GhostConceptKoselleck

KoselleckConceptGhost

Consider the Kompositum “KoselleckConceptGhost” (Koselleckbegriffgespenst). The agglutination is not stable, and it is unclear which term should lead the way. If it is Koselleck, or Koselleck’s ghost, that leads, then the injunction is to investigate the semantic value of the word “ghost” to determine whether there has been a change in its valence and significance over time. If we look to concepts themselves, then the ghost might be a new and important metaphor to think through the ways that concepts move across time and space, as Margrit Pernau suggests in her post on “Stones and Jinns.” If we allow the ghosts themselves to take the lead, however, things become messier. They become confused. Try to imagine a Koselleck concept and then try to imagine a ghost concept. Concepts and dead thinkers are much easier to put into place (whether theirs or ours) when one does not have to contend with the pesky presence of the ghost. We can simply pretend that they are constant and stable or, as in the case of Koselleck, that there are metahistorical means by which to stabilize them. We could say that “Koselleck was a thinker who had a specific theory and method of conceptual history” or “the concept of democracy held this particular meaning at this particular time.” Ghosts are much trickier to work with. They are unruly and seldom do what one wants them to.

Koselleck

Conjuring the ghost of Reinhart Koselleck to ask him what he thought about ghosts already brings us into the vortex of confusion. An extratemporal and thus more extreme version of the “vortex of historicization” about which Koselleck warned us. The empirical evidence of his own spectral existence notwithstanding, Koselleck would likely tell us that in the modern era we no longer dwell with ghosts themselves but amongst the metaphorical ghosts of time. There was, however, in the not so distant past, a time of ghosts. This was a time when ghosts were taken quite literally as existing, if problematic, actors in our world. On this view, and in this belief system, the past came back in the form of these haunting specters. This is to say that at that time, the past was actually allowed to come back and the ghost was the means to literally do so. But in our current moment, the moment of Koselleck’s revenant, this is not entirely or even mostly the case because “the
“ghost” has undergone a semantic shift such that it has become a metaphor for the presence of the past in the present. This intermingling of temporal dimensions is quite different from the time of ghosts because here, it is the ghost of times or events past that haunt us, wherein the ghost becomes the means of representing an untimely cohabitation, whether this manifests as trauma, collective memory, or in the sorts of fictional accounts that I find so appealing and fecund. Whether the time of ghosts or the ghosts of time, the confrontation with the ghost is a confrontation with the past.

If we heed the ghost of Koselleck and accept our current understanding of ghosts as metaphorical, conditioned by the ghost of time, we could say that the continuing existence of belief in ghosts is an example of Koselleck’s Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen (the synchronicity of the non-synchronous or contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous, depending on which translation one follows). The prior understanding of ghosts persists alongside our current one but is out of synch. It could be that those who believe in the time of ghosts inhabit a world less “conceptually modern” than those who engage with the ghost of time, though it could also be the case that the strata of meaning from different times are simultaneously held in the concept of the ghost. In the first case, different places meet within the same time, while in the second case, different times meet in the same place. It is true that in each of these cases, Koselleck constructs a zone of stability in which the comparison can take place, and in each it is a stable moment in the present. The ghost as metaphor reins in the ghost as ghost, but the absent presence of Koselleck’s revenant exposes the temporal instability and, indeed, the malleability of any attempt to define or restrain the specter.

Concept

The ghost can provide us with a metaphor for the way concepts work that is more temporally dynamic than sedimentation or layers. The ghost, after all, will not stay buried underground. To use Koselleck’s terms, it refuses to remain in its layer or sediment of time (Zeitschichten). The ghost offers an alternative to “an image, which sets the contemporaneity of the past in stone, fixed and unmovable” and “captures neither the malleability of the past through its multiple reconceptualizations” nor “the possibility that the past might have an agency of its own, not exclusively derived from the present.” Then again, the history of some concepts may very well be best imagined as fixed in their sediment of time, so in this regard the metaphor needs to be expanded to include the dead as well as the
undead. I propose we do so by thinking of concepts as akin to corpses, zombies, and ghosts.

Corpses are the easiest to fit into Koselleck’s existing model of concept history. Corpses are usually buried underground and thus, like concepts, remain in their temporal layer until exhumed. Corpses, of course, are matter and thus obedient to the rules of time and space and likewise corpse concepts retain such fidelity to their strata. It is true, the historian must deal with decomposition, but by and large the bones remain intact and available for investigation. Sometimes one is lucky enough to come upon a mummy which has been exquisitely preserved organs and all, but this is rare. It is more likely the case that the corpse has been disturbed, dug up, and redeposited in a catacomb, making the interpretative work of the conceptual historian one of reassembly and inference. The corpses of these concepts are inanimate and only become available in the present once the historian enters the graveyard and digs them up.

Other concepts are less willing to rest in peace. Zombie concepts are mobile remains that, like ghosts, refuse to be confined in their temporal layer. Unlike ghosts, however, these zombies show the wear and decay of time, decomposing even as they continue their existence. Interestingly, zombies are obedient to the rules of space though their relationship to time is an open question. Temporally, at least in terms of our biological clock, they certainly shouldn’t be where they are. As remains from the past, zombie concepts actively come to the living in the present, but they have no interest in communication. Instead, they are the persistent continuation of an outdated and decaying mode of thought that seeks to prey on the minds of the living. What’s more, zombies are a mass phenomenon composed of but not singular individuals. Zombie concepts are the same and move like brainless mass discourses.

Lastly, there is the concept as ghost. These are concepts that, like the ghost, are not beholden to the rules of time or space. They can appear as they were or signal their age and multiple incarnations. The historian can seek to conjure the ghost, but it is as likely that the ghost will find the historian. In this way the ghost is more available to the historian in the present than the corpse or even the zombie. Then again, a ghost may remain unavailable for years, decades, or centuries, yet it always guards the possibility of return. And while the ghost may be just as frightening as a zombie, or in some cases a corpse, it can also offer comfort or wisdom though even here it manifests as the uncanny or uncomfortable. Ghosts are, or can be, intelligent and interested in communicating with us. The ghost is the
past as an untimely visitor to the present and thus seems the most productive instantiation of Koselleck's *Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*.

Of course, the ghost is not only a metaphor.

**Ghost**

Ultimately, what is most troubling and powerful about the ghost is the ways that its presence disturbs the spatio-temporal categories by which we come to make sense of the world around us. It is the past come again but emptied of its physical properties and disobedient to the rules of time and space. The ghost troubles both as a *revenant*, that which should no longer be with us but is. The conjured ghost of Reinhart Koselleck is no exception, and as such is the site of what I call temporal anarchy, the messiness or unruliness of time and temporality (*an-arkhos* is without chief or ruler, so it is a time without rules or measure). The ghost in this sense is a temporal and spatial anarchist.

Perhaps we should follow the ghost to rethink concept history set free from the sediments of time that try to restrict its movement. This would mean letting go of the “metahistorical definitions directed toward the temporality of history” which Koselleck saw as a guardrail to prevent us from getting “caught up in the vortex (Strudel) of its historicization.” The ghost would become our metahistorical guide, taking the place of coordinates such as Koselleck’s “space of experience” and “horizon of expectations,” or, more precisely, haunting that space and horizon. When we experience the ghost, we experience the impossible, and the horizon that opens before it is that of the unexpected. It is not an imposition from without, but neither is it internal to our moment. It is somehow inside and outside, thus forcing us to question the very coordinates by which we create stable meaning, semantic or otherwise.

**GhostConceptKoselleck**

Into the vortex we go. By welcoming the ghost of Koselleck we welcome something that is and isn’t Koselleck, precisely because it leads us into the vortex of time and historicization. Is the intellectual figure and the thought an artifact from the past? Or is it a reconceptualization for our present? Is it Koselleck who speaks to us, or are we speaking through Koselleck?

The vortex works with Koselleck because it is neither linear and teleological nor cyclical and repeating. We know not where it takes us, and what has come back is
not what was “there” before. As such, it also works against Koselleck, because in the vortex there is no stable sediment of time, be it short-term, mid-term, or long-term. The ghost enters and exits the vortex as it will, where it will, and when it will though we can never be sure what this “it” is or even if it is. And just so, the vortex keeps our Komposita unstable, appearing at times as KoselleckConceptGhost, then ConceptKoselleckGhost, then ConceptGhostKoselleck, and on, and on, and on… The terms keep shifting and moving so they do not sediment into fossils and the historian cannot relent in pursuing their meaning. They remain dynamic in search of a future time.

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Tags: deconstruction / Ghosts / temporality

In my scholarship I’ve turned to Shakespeare, Charles Dickens, and Franz Kafka among others but one could also think of Toni Morrison, Juan Gabriel Vásquez, and others whose fictions are as engaged with the past as any conventional history.

Pernau, “Stones and Jinns.”


Koselleck, “‘Space of Experience’ and ‘Horizon of Expectation,’” 259. See Kleinberg, *Haunting History*. 