On Conceptual History

Jan-Werner Müller

A consciousness of the history of concepts becomes a duty of critical thinking.

—Hans-Georg Gadamer

Concepts are like joints linking language and the extralinguistic world. To deny this distinction is to hypnotize oneself and, like Hitler, to succumb to a self-produced ideology.

—Reinhard Koselleck

Words, too, can destroy.

—Reinhard Koselleck

Reinhard Koselleck was the greatest theorist of history in postwar Germany. Yet, somewhat paradoxically, there exists no real theory of the approach in intellectual history for which Koselleck became most famous both in Germany and internationally: conceptual history, or Begriffsgeschichte. While Koselleck throughout his life was working out his proper Historik—that is, a theory explicating the very conditions of possible histories—conceptual history remained a related, but in many ways quite undertheorized, project. In the end, much of what he wrote either about or for the famous lexicon of Basic Historical Concepts (Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe) takes a pragmatic approach.

That pragmatism, however, also helped Begriffsgeschichte travel. Apart from the original projects in Germany, there are now great collective research undertakings in other parts of Europe (especially northern Europe), but also further afield—with Latin America a particularly important area of development. Yet, the global expansion of conceptual history has also been overshadowed by a number of doubts about the very approach. Some of this skepticism is purely methodological, especially when it takes the form of intellectual sniping from members of the “Cambridge School.” In particular, there have been questions about whether concepts can actually change, or whether all that can be investigated is the “changing usage of words.” There have also been concerns as to whether conceptual history can really give a coherent account of, broadly speaking, the relationship between language and social history, which in many ways was its most exciting initial promise.

On a more political front, Begriffsgeschichte has been suspected of being bound up with—or, less politely put, contaminated by—a profound antimodernism and deeply problematic assumptions about the nature of political and social life that ultimately derive from Carl Schmitt and Otto Brunner, a legal theorist and a historian, respectively, deeply implicated in National Socialism. Many observers think that conceptual history can be disentangled from Koselleck’s and Schmitt’s diagnoses of modernity as an age of dangerous “ideologizations.” At the same time the claim that conceptual history needs to take into account the particular dynamics of modernity (in particular, the rise of “collective singular terms” such as “History” in and of itself, which in its abstract quality is prone to some form of “ideologization”) is precisely what made conceptual history as practiced by Koselleck and his followers so stimulating in the first place—as opposed to a pedestrian comparison of the usage of words in lexicons in, let’s say, fifty-year intervals (an approach that, alas, can also be found in a number of the chapters in the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe). In what sense, then, might very different modernities need very different conceptual histories? In other words: is conceptual history so far completely bound up with a particular European, or at least Western, experience—and can there be multiple conceptual histories for multiple modernities? Or are there limits to travel, after all?

In this essay I shall start out by reconstructing the origins of conceptual history, before discussing the great success of Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, as well as attempts to export conceptual history beyond its original German contexts. Subsequently, I shall address some of the doubts and concerns about conceptual history at which I already hinted: I shall argue that conceptual history can indeed be dissociated from some of the particular assumptions about modernity that perhaps tell us more about 1950s and 1960s Western Europe than modernity as such. On the other hand, I shall confirm the suspicion that in many ways the actual “method” or, for that matter, the underlying theoretical assumptions of conceptual history are not nearly as clear as might be desirable.
In fact, conceptual history has always remained somewhat indeterminate; it promised to mediate between "social history and the history of consciousness" or, put differently, "between language and reality," without it ever becoming fully clear how that mediation can be carried out coherently, or for that matter whether assuming a split between language and "reality" was actually plausible. This indeterminacy is not the only explanation for conceptual history's success—but, as Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht has pointed out, it probably contributed significantly to it. Put differently: doing conceptual history itself opens certain horizons of expectations about how one can really comprehend very large-scale processes of historical change (not just in intellectual history)—but there are legitimate doubts as to the extent to which these expectations can actually be fulfilled.

Having said that, it is also somewhat naive or at least unimaginative to expect that a method, even with its ambitions of historical understanding somewhat scaled down, can somehow mechanically be applied to ever more topics, times, and geographical areas, until all regions and historical experiences have been covered with "their" conceptual histories. What then should one expect, or work toward? This question opens up the final section of the essay, where I offer an explicit assessment of what is dead and what is alive in conceptual history. Conceptual history, in the way initially envisaged by Koselleck (before he moved away from overly normative considerations), can provide a "semantic check" and have a clarifying function for present-day political theorizing, especially if coupled with a convincing account of present-day understandings of the experience of historical time (this may sound rather cryptic—bear with me). I am less convinced, however, that somehow conceptual histories can serve as vehicles to realize lofty ideals such as "mutual European understanding" or even "intercivilizational dialogue," as is sometimes claimed.

Second, I want to encourage more work on how concepts travel and are reworked under very different circumstances of "real history." Finally, I want to suggest that conceptual history could fruitfully be broadened both in its objects and in its ambitions to comprehend lived experience, as opposed to elite discourses. For instance, it could include a focus on political iconology, as has sometimes been suggested. Most important, however, might be a stronger attention to semantic fields, as opposed to single words, especially in everyday use and lived experience, not just among social and political theorists. The last point is not a cheap populist shot. Conceptual history itself, as I shall show, demands an account of historical times and experience, and the broader that account the better. In that sense, "populism" was always a postulate of conceptual history itself.

This essay will offer three recommendations in the end: to undertake a critical conceptual history of the present; to write more histories of translations and appropriations, as well as mistranslations and misappropriations; and, finally, to make more sophisticated use of the idea of conceptual history as a means to theorize processes of historical change—in particular the changing nature of experience itself, and on a broader basis than "basic concepts" or Grundbegriffe. In all three areas Koselleck's own theory of history might be productively employed. The exact relationship between conceptual history and Historik in Koselleck's own work has not always been entirely clear, but they undoubtedly informed each other profoundly and partly made for such a rich intellectual legacy, the full measure of which has yet to be taken.

Historicizing Begriffsgeschichte: Positions and Concepts in Wrestling with European Modernity and Twentieth-Century History

The Begriffsgeschichte of Begriffsgeschichte tells us that Hegel first used the word. However, as a research program (and much less obviously as a distinct "method") Begriffsgeschichte emerged in the late 1950s and early 1960s in West Germany. In a very broad way it can be interpreted as part of the linguistic turn—but with crucial caveats. This point is important to stress because "historical semantics," "discourse analysis," "contextualism," and so on are nowadays often run together with conceptual history, despite their profoundly different objects of study, differing philosophies of language, and, at least in some cases, different normative background assumptions and goals.

German Begriffsgeschichte can be understood as a common movement of historians and philosophers—although the movement was internally complex, with many, sometimes deep-seated philosophical and political differences. For instance, Joachim Ritter's project of a philosophical dictionary was not the same as Koselleck's program for specifically investigating historical change and the making of modernity in a national (German) context. Ritter's approach remained much more in the tradition of trying to fix the essential meanings of philosophical terms. To be sure, Hans-Georg Gadamer influenced them all—but different parts of the movement took very different insights from Truth and Method.

There are two plausible, but perhaps rather reductionist, readings of why the great wave of Begriffsgeschichte happened when it did. On the one hand, it could actually be understood as a form of coming to terms with the past: a tracing and testing of concepts after the Third Reich, with much more obvious examples of examining political languages as part of Vernünftigkeit being Victor Klemperer's LTI (Lingua Tertii Imperii) and Dolf Sternberger's
Simultaneously, as Gumbrecht has claimed, *Begriffsgeschichte* allowed a broader reappraisal of national traditions. In addition to a more particular process of “semantic chastening” for inherited German languages of politics, conceptual history was both a coming-to-terms with the past and a coming-to-terms with the present—but of modernity more broadly, with its supposedly fateful processes of “ideologization,” rather than just the immediate Nazi past.10

*Begriffsgeschichte* had many quasi-official aims originally. In the most ambitious purely philosophical form—which is to say, Gadamer’s and, to some extent, Ritter’s—it was to provide a firm philosophical foundation for the *Geisteswissenschaften*, or, put more provocatively, hermeneutics and conceptual history were ultimately supposed to become one. The main vehicle for this project was the *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* journal (which began in 1955) and later the *Wörterbuch*, initially edited by Ritter, whose first volume appeared in 1971.

In its most ambitious historiographical (or, critics might say, barely veiled political) form, conceptual history was to illuminate the dialectic of the Enlightenment (the original title of Koselleck’s dissertation, which was renamed *Critique and Crisis*, when Koselleck realized that the title existed already). The project of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* as a whole was deeply informed by the somewhat skeptical perspective on modernity as an age of “ideologizations” (which is not to say that each individual chapter actually took up this theme). What Koselleck and his contributors called the modern *Sattelzeit*—the period when the basic concepts took on their modern meaning or at least when the range in which their meaning could be contested became limited—was also one of enormous social upheaval, a general sense of acceleration, the “ideologization” and “democratization” of increasingly abstract concepts—and thus a new kind of mass politics, and, not least, the reign of dangerous philosophies of history.11 The modern age was diagnosed as one of actual or latent ideological civil wars (Koselleck once spoke memorably of a “Feuerkranz von Bürgerkriegen”—a “ring of fire consisting of civil wars”—hinting that they all might culminate in nuclear annihilation during his own time). Why? Because, among other things, modern concepts demanded change, political movement, and, ultimately, conflict.

Who in particular were the formative influences for the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*? Officially the lexicon had three editors: Koselleck, Brunner, and the social historian Werner Conze. But de facto it became Koselleck’s project. He oversaw it from beginning to end, edited most of the chapters, and ended up writing a few of them (more than he had ever wanted) himself. Koselleck in retrospect identified “many fathers”—but four major points of reference stood out. First, Otto Brunner and Werner Conze as the main members of the Arbeitskreis für Sozialgeschichte (working group on social history) were already relating social and conceptual history; second, a tradition stretching back to Hegel, which understood conceptual history as the history of philosophical terms and which found its most important contemporary proponent in Gadamer (and, indirectly, Heidegger, whom Koselleck encountered in various colloquia in Heidelberg); third, Koselleck’s dissertation adviser Johannes Kühl, whose historical work on different types of toleration effectively amounted to an analysis of different historical concepts; and, last, but certainly not least, Carl Schmitt, whose book on dictatorship had been a kind of protoconceptual history and who, in his writings and direct exchanges with Koselleck, insisted on the need to contextualize legal and political concepts—in particular the need to relate the meaning of concepts to the character of a historical epoch as a whole.12

Yet the initial official justifications of conceptual history hardly ever evoked any of these names or traditions. No doubt they can only be fully understood in the context of the major trends in the German historical profession during the 1960s and 1970s. This might sound reductionist, but there is little to doubt the sincerity of some of Koselleck’s retrospective attempts to relativize some of the original claims for the importance and particular role of *Begriffsgeschichte*. At the time, conceptual history was rather modestly presented as an auxiliary enterprise, a handmaiden even, to social history—all in order to legitimize itself and mark a proper distance to traditional *Ideen- und Gesellschafts-*. which were widely suspected not only of being methodologically flawed, but of having had pernicious political consequences (whether nationalism, conservatism, or simply political passivity).

The marriage to social history was one of convenience, then—and quarrels quickly ensued. Koselleck ever more openly suspected social history in the Bielefeld mode of being more or less teleological (in particular with its theory of a special German path of development, or *Sonderweg*). He also thought social historians were uncritically and, in a sense, ahistorically adopting nineteenth-century concepts such as class, nation, and bourgeoisie.13 In the end, Koselleck would abandon the term “social history” altogether and speak only of the history of facts or events (*Sachgeschichte* or *Ereignisgeschichte*).

Social historians returned the compliments. In their eyes, conceptual history was at best a “dead end,” as Hans Ulrich Wehler, the doyen of social history, once put it. At worst, it was “historicism,” or part of a conservative revival of a certain kind of idealism, with dangerous political consequences for the progressive projects of social history in particular.

To be sure, conceptual history had from the beginning also been justified with some present-day concerns. In Koselleck’s conception, it could serve as a
form of “semantological control” of language use in the present and even lead to “political clarification.” Koselleck and his colleagues also insisted that in the present concepts in one sense needed no historical account, as their meaning could be grasped by anyone (his elegant formulation is untranslatable: in one’s own time Begrifflichkeit collapsed into Begriffbarkeit). In other words, according to the official self-presentation, nothing directly normative at all followed from the diagnosis of the modern age.

However, de facto at least a mildly conservative or liberal conservative position resulted (and was advocated by Koselleck in some more occasional writings): a sense that our realm of expectations should be “controlled” by past experience, after all, and that prudence demanded a *Postulat der Prognosenkontrolle*—a postulate carefully to control prognoses about the future. Moreover, Koselleck, who eventually did admit to a “reflexive historicism” (reflektierter Historismus), cast suspicion on the “collective singular” terms—especially “History,” which suggested a singular, goal-directed global process in the name of which all kinds of atrocities might be justified. There was never History—there were only histories, according to Koselleck, who was memorably described by Jacob Taubes as a “partisan of histories” against single History. This insight into the irreducible plurality of human experience was then translated into a kind of normative liberal pluralism.

The research program of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* arguably had varying success: rather than actually uncovering changing understandings of concepts, at least some of the contributors just traced the changing official or semi-official definitions (and semantic environments) of words, especially from one lexicon entry to another over time. Still, regardless of the more or less lexicometric merits of individual chapters, there was a sense that the roughly 7,000 pages of what often simply came to be called “the GG” represented a monumental achievement in scholarship. So much so that a contributor like Gumbrecht later concluded that the lexicon was really a “pyramid of the spirit”—highly impressive, similar to the pyramids, as far as the necessary time for completion was concerned (about twenty years), but never to be built again, even in different versions, and more of a museum really than anything anyone would consider for present-day use.

Yet that conclusion seems hasty. Other projects in Europe and elsewhere have gotten under way. Of course, different concepts were chosen in different contexts (sometimes surprising ones: “simplicity” for the Dutch project, for instance), and different accounts of historical development framed the inquiries. For example, the British or Dutch *Sattelzeit*, that is, the era when concepts took on meanings recognizable for those living today, is clearly a different one than the period 1750–1850, which Koselleck had identified for Germany.

Specialized journals and summer schools were founded. Conceptual history spread north, in particular to Scandinavia, and then the notion of a Europe-wide conceptual history was born. The method then went global, with investigations as to how, for instance, Spanish and Portuguese concepts were received, reworked, and even entirely re-created in a Latin American context. While there might be some suspicion that this is conceptual history in its era of mechanical reproducibility, there is ultimately no doubt that these investigations have not only usefully mapped histories, but also opened wider historiographical questions and facilitated comparative work in the history of social and political thought. Whether they will really help “understanding” or even facilitate the creation of new concepts, as is sometimes promised, are questions to which I shall return.

Decontaminating Begriffsgeschichte, Clarifying Begriffsgeschichte

Is conceptual history somehow contaminated with deeply problematic political assumptions, or principled kinds of antiliberalism and antimodernism, as some critics have suspected? This suspicion has usually been articulated in the form of some kind of genealogy, rather than as a real methodological or, for that matter, broader historiographical or philosophical argument. Brunner, so the story tends to go, was the first, with his pathbreaking *Land and Lordship*, emphatically and systematically to insist on the historicity of concepts. Schmitt emphasized the need for a “sociology of concepts” in his *Political Theology* and explicitly demanded a kind of conceptual history in one of his lectures from the late 1920s:

> All relevant conceptions of the spiritual sphere are existential and not normative. If the centre of spiritual life constantly shifts in the last four hundred years, then consequently all concepts and words change, too, and it is necessary to remember the multiple meanings [Mehrdeutigkeit] of every word and concept. The most and the crudest misunderstandings (of which, however, many common live) can be explained from the false transposition of a concept at home in one sphere... onto the other spheres of spiritual life.

Of course, Schmitt was not just interested in conceptual history as a value-neutral research program. He explicitly practiced a form of political writing that aimed at “capturing” or “occupying” concepts. Schmitt thought of concepts as “real carriers of political energy” that could effectively separate friends and enemies. Successful political action meant, not least, imposing the meaning
of concepts on politically weaker or vanquished parties; as he put it, it “is a sign of real political power, when a great people determines the way of talking and even the way of thinking of other peoples, the vocabulary, the terminology and the concepts.” In short, “Caesar dominus et suprema grammaticam” (Caesar is also the master of grammar), as Schmitt, in this sense not at all that different from Hobbes, liked to point out.27

Brunner also pursued political goals with his kind of conceptual history: the point of Land und Herrschaft was not merely to admonish historians that a nineteenth-century distinction between state and society was profoundly misleading when projected onto feudal orders; he actively sought to undermine and, ultimately, abolish that distinction as such. At the meeting of the German historical profession in 1937 he demanded nothing less than a “revision of basic concepts.” To be sure, after the war, Brunner replaced Volk with “structure” throughout Land and Lordship. Schmitt, barred from teaching, retreated into a semiprivate world that hardly allowed him (at least officially) to further the kinds of histories and sociologies of concepts he had called for earlier. Of course he did influence individual historians, above all sensitizing them to the importance of changing and contested Begriffe: Koselleck and the ancient historian Christian Meier are only the best known.

However, none of the above conclusively demonstrates that the Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe, let alone conceptual history more broadly, is somehow contaminated by antidemocratic ideologies, whether Nazism directly or some other völkisch set of ideas. Observers have argued that the importance of the “concrete” context and the conception of the essence of politics as conflict are problematic legacies of Schmitt’s thought in Koselleck’s work—even going so far as to claim that the latter essentially put forward conceptual history as “a form of intellectual military history” (with the historian as a kind of “war correspondent”).28 Others, equally experienced as intellectual war correspondents, have indirectly confirmed this impression: “Koselleck and I both assume that we need to treat our normative concepts less as statements about the world than as tools and weapons of ideological debate. Both of us have perhaps been influenced by Foucault’s Nietzschean contention that ‘the history which bears and determines us has the form of a war.’”29 Or so Quentin Skinner observed, probably inventing a Foucauldian influence on Koselleck, but correctly reminding everyone that he and Koselleck share a certain view of politics—even though Skinner appears to have undergone no Schmittian or, for that matter, Brunnerian education in the way that Koselleck obviously did. Put simply, it is not enough to show that Koselleck had a conception of politics as conflict, or that Brunner, like Koselleck, posited a historical break, or “saddle time,” to be able to claim that conceptual history is somehow secretly Schmittian. Furthermore, Koselleck’s own account of the modern ideologization of concepts can in a sense explain what happened with intellectuals like Brunner and Schmitt—or, put differently, Begriffsgeschichte itself can historicize some of the fathers of Begriffsgeschichte, as they self-consciously “ideologized” their concepts and theories.30

Such a claim makes it all the more urgent, however, to clarify what Begriffsgeschichte really is—because that is in fact far from obvious. How does one know whether one has identified a “basic concept”? What role exactly do concepts play in history? What kind of evidence ought conceptual historians to gather in order to substantiate claims about conceptual history? Ultimately, to what extent can conceptual history really be understood as a “method” or “approach” that is in some meaningful way “transferable” in understanding the relationship between social and political language, on the one hand, and Sachgeschichte, on the other?

Arguably Begriffsgeschichte never fully worked out its relationship to “real history”—despite the initial self-presentation as being closely linked to social history. The famous formula of a “convergence of history and concept” confused more than it clarified, but it also allowed its representatives to insist that their approach was fundamentally different from that of, for instance, Michel Foucault or Hayden White (as much as Koselleck exhibited warm sympathy for White’s thought in particular). Koselleck was adamant that Begriffsgeschichte was precisely not one of the “contemporary modern theories that reduce reality to language and nothing else.”31

To mark the difference from such theories, Koselleck time and again sought to clarify what he called “the key to the history of concepts”—the key to the question, that is, how “the temporal relationship between concepts and factual circumstances [is] configured.” He insisted that “every semantics points beyond itself, even if no subject area can be apprehended and experienced without the semantic performances of language.” Moreover, “reality” and concepts do not map onto each other, or move in synch: “the meaning and usage of a word never have a one-to-one relationship with so-called reality”; and “concepts and reality change at variable speeds, so that on occasion it is the conceptuality that outpaces the reality, and sometimes the other way around.”32

This nonsynchronicity implies that there are concepts that above all register experience (Erfahrungsregistaturbegriffe) and concepts that actually create experiences (Erfahrungsstiftungsbegriffe). Furthermore, there are concepts in modernity that are essentially utopian—that is to say, not based in any existing “reality” at all—and thus purely about creating expectations (Erwartungsbegriffe). All concepts contain an “internal temporal structure,” but modern basic concepts—especially those ending in “ism”—demand and inspire “movement
and change" (and conversely have little or no "experiential content"). As Koselleck famously summed up this thought, concepts are not just *indicators*—they are also *factors* in history. To be sure, concepts and fact (*Sachverhalte*) always diverge—and that divergence keeps driving historical change. But in modernity, or so it seems from Koselleck's account, concepts seek to close the gap ever more urgently, even aggressively.

This raises a further question: conceptual history ought primarily to be after "basic concepts"—but how does one identify them? Basic concepts, according to Koselleck, are in a sense those concepts that are inevitable at a given time: they are "non-interchangeable"; and in their absence it is "no longer possible to recognize and interpret social and political reality." For concepts to acquire this status, they first have to become "exclusive" and lose a range of meanings—only to then turn particularly contentious, as all parties to a semantic (and, ultimately, political) struggle seek to fix their core meaning in their favor, so to speak. In short, concepts—to be basic concepts—have actually to be ambiguous or have multiples meanings (*vieleutig*).

Concepts can rise—and concepts can fall. They can even become what Ortega y Gasset once called "cadaverous concepts." How does one know whether a basic concept has ceased to be one, or been replaced by another? Koselleck claimed that "only when a word has lost its capacity to bundle together enough of the experiences arising from the concept and to express all its pent-up expectations in that single common term has it been drained of its power to represent a fundamental concept. Then the word will slowly be taken out of circulation." 14

Such a "life and death of concepts" perspective might easily suggest that conceptual history amounts in the end to nothing more than what Koselleck at one point dismissed as "positivist registration"—a kind of record of concepts coming and concepts going. However, what makes conceptual history history—indeed what really makes it possible in the first place—is what Koselleck called a "theory of historical times." The particular project of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* depended on the theory of the *Sattelzeit*, the "saddle-time" of about 1750 to 1850, during which concepts took on their contemporary modern meaning. It was also during this period that the experience of time is said to have changed fundamentally or, more precisely, to have become "denaturalized." Aristotelian meanings waned; topological concepts became replaced by temporalized, dynamic ones; and "collective singulars" emerged, such as History, Progress, and Freedom. In other words, the specific account of conceptual change during the "saddle-time" only became possible against the background of the theory of modernity as an era of acceleration, politicization, temporalization, and democratization.

To be sure, Koselleck always freely admitted that *Sattelzeit* was just a heuristic device, not so much a *Begriff* as a *Vorgriff*, literally a theoretical anticipation, an attempt to get ahead of oneself to structure an investigation that otherwise would have amounted to mere "positivist registration" (though arguably not even that since one would not have known where to look for units of analysis in the first place). Koselleck even nonchalantly revealed that the specific term *Sattelzeit* had occurred to him at the spur of a moment in order to make a funding application during the heyday of social history more plausible. 15

But the basic point remains: Koselleck and company insisted that no conceptual history is possible without some kind of prior theory of historical times, and some account of the experience of time during a particular period. There is no experience without concepts, and no concepts without experience. 16 This does not automatically set limits to where and how conceptual history can be applied, but it does make it clear that conceptual history can never be simply a matter of picking out what might look like important words in a set of national or regional languages of politics and then examining how these words have been used over time. For proper conceptual history, as Kari Palonen has stressed, semasiological and onomasiological approaches proceed together, along with an account not only of changes in "reality" in general, but also a theory of how history and time are experienced. 17

The seemingly naive talk about "reality" so far might have raised eyebrows. According to Koselleck, conceptual history remains permanently suspended in an intermediate position between "pure history of consciousness" and "pure history of reality." Therefore conceptual history is also never enough to comprehend what ought to be comprehended, as Koselleck put it at one point. 18 So, in one sense, the advantage of conceptual history over other approaches is that it at least tries to break out of the kind of explicit or implicit idealism that, as Samuel Moyn points out in his chapter in this volume, characterizes so much of twentieth-century intellectual history. Quentin Skinner in a sense conceded the point, claiming that "I have no general theory about the mechanisms of social transformation, and I am somewhat suspicious of those who have." 19 For sure Koselleck et al. also had no "general theory," but they at least tried to relate representations and the "inerradicable remainders of facticity" 20 that cannot be grasped with language, as opposed to Retreat to a tracing of what Koselleck had called a "pure history of consciousness." Now Koselleck explicitly stated what to some might seem obvious, namely that "all language is historically conditioned, and all history is linguistically conditioned," and that, furthermore, "there is no acting human community that does not determine itself linguistically." 21 But he still sought to hold on to some
ontological distinction between the history of languages and Sachgeschichte: not all representations are actions, and not all action is somehow linguistic. Here Koselleck insisted on the wisdom of Herodotus: "There are some things which cannot be explained in words, but only in actions. Other things can be explained in words, but no exemplary deed emerges from them." Koselleck made his claim about the "pre- and extralinguistic conditions of human history" more precise by pointing to what he did not hesitate to call "natural givens" (given for all life, that is, including animals): the metahistorical oppositions of "earlier/later," "inner/outer," and "above/below." Of course, one can fault conceptual history for precisely this Sonderweg: that it somehow failed fully to take the linguistic turn; that it wrongly insists on a mysterious "surplus of history" that can never be captured by language; and that Koselleck's "metahistorical" prelinguistic conditions of history were chosen arbitrarily. But especially for discontents of the linguistic turn, or those who think that we have become somewhat lazy in our assumptions about how thought and practices are indissolubly bound up with each other, this peculiarity of conceptual history might prove a fruitful provocation—and hold out a promise of how thought, time, and the invariants of historical existence could be related in novel ways.

Some have conceded that they have no such account at all—but also implied that we do not need one. Skinner, for instance, owned up to having no interest in theorizing Time itself—or even just the possibility of including a temporal dimension in an account of the meaning of certain concepts. But Koselleck's point had been that it is impossible to have any kind of conceptual history—or for that matter to understand modern social and political concepts—without a theory of historical times, and, more particularly, of how experience and expectations are built into the very meaning of concepts. Put differently: we cannot see things their way, if we cannot grasp how they experienced time. To be sure, this is not a point that can be generalized. I can ask someone on the street for the way to the train station and expect to be able to make sense of their answer without an account of how they conceive time (though there might be curious exceptions). But if I ask about the conceptual history of "progress" or "democracy," the way "hope and action come together" (Koselleck) in these key concepts, or Leitbegriff, and the way they anticipate the future—then I need to understand how, in modern times, these concepts have become "loaded" not just with diverse experiences, but also with expectations of the future and, consequently, particular images of time and history.

One might be tempted to conclude from this that Bielefeld and Cambridge just kept talking past each other, the best efforts of mediators like Melvin Richter notwithstanding, or that the approaches remain fundamentally at odds. Yet that would be too hasty. In particular, the point that one looks at the longue durée, while the other is interested in "epiphanies" or one-off acts is only somewhat plausible. Both in a sense agree that concepts actually do not change at all; what changes is the usage of words, as Koselleck once put it, with Skinner making an essentially similar argument that there is no "conceptual change" at all, but only "transformations in the applications of the terms by which our concepts are expressed." In a sense, Koselleck's "reflective historicism" and what Koselleck himself refers to as Skinner's "rigorous historicism" (according to which all concepts occur as unique speech acts) can converge. As Koselleck puts it, "The historical uniqueness of speech acts, which might appear to make any history of concepts impossible, in fact creates the necessity to recycle past conceptualizations." What we have then are essentially unchanging concepts, but changing conceptualizations in the form of at least some "linguistic recycling"—not quite Cambridge, but also not quite what Skinner had long argued was the central flaw of Begriffsgeschichte.

To be sure, there are still important differences: Begriffsgeschichte explicitly cares about nonlinguistic contexts, Cambridge does not; Begriffsgeschichte needs to engage with "discourses" and "languages," but how concepts interrelate in a language or discourse (almost like a "living thing," according to Pocock) is not the primary focus—and a fateful temptation is indeed to treat single words as units that can be analyzed more or less in isolation (even if de facto, like a Pocockian language, they always have to be seen in relation to what Pocock calls a "semi-specific community of language users"). Concepts and discourses are not separate; they are part of a hermeneutical circle—but, as some of the chapters of the GG make clear, it is in practice easy to lose sight of this basic point.

What Is Dead and What Is Alive in Conceptual History?

Not so much by way of conclusion but rather by way of tentative recommendations, I would like to suggest three areas in which conceptual history could productively be employed and extended. First is what one might call a critical conceptual history of the present. It was a given for Koselleck and other conceptual historians that, at least in the German context in which they were initially interested, there was no point in tracing conceptual history further than the moment when concepts become immediately comprehensible for the living. This does of course not mean that such concepts turn out to be uncontested. Quite the opposite, for concepts to remain basic they have to be simultaneously unavoidable, ambiguous, and continuously contested.
A critical conceptual history of social and political terms would take on board the point that only that which has no history can be defined and trace the history of contestations up to the very present. At the same time, it might broaden the field of investigation from elite discourses (in particular, academic political and social theory on which the GG drew heavily) to lived, everyday experience—an example being Rolf Reichardt’s work on French conceptual history, which examines a wide variety of genres, from satires to songs to games, to understand popular mentalités. An emphasis on the latter might then generate research into whether some of our basic political and social concepts have not in fact been changing because of different degrees of experience and expectations with which they are invested—in other words, their internal temporality might have been transformed. We might well have similar intuitions to people during the Sattelzeit when we talk about democracy, as far as a basic image of political institutions are concerned—but the politics of time associated with democracy might have changed fundamentally, as might have the understanding of the “collective singular concepts” that were representative of a certain ideologization of social and political concepts. Few of us, one would think, believe in unqualified “Progress” or a single, goal-directed process called “History.”

Second, the ways concepts travel have yet to be fully explored and understood. If conceptual history depends on a theory of historical times, then what happens when concepts move between different kinds of modernities and their associated temporalities? Concepts do get transmitted and translated, but how—and, not least, why—are questions that, one would think, could only be properly answered if Sachgeschichte and the history of experience are meaningfully related through an account of linguistic change. Think, for instance, what “liberalism,” or for that matter, “neoliberalism,” “globalization,” and “democracy” mean once they have traveled outside an Anglo-American context (to take some fairly clichéd examples of our time); and also how such terms are used to come to terms with experiences of “compressed modernity” in ways that seek neither just to copy modernization theory nor to react with some homegrown nationalism. We lack a good theoretical grasp of the contemporary coexistence of the noncontemporaneous, of what one might call “diachronic synchronicity.”

Third, I see no reason why conceptual history could not be broadened in two senses. Especially if it ought to focus more on everyday lived experience (as opposed to what is put forward in more or less abstract social and political theory), it might include metaphors and images. It might also shift from a concentration on single terms to a concern with what Willibald Steinmetz has called “elementary sentences”—claims that are frequently repeated and that might expand both the sayable and the doable, to paraphrase the title of Steinmetz’s seminal book on British parliamentary debates in the nineteenth century. Of course one can object that this is no longer conceptual history at all—images might indeed make arguments, but they are not unavoidable or contested in the way basic concepts are. Yet both images and metaphors on the one hand, and elementary sentences on the other, might be as important in structuring a social imaginary—if that is indeed a plausible conceptualization of the intermediary between the “pure history of consciousness” and “real history.” Of course it is also possible to want to collapse that distinction completely—but then one will have moved decisively beyond the thought of Reinhart Koselleck, and of Herodotus, for that matter.

Notes

I am very grateful to Niklas Olsen, Melvin Richter, Bo Stråth, and Martin van Gelderen for stimulating exchanges on Begriffsgeschichte, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for Oxford University Press.

1. To be sure, theory is not the same as method. Kari Palonen has usefully distinguished six ways of conceptualizing the meaning of conceptual history: as “a subfield of historiography,” as “a method of historiography,” as “a strategy of textual analysis,” as “a micro-theory of conceptual change,” as “a macro-theory of conceptual change,” and, finally, as “a revolution in the understanding of concepts” (with the latter essentially being a judgment about the value of conceptual history). I agree with that judgment—but I also find that the two theories, the method, and the strategy are plagued by problems and lack of clarity. See Kari Palonen, “An Application of Conceptual History to Itself: From Method to Theory in Reinhart Koselleck’s Begriffsgeschichte,” Finnish Yearbook of Political Thought 1 (1997): 39–69; here, 41.

2. While deeply influenced by Martin Heidegger, Karl Löwith, and, in particular, Hans-Georg Gadamer, Koselleck was not himself a philosopher, and certainly had no patience for analytical perspectives and the development of sharp distinctions as such.


8. There have also been much more ambitious explanations on why conceptual history arose in Germany; some have stressed the unique role of Hegel, others the rise of *Dogmengeschichte* in the nineteenth century, and Koselleck himself argued that it was the need to translate from Latin in the modern period that led to a heightened sensitivity to concepts in a German-language context.


12. The relationship with Gadamer is not as straightforward as one might think: The *Begriffsgeschichte* of social and political concepts no doubt benefited enormously from Gadamer's philosophical *Begriffsgeschichte*. But later Koselleck insisted that his *Historik*—the theory of the conditions of possible histories—could not be subsumed under hermeneutics. The oppositions that Koselleck identified—dying and the capacity to kill, friend and enemy, public versus secret, as well as "earlier-later," "inside-outside," and "above-below" (or "dominant-dominated") could only be comprehended in language—but they were not themselves necessarily linguistic phenomena. See Reinhart Koselleck and Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Hermeneutik und Historik* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1987). In general, the relationship between *Begriffsgeschichte* and Koselleck's *Historik* has not yet been sufficiently explored.


19. Though the Iberoamerican Project also takes exactly 1750–1850 as the period of the "advent of modernity."

20. See "The European Conceptual History Project (ECHP): Mission Statement," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 6 (2011): 111–16. Eight volumes are envisaged, with an introductory one to be followed by collections focusing on "civilization, federalism, state and market, historical regions, liberalism, parliamentarism, and planning." The project also promises to be "useful in the design of new concepts." One might suspect that the choice of concepts will yield a social–democratic/left-liberal legitimation narrative for European integration—but it is clearly too early to tell.

21. Or rather reborn: Koselleck himself had conceived such a project comparing French, British, and German concepts, with three columns running next to each other to enable direct national comparisons. But he concluded that the nonsynchronicity of national experiences and the lack of a metalanguage for comparison rendered such a project virtually impossible.


23. For reasons of space I leave out an account of Conze, who also played a highly problematic role during the Third Reich.


27. Ibid.

31. Things are different with Koselleck's historical anthropology. Here claims about the anthropological status of the friend–enemy opposition (as well as the inside–outside pair) can look like an unwarranted privilege of a perspective informed by Schmitt.
34. Ibid., 43.
35. "... der Ausdruck 'Sattelzeit' ist natürlich ein Kunstbegriff, den ich benutzt habe, um Geld zu bekommen," in "Begriffsgeschichte, Sozialgeschichte, begriffene Geschichte," 195. At another point he claimed that “I invented the term and used it for the first time in commercial advertisements created to promote the GG—to sell more issues.” He also argued in retrospect that the term Schwelzenzeit (a threshold period) might have been preferable.
37. Palonen, "An Application.”
38. This is a perhaps rather poor translation/allusion to Koselleck's startling
claim: “Es ist eine begriffsgeschichtliche Delikatesse, daß die Begriffsgeschichte selber nie hineinrichtet, um das zu beschreiben, was begriffen werden soll.”
43. Koselleck, "Linguistic Change.”
44. As noted in ibid., 181–82.
47. Skinner, "Retrospect," 179. Koselleck went so far as to admit that the very concept of Begriffsgeschichte was a "logische Lässigkeit.”
49. J. G. A. Pocock, "Concepts and Discourses: A Difference in Culture? Comment on a Paper by Melvin Richter," in Lehmann and Richter, *The Meaning*, 47–58; here, 47. Another important difference on which I cannot elaborate in this context is the fact that Koselleck in his later *Historik* insisted on the importance of "recurring structures" in history—and, against the background of the oppositional pairs underlying his historical anthropology, came close to endorsing the view that there are indeed what he called "permanent challenges," a.k.a. perennial questions.
53. A good example of such attempts to use conceptual history to negotiate a particular experience of modernity is the survey of conceptual history in South Korea, Myoung-Ryu Park, "Conceptual History in Korea," *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 7 (2012): 36–50.
56. The matter with metaphors is both less and more straightforward: metaphors can become concepts, but it is hard to argue that social and political metaphors are somehow inevitable.