



Geschichtstheorie am Werk
Theory of History at Work
La théorie de l'histoire à l'œuvre
La teoria della storia all'opera

Three Memorable Excursions with Reinhart Koselleck

Jeffrey Andrew Barash

Cite as: Jeffrey Andrew Barash, "Three Memorable Excursions with Reinhart
Koselleck," in *Geschichtstheorie am Werk*, 21/02/2023,
<https://gtw.hypotheses.org/12690>.

ISSN: 2750-7165

URL: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/12690>

License:



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/).

Three Memorable Excursions with Reinhart Koselleck

In 1982 I took the initiative to write to Reinhart Koselleck, although I had never met him, to ask if he would be willing to serve as the sponsor of my application for an Alexander von Humboldt-Fellowship. I had just defended my doctoral dissertation at the University of Chicago, entitled *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning*, and I returned to Paris to apply for grants that would permit me to rewrite my thesis for publication as a book. Upon receiving my letter, Koselleck kindly invited me to give a talk in Bielefeld on a topic of my choice. I proposed to speak on the theme of *Heidegger and Historism*. In the autumn of 1982, I traveled to Bielefeld to present my talk in his graduate seminar, which in those days took place in his house. My paper was well received, his associates and students asked a number of thought-provoking questions and, thanks to Koselleck's letter in support of my candidacy, my application was accepted. I spent the years 1985–87 working under his supervision at Bielefeld University. Koselleck gathered around him in Bielefeld an impressive group of young professors, assistants, and students, and I remember many conversations and other encounters I had with a number of them, including Gerhard Dohrn-van Rossum, Jörg Fisch, Lucian Hölscher, Jochen Hoock, Martin Papenheim, and Willibald Steinmetz.

After these years in Bielefeld, I felt privileged to be able to maintain my friendship with Reinhart Koselleck. In 1989 I settled permanently in Paris after obtaining a tenured position in the philosophy department of the University of Amiens. In the 1990s Reinhart Koselleck was a frequent visitor to France, and I was able to attend a number of his talks at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales*, the *Deutsches Historisches Institut Paris*, and the *Heine Haus*. We occasionally made arrangements to meet when I traveled to Germany and at a time when we were both in New York. In what follows I will briefly recount three outings with him during which he shared his insights with me.

Bückeberg

In 1995 I returned often to Germany and I had ample occasions to see Reinhart Koselleck. It was the turn of my wife, Silvana, to begin a two year stay at the University of Bonn under the auspices of a Humboldt Fellowship at the *Institut für Paläontologie* and, in November 1995, I arranged an excursion on her birthday with her and with Reinhart and Felicitas Koselleck to nearby Bückeberg (figure 1) [Figure(s) under: <https://gtw.hypotheses.org/12690>]. An outing to Bückeberg

seemed to provide the ideal place to continue earlier conversations we had had in Bielefeld on Johann Gottfried Herder's theory of language and of history, since Herder served as pastor in Bückeberg during the early 1770s when he wrote his Preisschrift *Abhandlung über den Ursprung der Sprache* and also his epoch-making work *Auch eine Philosophie der Geschichte zur Bildung der Menschheit*. I retain a distinct memory of the crisp and sunny November day during which we walked through the forest discussing the significance of Herder's theory of language and Heidegger's reception of Herder, before engaging in a conversation among the four of us about the political situation in Germany after the reunification.

Following our afternoon walk, we visited the church in Bückeberg in which Herder presented a number of his celebrated Sunday sermons. Koselleck vividly depicted for us the complicated religious situation that this town in the former principality of Schaumburg-Lippe had faced in the aftermath of the Protestant Reformation. As we walked inside the church, Koselleck called our attention to the sober white walls of the church's interior which in an earlier period, as he added, had been adorned with frescoes. Following the Protestant Reformation, he continued, most of the population adopted the Lutheran faith, yet the high nobility of Schaumburg-Lippe converted to a strict form of Calvinism that motivated them to have the frescoes covered over with white paint.

Heidelberg

In the winter of 1995/96, I met Koselleck once again during an excursion to Heidelberg with my wife. We traveled to Heidelberg to participate in the festivities surrounding the 95th birthday of Hans-Georg Gadamer, which took place in the Aula of the University of Heidelberg. Koselleck was among the guests of honor on this occasion, during which Gadamer himself presented a remarkable talk before a large assembly of philosophers who had come for the celebration. After the ceremony, Koselleck invited me and my wife to accompany him for a walk through the streets of Heidelberg. As we crossed the city, he reminded us that he descended from a family of Huguenots who, as Protestants, were obliged to flee from France following the abrogation of the Edict of Nantes under the reign of Louis XIV. Koselleck's conversation became increasingly animated as he recounted the history of Heidelberg in this period. He evoked the misdeeds of the French invaders during the war of the League of Augsburg in the 1690s that wrought extensive damage to the Palatinate, including the burning of Heidelberg and the destruction

of the Heidelberg palace that stood before us in ruins on the hill. The vividness of his recollection of intricate details of seventeenth century events in Heidelberg brought them so near that we could almost believe he was reliving them.

New York

Two years after our walk through the streets of Heidelberg, Koselleck and I happened to be in New York at the same time. He was lecturing at New York University and we decided to set aside an afternoon for an excursion in Manhattan. He invited me to accompany him on a tour of different monuments on the upper West Side, near Columbia University. As he explained to me, he was pursuing his investigation of the specific differences between war monuments in Germany, France, and the United States.

Although I was struck on that warm and sunny spring day in New York by Koselleck's insight into the symbolism of war monuments, in my later recollections I curiously came to associate our outing that day with an entirely different kind of monument we didn't visit, which I discovered in later years during a walk on the edge of the Hudson River in Riverside Park. It is a double monument erected to commemorate the valor of the firefighters of New York who had lost their lives while quelling blazes that had ravaged the city. This *Firemen's Memorial*, as it is called, was constructed to commemorate not only the *people* who had been killed in the line of service, but also the *horses* that carried them into the midst of peril (figure 2).

The Symbolism of the Horse and the Evaporation of Confidence in a Goal of History

When I now pass by that monument, I relate it to Koselleck's later reflection on the historical role of horses. It foreshadows from my present perspective the conception of history he outlined in 2003 in the address he presented upon his reception of the Historikerpreis of the city of Münster, titled *Der Aufbruch in die Moderne oder das Ende des Pferdezeitalters*.¹ In this talk, Koselleck organized the temporal schema of the modern period in relation to one of its central, if often neglected consequences: the disappearance of the primary role of the horse, not only as a mode of transport, but as a central aspect of all spheres of human life, from war, agriculture and art to mythical and religious symbolism. Dividing historical periodization into time prior to and after the domestication of the horse,

leading finally to the devaluation of its role in the modern epoch, Koselleck situated the advent of the technological era of instantaneous media communication, rapid transit, and automated warfare in a development that avoided purely human categories of progress or decline, for he set the obsolescence of the horse in a temporal framework that has no manifest direction or goal, nor could it be unified in terms of a clear overall orientation. To illustrate the evaporation of confidence in a clear goal of history, Koselleck chose as an eloquent example the symbolism of the horse depicted in war monuments. In a seminal article on equestrian statues, Koselleck analyzed the transformation of their role from the evocation of the majesty of kings, towering above their mighty steeds as an embodiment of national glory, to the lamentation of violent death brought about in the course of wars that lack any apparent sense. To this end, Koselleck singled out the sculpture work of Marino Marini, *Il grande miracolo* (1953) (figure 3). This sculpture, according to his interpretation, exemplifies the transformation of equestrian statues: "mourning over anonymous death and corpses that have disappeared has devoured the symbolic force of the stately equestrian monuments." Marini's statue depicts horse and rider thrown into an awkward vertical position. They "rear up together," as he wrote, "in the vain attempt to escape death."² Marini's work was chosen by the city of Rotterdam as a memorial on the spot where twenty citizens of the city, including three firemen, were executed by firing squad as a reprisal by the Nazi occupiers during World War II.

Some years later, in the summer of 2005, I called Koselleck one late afternoon in August to tell him of my plans to spend several weeks in Bonn during the spring of 2006. I hoped to organize another outing with him. Once again he responded with enthusiasm and he mentioned his plans to visit one of his daughters who lived in Bonn at the time. Our outing could coincide with one of his trips to Bonn, and we decided to think about the best place for another of our roaming conversations.

These plans, however, were soon cut short. Months before the period of our projected outing, I learned with a great sense of loss and sadness that my inspired guide was no longer among us and that our outings were from then onwards consigned to the realm of memory.

Jeffrey Andrew Barash is Emeritus Professor of Philosophy at the University of Amiens, France. His publications have focused on the themes of collective memory and its political articulations, political philosophy, historicism, and modern German thought. He is the author of several books, among them *Martin Heidegger and the Problem of Historical Meaning* (second, paperback edition, New York: Fordham University Press, 2003), *Politiques de l'histoire: L'historicisme comme politique et comme mythe* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2004), and *Collective Memory and the Historical Past*, (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

jabarash@gmail.com

Tags: Excursion / Memory / monuments

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, "Der Aufbruch in die Moderne oder das Ende des Pferdezeitalters," in *Historikerpreis der Stadt Münster. Die Preisträger und Laudatoren von 1981 bis 2003*, ed. Berthold Tillmann. Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005, 159-173.

² „Die Trauer um den anonymen Toten, um die entschwundenen Leichen hat die Symbolkraft des herrschaftlichen Reitermals verzehrt. Mal brechen Reiter und Pferd gemeinsam nieder (Abb. 19), mal bäumen sich Reiter und Pferd gemeinsam auf, um vergeblich dem Tod zu entkommen.“ See Reinhart Koselleck, "Der Unbekannte Soldat als Nationalsymbol im Blick auf Reiterdenkmale," in *Vorträge aus dem Warburghaus*, vol. 7, ed. Wolfgang Kemp et al. Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2003, 137-166, 150-51.