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Koselleck's Theory of History and Its Subversive Potential

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Why Is Koselleck Internationally Successful?

Despite the fact that Koselleck's history of concepts and theory of history have long remained fairly marginal in Germany, the impact of Koselleck's work in the international context is impressive. *Kritik und Krise* and *Vergangene Zukunft* were translated into several languages immediately after their appearance in German, while *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* served as a model universally recognised by the academic world in Europe and the Americas.¹ Regarding the same work, Melvin Richter rightly observed that Koselleck's theorisation of history is the greatest international success of postwar German historiography.²

What makes Reinhart Koselleck's studies exceptional is not only the quantitative and qualitative information they contain, nor exclusively the results produced by twentieth-century currents such as the history of mentalities, but the history of the everyday, social history, and cultural history. He advances his understanding of history as such and the discourse of history. He does so by processing in a particular way the information, events, and thought of his predecessors; he does so through the prism of time, through openness to universal values, by taking on the priorities of today's world, and above all through the filter of individual biography and memory. Koselleck is aware that historical representations can become ambivalent rather easily. He seeks to identify the relationship between theory, events, and life experiences, paying particular attention to the difference between historical reality and language, between the event and the language used to represent it. In this sense, his work converges with that of Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes. The historian's evaluations highlight the fundamental role of historical theory. In the context of the partisan interpretations of history with consequences in political thought and action, he is concerned with the methodological repositioning of the humanities. Compared to the beginning of the twentieth century, when culturalist ideology was decisive in understanding the past and the future, Koselleck prefers a hermeneutic approach to the text, from which the formative side of concepts emerges, i.e. their contribution to knowledge of the past through the issues facing society. This explains why he was interested in identifying what transformed *History* into a modern regulatory concept.

Reconstructing the German evolution of concepts, Koselleck and the Heidelberger *Arbeitskreis für moderne Sozialgeschichte* aimed mainly at a better understanding

of the vocabulary we use to express our experiences in political reality. The history of political concepts has been involved since the beginning in developing a comprehensive theory of history and concepts that goes beyond the historicist assumptions of German intellectual history.³ In *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, *Vergangene Zukunft*, and *Zeitschichten*, Koselleck's concern turns to the diversity of meanings that have been attributed to history over time, those which urged a rediscovery of the connection between history and language.⁴ By influencing social relations, religious manifestations, political thought and action, the history-language relationship stimulated a better grasp of the experiences and texts concerning human problems. Koselleck emphasised the influence of legal history on economics, religion, literature, and language, proving a remarkable originality by asserting a "particular voice" between historical theory and practice, philosophy and linguistics, anthropology, and political theory.

Attentive to what was happening around him, Koselleck was equally concerned with the orientation of the world as a whole. In his particular case, his theory of history is influenced by his personal biography and insights generated by his life experience. Hence the invitation to pay more attention to his personality. In fact, the writing of history is given a provocative impulse, in the best sense of the word, by Koselleckian work. Not only the industrial world, but also politics, economics, and population reproduction have accelerated.⁵ The benefits are to be found in the diversity of questions, in the wealth of pluri- and interdisciplinary analyses, and interpretations that followed. Koselleck understood earlier than others that humanity had entered a phase of globalisation of history and that European centres of action had multiplied and spread throughout the world.

Beyond the choice of "possibilities", and of "plausibility" that are offered to us and that we have to consider, what is at stake according to Hans-Georg Gadamer is the capacity to decide, to recognise the permanent struggle between victory and defeat, a fight visible throughout human history.⁶ In Koselleck's view, temporal acceleration and deceleration, matrix functions within historical events, but also the causal force in determining social reality, must be taken into account. Historical reality is a social reality. Thus, historical knowledge is to be preceded by theoretical reflection, which is the basis of the whole approach, critical consciousness being a response to the gap between the historical event and the language used to represent it.⁷ Starting with the principles of the organisation of historical material, an understanding of temporality and history's repetitive structures, Koselleck introduces criteria by which he verifies the claims of previous writings and his own hypotheses. Vital points are the analytical spirit, the selection and precise ordering

of information according to subject, and the distinction between methods and insights coming from the natural sciences and those belonging to the human sciences.

Reassessing the Relationship Between Experience and Historiography

Of reference are two categories through which Koselleck examines the past: the “space of experience” and the “horizon of expectation.”⁸ Both contribute decisively to the reorientation of humanistic and socio-political studies by understanding the people, communities, and ideologies in which the past and future intersect. They are categories through which empirical research recovers concrete events and clarifies social-political movements.⁹ Through the two categories the historian can establish the inner connection of the events, and highlight crimes committed in the name of totalitarian ideologies and political regimes of the 20th century. Their descriptions, monuments and symbolism point to the great tragedies—the Holocaust and the Gulag—which must also be seen through the prism of personal experiences. Koselleck insists on the plurality of events, a context in which he shows the importance of knowing the perpetrators of evil—Nazis, Fascists and Communists—emphasising their complexity and reverberations over time.

Koselleck notes that politics is inspired by the controversies of historians. He knows that archives are not entirely relevant to research and knowledge of the past, that they have nothing to do with human sensuality, and that they can never reproduce what was experienced individually. Even less so when it comes to the events and crimes committed by totalitarian regimes, whose ability to falsify reality and produce extremist ideologies is well known. Due to controversies of method, and to frequent lack of knowledge of the role of concepts in the reform of vocabulary and social-political thought, history has remained a discipline not only of disputes, but also of ideas through which state ideology is propagated. The tragedies of the past—especially of the recent past, still alive in the memory of its survivors—cannot be hidden or transferred as soon as individual experiences are considered.

Retrospectives cannot rely on the sources left by the perpetrators of evil. The files in the archives of totalitarian political institutions are concrete evidence of an art of manipulation, rich in notes, information, and messages specific to radical politics. The documents, once transferred from one regime to another, serve to build the official memory of the new political power and disseminate it to the community,

perpetuating a false, undesirable image of the past. I wonder—as have other historians—whether Leopold von Ranke’s positivist research method can still be valid under these conditions, resulting in a history “as it really was.”¹⁰

Koselleck’s rebellion against partisan interpretations of history can be explained by the fact that the politician substitutes himself for the researcher. This is precisely why Koselleck sees the role of individual memory as fundamental in questioning past and present conflicts. This is because experiences are articulated completely differently from individual to individual, which is true from the histories of Herodotus to modern histories of terror. The oppositional categories, early-late, inside-out, up-down, through which the research is conducted, help to define the conflict and the structural ruptures generated by it. The historian argues that a theory of possible conflict is applicable in any context, with new conflicts breaking out at different levels from previous ones.¹¹ When Koselleck says that history as a totality is not possible, that it cannot be seen as a linguistic event, he is drawing upon his own life experiences.

The Subversive Power of Individual Memory

Koselleck’s critical reactions began with the commemoration of the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the Second World War. In 1993 he participated in the debate on the monument for a reunified Germany. According to Koselleck, its dedication, “For the Victims of War and Dictatorship” (*Neue Wache*), was contradicted by the absurdity of the mass murders committed by the Nazis. In this context, Koselleck asked that the inscription be changed to: “For the Dead: Fallen, Killed, Gassed, Dead, Missing.” By doing so, he drew attention to the need to recognise different experiences and the importance of reconciling the plurality of Germany’s past. He argued for individual memory and against a collective memory of the past, criticizing the way the state, politicians, and shapers of civic opinion impose the meaning of history through an official politics of memory.¹² He had in mind the year 1945, the end of the Second World War, when he did not know that the Americans would hand over to the Russians all the German prisoners of war, among whom he was one, and when he marched to Auschwitz he discovered that millions of people had been gassed to death and incinerated in ovens. He realised that such facts are impossible to invent. Experiences like this awaken all his senses, requiring no effort of recollection.¹³ Not only the absurd historical experience of the war, but also learning about the Holocaust marked him for life, hence the view that each history should be a distinct one. He explains the trauma of the

twentieth century, the rupture between “us” and “them,” the marginalisation of the person with particular traits who does not belong to the majority, the elimination of the “stranger from within or from outside.”

Historians bear the imprint of the familial, social, and intellectual environments in which they were formed, and their orientation can be understood in terms of the events experienced, and in terms of the legislation, administration, and state policies during their lifetime. All of these exert an influence on their discourses. It is true that research requires reading, the selection and criticism of sources, correct description of themes, reasoning based on rational arguments, etc. Beyond these, however, there are experiences from a historian’s personal biography that are unique, unrepeatable, and inexpressible. Some of them are related to emotions, suffering, intuitions, feelings that leave their mark on the soul, and generative, visionary perspectives. The more powerful they are, the more their memory becomes singular and permanent. Individual memory plays a critical role, being subversive and unable to be replaced either by written sources or by the testimonies and experiences of others. Therefore, it becomes essential in understanding past and present facts. Koselleck accompanies rational analyses and interpretations with innovative ideas resulting from very painful memories, awareness of the tragedies of war, intensity of emotions and intuitions, references to the place and the human universe in which he was born. Görlitz, his hometown, is a cross-border city with a plural cultural heritage where the fusion of Eastern and Western European horizons has been possible. The dynamic relationship between assimilated experiences, memory, and historiography explains the historian’s constant inclination towards the renewal of languages. Similarly, dialogue and controversies highlight the aspiration to continually rewrite history and to reflect on political thought. Individual memory becomes a subversive power, making it possible to understand and acknowledge Germany’s plural histories.

What interference has historiography had with the ideologies of the modern world, and especially those of the totalitarian political systems of the twentieth century? Is the multi-perspectival view of history useful today? Beyond administrative changes and declarations, there are many examples—especially from the former communist countries—of interpreting the past that show continuity from one political system to another. There is also the case of preserving collective memory through an official policy of memory. Koselleck rightly observed that separation from past ways of thinking occurs slowly and only partially. Koselleck showed how important it is to go beyond traditional content and the sacredness of history. In rethinking and rewriting the past, he developed a new politics of memory.

Interdisciplinarity and the results of his research enabled him to reassess the relationship between experience and historiography, giving new meaning to the facts and phenomena of the past. In the same way, the identity crises of Eastern European historians, the shortcomings of their writings, and their impact on political thought in the decades of national communism and its aftermath, can be explained. In other words, the innovative perspective imprinted by *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, it seems to me, may also be useful to “the other Europe,” and will have to start with the study of radical notions, concepts, languages, and ideologies of the previous century.

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Tags: Experience / Memory / politics

¹ Reinhart Koselleck, *Kritik und Krise. Eine Studie zur Pathogenese der bürgerlichen Welt* (1959). Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1973. Reinhart Koselleck, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, and Reinhart Koselleck (eds.), *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*. 8 vols. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972–1997.

² Melvin Richter, “Reinhart Koselleck’s Impact on Scholarship outside Germany,” in *Bielefelder Universitätsgespräche und Vorträge 9. Reinhart Koselleck 1923–2006. Reden zur Gedenkfeier am 24. Mai 2006. Mit einem Beitrag von Melvin Richter*, ed. Neithard Bulst and Willibald Steinmetz, Bielefeld, 2007, 61–66, 62.

³ Sandro Chignola, “History of Political Thought and the History of Political Concepts: Koselleck’s Proposal and Italian Research,” *History of Political Thought* 23, no. 3 (2002), 517–541, 518.

⁴ Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2000.

⁵ “Es ist allenthalben die Beschleunigung, welche die damals gegenwärtige Zeiterfahrung von allen vorangegangenen unterscheidet.” Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*, 162.

⁶ Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Historik und Sprache," in Reinhart Koselleck, *Zeitschichten*, 119-127, 122.

⁷ Hayden White, "Foreword," in Reinhart Koselleck, *The Practice of Conceptual History. Timing History, Spacing Concepts*, translated from German by Todd Samuel Presner and others. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002, ix-xiv.

⁸ Reinhart Koselleck, "'Erfahrungsraum' und 'Erwartungshorizont' – zwei historische Kategorien," in *Vergangene Zukunft*, 349-375.

⁹ Reinhart Koselleck, "Moderne Sozialgeschichte und historische Zeiten," in *Zeitschichten*, 317-335, 331.

¹⁰ Timothy Garton Ash, *The File. A Personal History*. London: Random House, 1997. The question arises after reading the documentary pieces from the STASI archives on his research stay in the GDR before 1989, in which the British historian shows how the fictitious information in his file and the prejudices conveyed through them are a complete substitute for reality. See also Victor Neumann, "Despre biografia personală, fanteziile identitare și pacea socială" [On personal biography, identity fantasies and social peace], *Timișoara newspaper* (07.09.2022), URL: <https://www.ziarultimisoara.ro/special/8842-despre-biografia-personala-fantezii-identitare-si-pacea-sociala> (24.07.2023).

¹¹ Reinhart Koselleck and Carsten Dutt, *Erfahrene Geschichte. Zwei Gespräche*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2013, 49-50.

¹² Margrit Pernau and Sébastien Tremblay, "Dealing with an Ocean of Meaninglessness. Reinhart Koselleck's Lava Memories and Conceptual History," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 15, no. 2 (2020), 7-28, 24.

¹³ Reinhart Koselleck, "Fiery Streams of Lava, Frozen into Memory. Many Farewells to War. Memories that are Not Interchangeable," translated from German by Margrit Pernau and Sébastien Tremblay, *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 15, no. 2 (2020), 1-6.