The Incomprehensible, or Groping in the Dark: At the Limits of Concepts

Jan Ifversen
The Incomprehensible, or Groping in the Dark: At the Limits of Concepts

Darkness constitutes a paradigm opposed to enlightenment. While conceptual history is an approach suited to understand progressive semantic mastery, Reinhart Koselleck – although hesitatingly and implicitly – also developed an approach suited to situations where concepts are beyond reach and leave everyone groping in the dark. This entry traces Koselleck’s theory of the incomprehensible.

Koselleck is a true thinker of modernity. He spent his entire academic life reflecting on the dynamics of European modernity. In his first major work, Kritik und Krise, he emphasized the negative and destructive side of the modern project that emerged in the latter half of the eighteenth century. In this early view, modernity took shape as a pathogenesis1 that replaced the beginning autonomy of the political domain with an illusory reliance on universal morality backed by a philosophy of history that ended up circumventing the present and thus politics. Enlightenment was to blame for the creation of a potential monster that would lead to Europeans believing in the megalomaniac illusion that “modern man is destined to be everywhere and nowhere,” as Koselleck states in the opening paragraph of Kritik und Krise.2 When Koselleck and his co-editors some twenty years later rolled out the breathtaking endeavor of investigating the conceptual armature of the modern project in a lexicon of the basic concepts in the political and social language that was used to construct it, his view of modernity had changed. Politicization and democratization had tempered the destructive, illusory forces of ideology and philosophy of history. Acceleration and futurism (or more mundanely, expectations) still drove the modern machine, but together with intense conceptual and political activity to form its basic concepts. Through its fine-tuned investigation of the conceptual and political laboratory, the lexicon presented us with both a more complex and a more positive image of European modernity.

Since its birth, European modernity has been ridden by fears of its destructive and illusory dimensions. Early thinkers such as Adam Ferguson and Honoré Gabriel de Riqueti, comte de Mirabeau feared that civilization was merely a mask that covered up emptiness, savagery, or barbarianism. In his approach, Koselleck epitomizes this fear of a negative dialectics, and for good reasons since he
experienced firsthand the terrible consequences of a totalitarian imaginary unleashed in incomprehensible violence. There is, however, a middle road between viewing European modernity as a fatal ideological project or as a success story of inventing and building the democratic state. The fear of modernity’s dark side is linked to experiences of not being able to master and contain otherness.\(^3\) Koselleck had great trust in the stable rhythm between the innovative force of concepts and their capacity to respond appropriately to new events. Sometimes concepts would create new realities; at other times, they would retrospectively have to order new realities. As Koselleck and his editors noted in the introduction to the first volume of the Lexicon, it might happen that “there may be no appropriate concepts to designate a new situation, or else one has to grope in the dark to discover it.”\(^4\)

Successful modernity would always end up relying on discovery, its core concept for mastery. As implicitly implied in the quote, the “groping” provides a strong metaphor for an experience of uncertainty, fragility, and impotence: we do not know where we are heading; we do not have the words to respond.

Conceptual history is primarily a method that allows the historian to demonstrate the successful, innovative force of modernity as an exercise of semantic mastery. Concepts from the historical archive could be discarded or remodelled; neologisms could bring new concepts forward. But it is challenging to make the method work when words (or other forms of expressions) fail, when we are groping in the dark. Hans Blumenberg, the master thinker of metaphors, once proposed a theory of non-conceptuality, which would be able to “represent unsayability itself linguistically.”\(^5\) Obviously, if the groping would stay completely in the dark, there would be nothing to find. It is not a matter either of simply switching to other codes and semiotic systems (body language, images, sounds, material forms). What Koselleck – at least indirectly – points to are the situations where groping manifests itself hesitantly, brokenly, uneasily, disturbingly in the language uttered. In such situations we are far away from the comfort secured by basic concepts that – even if contested – guarantee a stable scene.

Koselleck did not develop a coherent theory of groping in the dark that would match his lengthy reflections on conceptual history and social history. Here, he maintained a dual ontology in which the force of concepts existed in interaction with non-linguistic social structures\(^6\) that operated within a system independent from language and in a non-linguistic reality. In his oeuvre, we can, however find an undercurrent that questions the armature of the double ontology and explores alleys beyond the ontological safety net. To highlight these alleys would be to add a lesser-known dimension of Koselleck’s approach to the history of European
modernity, namely one that focuses on the cracks in and the limits to its powerful dynamics.

In his conceptual history, Koselleck has demonstrated how modernity primarily operates through a mastery of time with the conceptual arming of a universal history – including the concept of history itself – to fill out the horizon of expectation. This mastery is, however, challenged by events that cannot be contained by what is at hand. As Koselleck says, “every event produces more and less than is contained in the pre-given elements: hence its permanently surprising novelty.” In one sense, events signify the unexpected and the uncontrolled. For the historian or the historical actors themselves to get a hold on things, they call in the concept of event after the fact to restore temporal order. Koselleck certainly had a close eye on concepts frenetically designating time out of joint such as “crisis,” “emergency,” and “catastrophe,” but often also relied on a solid social history to secure the historian a retrospective clarity, which would contain the event. Seen from the perspective of historical actors, speaking of an event, could, however, also indicate an effort to hesitantly or desperately get hold of matters out of order. In this sense, the event would rather work as a loose or floating signifier for a now that breaks with the past and darkens the horizon of expectation. We would then be in a situation of heightened uncertainty or – in Koselleck’s more clinical language – experiencing that “semantics have a slower rate of change than the events themselves,” which is just another way of stating that when confronted with novel events, we are always groping in the dark. Efforts to get a grip on time are confronted by increasing disorientation with catastrophe designating the ultimate collapse of meaning.

Reflecting on his own wartime experience, Koselleck proposed to speak of certain events as simply being absurd (unsinning, widersinnig) for historical actors witnessing them. By absurdity, he understands events that stay meaningless in the sense that actors could not detect any kind of rationality in them. As an ethical contribution to the past, later historians should refrain from a post eventum Besserwissen that would ascribe meaning to these events. For the historical actors, events thus designate a groping characterized by disorientation and loss of meaning, and in some instances even of sheer absurdity that would make later ascriptions of meaning problematic.

In one of his most critical reflections of European modernity after Kritik und Krise – a lengthy study of the asymmetrical counter concepts used in European identity politics to designate the positions of inferiority justifying violently exclusionary
practices – Koselleck demonstrates that conceptual border policing of communities also demarcate an engagement with that otherness which is outside semantic and cognitive control. For the European modernizers, the barbarian symbolizes a position that rejects all comparison. In its different manifestation (the less than human, the non-human), it is a negation that goes beyond existing classificatory systems. While European modernity intends to be everywhere based on a universal knowledge that allows excluding barbarians from civilization, it also casts an outside, which is simply portrayed as dark, but also dangerous since the barbarian always risk being inside the gates. In this sense, the barbarian is a prime example of European modernity groping in the dark. Despite all its technologies of power and accompanying concepts, European modernity constantly fears the force of the barbarian.

Koselleck’s reflection on the dark and dangerous outside stays European. He underlines the efforts of the states and the church to either convert heathens or eliminate the heretics, but he does not pursue an interest in examining further how some Europeans – for instance in their first encounters with the so-called barbarians – were caught in moments of disorientation, uncertainty, being overwhelmed, and loss of meaning. It is certainly true that European modernity as expressed most dramatically in colonialism activated its asymmetrical counter-concepts to pursue an expansion based on political control, racism and genocide, but there are also these moments where Europeans such as Christopher Columbus, Michel de Montaigne, and Alexander von Humboldt expressed their groping in the dark. Montaigne in his famous essay from around 1580 on the cannibals even instigated – or rather reconstructed – a dialogue with the strangers that Europeans called cannibals in which they responded to the groping with new knowledge. To move beyond European control, including concepts, and to allow the so-called barbarian to speak and to speak back, would be a further step towards a critical history of European modernity that opens with an investigation of all the moments characterized by groping in the dark.
Jan Ifversen is Professor in European Studies at the Department of Global Studies, Aarhus University. He is the author of a history of current European history (Hjem til Europa, 1992) and a book on power, democracy and discourse (Om magt, demokrati og diskurs, two volumes, 1997). He has published on conceptual history, intercultural relations, European history, European identity politics, heritage politics and history politics. He is one of the founding members of the international research group on conceptual history, History of Concepts Group. He has led several research projects including a research project on coastal tourism (The Danish Innovation Fund), and the Horizon 2020 research project ECHOES (European Colonial Heritage Modalities in Entangled Cities).

**Tags:** conceptual history / modernity / otherness

---


