, if not absolutely impossible, to build a complete record of culture de Bolla adds significant value to his study by assuming a large corpus of data. Chapter three combines the issue of creating conceptual dispositions with poignant debates about rights that pervaded the First Continental Congress during the 1770s. Maintaining the analytical relationship between chapters proves anything but tenuous for de Bolla who states, "[t]he major preoccupation of the third chapter is to provide a detailed account of how a transformation in conceptual architecture became common currency in a community" (p. 6). The fourth chapter repositions items of inquiry located in chapter two by challenging the assumption of the origin(s) of human rights.

How could one expect a study about the architecture of concepts to be read with a narrow resolution? It might seem axiomatic that building the foundations for such a study would be intrinsically problematic. Nonetheless, even de Bolla speaks of the difficulty of such a task. Internalizing the primary question of this book is a personal matter to and for each and every scholar in his or her own field(s). Explanations, rather than distinct answers, to de Bolla's question "will to a great extent be determined by the uses to which a specific discipline wishes to put the category 'concept'." (p. 19). Contemporary inquiries from such thinkers and writers as Philip van Loocke, Andy Clark, Morris Weitz, and Quentin Skinner support de Bolla's attachment to disambiguating words and concepts—an ordering that is likely to spawn vociferous debate. The author builds on the Cambridge school, claiming that, "[i]t is useful to cantilever this historical account of conceptuality with the cognitive-science approach because the two intellectual traditions [*Begriffsgeschichte* acting as contender] cast very different lights on my object of inquiry" (p. 25).

Historical formation of the term *human rights* takes readers to an exploration of the historical settings and its encounter within contentious locution. The very substance of conceptuality and the nature in which words and concepts interact is featured. This is an exercise in discovering linguistic behaviour. De Bolla states:

One might very well be able to negotiate the world and one's self with a conceptual lexicon that contains a proportion of "fuzzy" concepts, those that lack coherence or consistency. This observation can be taken in a number of directions with respect to my initiating question about the "invention" of human rights: It may have been the case that the period may not have had access to a fully formed concept of human rights, or perhaps it created a kind of concept *in potentia*, an as yet to be fully formed or coherent conceptual entity (p. 51).

The concept of human rights has received enormous attention within the fields of history and political thought especially. It is only natural (and absolutely productive) for these discussions from one discipline or another to interact and become subsequently layered. Michael P. Zuckert, Francisco Suarez, and Hugo Grotius, to name a few, are intellectuals who became the object of attention for their work on the "natural rights republic," ideas surrounding the natural law perspective, and modern secular theory of natural law, respectively. Explorations of de Bolla's quantitative data, guided by a solid typology, reveal sharp distinctions between concept usage, connections they share, and their frequency of use over different periods of time. These data suggest (the results of intricate historical formation and comparative historical analysis), as de Bolla expresses, "that we need to attenuate the common assumption that, over the course of the Anglophone eighteenth century, rights were increasingly misunderstood as subjective" (p. 82).

The tedious efforts that bring about this unusual book should not be overshadowed by the author's focus on the issue of human rights. To be sure, this is a very pressing issue in contemporary society and should find that efforts to understand its roots and historical implications are made in tall order. However, as important as the topic is, de Bolla's methodological *testing* is the most fascinating aspect of this book. Prickly terms such as "democracy" and "liberty" receive analytical treatment whereby a "forensics" fleshes-out the elasticity of concepts through their grammar and syntax. This is very much an exercise of applying both a broad and targeted approach. Though extremely quantitative, de Bolla's analysis carries a strong element of taciturnity. Overwhelmingly calculated analyses tend to abandon a more humanistic side of scholarship, which in this case is somewhat of an oddity given the focus on a very *human* matter. To that end, what is identified as particular usage and which concepts pave the way for others needs to be plugged-in to social- and cultural-specific contexts.

There is value in highlighting the social-constructivist view in order to understand the world and those many traits within it. De Bolla's work would benefit from greater attention on the narrative of phenomena so as to *synthesize* significant misconceptions. Others might agree that the matter of human rights is more than just a numbers game. But the abstract concept of human rights might welcome the application of very different approaches to understanding what this concept is, where it came from, and where it is heading. Though future studies on this topic will illuminate the value of diverse intellectual approaches there is little doubt that the product of de Bolla's perspective in tackling the matter and contributing to methodological scholarship especially should certainly be met with substantial praise.