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Evidenzwandel: On the Historicity of Concepts, Monuments, and the Visual Sphere

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Evidenzwandel: On the Historicity of Concepts, Monuments, and the Visual Sphere

The brief contribution I propose in the framework of this blog centers on what I take to be a fundamental concept that has emerged in the discourse of contemporary historical theory over the last decades. My analysis is admittedly hypothetical, not only due to its theoretical character, but also because I propose to interpret the nuances of the term *Evidenzwandel* in a language that is not my native tongue and that has no exact equivalent in English. Be this as it may, the prominence of this concept in contemporary historical theory and its singular role in demarcating the present situation of historical reflection merits an attempt at elucidation.

I. Preconceptions Incorporated in Concept, Language, and Image

A passage from Reinhart Koselleck's introduction to the multi-volume work *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* will serve to map out the semantic depth of this term. In this introduction, which was first printed in 1972, Koselleck examined what he took to be the method and scope of *Begriffsgeschichte* that inspired this multi-volume lexicon. Koselleck specified that *Begriffsgeschichte*, beyond a simple adding together and systematization of documentary sources, aims to interpret the experience compressed in concepts ("in den Begriffen sich niederschlagende Erfahrung") and, in light of this interpretation, to inquire about the "Evidenzwandel" that comes to the fore in different epochs as it is articulated in concepts through language.¹

To my ear, the word *Evidenzwandel* is laden with a series of different connotations. It can refer to a transformation in what is accepted as evidence (i.e. proof, source) in an attempt to verify an assertion. In a more general sense, it may also signify a mutation in what is broadly taken to *be evident*. At this more general level it does not need to be a topic of reflection and may function in terms of preconceptions that are for the most part taken for granted. Recent translators of the word *Evidenz* (in this general phenomenological sense) often render it, and justly so, as what is taken to be "self-evident."² The word *Evidenzwandel* is highly suggestive for its way of indicating changes in the fundamental beliefs of an epoch. It signals points of radical *discontinuity* between different periods in regard to the kind of evidence

that is put forward to assert the veracity of basic assumptions and to forge consensus concerning what is broadly accepted to be self-evident.

In his work in the domain of *Begriffsgeschichte* Koselleck did not limit his analysis to the problem of historical discontinuity, and important aspects of his theoretical work in the years after the composition of the introduction to *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* were devoted to the question of how it might be possible for the historian, in light of successive periods of *Evidenzwandel*, to demarcate lines of continuity linking together past and present. His reflection on the perspectival character of human historical understanding in Chladenius and Herder made him particularly sensitive to the problematic implications of claims to designate such lines of historical continuity traversing different historical periods that had been brought to light in the post-Hegelian world of critical theories of history. In view of the ineluctable connection – the *Standortgebundenheit* – of fundamental human assumptions to the perspective of the epoch in which they emerge, historical understanding in any given period is limited in its capacity to reach beyond the contingency of its perspective to glean the meaning of history as a whole. This insight into the perspectival character of human historical understanding did not prevent Koselleck from prudently seeking for long-term structural continuities that might be capable of bridging the epochs of history in their singularity. In his writings of the 1970s and 1980s this attempt became a central aspect of his historical theory. As explored in essays like “Darstellung, Ereignis und Struktur” (1972), published in *Vergangene Zukunft*, these structures, which he also designates as “conditions of possibility of events,” include the relation between friend and foe, constitutional forms and types of political regime, economic interrelations, or the natural succession of generations that are potential sources of conflict or of the formation of traditions. Far from constituting static forms, these structural conditions, which overlap and are subject to change, account for the specific temporal dynamics of intersubjective relations.³

In the years that followed the publication of *Vergangene Zukunft*, Koselleck, as is well known, broadened the focus of his investigation and he increasingly examined the extra-linguistic aspects of experience, incorporated in images and iconographic forms, which were subject to modification in different historical periods. His work on monuments evinces a deep sensitivity to changes in visual codes corresponding to an underlying *Evidenzwandel* that characterizes a given period. The radicalism of such “mutations in visual experience” (“optischer Erfahrungswandel”), as he specified at the conclusion of his pioneering essay on war monuments, “Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftungen der Überlebenden,” may

indeed prove to be so acute that the significance of written inscriptions and visual codes may become opaque and lead to incomprehension or misconstrual by those who behold them in later periods: “[...] the identities that a monument is supposed to evoke melt away (zerrinnen), in part because of the dissipation of the sensuous receptivity of the proposed articulation of forms, in part because the uniquely patterned forms begin to speak another language than that they were originally supposed to speak.”⁴

II. Symbolic Embodiment and the Opacity of the Historical Past

This brings me to the central question raised by my comments thus far: How are we to interpret this veil of opacity that engulfs expressions of past interaction, both in the sphere of language and of visual images, which is the most immediate sign of shifts in basic group preconceptions? To my mind, in order to respond to this question it is necessary to identify different intersubjective levels that reach from active words and images conveyed in everyday communication to the passive depths of collective experience and remembrance that orient preconceptions without necessarily being brought to mind.

Beyond Koselleck’s specific attempt to identify long-term structural preconditions of historical experience, I would argue that the possibility of discerning heterogeneous linguistic and extra-linguistic articulations of experience, including such diverse phenomena as words, images, gestures, and styles, lies in their identification as embodied *symbols*. I take symbols in the broadest sense as configurations through which remembered experience in the diversity of its linguistic and extra-linguistic articulations is made communicable among groups. Symbols in this sense are not mere signs or signals, nor are they secondary additions to what has been given beforehand; they are spontaneous ways of conferring spatio-temporal pattern and intelligible order on experience. They configure “ways of world-making” to use Nelson Goodman’s apt expression, which orient group interaction in a common world.⁵ The archeological pursuit of complex interwoven layers of symbolic embodiment seeks to uncover the communicable scope of word, image, and gesture as they reach into the passive depths underlying intersubjective relations. Far from constituting uniform configurations, they are always fragmented among living contemporaneous generations according to group perspective.

As I interpret them, the symbolic reservoirs that underlie experience are subject to constant shifts in perspective as living, overlapping generations subside and are replaced by younger successors. Changes in the conditions of group experience and in the ways in which it is symbolically embodied in group remembrance correspond to fundamental mutations over time in what seems to be spontaneously evident both in the visual sphere as in that of linguistically articulated concepts.

At its deepest and most perdurable level, symbolic networks embodied in long-term group remembrance correspond to a group *êthos* or *habitus* that is brought to expression in such diverse forms as clothing, style, and gesture, as in everyday demeanor, convention, and ritual. If this passive level of embodied group memory may reveal remarkable resiliency over time, it is nonetheless subject to re-elaboration and to gradual effacement following the demise of living generations and the passage of their traces into the remote reaches of the historical past. Even where language and visual images retain their general intelligibility over the course of centuries, the nuances that living groups accord to them evoke an intrinsic sense that is specific to their context. These nuances are subject to subtle variability, which is often barely palpable, that ensues with the passage of a contemporary group into the past beyond all living memory. In this later context, the passive symbolic reservoirs that have been interwoven over the course of many generations may display a remarkable potency in their capacity to actively mobilize socio-political action where they are placed in the service of aims that reconfigure in a later context the original sense that was accorded to them.⁶ Where concepts and theoretical convictions and the wide consensus they command change over time, this *Evidenzwandel* is tacitly correlated with shifts in the passive symbolic networks – the spontaneous dispositions, habitual practices, and basic attitudes – that are not generally objects of scrutiny by those who adopt them.

III. The Example of Clothing: An *Evidenzwandel* Signified by Changing Visual Codes

I will conclude with an example to illustrate the hypothesis I have briefly elaborated thus far. Beyond the sphere of monuments and other visual symbols that were Reinhart Koselleck's preferred topics of analysis in his work on political iconography, I draw my example from the realm of clothing. If we take clothing in the widest symbolic sense, it is most immediately identifiable through its functional value as covering for the human body, protecting it from exposure to the elements. As a

symbolic function, it is intelligible as a spatio-temporal unity of form and material that, in most instances, may be traced to the historical context of its production. Clothes take on a host of other well-known symbolic connotations, in conformity with predominant social codes, through a variety of functions extending from hiding parts of the human body to expressing sexual difference and social rank.

In eighteenth century France, as elsewhere in Europe, clothing provided the most immediately evident visual expressions of symbolically configured differences between individuals and groups. Most notably, the practice of wearing breeches and hose, wigs, and other similar attire among males of the nobility and bourgeoisie distinguished them from the artisan and manual worker, who wore long pants without wigs or other typical attire adorned by other social classes. Following the collapse of the *Ancien Régime*, the revolutionaries sought to bring about the uniformization and democratization of clothing. The radicalization of the Revolution following the ratification of the constitution of 1792, which accorded universal manhood suffrage, was accompanied by the rise of the Jacobins and *Sans-Culottes*, who intensified the challenge directed against the sartorially articulated social hierarchy. This challenge found its visual complement in the typical attire of the *Sans-Culottes*: long pants and the red Phrygian cap that drew on the vivid symbolism of the liberated slave of Roman antiquity.

It would reach beyond the framework of this brief reflection to deal in detail with the topic of clothing and fashion in the French Revolution, which has been the object of numerous insightful investigations over the past years.⁷ I will limit my concluding remarks to one aspect that is particularly suggestive as an indicator of the complexity of this theme and of the often unnoticed distance that separates our world from the symbolic horizon that a closer investigation of this temporal slice of the historical past uncovers.

I draw attention here to two decrees of 25 floréal and 5 prairial, an II (May 14th and 24th, 1793), ratified at the height of the revolutionary Terror and of war with the great coalition of European powers, which aimed to set the standard for clothing worn by French officials, including judges, municipal authorities, or representatives of the people to the French armies; they also designated a “civil costume of the French citizen” (“habit civil du citoyen français”). This costume intended to provide distinctive apparel for all male citizens of the French nation (no models had been established at that point for women), a suit that the famous painter Jacques-Louis David was commissioned to design. A closer look at the models for this attire reveals its most striking quality: the absence of similarity between David’s models

for the French “habit civil” and the attire of the *Sans-Culottes* or of artisans and manual workers more generally! The republican attire was composed of a jacket and tight pants, a short cloak, and a round hat with feather. After David submitted a series of etchings produced by Dominique-Vivant Denon, the Committee of Public Safety enthusiastically accepted his model. However, following 9 thermidor in 1794 and the fall of Robespierre, the plans for the “habit civil” were definitively shelved. Later historians have often pointed out the curious incongruity between this project and the apparent ideals of the Revolution at its most radical moment. A century after the ratification of these decrees, Alphonse Aulard, the first historian to occupy the Chair of the History of the French Revolution at the Sorbonne, noted what he took to be the “absurdity” of this national costume, the “beautiful dream of an artist, with a certain dose of workshop bluff, if it is possible to smile at the grave passions of those times.”⁸ Be this as it may, the project to enact this artistic dream was taken seriously at the time, not only by David’s disciples but also by the members of the Committee of Public Safety who, in anticipation of its creation, ordered the printing of 20,000 engravings of this costume for distribution among members of the Convention and other officials in France.

What does this sartorial symbolism reveal? How might one interpret the incompatibility of these clothes with the social function of manual workers and artisans whose tasks were hardly adapted to such ornate and costly dress? How are we to understand the persuasive power in this radical revolutionary context of artistic fantasy in the quest for national identity through the legislation of elaborate visual codes? Scrutiny of available evidence only confirms the difficulty of interpreting the symbolic resonances associated with these clothes. Above all, it brings to light the subtle ways in which shifts in fundamental group assumptions, engaging visual codes, language, and concepts, animate a symbolic logic that is often recalcitrant to interpretation outside the temporal horizon of its original elaboration.

The example of visual codes associated with clothing, and of the margin of opacity of these codes for those in later periods who attempt to decipher them, brings us back full circle to our initial comments on the *Evidenzwandel*. The emergence of this fundamental concept in contemporary discourse is a clear sign of a heightened awareness of the radical discontinuity in the ground of historical experience that singularizes different historical epochs and marks the distance of the present from the historical past. In designating these radical shifts as successive expressions of an *Evidenzwandel*, Reinhart Koselleck’s theoretical work had the great merit of extending the scope of this concept beyond the threshold of

linguistic constructs encapsulating the experience that is specific to a given period to embrace the extra-linguistic sphere that he explored in his work on iconography and monuments. As the visual codes embodied by monuments illustrate, an *Evidenzwandel* over time, governing mutations in the preconceptions of predominant groups, may well render obscure in a later period what an earlier period had invested with supreme significance.

In the framework of my own interpretation, the discontinuity that the *Evidenzwandel* brings to the fore signals above all mutations in the broad *symbolic* configurations through which we interpret ourselves and our modes of coexistence with others in a common world. The identification of mutations in fundamental preconceptions adopted by predominant groups in given epochs at the level of profound and often barely palpable shifts in the meaning of embodied symbols places in evidence rifts in the texture of history that no philosophy of history and no political ideology, claiming to encompass history as a continuous process, is able to surmount. If this novel contemporary awareness that the complex stratifications of historical time – to borrow Koselleck's apt metaphor – are irreducible to the uniform schema of preconceived models, this insight also invites us to reorient historical interpretation to focus a renewed attention not only on mutations in language and concepts, but on the tacit shifts in a whole range of visual codes associated with such expressions as gesture, demeanor, apparel or style, embracing an extra-linguistic universe that is for the most part taken for granted in the period in which it predominates.

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Tags: clothing / human historicity / symbolic interaction

¹ "Sie fragt ausdrücklich nach dem jeweils epochalen Evidenzwandel, wie er sich sprachlich in den Begriffen artikuliert hat." Reinhart Koselleck, "Introduction", *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. Vol. 1, Stuttgart: Klett, 1972, xix. Unless otherwise specified all translations are my own.

² See for example the entry for the word "Evidenz" in the glossary of the *Blumenberg Reader*. As I understand it, Blumenberg and Koselleck interpret the term "Evidenz" in a similar manner to indicate the historicity of what is taken to be evident. This can be seen as early as Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise* and Blumenberg's talk "Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit des Romans," presented at the first session of the group *Poetik und Hermeneutik, Nachahmung und Illusion*, in which Koselleck participated. See *History, Metaphors, and Fables. A Hans Blumenberg Reader*, ed. and translated from German by Hannes Bajohr, Florian Fuchs, and Joe Paul Kroll. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2020, 581; Hans Blumenberg, "Möglichkeit und Wirklichkeit des Romans," in *Poetik und Hermeneutik*. Vol. 1: *Nachahmung und Illusion*, ed. Hans Robert Jauss. Munich: Fink, 1969, 9-27; Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Ein Beitrag zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt*. Freiburg/Munich: Karl Alber, 1959.

³ Reinhart Koselleck, "Darstellung, Ereignis und Struktur," in Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979, 148-149.

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, "Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftungen der Überlebenden," in *Identität, Poetik und Hermeneutik*. Vol. 8, ed. Odo Marquard and Karl-Heinz Stierle. Munich: Fink, 1979, 274.

⁵ Nelson Goodman, *Ways of Worldmaking*. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1978, 1. Goodman explicitly draws here on the theory of the symbol elaborated by Ernst Cassirer (*Philosophie der symbolischen Formen, 1923-1929*). See in this vein my interpretation of the symbol in: *Collective Memory and the Historical Past*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

⁶ See also Moira Pérez's contribution on the "new historical condition" and deployment of monuments on this blog: [Is There a Place for Monuments in the "New Historical Condition"?](#)

⁷ See for example Jennifer Harris, "The Red Cap of Liberty: A Study of Dress Worn by French Revolutionary Partisans, 1789-94," *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 14, no. 3 (Spring, 1981), 283-312; Michael Sonenscher, *Sans-Culottes: An Eighteenth-Century Emblem in the French Revolution*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2008.

⁸ Alphonse Aulard, *Études et leçons sur la Révolution Française*, first series. Paris: Felix Alcan, 1893, 262: "Ce sont des costumes simples, poétiques, absurdes. C'est un beau rêve d'artiste, avec je ne sais quel soupçon de fumisterie d'atelier, s'il est possible de prêter un sourire aux passions graves de ce temps-là"; see also Pierre Mollier, "David ou le triomphe de la citoyenneté," *Grand Orient de France, Humanisme* 1, no. 284 (2009), 97-106.