

In spite of the objections above, the book constitutes an important contribution to contemporary debates on the matter. It develops an analysis of an intense speculative level and opens up new perspectives on theorizing the political.

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**Introducing the German Genre of Conceptual  
History to an Anglo-American Audience**

*Melvin Richter: The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995. 204 pp. Appendices, notes, and index.*

In his book *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction*, Melvin Richter sets out to offer English-speaking audiences the possibility to acquaint themselves with history of concepts as written by German historians. He advocates that Anglo-American historians can learn much from the approaches, systematic methods and variety of sources of the German genre. He himself states that the purpose of his book is to provoke methodological debate between Anglo-American and German historians who may not be as familiar with each others' work as they ought to be.

The compatibility of the German and Anglo-American approaches forms the central theme of Richter's book. He stresses the common background of the two traditions in that both have derived from the "linguistic turn" of historical research and the growing interest in the study of meaning. Referring to research that *Begriffsgeschichte* has motivated in The Netherlands, Hungary and the Nordic countries, Richter argues that the methodology developed by linguistically oriented German historians can be applied to the history of any country and any language. He also contends that such an application would enable comparative studies between dif-

ferent language areas.

Much of the book summarizes current discussions on the history of concepts. We are told that the points of focus in conceptual history include continuities, shifts and innovations in major political and social concepts, particularly in times of crises such as during the French Revolution. For Richter, few doubts remain as to the innovativeness of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe: Historisches Lexikon zur politisch-sozialen Sprache in Deutschland*, the most eminent product of German conceptual history. He argues that this massive dictionary of historical semantics “sets the standard for rigorous historical study of the specialized vocabularies of political and social theory [p. 5]”. He further states that semantic definitions of historical terminology in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* can be helpful for historians in spite of their lack of reference to political and social contexts.

Richter also contributes some interesting insight into differences between the research projects of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* and that of the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680-1820 (Handbuch)*. According to him, the projects differ in their conceptions of social history and in their interpretations of the role of politics in history in that the contributors to the *Handbuch* focus on popular mentalities rather than on structural social history and they study popular rather than canonical writers. Thus Richter introduces the variety of approaches used by conceptual historians and illustrates the continuous methodological debate in which they participate.

Indeed, Richter offers the clearest introduction to the research strategy of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* available in English. His manner of reviewing its historiographical background should be welcomed by those unfamiliar with recent developments in the works of German historians. His account points to the German historians’ interest in groups rather than in individuals, to the effects of their reception theory on the emphasis on audience rather than on authorial intentions only, and to their focus on the question of modernity. While keeping in mind the potential criticisms of Anglo-American readers, Richter argues that both the author and the intended audience should be included in studies on the history of concepts. He

also finds innovative use of linguistic techniques, historical contexts, and combinations of synchronic and diachronic analyses in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* and calls attention to its way of studying both conceptual and structural change. This combination should reveal the intentions of a particular text and illustrate contested conceptualizations of contemporary experience. Richter does his best to make type of conceptual history presented by the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* acceptable when viewed according to the conventional standards used for the history of political thought in the Anglo-American countries. He even endeavours to supplement the programme of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* by Anglo-American methodological contributions. However, when introducing the main hypotheses of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, he is careful not to comment on the implications of their application to British history. In this respect it might have been helpful to discuss some English concepts, such as *patriot* and *party*, on which research already exists. The effects of what the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* has called historicization, democratization and politicization of concepts and the increasing incorporation of concepts into ideologies certainly require closer illustration in future work on English history.

Aware of the doubts that easily arise about conceptual history as structuralism that ignores historical contexts, Richter is anxious to underscore the prominent position held by the social history of structures or mentalities in conceptual research. He repeatedly and rather abstractly emphasizes the need for simultaneous study of both conceptual change and transformations in political, social and economic structures. I would have welcomed a more sceptical approach to the actual possibilities of studying all the assumed "relevant" contexts of the great variety of sources typically consulted by conceptual historians. Richter argument would have been more convincing if he had given more concrete illustrations from English history by combining the research on structural social history with that on conceptual history. Instead, he is forced to concede that universal studies on relationships between conceptual usages and the social and political groups of language users have not been included in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* either. He is more convincing when pointing out that the great variety of sources studied by German

conceptual historians should make English-speaking intellectual historians appreciate a broader basis for sources, including the systematic study of dictionaries in English. A strong point that Richter could have made is that Anglophone historians studying concepts currently possess a unique tool for searching pre-1800 printed material of all kinds in that the computerised *English Short Title Catalogue* is now available. I share Richter's awareness of the problems which arise when such a variety of sources is consulted, for example, the levels of abstraction differ, as does potential of authors to innovate in language, and it is therefore difficult to draw conclusions on the relative weight of particular usages. Richter's conclusion that both familiar canonical authors and forgotten anonymous writers should be consulted appears to be a plausible solution to these problems.

After discussing the German concept of *Herrschaft* on the lines of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Richter develops a stimulating analysis on more recent conceptual history as influenced by the French *Annales* school and its critics. He raises the question of the proper emphasis on the social history of mentalities in conceptual history. For the editors of the *Handbuch*, who study transformations in traditional concepts caused by the French Revolution, it is the mentalities as conveyed by popular political texts that deserve attention, rather than the abstract contemplations of canonized elitist thinkers who dominate many of the articles of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. Richter also uses the *Handbuch* to illustrate the fact that historians should pay particular attention to disagreements on the proper use of language among participants in past discourses. Furthermore, he explores its systematic and occasionally quantitative method of analysing series of uniform sources to avoid impressionistic interpretations. His discussion of the possibilities of advancing this methodology forms one of the most valuable sections of his book. He points to the limitations of studying single concepts, as changes in one concept affect other concepts, and suggests that historians should construct networks of key concepts within a genre in periods of accelerating conceptual change in order to reveal which concepts remain unchanged, which disappear, and which replace earlier concepts. Particularly interesting is the section on Rolf Reichardt's work on French political catechisms after the 1760s.

Political catechisms combined the resources of authoritative religious language with the language of secular politics in order to create political persuasion suitable for all orders. What could have been added is that an analogous genre already flourished in early 18th-century England. This fascinating combination of ecclesiastical form and political content illustrates the importance of studying the role of religion in 18th-century English political discourse and thus deserves further research.

Richter writes very positively on the *Handbuch's* manner of studying the self-understanding of past actors by focusing on their conceptualizations of historical change, on the history of semantics, and on theories about the nature of language and lexicography. However, not all English-speaking scholars will agree that this method adds much to the history of political thought. Some, like Richter himself, reject the dominance of the history of mentalities and the tendency to play down canonical authors. Considering both extremes, Richter returns to the conclusion that both great philosophers and minor writers should be read, and he adds that the influence of the varieties of political language on each other should also be studied. It should be easy for most historians to agree with Richter's assertion on page 120 that "it is a mistake to present as intellectual history, as the history of political thought, or as that of political language, any account based only upon major thinkers, or upon those thinkers who have been bundled together to comprise a canon".

Richter next focuses on more-detailed comparisons between the methods of Skinner and Pocock on one hand and those of *Begriffsgeschichte* on the other. He maintains that "there are no major obstacles to bringing them together [p. 138]". However, given the diverse traditions of philosophy and historical research in the English- and German-speaking countries, combining the two is far from easy and the task remains open to objections. The assumed common interests of the history of political languages and the study of political vocabularies in contexts may not be enough to overcome the resistance to mixing their methodologies. As Richter points out, Anglo-American researchers have paid little attention to the emergence of modernity. Neither is social history, whether that of mentalities or structures, generally employed as a major explanatory component in

Anglophone studies of past political thought, even though there are excellent studies on English history – ignored by Richter – in which changing social circumstances are used to explain shifts in political attitudes.<sup>1</sup> Richter elegantly summarizes the major methodological points and criticisms of Pocock and Skinner. But he writes somewhat undiplomatically when he calls Pocock’s study of political languages “eclectic, unsystematic, and not always consistently applied [p. 129]” and when he offers “nonreductionist types of social history [p. 136]” as a solution to failings in Skinner’s study of linguistic utterances as actions. In anticipation of opposition from the Cambridge school, Richter discusses Skinner’s earlier methodological writings that seem to question the foundations of conceptual history<sup>2</sup> and finds evidence for Skinner having modified his critical attitude towards conceptual research. It must be conceded that, because of the lack of concrete examples from English history, Richter may not be able to convince all his readers of the essentiality of studying the language used to characterize structural change.

Richter’s book raises at least three additional issues worth the attention of its readers. The first concerns the problem of the English *Sattelzeit*, the second is the status of the *Oxford English Dictionary* as the sole authority of semantic change in English, and the third relates to the possibilities of applying modern information technology to the study of conceptual history.

As regards the English *Sattelzeit*, a period of fast conceptual and structural transition to modernity, Richter does not really supply an answer. He touches upon the issue in several places, asking whether it was connected with the 17th-century revolutions, as Reinhart Koselleck has suggested, or to the Industrial Revolution, but he does not problematize the question because of what he calls, the lack of “adequate history of political and social concepts in English [pp. 141 and 146]”. Further research is needed on the timing of the English period of rapid conceptual change – if there was such a period at all. Early 18th-century primary sources indicate that England was unlikely to have experienced an irreversible conceptual transition to modernity by the end of the 17th century. In the 1700s and 1710s, much of the political discourse in England experienced a reversion to the political languages predating the 17th-century revo-

lutions. The early 18th century as a whole then involved a very slow transformation of political structures and of political language during which some interesting changes in meaning and usage occurred even though few neologisms emerged. These shifts are visible in the popularization of the vocabulary of classical republicanism and also in some of the novel usages and changing meanings of inherited religious-political and medico-political vocabularies. The influence of religious discourse on the language of politics seems also to have been gradually declining.

Richter's criticism of the *Oxford English Dictionary* can be considered well-founded. Many Anglo-American researchers depend on frequent references to this source; yet many agree that its emphasis on literary sources make numerous entries on political and social terminology inadequate. In particular, 18th-century usages and the language of politics have been neglected by earlier compilers of the dictionary. Richter questions the reliability of the current version as the only source of information on the senses and on the first appearances of political vocabulary, but he correctly sees the existing corpus of historical semantics as a good starting point for a computerized history of concepts in English, once it is supplemented by previously neglected genres. Occasionally Richter touches the interesting question of constructing textbases for research in conceptual history, but he does not carry the point as far as could be expected. We are told that, thus far, most historians studying concepts have excluded databases consisting of historical documents and criticized previous attempts in computer-based political lexicology. However, the opportunities for at least a partly computerized analysis of political concepts may be increasing with the rapid growth of electronic text corpora and developments in text analysis programs.<sup>3</sup>

In conclusion, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* is based on the author's broad knowledge of the recent debate on the methodology of conceptual history and on his contacts with major historians specializing in political thought and intellectual history in Germany, France, Great Britain, and the United States, and it is characterized by a lively sense of the most recent approaches to the subject. There has been a need for a general introduction in English to the work of continental conceptual his-

tory, and this volume fills this need. On the whole, it is scholarly, controversial and thought-provoking and thus reaches its declared goals.

However, instead of being particularly critical, the author may have occasionally been carried away by his admiration of German projects as having “set standards of excellence for the historical study of the concepts and semantic fields that constitute vocabularies [p. 21]”. Though the author introduces some problems encountered in writing conceptual history, his own contribution is limited to reviewing previous work, questioning established orthodoxies of Anglo-American history of political thought, and advocating continental methodologies as a solution to these shortcomings. While the book is theoretically stimulating, it would have been helpful if it had demonstrated the practice of writing conceptual history in English by means of a case-study.

Another weakness of the book is related to its organization. Although the major points are presented with clarity, they are sometimes repeated excessively. This tautology is probably due to the extent to which the book consists of previously published review articles.<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding these reservations, Richter provides a highly useful introduction to an interesting topic for advanced students in intellectual history. Furthermore, the volume is essential reading to anyone interested in the methodological development of conceptual history. Not only has Richter provided the first English-language version of a comprehensive introduction to conceptual history, he has also argued in favour of rethinking the methodology used in the history of political thought as practised in the English-speaking world.

It remains to be seen how the Anglo-American audience will receive Richter’s provocative suggestion to combine German conceptual history and the Cambridge history of political thought. This book, like previous attempts to introduce conceptual history to Anglophone audiences, may meet with limited success in convincing its readers.<sup>5</sup> It is true that many Anglo-American researchers lament the tendency to study British history in isolation from Europe, but, as Richter himself suggests, few may be prepared to apply a “German” methodology to British history. Therefore the job of fitting British history into the European context, which is undoubtedly

a worthwhile project, may remain for non-native English-speakers to attempt.<sup>6</sup> The wish for a history of political and social concepts in English has already been fulfilled – though only on a modest scale – by individual researchers engaged in empirical research on early modern English history. However, an international project that both based its study on English materials and extended its work to comparisons between Anglo-American and continental societies, as suggested by Richter, would be welcomed in conceptual history.

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**Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> See Gary Stuart De Krey, *A Fractured Society: The Politics of London in the First Age of Party 1688-1715*, Oxford 1985, and Tim Harris, *Politics Under the Later Stuarts: Party Conflict in a Divided Society 1660-1715*, London and New York 1993.
- <sup>2</sup> Jeremy Rayner among others, has not been enthusiastic about adopting the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* as a model for future historiography in English. Finding it particularly difficult to accept the idea that the history of concepts is as significant as the history of political argument or political ideologies, he has referred to Skinner's methodological writings predating the start of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* project in an attempt to demonstrate that any history of concepts is based on a senseless picture of language. Jeremy Rayner, 'On *Begriffsgeschichte*', *Political Theory*, Vol. 16, No. 3, August 1988, pp. 496-8; Compare with Richter's reply in Melvin Richter, 'Understanding *Begriffsgeschichte*. A Rejoinder', *Political Theory*, Vol. 17, No. 2, May 1989, pp. 297-8.
- <sup>3</sup> See Mark Olsen and Louis-Georges Harvey, 'Computers in Intellectual History: Lexical Statistics and the Analysis of Political Discourse', *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, Vol. 18, No. 3, 1988, pp. 449-452, Evan Mawdsley and Thomas Munck, *Computing for Historians: An Introductory Guide* (Manchester and New York 1993), pp. 168-72, and Daniel I. Greenstein, *A Historian's Guide to Computing* (Oxford and New York 1994), pp. 183-99.
- <sup>4</sup> These include Melvin Richter, 'Conceptual History (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and Political Theory', *Political Theory*, Vol. 14, No. 4, November 1986,

### Book Reviews

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pp. 604-37, Melvin Richter, 'Begriffsgeschichte and the History of Ideas', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 48, No. 2, April-June 1987, pp. 247-63, and Melvin Richter, 'Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner, and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*', *History and Theory*, Vol. 24, No. 1, 1990, pp. 38-70.

- <sup>5</sup> Favourable comments on conceptual history include those of Keith Tribe, the translator of Koselleck's *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. He has presented the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* as "an undertaking of such length and detail" that it would be "hard to imagine in the theoretical and historical traditions of Britain and North America". He regards *Begriffsgeschichte* as "'conceptual history' of a sort unfamiliar to the Anglo-American reader". Keith Tribe, 'The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* Project: From History of Ideas to Conceptual History. A Review Article', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 1989, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 180, 182, 184. Other commentators on conceptual history in English include Irmeline Veit-Brause in her 'A Note on *Begriffsgeschichte*', *History and Theory*, Vol. 20, No. 1, 1981, pp. 63, 66-7, Tracy B. Strong in a review article in the *American Political Science Review*, 1991, Vol. 85, Iss. 4, pp. 1437-8, and Peter T. Manicas in his review essay in the *Philosophy of Social Sciences*, 1992, Vol. 22, Iss. 3, pp. 402-3. Of the few concrete examples of writing conceptual history in English that of Terence Ball should be mentioned, *Transforming Political Discourse: Political Theory and Critical Conceptual History*, Oxford and New York 1988, pp. 9-10. Conal Condren's *The Language of Politics in Seventeenth-Century England*, New York 1994, also resembles conceptual history due to its focus on semantic fields of 17th-century politics. The major difference when compared with *Begriffsgeschichte* is that Condren regards the words themselves rather than the past social reality as the major explainers in the study of political thought.
- <sup>6</sup> The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* frequently refers to developments in English conceptual history but its handling is restricted to major thinkers. This German interest in Anglo-American history has also been illustrated by Willibald Steinmetz, who has recently discussed English political discourse during the early 19th-century debate on parliamentary reform in his book *Das Sagbare und das Machbare. Zum Wandel politischer Handlungsspielräume England 1780-1867*, Stuttgart 1993. What he has claimed to have done is, however, neither the writing of a history of ideas nor conceptual history but an "analysis of elementary sentences".