

# Concepta

## The Political Rhetoric of Isms

University of Helsinki, June 14–15, 2016

Convenors: Helge Jordheim (Oslo), Jussi Kurunmäki (Stockholm),  
and Jani Marjanen (Helsinki)

Organized by the project *The Political Rhetoric of Isms* at the University of Helsinki and  
*Concepta: International Research School in Conceptual History and Political Thought*

Isms form a great part of our political, cultural, and scholarly language. It would be quite difficult to conduct a serious conversation on literature, music, religion, or sciences without isms like “romanticism,” “classicism,” “neorealism,” “constructivism,” “Freudianism,” or “Platonism.” And it would be hard to imagine any news broadcasting on politics without words such as “liberalism,” “conservatism,” “communism,” “feminism,” or “multiculturalism.” It is perhaps illustrative that the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides entries for 2,932 words that end in an ism. Furthermore, the ism suffix has spread to nearly all languages either as a direct adaptation, or as a sign that roughly corresponds to the idea of an ism. In short: the use of ism is an irreplaceable feature of political and social language globally.

In debate, isms tend to be used to reduce a complex figure of thought into one word. By doing this, isms have often been a way of forging a long tradition of thought (e.g. Aristotelianism), pointing toward a future state of things (e.g. socialism), including or excluding strands of thought (e.g. true or false liberalism), delineating a set of unwanted practices (e.g. racism), or labeling an intellectual or political movement (e.g. feminism). In

many cases, isms have been a way of setting the agenda for debate, making them unavoidable for anyone who wants to be heard in public life.

This Concepta Research Seminar is interested in studying the conceptual history of isms from a comparative perspective. It assumes that different ism concepts are related, and that the rhetorical potential and temporal properties of the ism concepts have changed over time. While some concepts are obviously more closely linked (e.g. socialism and communism) than others (e.g. anachronism and multiculturalism), we still presume that not only the main word in an ism (e.g. terror in terrorism), but also the suffix itself is contested and used for various rhetorical purposes. Isms are often seen as typical movement concepts of the modern era, but their use goes much further back in history. There are crucial shifts in the history of individual isms as well as the use of the suffix itself that merit closer scrutiny.

By bringing together scholars working on the conceptual history of ism concepts, we seek to explore how isms have been used in a variety of discourses, languages, and periods of time. We encourage scholars in all stages of their careers to submit paper proposals with a tentative title and an abstract of no more than 500 words to [jani.marjanen@helsinki.fi](mailto:jani.marjanen@helsinki.fi) and [jussi.kurunmaki@sh.se](mailto:jussi.kurunmaki@sh.se) by April 5.

All papers should include analysis of historical examples of ism concepts in use. We prioritize papers that focus on the contextual reading of sources and show that the author is familiar with conceptual history and/or contextualist intellectual history. In your proposal, please also state if you need a travel stipend to come to Helsinki.

<http://www.concepta-net.org/>