Reinhart Koselleck, "*Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History" (1979)

Abstract

The following excerpt introduces Reinhart Koselleck's notion of *Begriffsgeschichte* (or conceptual history) and describes its independence from, and implications for, social history. Together with Werner Conze and Otto Brunner, Reinhart Koselleck (1923–2006) co-edited an eight-volume historical encyclopedia of political-social concepts (*Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, 1972–97). Entries (some over 100 pages long) on keywords such as "Bürger, Staatsbürger, Bürgertum," "Freiheit," or "Gleichheit" mapped the ways in which the transformation of social, political, and economic language in Germany was not only inflected by modernity but also actively shaped it. He is also known for coining the term "Sattelzeit" to refer to the politically and socially transformative era of 1750–1850.

Source

Begriffsgeschichte and Social History

According to a well-known saying of Epictetus, it is not deeds that shock humanity, but the words describing them. Apart from the Stoic point that one should not allow oneself to be disturbed by words, the contrast between "pragmata" and "dogmata" has aspects other than those indicated by Epictetus's moral dictum. It draws our attention to the autonomous power of words without the use of which human actions and passions could hardly be experienced, and certainly not made intelligible to others. This epigram stands in a long tradition concerned with the relation of word and thing, of the spiritual and the lived, of consciousness and being, of language and the world. Whoever takes up the relation of *Begriffsgeschichte* to social history is subject to the reverberations of this tradition. The domain of theoretical principles is quickly broached, and it is these principles which will here be subjected to an investigation from the point of view of current research.

The association of *Begriffsgeschichte* to social history appears at first sight to be loose, or at least difficult. For a *Begriffsgeschichte* concerns itself (primarily) with texts and words, while a social history employs texts merely as a means of deducing circumstances and movements that are not, in themselves, contained within the texts. Thus, for example, when social history investigates social formations or the construction of constitutional forms – the relations of groups, strata, and classes – it goes beyond the immediate context of action in seeking medium- or long-term structures and their change. Or it might introduce economic theorems for the purpose of scrutinizing individual events and the course of political action. Texts and their attributed conditions of emergence here possess only a referential nature. The methods of *Begriffsgeschichte,* in contrast, derive from the sphere of a philosophical history of terminology, historical philology, semasiology, and onomatology; the results of its work can be evaluated continually through the exegesis of texts, while at the same time, they are based on such exegesis.

This initial contrast is superficially quite striking. Once engaged methodologically, however, it becomes apparent that the relation of *Begriffsgeschichte* and social history is more complex than would be the case if the former discipline could in fact be reduced to the latter. This is immediately apparent when considering the domain of objects which the respective disciplines study. Without common concepts there is no society, and above all, no political field of action. Conversely, our concepts are founded in politicosocial systems that are far more complex

than would be indicated by treating them simply as linguistic communities organized around specific key concepts. A "society" and its "concepts" exist in a relation of tension which is also characteristic of its academic historical disciplines.

An attempt will be made to clarify the relation of both disciplines at three levels:

> To what extent *Begriffsgeschichte* follows a classical critical-historical method, but by virtue of its greater acuity, also contributes to the tangibility of sociohistorical themes. Here, the analysis of concepts is in a subsidiary relation to social history.

> To what extent *Begriffsgeschichte* represents an independent discipline with its own method, whose content and range are to be defined parallel to social history, while both disciplines, at the same time, mutually overlap.

> To what extent *Begriffsgeschichte* poses a genuine historical claim without whose solution an effective social history cannot be practiced.

There are two limitations on the following considerations: first, they do not deal with linguistic history, even as a part of social history, but rather with the sociopolitical terminology relevant to the current condition of social history. Second, within this terminology and its numerous expressions, emphasis will be placed on concepts whose semantic "carrying capacity" extends further than the "mere" words employed in the sociopolitical domain.

The Method of *Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History

So that the critical-historical implications of *Begriffsgeschichte* might here be demonstrated to be a necessary aid to social history, it is most convenient to begin with an example. It comes from the time of the French, and of the emergent industrial, revolutions; hence, from a zone that was to prove decisive for the development both of sociology and of sociohistorical questions.

Hardenberg, in his well-known September Memorandum of the year 1807, drew up guidelines for the reorganization of the Prussian state. The entire state was to be socially and economically restructured according to the experiences of the French Revolution. Hardenberg wrote:

"A rational system of ranks, not favoring one *Stand* over another, but rather providing the citizens of all *Stände* with their places alongside each other according to specific classes, must belong to the true needs of a state, and not at all to its immaterial needs."

In order to understand what is, for Hardenberg's future reform policy, a programmatic statement, an exegesis is required which, through a critique of the sources, can unlock the specific concepts which the policy contains. The transfer of the traditional differentiation between "true" and "immaterial" from the *Stände* to the state was a conception current for just half a century and will not be examined here. What is initially striking, however, is that Hardenberg opposes the vertical ranking of the *Stände* with a horizontal articulation of classes. The *Standesordnung* is evaluated pejoratively insofar as it implies the favoring of one *Stand* over another, while all members of these *Stände* are, at the same time, citizens and as such should be equal. In this statement they do, as citizens, remain members of a *Stand*; but their functions are defined "according to specific classes," and it is in this way that a rational system of ranks should arise.

Such a statement, liberally sprinkled as it is with politico-social expressions, involves, on the purely linguistic level, not inconsiderable difficulties, even if the political point, exactly on account of its semantic ambiguity, is clear. The established society of orders is to be replaced by a society of citizens (formally endowed with equal rights), whose membership in classes (yet to be defined politically and economically) should make possible a new, state-based system of ranks.

It is clear that the exact sense can be obtained only by reference to the complete Memorandum; but it is also necessary to take into account the situation of the author and the addressee. Due regard also must be paid to the political situation and the social condition of contemporary Prussia; just as, finally, the use of language by the author, his contemporaries, and the generation preceding him, with whom he shared a specific linguistic community, must be considered. All of these questions belong to the usual critical-historical, and in particular historical-philological, method, even if problems arise that are not soluble by this method alone. In particular, this concerns the social structure of contemporary Prussia, which cannot be adequately comprehended without an economic, political, or sociological framework for investigation.

Specific restriction of our investigation to the concepts actually employed in such a statement proves decisive in helping us pose and answer the sociohistorical questions that lie beyond the comprehension of such a statement. If we pass from the sense of the sentence itself to the historical arrangement of the concepts used, such as *Stand,* "class," or "citizen," the diversity of the levels of contemporary experience entering this statement soon becomes apparent.

When Hardenberg talks of citizens (*Staatsbürger*)*,* he is using a technical term that had just been minted, that is not to be found in the Prussian Civil Code, and that registered a polemical engagement with the old society of orders. Thus, it is a concept that is consciously deployed as a weapon in the struggle against the legal inequalities of the *Stände,* at a time when a set of civil rights which could have endowed the Prussian citizen with political rights did not exist. The expression was novel, pregnant with the future; it referred to a constitutional model yet to be realized. At the same time, at the turn of the century, the concept of *Stand* had an endless number of shades of meaning – political, economic, legal, and social – such that no unambiguous association can be derived from the word itself. Insofar as Hardenberg thought of *Stand* and privilege as the same thing, he critically undermined the traditional rights of domination and rule of the upper *Stände,* while in this context, the counterconcept was "class." At this time, the concept "class" possessed a similar variety of meanings, which overlapped here and there with those of *Stand.* Nevertheless, it can be said for the language in use among the German, and especially the Prussian, bureaucracies, that a class at that time was defined more in terms of economic and legal-administrative criteria than in terms of political status or birth. In this connection, for instance, the physiocratic tradition must be taken into account, a tradition within which the old *Stände* were first redefined according to economic criteria: a design which Hardenberg shared in its liberal economic intention. The use of "class" demonstrates that here a social model which points to the future is set in play, while the concept of *Stand* is related to a centuries-old tradition: it was once again given legal expression in the Civil Code, but the Code's ambivalence was already increasingly apparent and in need of reform.

Surveying the space of meaning of each of the central concepts employed here exposes, therefore, a contemporary polemical thrust; intentions with respect to the future; and enduring elements of past social organization, whose specific arrangement discloses a statement's meaning. The activity of temporal semantic construal simultaneously establishes the historical force contained within a statement.

Within the practice of textual exegesis, specific study of the use of politicosocial concepts and the investigation of

their meaning thus assumes a sociohistorical status. The moments of duration, change, and futurity contained in a concrete political situation are registered through their linguistic traces. Expressed more generally, social conditions and their transformation become in this fashion the objects of analysis.

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