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Appreciating a Contemporary Classic

The Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe and Future Scholarship

A Contemporary Classic

After more than a quarter-century, there are now in print all seven of the substantive volumes of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, or to give its full title in English, *Basic Concepts in History. A Dictionary on Historical Principles of Political and Social Language in Germany*.² A definitive work on its subject, the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, or *GG*, as I shall call it, is unlikely to be superseded for a very long time to come. Although any or all of its articles may be corrected within the predictable future, it will continue to be indispensable. Thus the *GG* will join the *Pauly-Wissowa* lexicon for classical learning as among those indispensable classic works first consulted by anyone beginning serious research on the subjects it covers.

But what exactly is the *GG*? Some of those who praise it tacitly diminish their praise by classifying it as a reference work, a dull genre executed by faceless contributors, rather than by an individual with shining abilities. So to describe the *GG* as a multi-authored

lexicon, while not completely inaccurate, is seriously to underestimate the originality of its program, and the high quality of its execution. Nor does such well-merited praise suggest that the purposes of the *GG* are advanced by prematurely canonizing it. After all as a work of scholarship, its value in part derives from those of its statements which can then be revised in the light of subsequent research. More generally, the distinctive advantages of *Begriffsgeschichte* can be realized only after both its method and findings have been subjected to vigorous criticism and reworking by those who care enough to separate what is worth preserving from what ought to be discarded because of faults in the method, inadequacies in its application, or ideological biases in one or another article.

It is in this spirit that I propose two main purposes for the rest of this paper. First, I should like to continue the dialogue among English- and German-speaking specialists in the history of political thought and intellectual history.² Perhaps the single most relevant issue involves the relationship of individual concepts to the political language or languages in which they are used. For English-speaking historians such as John Pocock, Quentin Skinner, and Keith Michael Baker have developed distinctive modes of treating political and social thought and language historically. Still another Anglophone tradition, that associated with A. O. Lovejoy, is being continued by Donald Kelley in his own work and as Editor of the *Journal of the History of Ideas* founded by Lovejoy. All of these modes of analysis applied to political language by English-speaking historians, while differing in some regards among themselves, raise important questions about the linguistic and extra-linguistic dimensions of historical analysis.

The second issue I propose to raise, concerns future uses of the method and findings of the *GG* now that it is finished. What sorts of research, applications of *Begriffsgeschichte*, or comparative analyses ought to be undertaken?

But before turning to these questions, let me summarize briefly what I take to be the main points of the *GG*.

The project encompasses about 120 concepts covered in some 7,000 pages. Articles average over fifty pages; the most important contributions are monographs exceeding a hundred pages. Yet it is not the *GG*'s scale but its program that makes it notable. What are

its stated purposes? 1) to provide for the first time reliable information about past uses of political and social concepts by assembling systematically extensive citations from original sources; 2) to characterize the ways in which language both shaped and registered the processes of change which transformed every area of German political and social life from approximately the middle of the eighteenth-century to that of the nineteenth; 3) to sharpen our awareness at the present time of just how we use political and social language.

By understanding the history of the concepts available to us, we may better perceive how they push us to think along certain lines, thus enabling us to conceive of how to act on alternative and less constraining definitions of our situation. This work aims at much more than providing histories of concepts. It opens the way to understanding how those experiencing the historical formation of the modern world in German-speaking Europe conceptualized those great changes, incorporated them within their respective political and social theories, and acted upon these contested understandings. Comprehensive and highly structured, the *GG* could not have been planned and executed without Professor Koselleck's pointed historiographical queries and hypotheses.

The *GG* seeks to correlate political and social concepts with the continuity or discontinuity of political, social, and economic structures. But the history thus provided goes beyond social and economic history. Because those who lived through the unprecedented rapid changes of modern history did not all experience, understand, and conceptualize structural transformations in the same way, their prognoses differed sharply, as did their actions as members of different social formations and political groups. The range of alternatives depended upon the concepts available. What these concepts were, how they were contested, and the extent to which they remained constant, were altered, or created *de novo* are the integrating themes of the *GG*'s project. In order to treat them, the *GG* has utilized both the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and structural social history.⁴ Its program is anti-reductionist, positing the mutual interdependence of both types of history, which it sees as in a condition of fruitful irreducible tension. Thus, as formulated by Professor Koselleck, *Begriffsgeschichte* simultaneously refuses to

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regard concept-formation and language as epiphenomenal, that is, as determined by the external forces of "real history;" while at the same time, he rejects the theory that political and social language are autonomous "discourses" unaffected by anything extra-linguistic. This position has endeared the *GG*'s method to neither social nor intellectual historians, both of whom prefer their respective professional oversimplifications. These simply ignore concepts or structures respectively.

As a lexicon of political and social concepts. The *GG* charts the concepts constituting specialized vocabularies, that is, the semantic fields or linguistic domains, of political and social language used in German-speaking Europe. In addition, the *GG* proposes a set of hypotheses about how particularly during the *Sattelzeit* (approximately 1750-1850), German political and social vocabularies were transformed at an accelerated speed, and in certain specified directions. These changes in language both conceptualized rapid transformations in the structures of government, society, and the economy, and helped produce determinate reactions to them.

The *GG* combines the study of the languages used to discuss state, society, and economy with identifications of the groups, strata, orders and classes that used or contested such concepts. This program requires contributors (occasionally individuals, more often teams) to look back as far as classical antiquity, and forward to the conceptual usages of our own time. The *GG*'s objective is to identify three types of political and social concepts, each defined in terms of German usage at the present day: 1) concepts long in use, such as "democracy," the meaning of which may still be retrieved and understood by a speaker of the language today; 2) concepts such as "civil society" and "state," whose earlier meanings have been so effaced that they can now be understood only after scholarly reconstruction of their prior meanings; 3) neologisms such as "Caesarism," "Fascism," or "Marxism," coined in the course of revolutionary transformations they helped shape or interpret.

What is specifically modern in such concepts? High on the agenda of the *GG* are a number of hypotheses about conceptual developments during the period Koselleck calls the *Sattelzeit*: 1) *Verzeitlichung*, the disposition to insert modern political and social

concepts into one or another philosophy or horizon of history set out teleologically in terms of periods, phases, or stages of development. The concepts of progress and emancipation are among the best known ideas which were put into temporal frames of movement towards historical goals. Such impositions of temporal patterns have produced discernible consequences. They led to tensions between perceptions of the present and some more desirable future. Thereby such historicized and future-loaded concepts greatly increased the emotional charge, intensity, and polarization of passions in political and social life during this period. For this use of historical time helped create the horizon within which such concepts functioned thereafter. Especially significant for establishing such horizons oriented towards the future were eschatologies, religious or secularized, which made political actors conceive of themselves as either already living in a unique period, or else in one that would make history by transforming the world as hitherto known. Dr. Motzkin's paper⁵ admirably states other aspects of this hypothesis.

2) *Demokratisierung* (democratization) of political and social vocabularies, which prior to this period, had been specialized and relatively restricted to elite strata. During the eighteenth century, profound changes occurred in the manner of reading, what was read, the political messages delivered, and the size of the audiences to which they were directed. Previously the same texts had been intensively read and reread. Now many more texts became generally available, and were read more rapidly. Political and social concepts came to be communicated through varied media rather than through books exclusively. In these ways was increased the size of the reading public exposed to political concepts. As for nonreaders, many of them became familiar with the themes of contested discussion they encountered through personal participation in large-scale political movements of a kind previously unknown.

3) *Ideologisierung* (the growing extent to which concepts could be incorporated into ideologies). Under the systems of estates and orders characteristic of pre-revolutionary Europe, political and social concepts tended to be specific and particularistic, referring in the plural to well-defined social gradations and privileges such as the liberties of the *Bürger* (citizens) of a city, or to stories connect-

ing chains of events. But beginning in the 18th century, those older terms remaining in use began to become more general in their social reference, more abstract in meaning, and hence took the linguistic form of "isms" or singular nouns like "liberty," which replaced such prior usages in the plural as "liberties," or "history," which took the place of previously discrete narrations. These abstract concepts easily fitted into open-ended formulae which could be defined according to the interests of movements and groups competing for adherents. Neologisms were coined in unprecedented numbers to designate newly created ideologies: liberalism, conservatism, anarchism, socialism, communism, fascism.

4) *Politisierung* (politicization) of concepts. As old regime social groupings, regional units, and constitutional identifications were broken down by revolution, war, and economic change, the publics being addressed became much larger than before. More and more individuals previously uninvolved in politics became the targets of messages meant to persuade them. These newcomers were mobilized by competing movements and parties. In the process, political and social concepts became more susceptible to use as propaganda slogans and terms of abuse. In short, concepts increasingly served as weapons in political conflicts among antagonistic classes, strata, and movements.

Now that the *GG* is completed, what is it that we know about political and social language that we did not know before? And what difference does it make to possess such knowledge? Perhaps the single most important answer to the original editors consisted in contrasting the political and social concepts created by the advent of modernity and those which preceded it. Since we live in this modern, or as some say, post-modern world, we have much to learn about every one of its aspects that is illuminated by the *GG*. Some queries about this aspect of the *GG*'s findings will be considered below. But a work of this scope is directed to more than one audience, and hence has more than one justification. Let me list some of its more obvious contributions.

For those concerned with politics and the history of political thought, the *GG* provides situated, that is, contextual accounts of how key concepts came into existence, were modified, or became

transformed, always understanding that these concepts were contested. The founding editors were convinced that *Geistesgeschichte* and *Ideengeschichte*, both older German styles of writing such histories, were seriously inadequate because they did not treat thought within its context, because they did not address the question of what historical actors thought was at stake when they disputed the meanings and uses of abstract terms in use, or else proposed new language. The *GG* was meant to help us to understand when and why ideologies first emerged so as to combat ideological thinking in our own times and places. And by specifying alternatives excluded by ideologies, the *GG* may suggest categories of thought and patterns of action previously unidentified and unavailable. Recently we have seen how retrieving the concept of civil society has turned out to be valuable to those who have emerged from the repressive setting of the former Soviet bloc.

For scholars concerned with political and social thought in the past, *Begriffsgeschichte* enables them to avoid anachronism and to penetrate to the original meanings of the texts they read, as well as to the practical goals of their authors. Definitions of key terms need no longer be phrased unhistorically, nor remain at a level of abstraction which makes understanding difficult or impossible. Like much recent work in English, the authors of the *GG* sought to avoid erroneous interpretations derived from the false assumption that the questions of political and social theory always remain the same, and that their histories should be written in terms of the debate among canonical great thinkers about these perennial issues.

For political theorists today who discuss the meaning and application of such subjects as justice or equality, the *Begriffsgeschichte* of the *GG* is more closely fitted to their needs than any other type of historical treatment. Conceptual history enables political philosophers to perceive the relationship between past and present uses. The dangers of applying one or another conceptual usage may emerge from learning what have been its past implications and consequences. Again, because of present-day associations, a political philosopher may assume intuitively that there is some connection or opposition among concepts that is logically rather than contingently given. Detailed knowledge of past usages may reveal that such assumed con-

nections are fortuitous rather than logically given.

Finally, the *GG* is of inestimable value to translators of German political and social thought. Far more precisely than any other work previously available, the *GG* indicates the range of usage in German theorists. Thus indispensable information is provided about theorists' language, their intended audiences, and actual reception.

Some Unresolved Questions about the *GG*

Now that I have briefly described the program Professor Koselleck stated in the first volume of the *GG*, I should like to consider some problems about the *GG* as a historical work on political and social language.

It is clear that what is most needed after the *GG*'s completion is a further analysis of its findings. Before synthetic judgments can be made about the adequacy of the *GG*'s program and method, a considerable amount of analysis will be required. Although the *GG*'s introduction sets out a number of hypotheses about changes in political and social concepts, the work contains no analysis of its findings. More than twenty-five years of research and seven thousand pages of findings are or soon will be available to those seeking to answer the questions posed when this project was undertaken. Certainly the first order of priority is to make a systematic assessment of the extent to which the studies now available in the *GG* confirm, disconfirm, or confirm in part the *GG*'s hypotheses about the nature of conceptual change during the *Sattelzeit*. To note this absence of evaluation is neither a reflection on the editors nor a call for Professor Koselleck personally to undertake this task. But if historians continue to use *Begriffsgeschichte*, the original hypotheses of the *GG* ought to be reconsidered in the light of this unprecedented evidence now available for their evaluation.

Another difficulty derives from the *GG*'s lexicon format. This was adopted reluctantly, but there turned out to be no practical alternatives to it as a scholarly and publishing enterprise.⁶ Foremost among the unresolved problems is the question of how to proceed from an

alphabetical inventory of individual concepts to the reconstruction of integrated political and social vocabularies at crucial points of development in German political and social languages. At any given time, concepts were grouped together thus forming a semantic field, or a special language. Thus when such concepts are treated synchronically as constituting the specialized vocabularies of particular semantic fields or political and social languages, a question must be answered. At which periods or intervals ought concepts be brought together? A further question involves the periodization which should serve as the basis for diachronic comparison of concepts. For another part of the *GG*'s program proposes investigation of changes in the sense of concepts.

A further set of issues grows out of questions posed by scholars writing in English. They have inquired into the effects of different political languages upon perceptions and consequent action of those using one or another of the conceptualizations available. Which concepts were restricted to particular groups? Which were held more generally? What was the range of political languages? To what extent was communication facilitated or impeded by conflict over the concepts and conventions of political and social discourse? And in terms of the consequences for action – individual, group, governmental – what difference did it make how structural changes were conceptualized? Serious efforts to answer these questions could utilize the unparalleled materials gathered in the *GG*, and fit them into new patterns, including some adapted from programs developed by Pocock, Skinner, and Baker. It remains to be seen to what extent their work is compatible with that done in *Begriffsgeschichte*. What would be the consequences of trying to combine the resources of these two bodies of work in German and English on the language of political thought?

To pose this question is to ask how has this problem of synchronic synthesis been treated by English-speaking historians of political thought? That is, how do they go about determining what at a given time were the concepts available to those using one or another of the identifiable political vocabularies? Pocock, Skinner, Baker, et al. have been studying the complex interactions among political language, thought, and action, as well as seeking to develop an ad-

equate historiography of these subjects. Their project is in part to discover and analyze the competing political languages, "discourses" (in Pocock's preferred terminology), or "ideologies" (in Skinner's) available from early modern to eighteenth-century Europe.⁷ Their method differs from the German works which emphasize concepts. John Pocock has presented historical accounts of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century political discourses in the English-speaking world. No small part of his achievement has been to identify and trace, to present narrative and analytical accounts of alternative and competing "discourses," each of which combined concepts into a distinctive pattern of meanings. Such integrated modes of analysis and belief as the tradition of the "ancient constitution," classical republicanism or civic humanism, or the various forms taken by whiggism – all defined the meanings of thought and actions, which framed otherwise, would not have been meaningful to their adherents, or comprehensible to us.

Quentin Skinner has emphasized two levels of historical analysis: 1) treating political theories within historical contexts and linguistic conventions which both facilitate and circumscribe legitimations of political arrangements; 2) describing and making intelligible such theories, or "ideologies" as he calls them, as intentional speech acts. At the same time, Skinner, in his influential writing on method, has consistently ruled out the possibility of writing any meaningful history of concepts. Thus the "strictly historical" accounts of political language demanded by Pocock and Skinner have in their actual practices produced distinctive methodological emphases and types of histories. While differing somewhat from one another, nevertheless Pocock and Skinner have not as yet embraced any research program approximating the German project of reconstructing political and social language by charting the histories of the concepts that make up its vocabulary.

In a recent paper, I argue that to add the conceptual histories found in the *GG* to the projects of Pocock and Skinner would provide a more nearly satisfactory historical account of political and social thought and language.⁶ But it is also the case that an adequate linguistic synthesis of the concepts treated separately in the *GG* might necessitate both Pocock's strategy of seeking the overall pat-

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terns of the political languages used in given times and places, and Skinner's emphases upon the types of legitimation made possible or restricted by the linguistic conventions and political intentions of writers regarded as active agents or actors. These German and Anglophone styles converge to an extent that justifies dialogue among their practitioners. Out of this might come a meaningful comparative analysis of how different political and social languages in Dutch-, German-, French-, and English-speaking societies have converged and diverged.

***Begriffsgeschichte* and Comparative Inquiry**

In a paper assessing historiography in this century, a leading Dutch cultural historian, Professor Pim Den Boer, has characterized German *Begriffsgeschichte* in the last third of the twentieth century as among the most important developments in the writing of history, and placed the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* high among the greatest achievements by historians anywhere. Nor is this praise purely formal.⁹ Dutch historians are launching a major new undertaking, a history of political, social, and cultural concepts in the Netherlands. The first of its kind outside Germany, this project acknowledges the need for comparative, transnational studies of the languages and conceptual schemes created by Europeans with such enormous consequences for the rest of the world as well. This prospective addition of these specialized Dutch vocabularies to those of German- and French-speaking Europe underlines the further need to fill what will be the greatest remaining *lacuna* in our knowledge of language and culture. This is the absence of any study in depth of the distinctive forms, cultural and linguistic, as well as political and social, of the principal conceptual categories developed in English-speaking societies.

This Dutch initiative, then, is particularly important because it is being undertaken at just the time when in order to prepare its future, a newly united Europe will need to take stock of the ways each of its constituent parts has understood its past. Are such attempts to chart the component parts of a culture in complex detail impossibly

ambitious? In order to reply, we must realize that the Dutch project complements the *GG*'s charting of the political and social vocabularies of German-speaking Europe, as well as another analogous work on France that has been appearing since 1985. This major study, although published in German centers on the history of political and social concepts in France from 1680 to 1820. This is the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820* [A Handbook of Political and Social Concepts in France, 1680-1820]. The editor is Rolf Reichardt, once an assistant to, and still an occasional collaborator of Koselleck.¹⁰ Analogous Hungarian, Russian, and Scandinavian projects are either being planned or considered. Each of them contributes in different ways to a more detailed understanding of how Europeans have conceptualized their experiences of change since the end of the middle ages and the changes brought since the early modern period. To bring these findings together from a comparative perspective would produce a new field of study.

Still another project offers the prospect of a trans-cultural comparison of European and Chinese concepts of revolution.¹¹ This is a projected study by specialists of the keywords of the Chinese Revolution from 1911 to the present. Thus it may be that in the future, the *GG* will be seen as having made possible an altogether new subject of inquiry, the comparative history of political and social concepts, within and beyond Europe. Without the precedent of the *GG*, any such comparison would be inconceivable, as would be the separate national studies occasioned by it. Here is still another reason for thanking Professor Koselleck for the great work, the completion of which we salute today.

Notes

¹ Previously published in *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts. New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte*, eds. Harmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter. German Historical Institute, Washington D.C. Occasional Paper No. 15. Washington 1996.

² *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe. Historisches Lexikon zur Politisch-*

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sozialen Sprache in Deutschland, [*Basic Concepts in History. A Dictionary on Historical Principles of Political and Social Language in Germany*], eds. Otto Brunner, Werner Conze, Reinhart Koselleck (7 vols; Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1972-93). Although ready for publication, the eighth or index volume, which will greatly facilitate the use of those which preceded it, has not yet been printed.

- ³ See my *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (NY: Oxford University Press, 1995). Earlier efforts by me to inaugurate and continue this dialogue are: "Conceptual History (*Begriffsgeschichte*) and Political Theory." In *Political Theory* 14 (1986) pp. 604-37; *Begriffsgeschichte* and the History of Ideas," in *Journal of the History of Ideas* 48 (1987), pp. 247-63. Finnish translation, with preface by Kari Palonen, *Politiikka XXXI* (1989), 76-87. "Pocock, Skinner, and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*." *History and Theory* XIX (1990), 38-70; German version, "Zur Rekonstruktion der Geschichte der Politischen Sprachen: Pocock, Skinner, und die *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*," in *Alteuropa oder frühe Neuzeit? Probleme und Methoden der Forschung*, Hans Erich Bödeker and Ernst Hinrichs, eds. (Stuttgart- Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holboog, 1990), 134-174; "Begriffsgeschichte in Theory and Practice: Reconstructing the History of Political Concepts and Language," in *Main Trends in Cultural History*, Willem Melching and Wyger Velema, eds. (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi Press, 1994).
- ⁴ "Begriffsgeschichte und Sozialgeschichte," in Koselleck's collection of essays, *Vergangene Zukunft. Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (Frankfurt, 1979), 107-129. This has been translated as "Begriffsgeschichte and Social History," in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past*, tr. Keith Tribe (Cambridge, MA, 1979), 73-91. A more recent paper by Koselleck is "Sozialgeschichte und Begriffsgeschichte," in *Sozialgeschichte in Deutschland*, eds. Wolfgang Schieder and Volker Sellin, (2 vols; Göttingen, 1987), I, 89-109.
- ⁵ "On Koselleck's Intuition of Time in History. In *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts. New Studies on Begriffsgeschichte*, eds. Harmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter.
- ⁶ Koselleck's original proposal was for a single volume dictionary from classical antiquity to the present. This was to be organized in terms of connected subjects rather than alphabetical articles. But as the project expanded from one to eight volumes, it became clear that in order to make progress on the project as a whole, the concepts would have to be published in individual volumes ordered alphabetically. However, once the lexicon is completed, there is a possibility that there will be a

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publication in paperback of articles grouped by subject rather than alphabetically. Given the prohibitively high price of the hard cover format, such a step would make the GG much more accessible to scholars. See Keith Tribe, "The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* Project: From History of Ideas to Conceptual History," in *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 31 (1989), 180-184; and "Introduction," in Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past*, tr. Tribe (Cambridge MA, 1985), pp. x-xiii.

⁷ See Anthony Pagden, ed., *The Languages of Political Theory in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1987). The book was published in the "Ideas in Context" series, edited by Quentin Skinner in collaboration with Richard Rorty, J. B. Schneewind, and Wolf Lepenies.

⁸ *History and Theory* XIX (1990), 38-70; German version, "Zur Rekonstruktion," 134-174;

⁹ In *Main Trends in Cultural History*, Willem Melching and Wyger Velema, eds. (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi Press, 1994). This paper opened the International Summer School on "Main Trends in Cultural History" sponsored by the Dutch Graduate School for Cultural History in Amsterdam, June 18-27, 1991.

¹⁰ *Handbuch polittisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820*, [A *Handbook of Political and Social Concepts in France, 1680-1820*] (18 Hefte to date; München, 1985), eds. Rolf Reichardt and Eberhard Schmitt, hereafter cited as the *Handbuch*. The new co-editor along with Reichardt, replacing Schmitt, is Hans-Jürgen Lüsebrink. The proceedings of a notable conference at Bielefeld has been edited, along with their own contributions and comments by both Koselleck and Reichardt: *Die Französische Revolution als Bruch des gesellschaftlichen Bewusstseins*, Reinhart Koselleck and Rolf Reichardt, eds. (Munich, 1987).

¹¹ The keywords project is led by a team of five scholars: Timothy Cheek, Joshua Fogel, Elizabeth Perry, Michael Schoenhals, and the project director, Jeffrey Wasserstrom. An initial conference organized by Professors Wasserstrom and William B. Cohen, Department of History, Indiana University, took place at Bloomington, Indiana in September, 1992.

An example of the type of work likely to be generated by the project is Michael Schoenhals, *Doing Things with Words in Chinese Politics* (Berkeley CA: Institute of Asian Studies, University of California, 1992).