

Reinhart Koselleck

## The Temporalisation of Concepts<sup>1</sup>

It is a basic hypothesis of the lexicon *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* that the experience of modern times is simultaneously the experience of a new time. The relation of the acting and suffering people to historical time has changed in empirical as well as in theoretical terms. "History itself" (*Geschichte selber*<sup>2</sup>) has been discovered as something new in relation to the previous experience.

Let me begin by discussing some notes on the history of the vocabulary. A central expression to which, as is well known, only the modern times have genuinely conceptualised, is progress. *Progressio*, *progressus* has unlike the theological *profectus* gained new meaning on its neo-Latin, French and English settings: the openness of the future which is at the same time conceived as increasingly controllable. This can be seen in two strings of meaning:

1. The natural metaphor of ageing, of growing old, which finally leads to decline or ends in a new circle becomes out-dated. Bacon consciously left the age metaphor blank when he introduced *Veritas Temporis Filia*, the truth as daughter of the time. Pascal in his *Traité du vide* consciously brought the human progress of reason to contrast with the ageing of the world. Human beings constantly increase their knowledge: "de la vient, par une prérogative particulière, non

seulement chacun des hommes s'avance de jour en jour dans les sciences, mais que tous les hommes ensemble y font un continuel progrès à mesure que l'univers vieillit."

Fontenelle broke openly with the comparison to age in 1688, in order to stabilise the ability to increase the human reason which once derived from this comparison. "Il y a toutes les apparences du monde que la raison se perfectionnera". The healthy views of all good spirits do not know any age, "c'est à dire, pour quitter l'allégorie, que les hommes ne dégèneront jamais, et que les vues saines de tout les bons esprits qui se succéderont, s'ajoutent toujours les unes sur les autres".

Hence, the circular, natural conception of time is replaced by a progressive time in which human reason perfects itself. Leibniz took these considerations perhaps most consistently to a conclusion, so that there is, until now, hardly any axiom of progress which he theoretically would not already have been formulated. Leibniz has put forward the thesis, that the universe neither repeats itself nor ages, and he goes a step further by saying that the universe can never reach the point of completion, of maturity. Similar to Pascal he says, that *progressus est in infinitum perfectionis*. The best of all worlds is the best only if she permanently improves.

Leibniz thus has formulated a dynamic conception of time which has conceptualised temporality (*Zeitlichkeit*) as being inherent in progress. The aim of completion is brought into the way of optimising. In this way we come to a further lexical reference:

2. Bacon, Fontenelle or Perrault still aligned their ideas of progression with the aim of *perfectio*. To discover the eternal laws of nature or art – or, as it was demanded in the eighteenth century, also of politics – means to define a finite aim. The same was also the case still with Voltaire, despite his polemical optimism, when he asked Rousseau: "Mais pourquoi n'en pas conclure qu'il (l'homme) s'est perfectionné jusqu'au point où la nature a marqué les limites de sa perfection?".

A really new, or at least a different time experience can be seen in two word formations: in *perfectionnement* and *perfectibilité*. The verb *se perfectionner* is old but the noun *perfectionnement*

was formed only in the first half of the eighteenth century. Turgot did not yet use the expression, he still liked to speak of the perfection *plus grande* which mankind emulates. Not until Condorcet does *perfectionnement* become a central catchword to sketch the processual character of the progression *infinite*.

As *perfectionnement* temporalizes the concept of *perfectio*, by using the theological expression in a historically new way, it articulates a specifically new time experience: it aims at the course of history, it articulates, following the intention of Condorcet, an objectifiable way of executing history.

A different case is the expression *perfectibilité* in Rousseau: this expression supplies the criterion which distinguishes the acting man from the animal. *Perfectibilité* is for Rousseau not an empirical determination of the course of events – as is *perfectionnement* – but a metahistorical category. It defines the basic condition of all possible history. Regardless of the pessimistic connotations Rousseau has connected with the expression, it is a basic definition which makes the process of history dynamic by refraining from a definite determination of aims.

Here I shall ignore the political and the social implications of this new conceptualisation. I only want to notice the semantic findings: with increasing reflection on progress the natural metaphor of time is forced back, it no longer carries enough strength to describe the experiences of modern history. Thus *per negationem* a genuine historical time is uncovered, a historical time which is aware of an open future, which takes the determinations of aims into the execution of acting.

I want to add here just one reference to German linguistic usage: The French plural *les progrès* is here still translated very naturally as progressing, as progression (*Fortgang, Fortschreiten, Fortrücken*) and so on. The emphasis still lies on the plurality of the single progressions which are empirically noticeable. It was only in the 1780's that the expression *Fortschritt* as a historical term was formulated by Kant. It is a word creation which sums up all single expressions of progress to a common concept.

This new collective singular contains the meanings of *per-*

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*fectibilité* as well as that of *perfectionnement* in one word. It is an expression of an ambitious theoretical claim. Namely it indicates a temporal modality of history which has not been formulated in this way before. Progress as historical experience is redeemable only if the people are conscious of their task of arranging or staging this progress. In this respect the concept is a reflective and defines the conditions of possibility but not the empirical course of the progress. Formulated differently: the expression is a transcendental category in which the conditions of the cognition coincide with the conditions of acting and the deed. It is evident, that this is the path which leads to Hegel and Marx, a path, however, which I shall not follow here.

Closely related to the formation of the term "progress" is the coinage of a new concept: history. Until the 1780s it was only possible to connect history with an object or a subject. One could only say: the history of Charlemagne, the history of France, the history of civilisation. Only during the epochal turn shortly before the French Revolution did it become possible in Germany to talk of history itself, of history in general. History also became a reflexive concept which reflects on itself without having to be connected to a concrete object or a concrete subject. Only after that was it possible to speak of history in contrast to nature. Clearly a new space of experience is uncovered.

As in the case of progress, there is a convergence available which connects several components to a common concept: no longer are histories thematized in the plural but history itself as a condition of the possibility of all single histories. As the coinage of the concept history as narrative (*Historie*) and history as nexus of events get simultaneously contaminated, the objective and the subjective aspects of historical experience became reduced to one collective singular. With regard to the French word *histoire* we occasionally come across this contamination as well. The next *analogon* in the French language seems to be *La Révolution* which attributes to itself much of the German meanings of the progress as such and of history itself.

These few notes of mine on the vocabulary are intended to illuminate the thesis of temporalization (*Verzeitlichung*) concerning specific concepts of movement (*Bewegungsbegriffe*) of modern times.

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These findings are certainly not limited to such expressions which explicitly thematize the temporal modalities. The surprising thing about the use of the hypothesis is that there is an entire socio-political vocabulary which refers to coefficients of movement and change. All socio-political concepts encounter a temporal tension which assigns the past and the future in a new way. In other words: the expectations are no longer deduced entirely from hitherto existing experiences, the experience of the past and the expectations for the future drift apart. This is only another wording for the temporalization which characterises modern times. Thus the complete terminology differs from the Greek-Christian tradition, though many elements of the original meaning are still contained in the modern usage.

Let me discuss this by giving some examples. Democracy in the Aristotelian tradition was a constitutional term which had two further alternative counter concepts, including their types of decline. What this triad characterises is the finiteness (*Endlichkeit*) of the predefined possibilities. However history proceeds, it always proceeds in the course of these quasi-natural organisational forms or stabilises itself into a mixed form, which is assumed to last longer. All experiences limit expectations so that – with exact analysis – it is possible to extract forecasts from the past into the future. The expectations are accompanied and limited by the previous experience.

All this no longer applies to the modern usage of democracy. Aristotle certainly still provides a multitude of interpretations which today remain usable in the analysis of a democratic constitution.

What is new is the expansion of the democratic constitutional form on megaspaces which exceed the oral communication of town people. New, too, is the setting of democracy as the only legitimate constitution which makes all other constitutional and ruling orders to appear to be wrong. But this is not what I would like to emphasise in terms of the questions under discussion. What in particular is new as well is that at the end of the eighteenth century a new horizon of expectation was opened by the concept of democracy which could not be deduced from or explained by the past.

When Rousseau defines democracy as an unrealisable constitution for angels, it is exactly this lacking realisation referring to infin-

ity which legitimates the plan to build a democracy. The German friends of the French Revolution, the young Görres, the young Schlegel or Fichte described themselves as democrats – also a new formation of the word – by proceeding from the assumption, that the aim of democracy, the identity of rulers and ruled can only be reached in a infinite approximation. But to reach for this aim is a moral duty. In this way an horizon is opened which turns democracy not only into a political concept – which it always was –, but into a concept of the philosophy of history as well. Hope and action come together in democracy. For the mode of realisation of the course of history the corresponding concept of movement was simultaneously created: namely democratism (*Demokratismus*).

Here we run into one of the numerous ”-ism” coinages which the temporalization of the categorical meanings generally brings about in socio-political vocabulary. I think of liberalism, republicanism, socialism, communism and also of conservatism, all of which have a common temporal structure. They are all movement concepts (*Bewegungsbegriffe*) which serve in practice to socially and politically realign the resolving society of estates (*Ständegesellschaft*) under a new set of aims. What is typical about these expressions is that they are not based on a predefined and common experience. Rather they compensate for a deficiency of experience by a future outline which is supposed to be realised. The basic pattern, the constitutive difference between the store of experience (*Erfahrungshaushalt*) and the horizon of expectation (*Erwartungshorizont*) in temporalization, marks all of these key-concepts (*Leitbegriffe*). Needless to say, these are concepts of the industrialised world which leave rural life behind, because rural life is naturally determined by a revolving time model on which the everyday life over the seasons was based.

The aforementioned concepts leave, – despite all Christian origins of the meanings – the eschatological or occasional apocalyptic space of expectation behind them. The Christian future expectation was as determined, albeit in a different way, as the future expectation of the antiquity. It was determined by the certain, though in a chronological sense uncertain return of Jesus Christ. Any prophecy which once seemed to be disproved by the events, used this failure as a basis for the certainty of its own future realisation. We are

dealing here with a kind of expected future which is assumed to be infinite.

The political future outlines of concepts of movement are quite different: They always remain bound to human planning and action and have to be adjusted to and fitted into changing events.

As an example I could mention Kant, who conceived in his work *Zum ewigen Frieden* in 1795 the concept of republicanism. It was Kant's aim to conceive the Basel peace treaty between republican France and monarchical Prussia as the starting point for a possible League of Nations (*Völkerbund*) – which is, by the way, also a word created by Kant. The difference between systems of governing in the two peace making countries was now dodged by Kant, who deduced both constitutions from the principle of republicanism. The Prussian King was thus obliged to rule his country as if it were already a republic all citizens could accept. Republicanism is hence, a determination of movement which declares constitutional change the principle of the constitution.

This shows how modern this conceptual definition is, as opposed to the earlier concept of constitution. In the French speaking world it was to my knowledge Vattel, who first defined the revision clause as a prerequisite of every reasonable constitution. This theoretically stems, of course, from Rousseau's *Contrat Social* in which the *volonté générale* is sovereign.

In conclusion: The temporalization of central or basic historical concepts (*Grundbegriffe*) is extended not only on concepts, which explicitly have to thematize the time – like progress or history. The other conducting concepts (*Leitbegriffe*) are also conceived and used in a way in which the change of the existing conditions is desirable, necessary, and therefore required.

From these findings it is possible, briefly, to make conclusions regarding the other criteria which structure our modern vocabulary politically and socially.

By "democratisation of linguistic usage" we mean: the dissolving of *stratum* or *status* specific usage of the terminology. To put it roughly, the political language in former times was restricted to the aristocracy, the jurists and the clergy. Thus, ensuring that the expressions were not used by the lower strata and did not to be trans-

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lated. This has changed rapidly since the eighteenth century. What was only possible in theological setting earlier becomes a political postulate now: Speaking to all people at the same time. Political language was first extended to encompass all educated people, the amount and spread of newspapers increased rapidly – a process which repeated in Germany after 1770 what has been done in England and France already a century before. The intensive repetitive reading of the same books, primarily the Bible and the psalm book, is replaced and outstripped by extensive reading which constantly includes new occurrences. Finally, the sounding-board of the political language expands to the lower classes which are supposed to be integrated in new way .

This process includes the compulsion to abstraction. The political concepts have to win a higher degree of generality, in order to be conducting concepts (*Leitbegriffe*). They now aim to speak simultaneously to people of most different living spaces and most varied classes with often diametrically opposite experiences. The concepts become catchwords in their use. This can be illustrated by the expression *Emanzipation*, which turns from a legal term, a *terminus technicus* related to the change of generations, into a historico-philosophical movement concept which indicates and practically sets off whole movements (*Prozesse*). Originally related to concrete individuals, later expanded to groups, nations and classes which demand all inclusive equal rights, the concept finally becomes so generalised that its reference to concrete actions can be recalled wilfully.

A further modern result, however, lies in the generalisation of modern concepts. With the global interdependence of all events the immediate spaces of experience no longer contain all the factors which constitute this experience. This means, the actual experience here and now which determines our everyday life, is determined by social and political factors which exceed our experience. This gaping difference can only be bridged by a political terminology which is universally usable. Behind the numerous abstract catchwords of present-day language lies a compulsion to abstraction which sets the preconditions for making politics.



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Finally, the liability to ideologies of all kinds also follows from these results. Ideology, this neologism, has, after being criticised by Napoleon, challenged a criticism of ideologies. It is a question of conscious contents which can neither be proved to be an error nor an open lie. They are rather attitudes which derive from the socio-economical life situation. As is known, this method can be extended to the whole historical past. But what makes this discovery a phenomenon of modern times?

I think that here too an answer can be found in the temporalization (*Verzeitlichung*) of conceptual language. For if the concepts are always preconceptions (*Vorgriffe*) towards the future which is no longer built up on previous experience, then there are no more controlling possibilities to disprove or to confirm these anticipations. The future can be, so to speak, specifically occupied by a particular social stratum, so that every stratum is able to project a different future on to another stratum. Everybody can then be analysed ideology-critically because every concept can be put in another perspective. In other words, the partiality of the modern vocabulary is constitutive for our politico-social language. Whether this is merely a phenomenon of modern times, I would like to keep as an open question for discussion.

*translated by Klaus Sondermann*

### **Notes**

- <sup>1</sup> The paper was originally presented in Paris in 1975 and served as a basis for the lecture in Helsinki in November 1995. The many French quotations refer to the original audience. All the quotations are presented and documented in the corresponding articles of the lexicon.
- <sup>2</sup> Note the difference between the German and English concepts. *Geschichte* refers to *Geschehen*, to that which happens, while *history* has *historia*, the story, as a reference, cf. the article *Geschichte, Historie* in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, vol. 2, 593-717. Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta 1975.