

History in the Plural: An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck

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In some ways it is a scandal that it has taken until now for an English-language book on the thought of Reinhard Koselleck to appear. Then again, as Olsen writes in the introduction to this work, Koselleck has always been somewhat of an outsider *vis-a-vis* the historical profession. The project he is best known for, the seven volumes of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, is still to be translated into English, although a couple of collections of his essays have appeared in English translation. The title of the book refers to Koselleck's aim to deconstruct all utopian and relativist notions of history in the singular, with a view to putting forward the notion of history in the plural.

Koselleck was born in Germany in 1923, and was drafted into the war effort in 1941. In 1945 he was captured by the Russians, and was made to carry out working duties at Auschwitz before spending 15 months in a POW camp in what is now Kazakhstan. Koselleck was thus part of the generation of post-war German academics who 'in various ways defined their identities, interests and beliefs with reference to their experiences of National Socialism, war and captivity' (p. 14). After his release Koselleck attended the University of Heidelberg, where he studied history, philosophy and sociology. Olsen argues that five scholars had a key influence on the intellectual development of Koselleck. His doctoral supervisor was Johannes Kuhn, and from him Koselleck learned his trade as a historian, as well as developing Kuhn's theme of the historical problem of tolerance. From Karl Löwith's *Meaning & History* – which Koselleck helped to translate – he took the idea of secularized eschatology, as well as scepticism towards the idea of history as a single progressive project. Carl Schmitt became an informal mentor to Koselleck while he worked on his

dissertation, and Koselleck developed Schmitt's reflections on Germany's defeat into a theory of how the 'vanquished' in history are those who develop new methodological tools and insights into history in their attempt to understand their negative experiences. Hans George-Gadamer arrived at Heidelberg in 1949, and his hermeneutical approach to history influenced Koselleck's view of how humans understand and act within the world. Finally, the work of Martin Heidegger inspired two of Koselleck's most important scholarly projects: an anthropologically based assumption of how history is created/understood and a theory of historical time conceived through understanding the historical actor's conceptions of time.

Koselleck's 1953 dissertation was published in 1959 as *Kritik und Krise: Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*, translated in English as *Critique and Crisis; Enlightenment and the Pathogenesis of Modern Society*. The book can be situated alongside a number of works written in the post-1940 period attempting to investigate the pre-conditions of totalitarianism, although Koselleck does not explicitly set out to investigate this in the way that others did. Nonetheless, like authors such as Adorno, Popper and Arendt, Koselleck traced the antecedents of totalitarian thought back to the Enlightenment. The idea of pathogenesis is that the modern world was born with a disease that would cause its own destruction. The thesis of *Kritik und Krisis* leans heavily on Löwith's aforementioned concept of secularized eschatology: the idea that the Enlightenment was characterised by a shift in the perception of time, and therefore of historical awareness. He also borrowed from Carl Schmitt's arguments concerning the secularization of theological forms of power. Unlike Löwith and Schmitt, however, Koselleck did not contrast an 'inferior' modern world in favour of a return to earlier conditions. The normative agenda of *Kritik und Krisis* was the necessity of striking a proper relation between morality and politics. Olsen argues that although the book was informed by concrete political reflections informed by a theoretical-methodological framework, ultimately it avoids addressing the question of which standards and rules responsible politics should be conducted under.

Kritik und Krisis also saw the beginning of Koselleck's interest in the evolution of concepts: the book explores the development of ideas such as 'critique', 'crisis', 'revolution' and 'politics' from Ancient Greece to the Enlightenment. Koselleck has often spoken of the influence of Schmitt on his decision to looking at how conceptual meanings had changed, but has never elaborated much beyond acknowledging the influence. Olsen examines in detail a letter Koselleck wrote to Schmitt in 1953 in order to shed some light on this. As he had done in *Kritik und Krisis*, Koselleck laid waste to the idea of historicism, and presented the foundations of what he called an 'ontology of history' – which owed its debt to Heidegger. Koselleck took Heidegger's notion of finality as his starting point: finality is a brutal fact of human existence, which no relativity can permeate and no human life can escape from. However, the 'historical space' which human beings move in contains more existential features than simply finality, specifically four conceptual pairs – man/woman, master/slave, parent/children, and geopolitical concepts which he later defined as inner/outer. Unlike that of Heidegger, Koselleck's historical space emphasises the importance of social and interpersonal relations. It was by means of these concepts that Koselleck was able to accommodate 'a Schmittian conception of an essentially political society in permanent conflict, and a normative notion of how such conflicts were to be contained, in his ideas for an ontology of history' (p. 66).

Koselleck's ontology of history was also intended to have a practical impact. The Cold War was one of the mainsprings of Koselleck's interest in studying the structure of history, and he believed that by disclosing its historical roots, one might find one's way to bringing an end to the conflict: the 'truth of such a historical ontology should be demonstrable by means of every correct prognosis, and it must also have a prognostic character itself, inasmuch as it can devalue the historical philosophical prophecies' (p. 69). Historical writing was not to be undertaken 'for itself' – it should be useful and have practical implication for conduct in life. Koselleck did not expound specific political visions or plans for the future, but rather thought that in pointing out the anthropological conditions for history and politics, the dangers of ignoring these conditions would become apparent.

Kritik und Krisis received a mixed reception upon publication. The book was eventually recognised as a classic in the field of Enlightenment studies, but the initial reviews of the book were on whole unenthusiastic. This was partly a problem of timing: the delay in publishing the thesis due to a lack of funds meant that in 1959, the political climate had changed. The easing of Cold War tensions meant that political

language had changed: the word 'crisis' had been replaced by 'detente'. Additionally, Koselleck was criticised for his intellectual affinity with Carl Schmitt, particularly by Jürgen Habermas, who accused Koselleck of being a mere mouthpiece for Schmitt's ideas. The reviews also emphasised Koselleck's status as an outsider in the historical profession. Helmut Kuhn wrote that the 'book in front of us is not a piece of historical writing. One might define it as a historical-philosophical situational analysis that is based upon historical erudition' (p. 86). There was one positive review of the book however – unsurprisingly, the reviewer was Carl Schmitt.

After completing his thesis Koselleck spent a brief spell lecturing in England in Bristol between 1954 and 1955. In late 1955 he was offered a position back at Heidelberg, and moved back to Germany. Initially he considered writing something on the Congress of Vienna, based around an analysis of the concept of 'legitimacy', the meaning of which had shifted as a result of onset of modernity. However, the arrival of Werner Conze as professor at Heidelberg put paid to this. Conze was not keen on the topic, and convinced Koselleck to work on a socio-historical theme centred on tension between state and society in the Prussian *Vormärz*. Conze would go on to play an important role in Koselleck's work on Prussia, and would become an important collaborator on the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. Like Koselleck, he had ended the Second World War in Russian captivity, and saw his historical project as bringing socio-political order to the chaos of modernity. Both men looked to go beyond historicism in combining history and sociology, although they both had differing conceptions of sociology.

Published in 1967, Koselleck's second book, *Preußen Zwischen Reform und Revolution*, focused on the successes and failures of Prussian constitutional reform 1815–45. It differed from *Kritik und Krisis* in that rather than consisting of a chronological, progressive narrative, it presented a single argument from a variety of angles. The three entities analysed in the book – the Prussian Law Code, Administration and Social Movement – were organized along temporally different planes echoing the famous tripartite structure of Fernand Braudel's *The Mediterranean*. Koselleck had met Braudel during the latter's visit to Heidelberg, and although Braudel is not referenced in *Preußen Zwischen Reform und Revolution*, Koselleck later acknowledged his influence. But whereas Braudel used his three layers as dividers, Koselleck wanted to analyse the interaction among them.

What holds the book together is 'its focus on the activity of the Prussian bureaucrats – more specifically, on how the bureaucrats as main actors in the reforms sought to navigate within the space of possibilities that had been opened up on the threshold of "modernity"' (p. 136). A study of Prussian history was nothing new in itself – Ranke, Droysen, Treitschke and Ritter had all tilled that particular field. But Koselleck's book did not go down the route of Prusso-centric nationalism, but rather that of social history, following on from the methods of Werner Conze. In the introduction, Koselleck stated that his book 'made use – in the traditional way – of the given texts, but transcends them, and more so than biographical or political historical writing, in pursuit of supra-individual problems the texts do not always bring to words, at least never explicitly' (p. 137). Olsen argues that Koselleck's interpretation of the period must be viewed in comparison with the standard work in the field at the time, Hans Rosenberg's *Bureaucracy, Aristocracy and Autocracy: The Prussian Experience 1600–1815*. Rosenberg had condemned the triumph of what he saw as bureaucratic absolutism, and also linked these conservative elements to the idea of a *Sonderweg* that culminated in the Nazis. Koselleck however, saw the Prussian administration having made an admirable attempt to mediate between various social groups in order to steer Prussia through the difficult transition into modernity. In Koselleck's account, blame was not to be ascribed to any particular actor, but rather, the historical forces of modernity set loose by the French Revolution. As one perceptive reviewer of the book noted, modernity in Koselleck's writings is 'portrayed as a unified, destructive, and unstoppable force' (p. 147). Nonetheless, the weight of evidence that Koselleck brought to play in the book meant his arguments could not merely be dismissed as teleology in sociological dress.

The reviews of the *Preußen Zwischen Reform und Revolution* were almost universally positive, and earned Koselleck a job at the University of Bochum. His next project would be that with which he is now universally associated with, the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. When the final volume was published in 1992, it consisted of 119 articles in seven volumes, written by 109 contributors. Quite a feat, considering the

original project as conceived in 1957 was supposed to consist of ten contributors examining conceptual change in the 19th century – the completed project encompassed 2,000 years, from ancient Greece to the Weimar Republic! Koselleck ‘was the central theoretical, methodological and editorial driving force behind the project’, also contributing ‘a number of renowned articles to the various volumes’ (p. 168).

It is interesting to see how Koselleck defined what a ‘concept’ was, particularly given the focus in English-language philosophy on the idea of reference in the past 50 years or so. Koselleck argued there was a difference between a word and a concept; the latter ‘must retain multiple meanings in order to be a concept. The concept is tied to a word, but it is at the same time more than a word’ (p. 172). A concept is not a narrowly defined linguistic expression; ‘rather it belongs to the epistemic sphere, though this sphere can seemingly not be separated entirely from the linguistic’ (p. 172). Semantic change and social change are inextricably linked, and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* aimed to be something more than a mere history of ideas in the Arthur Lovejoy sense of the phrase. In a contribution to a Festschrift for Karl Löwith, Koselleck gave a preview of the conceptual historical investigation he would pursue in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. In the article Koselleck argued that in the transition to the modern world history had lost its status as the ‘teacher of life’. The Greeks had seen history as a cyclical affair, while the Christians had looking forward to the second coming of Christ and the final judgement. However, modernity began to see history as the unfolding of a sequence of new and singular events.⁽¹⁾ And this re-conception of history ontologically had implications for the writing of history: the future was now unknown, and therefore it was possible to plan it. Historical writing was now therefore easy prey for the aspirations of social-political groups and individuals, such as Karl Marx.

Where did Koselleck’s approach stand within the German hermeneutic tradition? As we have already seen, he was influenced by both Gadamer and Heidegger, but his approach also differs in important aspects as well. For Heidegger and Gadamer, language contained the totality of experience, and in adopting such a stance they lost a perspective on concrete languages, and their function as indicators and agents of historical change. They did not ‘regard languages as limited, as setting conditions for what is sayable at a certain time and place – and consequently, they did not realise such limits are changeable’ (p. 184). As Koselleck saw it, the fact that these limits are changeable means there must be experience beyond language. However, for Olsen, Koselleck’s deviation may be seen as ‘a contribution to, rather than a radical departure from the hermeneutic tradition, because it retains the basic assumptions about human historicity from Heidegger’s and Gadamer’s work’ (p. 184).

The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* won Koselleck a new position and reputation within the German historical profession. In the 1950s he had been known as an outsider; in the 1960s he was seen as someone working within the framework of his Professor’s program. Now however, he was ‘known as a scholar who had launched an innovative and promising research project and possessed the institutional resources to carry it out’ (p. 192). Koselleck and his fellow editors managed to attract a number of both established and upcoming scholars to contribute to the lexicon, and established contact with scholars from other disciplines to discuss theoretical-methodological questions. However, there was a hidden tension at the heart of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. The lexicon is regarded as Koselleck’s most innovative scholarly achievement, and the project established him in German academia. On the other hand, ‘the lexicon was not as innovative as often assumed, as it relied to a great extent on discursive features that he had already outlined in his earlier work, and its rigid theoretical and methodological presuppositions made it impossible to further renew with the framework’ (p. 196).

In the 1970s, Koselleck began to develop his idea of the need for a theory of historical time. In 1971’s ‘Wozu noch Historie?’, he argued that in order to make itself relevant and distinguish itself from the social sciences, history needed to develop a theory of historical times. Koselleck’s writings on the topic were somewhat unsystematic; he never wrote an overarching treatise on the subject, and his thoughts on the subject have to be gleaned from a number of articles. Olsen argues that there are two lines of research that need to be looked at with regards to Koselleck’s ideas on historical time. The first line of thought can be traced from the late 1960s to the late 1970s, exemplified in a collection of essays published in 1979 under the title *Vergangene Zukunft*. Once again, the ideas of Heidegger and Gadamer come to the forefront.

Koselleck developed the Heideggerian notion of Being as a temporal phenomenon infolding in the interaction between past, present and future into a theory of historical time that focuses upon the historical actor's conception of time and finality. He also made use of the Gadamerian concepts of experience, expectation and time developed in the latter's *Truth and Method*. The goal of the essays in *Vergangene Zukunft* was to 'decipher the changes in the relation among past, present and future and between experience and expectation during the *Neuzeit*' (p. 224).

In 2000 a collection of essays were published under the title *Zeitschichten* documenting Koselleck's thought on the idea of historical time from the 1980s onwards. At this point we see Koselleck returning to the Braudelian idea of temporal layers, in particular the idea that history contains three layers of temporal structures. The first layer is that of events, which human beings habitually experience as *singular*. These singular events are embedded in various layers of *recursive* structures that represent the second temporal layer. The singular is conditioned by recursive structures – 'certain *recursive* patterns provide events with common features, and at the same time the events are always characterized by a *singular* dimension' (p. 227). For instance, receiving a letter is of singular importance for the receiver – but the letter can only be received because of the established structure of the mail service. The third layer concerns a type repetition that is biological and anthropological in nature, and thus *transcends* history.

Koselleck did not aim to construct something like an all-encompassing methodological system. Rather, he 'offered something like a toolbox of compatible assumptions of what historical writing is and what can be done with it' (p. 233). There are several dilemmas that set fundamental limits with regards to what the historian can achieve; but these dilemmas entail possibilities through which valuable insights can be gained. In particular, Koselleck emphasised the problem that faces any writer of history: of the relationship and interaction between objectivity and partisanship. The tension between the two is directly a result of the birth of modernity. According to Koselleck, it was the German historian and theologian Chladenius (1710–59) who first argued that the experiential space of contemporaries is the epistemological kernel of all history. Although positional commitment is a presupposition of historical knowledge, this 'does not necessarily lead to a partisan account in which events and knowledge are intentionally obscured' (p. 234). However, this insight was lost in the 18th century, as truth and temporal perspective were seen as no longer being separable, which leads to the exclusion of the participating agent from the privileged position he had occupied prior to the 18th century.

Where does Koselleck stand in relation to the so-called 'linguistic turn' in the philosophy of history? Hayden White was a big fan of Koselleck's work, and has made a significant effort to promote it over the years. Koselleck reciprocated, writing an enthusiastic foreword to the German translation of *The Tropics of Discourse*. Unsurprisingly, Koselleck related White's focus on the linguistic aspects of representing historical experience to the German philosophical tradition of Gadamer/ Blumenberg. However, he also argued that White's interest in the metaphorical language of historical writing left little space for the domain of social reality. Koselleck had famously stated that the historian's sources provided a power of veto on false or unreliable representations of the past, and in a later interview he criticised White for ignoring source criticism as a check that would distinguish historical writing from fiction. That said, Koselleck did not bracket White with the French post-structuralists, whom he classed as out-and-out relativists.

On the face of it, it is somewhat paradoxical to speak of Koselleck as an ‘outsider’ in the historical profession. In 1973, he took up what at the time the only existing chair in Germany in theoretical history, at the University of Bielefeld, and worked there until 1988, when he retired following his 65th birthday. When he did so, ‘his work had won a degree of international admiration that enabled him to begin something like a second career as a guest professor and lecturer at academic institutions in various countries around the world, such as the United States, France and Israel’ (p. 253). Yet Koselleck himself always portrayed himself as someone whose work was constantly out of tune with the rest of the historical profession. To an extent this is correct – topics such as conceptual change have not really dominated the philosophy of history in the past 50 years or so. But as Olsen notes, even in the 1970s when Koselleck felt marginalized at Bielefeld, he had ‘an on-going and fruitful communication and collaboration with a huge number of scholars both inside and outside of the university and influenced a number of research agendas’ (p. 256).

At the risk of sounding like Kingsley Amis’ titular character Jim Dixon, Reinhart Koselleck’s work has been much neglected by writers on the philosophy of history; lost in a wave of scholarship on Hayden White and French post-structuralism perhaps. German post-war philosophical writing in this area has never been particularly fashionable, with the exception of maybe some of the work of Jürgen Habermas: even Gadamer’s work tends to be known second-hand. But there is much in Koselleck’s approach that would surely benefit philosophers of history, not least the idea that instead of one over-arching method, we might be better served to examine the epistemological limits of history and go on from there. Of course, post-structuralist writers might argue that this is in fact what they have been doing with their project for the past 30 years. But as we have seen, Koselleck, while recognising constraints on historians, had no time for the idea that history had little to distinguish it from fiction. He was interested in what historians *could* do, as opposed to what they could not, and understood it was not a case of fact vs. fiction, or subjectivity vs. objectivity – but rather, the essential tension between them was what made historical scholarship what it was. Such an attitude is surely essential for any future philosophy of history, regardless of what it may take.

Notes

1. This is the theme of Zachary Schiffman’s book *The Birth of the Past* (Cambridge, 2011). See my review - <<http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/1205> [2]> [accessed 18 June 2012].[Back to \(1\)](#)

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