

THE LIFE AND WORK OF REINHART KOSELLECK

Niklas Olsen, *History in the Plural. An Introduction to the Work of Reinhart Koselleck*. New York: Berghahn Press 2012, 338 p.

Reinhart Koselleck has become a popular research topic after his death in February 2006. Two volumes of his articles, *Begriffsgeschichten* and *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte* been published by Carsten Dutt (for the latter see Helge Jordheim's review in this volume and my review in *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6:2, 2011). Books around the work of Koselleck have recently appeared (see in particular Hans Joas & Peter Vogt eds., *Begriffene Geschichte*, 2010, Javier Fernández Sebastián ed., *Political Concepts and Time*, 2011). To them we can now add a monograph, Niklas Olsen's *History in the Plural*.

The book goes back to a history dissertation written for Bo Stråth at the European University Institute in Florence. In his book Olsen tries in a classical German style to combine *Werk und Person*. Koselleck was, of course, a remarkable personality. He was, above all, a typical *Universalhistoriker* that is difficult even to imagine to rise in today's university. He told himself a lot of anecdotes on persons he had known – this was his own contribution to his 80th birthday party in 2003 – and from his former students and colleagues we can hear also additional anecdotes on Koselleck himself. It is without doubt that Koselleck's life, including his experiences as soldier of the *Wehrmacht* and prisoner of war in the Soviet Union, also has shaped his work. The question is, however, how far we should use this biographical perspective for the interpretation of an author's work?

Although Olsen title refers to Koselleck's "work", the genre of the book is rather an intellectual biography that relies strongly on Koselleck's personal experiences as sources for his scholarly work. For Olsen Koselleck "presented his work as personally motivated attempts to grasp the historical background of the modern world, in particular World War II, including how it was experienced, and how it could be understood and coped with." (p. 13). Or, his interest in the book lies in the "making of the historian" Koselleck (p. 4). This is, of course, an

entire legitimate perspective. It offers us a background for Koselleck's research interests and for his stands in the debates within the polity of West German historians since the late 1940s.

Despite emphasising that Koselleck was since his undergraduate days in Heidelberg indebted to Carl Schmitt's and Martin Heidegger's concepts and style of thinking, Olsen rightly insists that he did not share their political views or situational analysis. With good grounds he sees that the tendency to understand Koselleck's *Kritik und Krise* as a conservative critique of the Enlightenment, a view that was expressed soon after its publication in a review by Jürgen Habermas and persists among many scholars until today, misses the point of the book (p. 81–87 and notes).

Olsen's strength lies in the discussion Koselleck's profile as a relative outsider among historians that raised more interest abroad than in Germany. With his book Olsen joins in this respect the company of for example Melvin Richter, Helge Jordheim and myself. Through his work we can also know much about the West German academic and political culture and its shifting trends during the recent decades.

Koselleck's former students regularly tell anecdotes on his Bielefeld antipode Hans-Ulrich Wehler. Olsen contextualises this intra-faculty dispute and tries to do justice to its parts (see esp. 205–211, 242–250). To insist on the opposition between the respective styles of research with political implications, he first quotes Paul Nolte's view on Wehler: "Moral against distance, Enlightenment against skepticism, linearity and progress against plurality and decentralisation". Olsen then formulates himself the opposite pole: "Koselleck focused on the possibility of crisis, conflict, and war, on change and contingency, and he nurtured a much deeper scepticism toward every kind long-term planning, morality, and belief in societal progress" (p. 16). This difference can also provide a support for Koselleck's thesis that the losers in the ongoing struggles may turn to be better historians than the winners when the disputes concern the craft of the historians themselves.

As a Weberologist I always recommend a one-sided accentuation of a definite perspective. However, for Olsen the personality Reinhart Koselleck tends to dominate all too strongly over the textual corpus written by Reinhart Koselleck. In particular, a detailed analysis of the arti-

cles written or co-written by Koselleck to the volumes of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* is strangely missing (see my review article in *Redescriptions* vol. 10, 2006).

How can Olsen deal with Koselleck's concept of history without even mentioning the article *Geschichte, Historie* in the second volume of the "GG"? How can he defend "history in the plural" without confronting it with Koselleck's thesis that since late eighteenth century the German concept *die Geschichte* refers to a *Kollektivsingular*, to a "history as such", as opposed to particular histories? Olsen takes up the notion in the context of Koselleck's 1967 article *Historia magistra vitae* but sees its aim to "undermine notions of history in singular and to confirm the existence of histories in the plural" (p. 175). Koselleck's point in this essay and in the GG article from 1975 is, however, that the formation of the collective singular *die Geschichte* also constituted a new phenomenon, "history as such". Such reconceptualisation of the way to speak about the past also marked a horizon shift for historians that led to an entirely new agenda of research.

Koselleck refers to Goethe's interesting attempt to avoid this new concept of history, but he presupposes that contemporary historians still work within the collective singular. In this sense, when Olsen sees Koselleck's Goethe essay as a self-portrait as an outsider in the discipline (p. 254-256), he tends to miss the radical break that Koselleck identifies in the formation of *die Geschichte*, although he is critical of elevating this break into a veritable philosophy of history.

We can perhaps speak of a Hegelian and a Nietzschean manner of responding to the conceptualisation of history as such. For the former "one history" also requires a philosophy of history, as opposed to perspectivism in historiography that characterises the latter. Koselleck seems to sympathise with the Nietzschean side. Along this line he also takes for example stand for Weber's concept of *Kultur* against Hegel's *Geist* (in his contribution to Frühwald et al. *Geisteswissenschaften Heute*, 1991). In dealing with the world wars and their conceptualisation Koselleck supports the plurality of histories by opposing to all higher historico-philosophical meaning (*Sinngebung*) in the name of collective entities (see the title essay in *Vom Sinn und Unsinn der Geschichte* and my review in *Contributions*) to compensate the death of individuals.

One of the traps of intellectual biographies lies in the anachronistic mythologies of coherence and of prolepsis, to put it in the terms of Quentin Skinner. The biographical approach tends to emphasise “formative years” at the cost of later shifts, turns and transformations in the work. Olsen’s work on Koselleck is here no exception. He uses a classical tool of biographers, an unpublished letter of Koselleck to Schmitt on 21 January 1953, before submitting his dissertation *Kritik und Krise* in the autumn of the same year. Olsen tends to detect in this letter the entire Koselleckian re-thinking of the concept of history and the corresponding research programme for historical studies “as solutions to the scientific and political crisis that in his eyes marked the early 1950s” (Olsen p.58). Koselleck’s main target is ‘historicism’, in the sense illustrated by Friedrich Meinecke’s *Die Idee der Staatsräson in der neueren Geschichte* (1924), a study against which Schmitt turned in the 1920s. With good grounds Koselleck turns against Meinecke’s unhistorical use of concepts in the letter as well as in *Kritik und Krise*.

I have formulated the difference between histories of ideas and concepts so that the former tend to detect roots, precedents, or programmes as early as possible, while histories of concepts tends to insist on discontinuities and to date the breaks as late as possible. With his claim that Koselleck more or less formulated his entire revision of historiography in the letter to Schmitt from 1953, Olsen rather practises history of ideas than that of concepts. Such an approach is surely legitimate, and probably he has right – against my view in *Die Entzauberung der Begriffe* (2004) – that the anthropological dimension or the “ontology of history” (p. 64) can already be detected in this early stage of Koselleck’s work. This is an inherent part of his debt to the German tradition of “philosophical anthropology,” as practised by such authors as Max Scheler, Helmuth Plessner, Arnold Gehlen or Hans Freyer, but in a wider sense also by Martin Heidegger, Hannah Arendt and Carl Schmitt himself. Olsen insists that it is an anthropological reading of the work of Heidegger and Schmitt in particular that lead Koselleck to an anthropological “foundation” of his *Historik* and theory of historical times (see esp. the essays from 1980s in *Zeitschichten*, 2000).

For Olsen this “anthropological way of bringing in social considerations with the counter-concepts aimed to criticize and undermine the

very foundation of historical philosophies, the idea of an unified and universal history, and to replace them with a framework that thematized how human history unfolds in different ways, as histories within the described historical space” (p. 66). In other words, he claims that it is the ‘spatiality’ of history that guarantees its pluralism. The spatial opposites, such as up and down, or the limits of temporality, such as the finality of life and the possibility to end it, seem for him to provide a guarantee against the Hegelian type of founding one united History with capital H. In this sense the anthropological vision of history is that of a disillusionment, which Olsen counts as a typical attitude of the “sceptical generation” of German scholars born around 1925.

How is this anthropological space-dependence of human activities then related to the fact that just Koselleck is a theorist of temporalisation of concepts and experiences? Are not Schmitt, Heidegger and Arendt ultimately phenomenological essentialists in the search of a true meaning of concepts and, correspondingly, unable to understand their radical de-spatialisation and de-naturalisation of concepts and experiences à la Koselleck? Does not this temporalisation of concepts and experiences lead to possibilities of politicisation in the sense of rendering ever-new layers of allegedly ‘natural’ phenomena contingent and controversial? If understood in this sense, the temporalisation of concepts and experiences would rather invite to more devastating critique of unified histories à la Hegel than the anthropological disillusionment. Conversely, is not the looking for an anthropological basis for the theory of historical times a sign that – following Werner Conze’s early plans for a conceptual historical lexicon – also Koselleck was longing for something unchanging, although perhaps merely in order to render the historical changes better intelligible (see my review in *Contributions*).

Olsen directs the attention to a new conceptual instrument that Koselleck thematised in an article from 1995 and used as a title essay of his *Zeitschichten* in 2000. “With its assumption of history as an open, diverse, and contingent process composed of various *histories*, the notion of *Zeitschichten* softened up the more schematic account of history as composed by radically different epochs found in his earlier work” (p. 229). Is this an appropriate view of the main point of Koselleck’s new concept?

I would rather insist that temporal layers refer to the language of agents. The one and singular horizon shift in the formation of *die Geschichte* cannot be relativised to a shift in conceptual layers in historiography. The narrative and constellation of the articles in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* might sometimes exaggerate the radicalism of conceptual shifts. In cases such as *Geschichte* or also *Politik* we, however, have good grounds to emphasise that a new concept and a new manner to think was constructed, which also led to resetting of the research agenda for scholars. To sum up, I share Olsen's view on Koselleck as a defender of "history in the plural" but on different grounds than he does.

This does not diminish the value of Olsen's work. He has for example well understood that Koselleck was no system builder, that "he saw no reason to integrate the notions into a systematic and unified framework or to explain the exact relation among them" (p. 231). The recent interest in the work of Koselleck might well be due to this non-systematic character of his work that never makes reading his writings boring and predictable.

This leads to my final point regarding the character of Olsen's work, namely its subtitle "An Introduction...". What is the scholarly value of such introductions? Do we need them? Are the old Collingwoodian arguments in *The Idea of History* against the "text-books" written for readers *in statu pupillari* strong enough against writing introductions?

Niklas Olsen has approached the problematic pragmatically. This work is an introduction in the sense of presenting an overview of Reinhart Koselleck's *œuvre* to non-German readers by setting it to its own historical context and looking for Koselleck's moves to act in this context of debates. Olsen's own decisive move in the genre of introductions is that he has translated all quotations from Koselleck into English, without presenting the originals, without allowing the readers to see Koselleck's own words at the same time.

This has some unfortunate consequences. The readers who do not understand German are held in the *statu pupillari*, that is, they must rely on Olsen's translations rather than are encouraged to learn German themselves, as a condition to become a first rank conceptual historian. The German readers remain, as always when not easily available corpora of the works quoted are at hands, suspicious of translations. To take

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one example: “According to Koselleck, historical philosophy proved extremely effective as a political weapon?” (p.51). When referring to *Kritik und Krise* and to the Enlightenment, we can guess that the original word must be *Geschichtsphilosophie*. But should it rather be translated as “philosophy of history”? Or does Olsen refer by “historical philosophy” to something else, to a philosophy including a historical dimension? If this is the case, how does it differ from “philosophy of history”?

My final point is to share the Collingwoodian polemic. Olsen’s book is a genuine academic piece of scholarship. It should not be devaluated into an “Introduction”. Correspondingly, it should respond to the scholarly requirement of presenting the key quotations that are analysed in the book also in the original language of the author. One of the main points of conceptual history is obviously that it is not “ideas as such” but their formulations that matter in order to grasp their point and their context. The formulations would also allow the readers to do their own analysis.

This is at the same time a polemic against the increasing provincialism of the mono-lingual Anglophone publication industry. When books like Olsen’s hardly can be a commercial success, why to devaluate their content and quality by making misleading concessions to the publisher in omitting original quotes?

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