Welt/Umwelt

Helge Jordheim
Can there be something like a concept of the totality of being, including what lies outside and surrounds it? This is the self-contradictory, paradoxical question raised by the concepts Welt and Umwelt. They are not alone in this. “History,” Geschichte, offers a similar paradox, as do, in certain respects, “modernity” or “the modern,” even more so if we include liminal concepts like “the end of history” and “the postmodern.” Welt conceptualizes the spatial totality, Geschichte the temporal. This, however, would be a too crude simplification. Since the end of the eighteenth century, the totality of history has been spatial as much as temporal, which has also presented the main point of attack for postcolonial critics like Dipesh Chakrabarty and others. In most of Koselleck’s work, he carefully avoided totalities, both spatial and temporal ones, in order to develop a historiography of multiplicities. Nevertheless, throughout Koselleck’s work, Welt and Umwelt maintain a mostly unacknowledged, almost subliminal presence his texts, linked to “pathogenesis” and “anthropogenic change,” respectively.

Totalitas Absoluta in German Thinking

The concept “world” fulfills most of the criteria Koselleck lists for his Grundbegriffe, his “key” or “basic concepts.” That Welt and Umwelt are indispensable in political discourse, that they are words we cannot do without, is easily confirmed by a brief look at ongoing discussions of the Anthropocene, climate emergency, or global, even planetary health. Nor would anyone who is paying the least attention to the current news cycle doubt that they are contested. The problem with both Welt and Umwelt – which continue to haunt these discussions and contribute to the general paralysis – is that both are names for totalities. Already Kant in his precritical essays De mundis sensibilis from 1770 pointed out that “the world” is a totalitas absoluta, an absolute totality. As such, he adds, it is at the same time “ordinary and harmless” and “an almost unsolvable problem for the philosophers.”

In the Kantian tradition, the historian-philosopher Hans Blumenberg argued that there cannot meaningfully be a concept of world. The word lacks empirical substance and does not correspond to specific human experience. “We have no conception of the totality of being [Totalität des Seins],” Blumenberg writes, but, he adds, “we still use ‘the world’ as the subject in sentences, just as we do with ‘history.’” This use, Blumenberg adds elsewhere, is confused and should be avoided: “Even though I am inclined to believe that that we should in the future
entirely avoid creating and using statements regarding ‘the world,’ I doubt whether such an injunction would ever succeed.\textsuperscript{5} Although Koselleck never made a similar claim, his writings from the 1960s onward mostly avoided any reference to Welt as a concept or as ontology.

Several other German thinkers have turned the concept Welt into a pivotal element of their thinking. Among the most influential ones are the philosopher Martin Heidegger and the sociologist Niklas Luhmann. Heidegger’s use of the concept Welt, including the improbable verbalized neologism welten, takes us immediately to the center of this philosophy, to his differentiations between the ontic and the ontological – on the one hand, the totality of beings, both non-human and human, and, on the other hand, the different manners of being, such as Zuhandenheit and Vorhandenheit. To differentiate these two world concepts linguistically, Heidegger uses the term “Welt” in quotation marks for the first, Weltlichkeit for the second. This is only in the first part of the existential analysis in Sein und Zeit. In later works, new layers of meaning are added. Even Umwelt is introduced into Heidegger’s philosophy, as a rather neutral, unmarked term for describing for our surroundings, the world of humans and animals.\textsuperscript{6}

For Luhmann, on the other hand, who like Koselleck is a great theorist of differentiation,\textsuperscript{7} Welt, or, more precisely, what he calls Weltgesellschaft, “world society,” is a liminal concept. In an essay from 1971 with the same title, Luhmann argues that during the last centuries a “world society,” Weltgesellschaft, has emerged, which differs from previous societies to the extent that it has no regional or geographic borders, but comprises the entire world.\textsuperscript{8} This recent totality is a “social system,” constituted by other functionally differentiated systems of communication, concerned either with money, power, truth, or love. However, towards the end of the essay, another concept of “world” emerges, apparently not by intention or device, but as an afterthought, a semantic leftover. “So far we have proceeded in a naïve way with regard to the concept of the world, as if we were talking about the globe and its firmament [den Erdball und sein Firmament],” Luhmann muses. Then he goes on, much like Kant and Blumenberg, to localize this other concept in “the ordinary experience of the world, accompanying all life and activity.”\textsuperscript{9} To document this alternative experience of the world would indeed require the work of conceptual historians, since “this experience of the world has its own history and can always be analyzed again,” and “the concepts of the world which thus become visible vary in a non-contingent way.”\textsuperscript{10}
Welt in Begriffsgeschichte

Although it was probably not in response to Luhmann’s challenge, the emerging discipline of Begriffsgeschichte took up the task of writing the conceptual history of “world,” although not mainly in its “naive” or “ordinary” from. The entry Welt in Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe was contributed by the philosopher and theologian Hermann Braun, who like most of the other authors recruited to write for the lexicon took more interest in philosophical and scientific sources than in the language of the everyday German. Nevertheless, the suspicion voiced by Blumenberg and Luhmann that we are dealing with a non-concept is hard to shake. Whereas other concepts operate by delimitation, Welt works by inclusion. There are no meanings, contexts, actions, or events that cannot be included in Welt. According to Braun, the concept is capable of endless expansion by means of “self-transcendence,” “self-reference,” and “self-negation.” Even explicit attempts at escaping this conceptual maelstrom, like Umwelt, claiming that there is something beyond and outside Welt, is sucked back in: Umwelt is also Welt. It comes as no surprise that Welt did not appeal to a thinker like Koselleck who built so much of his work on making distinctions, like in the case of his anthropological dichotomies: before-after, inside-outside, above-below. Welt is all of this, and more.

Hence it is possible to speculate that Braun did not get much guidance from the sole surviving editor of Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe in writing his contribution. At the same time as Braun started his work, Koselleck was actively turning away from his own initial engagements with Welt, as the totality of being. After his attempt to become a Welt-thinker, and a Welt-historian in the mold of Carl Schmitt and Martin Heidegger, by blaming both the advent of the Third Reich and the threat of nuclear holocaust during the Cold War on the hypocrisy of the Enlightenment, and the machinations of the freemasonic Weltbürger, Koselleck lost interest in the world as totality and gave his full attention to the world as multiplicity – consisting of events and structures, representations and narratives, experiences and concepts, layers and non-synchronicities, always in the plural. As Niklas Olsen has pointed out, this insistence on plurality becomes that what defines him as a historian, albeit a historian of modern, Western Europe. After he turned from speculative intellectual history to Prussian legal history, Welt only makes brief appearances in his work as a prefix in compounds like Weltgeschichte and Weltanschauung.

This should not come as a surprise, since Koselleck was always a fundamentally political thinker, whereas Welt is in many ways an apolitical concept. Both friend and enemy, both conservative and progressive, both East and West, both human
and non-human – they are all Welt. Unless, of course, there is Welt(bürger)krieg, an idea that was propagated by Koselleck’s close friend and fellow Schmitt-admirer Hanno Kesting and that recently returned in Bruno Latour’s heavily Schmitt-influenced Gaia-lectures. In the case of Latour, what imposes totality on the world is no longer freemasonic conspiracies, revolutions, totalitarian regimes, or the threat of nuclear war, but global warming and species extinction. Latour’s return to James Lovelock’s Gaia-hypothesis – the world as a synergistic self-regulating complex system in the guise of a Greek goddess – signals – in the words of the James Bond-franchise – that the world, Welt, in terms of the anthropocentric “age of man,” is not enough. There is something more.

Um-ing the Welt

In the Deutsches Wörterbuch von Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, published between 1838 and 1961, the word um takes up more than 20 pages, more precisely 40 columns of volume 23. Most of it concerns the preposition, less the adverb. The remaining part of volume 23 contains compound words featuring um- as prefix, amounting to more than 250 pages, 500 columns, from umackern to umzwirbeln, which are summed up in the final um-entry, offering a typology of um-words. After having browsed through them all, I venture the claim that no part, realm, aspect, or dimension of the world is left out: the plant, animal, and mineral kingdom, as well as the human world, in all their temporal and spatial forms. They can all potentially be um-ed. To um- something means to provide it with a kind of circumference, so that it can be grasped, clasped, or seized, like in the German word for hug, umarmen. In other words, what is um-ed is at the same time delimited and captured or held.

Among the words that are um-ed is, of course, the world, Welt. The Grimm entry on Umwelt, however, is not particularly impressive, comprising only half of a column. According to the definition, Umwelt is “die den menschen umgebende welt,” “the world that surrounds humans,” first documented in the German language in an ode from 1800 written by the Danish poet Jens Baggesen, who spent much of his life in the German-speaking part of Europe. He lyricizes: “Und es verwandelt die Fluth in Feuer sich, Nebel in Nordlicht, Regen in Strahlenerguß, daß von fern erscheinet der Umwelt/ Ein’ ätherische Feste die Schicksalshöhle des Dichters,” which translates into something like, “and the flood transforms into fire, fog into northern lights, rain into cascades of stars.” Following this vivid imagery evoking something like a natural disaster, the translation gets tricky, but the next line could
be taken to mean something like, “that appears to the Umwelt from afar, an ethereal fortress, the poet’s inferno of fate.” Grammatically, the word Umwelt in Baggesen’s poem is a dative, which could be taken to indicate that rather than something that “surrounds humans,” Umwelt is something that is surrounded, that is itself um-ed, a point of view, possibly a mind. That shouldn’t surprise us. After all, we are dealing with an ode to Napoleon, not to nature.

As most German-speakers know by now, it takes another hundred years before the predecessor of our current concept of Umwelt emerges in the works of the German biologist–baron Jakob von Uexküll, who in 1924 founded the Institut für Umweltforschung in Hamburg and later would become strongly involved with National Socialism, as pointed out by Florian Sprenger and Gottfried Schnödl in a book aptly titled Uexküll’s Surroundings in which Uexküll is himself um-ed. Uexküll himself was not wedded to the spatial meaning of the um-, as defined by Grimm. Rather, he wanted to study the exchanges and functional connections between Innenwelt, the “inner world” and the Umwelt of animals, thus paving the way for a cybernetics of life. This move turned out to be an important inspiration for the rise of Earth System Science (ESS) as an interdisciplinary endeavor studying climate change on a planetary scale.

**Koselleck’s Welt–um–ing**

In his work from the 1980s, Koselleck was also doing some Welt–um–ing, albeit without the actual concept, as he returns to a level of analysis that he had turned his back on since Kritik und Krise. The main venue for this reorientation is his concluding lecture at the Historikertag in Trier from October 1986, just a few months after the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, which in a way had confirmed his fears from his first book. The lecture was not published until fourteen years later, in the volume Zeitschichten, with the title Raum und Geschichte, “Space and History,” then later translated in *Sediments of Time*.

The lecture can be said to contain three levels of um–ing. On the first level, Koselleck considers “natural spatial pregivens” (Vorgaben) as a backdrop or a stage for history, while at the same time distancing himself clearly from the spatial determinism of Geopolitik. Umwelt, what he mostly refers to simply as nature, is included among the “conditions for possible histories.” The second level of um–ing he announces in the following passage: “In our century, like it or not, the climate has entered the realm of possible human control, just as for millennia the world of plants and increasingly animals became subject to human control. Our globe
might soon be transformed into a single zoo, though one might well ask who holds whom captive, the animals or the humans.”22 The concept of Umwelt implied here is more similar to the one coined by Uexküll, in which there is an on-going exchange between Innenwelt and Umwelt. However, in Koselleck’s version the question is more about control than communication. Uexküll envisions a system, Koselleck a historical process. This leads to his third level of um- ing, the third way in which the world is circumscribed and put in relation to an outside, which in the end proves to be an inside. “Theoretically,” he writes, “this would entail asking where the metahistorical pregivens of the human Lebensraum shift and are transformed into historical pregivens that humans can influence, master, and exploit”23 – or suffer, we should add, in light of the current unfolding of the impact of anthropogenic environmental change on the world of humans, Welt. Koselleck’s main examples are found at the border between Welt and Umwelt. Due to processes of acceleration and modernization, he argues, “the historical quality of the elements has changed.” Water has become “territorialized,” whereas the air is now “the carrier of our contemporary communication system.”24 Is this Welt or Umwelt, or rather a cybernetically reconfigured in-between, in which the fate of all life of the planet is decided?

From Pathogenesis to Anthropogenic Change

To conclude, in spite of his attempt at rethinking the relationship between nature and history in the 1980s, Koselleck never became a Welt-thinker/-historian, nor an Umwelt-thinker/-historian. This has obvious historical reasons, but also some more theoretical ones. Totalities of being never appealed to him, at least not after he turned away from the “pathogenesis of the modern world” and focused his historicist curiosity on “genesis,” without anticipating a particular pathological outcome. That did not mean, however, that he turned his back on the catastrophes and crimes of history, only that he refused to attribute them to various determinisms, be they materialistic or idealistic. Koselleck’s historiography is human, all-too human, made up by experiences, concepts, events, and actions. No wonder, then, that when he finally turns his gaze to nature, sometime in the 1980s, he sets out to understand not pathogenesis, but anthropogenic change, beyond the distinctions between Welt and Umwelt: how the same human, all-too human reality of experiences and actions has started to impact the non-human world in possibly irreversible and fatal ways.
Helge Jordheim is Professor of Cultural History at University of Oslo, Norway. His research focuses on Early Modern and Enlightenment histories of knowledge and politics in Europe, especially in Germany, in addition to questions of time and temporality in the human and social sciences more generally. Among his recent book publications are Universal History and the Making of the Global (2018, with H. Bjørnstad, A. Régent-Susini) and Conceptualizing the World. An Exploration across Disciplines (2018, with E. Sandmo). He is a co-editor of the journal Time & Society.

Link: https://www.hf.uio.no/ikos/english/people/aca/cultural-history-and-museology/tenured/helgejo/

helge.jordheim@ikos.uio.no

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9 Ibid., 74.
10 Ibid., 80.
22 Ibid., 29.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 38–39.