The Linguistic Approach in the Study of Modernity: Political Interpretation on the Methodology of Koselleck's *Begriffsgeshichte*

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Abstract: The study of German *Begriffsgeschichte* (conceptual history) by scholars such as Koselleck focuses on historiography, but its basic hypotheses are highly philosophical. One of its tasks is to explore modernity from the perspective of language, hence can be understood as the "linguistic approach" in the study of modernity. As for the origin of the theory, the conceptual evolution of *Verzeitlichung* (temporalization), *Demokratisierung* (democratization), *Politisierung* (politicization), and *Ideologisierbarkeit* (ideologicalization) proposed by Koselleck was not only largely affected by Gadamer's hermeneutics and Heidegger's existential phenomenology but also deeply influenced by Carl Schmitt's political philosophy. In Koselleck's view, conceptual upheaval in the revolutionary era from 1750 to 1850 was, essentially, a semantic struggle in which old and new forces competed fiercely.
Keywords: *Begriffsgeschichte*, modernity, semantic struggle, Koselleck, Carl Schmitt

I. A STRUCTURAL DISCOVERY?

Almost all introductions to the study of German *Begriffsgeschichte* would mention the eight-volume *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Basic Concepts in History: A Historical Dictionary of Political and Social Language in Germany). However, this remarkable text, which took more than 20 years to complete, only comprises 119 entries and does not appear to lay readers like a typical encyclopedia. Some professionals argue that the alternative approach to compilation reflects the rigorous and profound pursuit of epistemology by German conceptual historians (Fang, 2020: 27). To some extent, the argument makes sense, but is this the whole story?

In recent years, the study of German *Begriffsgeschichte* has become popular in the Chinese academic community. Given this context, it is necessary to outline the basic logic of the approach with the special concerns as a foreign researcher in mind, as the gist of this theory can be summarized as follows: (1) An interdisciplinary team of numerous

scholars carrying out research and writing on German *Begriffsgeschichte* which would naturally need an academic guiding principle; (2) This guiding principle should provide operational and technical standards for matters like entry selection when it comes to organizational planning for projects such as the compilation of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*; (3) the concrete development of research in historical context can be regarded as verification of this guiding principle's theoretical presupposition. In this regard, as a set of guiding and planning principles, i. e., *Verzeitlichung* (temporalization), *Demokratisierung* (democratization), *Politisierung* (politicization), and *Ideologisierbarkeit* (ideologicalization) of the concept proposed by Reinhart Koselleck (abbreviated as the four "-tions"), serve as the filtering procedures for selecting dictionary entries from vocabulary at the primary stage.

Temporalization refers to words that fade as the discourse changes; words that cannot merge into the shared *Erfahrungsraum* (space of experience) or construct the future *Erwartungshorizont* (horizon of expectation), will fall into disuse. Democratization refers to a process whereby words used by a small number of elites, rather than widely used by the grassroots, will be sifted out. Politicization entails that purely academic words confined to textbooks, which cannot be used as mobilization tools in political games (such as wars and revolutions), will be eliminated. Ideologization means that words with a low level of abstraction, which do not evolve into basic political creeds and cannot be used to label various stances and demands in debates, should also be weeded out according to circumstances.[1]

After filtering out a large number of words, are 119 basic concepts all that remain? We do not know for sure. If complex historical and national factors are considered, there could be more; conversely, if the concept requires characteristics of the four-tions, there could be less. The selection of entries in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* is mainly based on local context, with an emphasis on semantic changes during what Koselleck terms the *Sattelzeit* (saddle period), between 1750 and 1850. The core political concepts in this period exert a strong inertial influence on this day. These concepts include "people", "nation", "state" and "sovereignty"; "democracy", "republic", "liberty" and "equality"; "constitution", "parliament", "party" and "representation"; "war", "crisis", "peace", and "security"; "revolution", "liberation", "development", and "progress"; as well as derogatory terms such as "autocracy", "dictatorship", "terror", and

"tyranny". It is no exaggeration to say that if these concepts were completely discarded, politicians living in modern times would be unable to speak, political journalism and commentary would be impossible, political historians would be unable to write records, and political philosophers would not know how to conduct normative discussions. Such a strong path dependence demonstrates that despite the fierce game in the field of public opinion, the basic concepts deployed by different parties in their political discourse are remarkably similar. Is this an important discovery in the study of German *Begriffsgeschichte*?

There are numerous scholars studying German *Begriffsgeschichte*, but even leading figures have significant differences in research interests and academic expertise. Koselleck was particularly concerned with the development, evolution, and maturation of basic concepts that strongly influenced political and social life in the 20th century. In this way, one of the goals of research on German *Begriffsgeschichte* is to focus on the transformation from premodern Europe to modern Europe and to examine and interpret "the collapse of the old order and the presentation of the modern world" from a linguistic perspective (Koselleck, 2011: 8). The problem, however, is that although the lexicographic style arranged in alphabetical order makes it easy to retrieve entries, it obscures the historical and logical connections among basic concepts. Therefore, the classification of concepts proposed by Koselleck in the monograph, such as "targeted concept", "expected concept", "struggling concept", "movement concept" and "integrated concept" (Koselleck, 1996: 64-65), is of obvious methodological significance to the study of German *Begriffsgeschichte*. The combination of this classification with the four-tions hypothesis can better explain the political, social, and conceptual upheavals that occurred during Koselleck's *Sattelzeit*.

II. THE POSSIBLE ANALOGY BETWEEN CONCEPT AND *DASEIN*

Quentin Skinner once put forward an intriguing critique: "there can be no histories of concepts; there can only be histories of their uses in argument." (Skinner, 1989: 283). This critique seems to ignore the premise of *Begriffsgeschichte*, but if we closely appraise Skinner's remarks, we may find clues to help us understand Koselleck's thinking.

Koselleck argued that there are always differences between an actual

event and the linguistic expression of that event. However, if we turn our attention to the research object of professional historians, that is, "past history", we realize the significant role language plays in terms of epistemology. As "past history" is history expressed in words, we can "experience" what has already happened only through spoken or written language (Koselleck, 1998: 28). In Koselleck's view, the study of *Begriffsgeschichte* based on linguistic turn also deals with two forms of "extremes".

One extreme is the pure *ideen-und geistesgeschichtliche* disconnected from the political-social context (Koselleck, 1998: 24). It is a long tradition among German philosophers to treat an idea as being in-itself/for-itself. In a sense, both Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer's thoughts on the relationship between language and existence also follow this tradition. Koselleck participated in seminars hosted by these two philosophers during his study. However, as a historian, Koselleck followed Otto Brunner and Werner Conze in his academic approach, devoting himself to separating *Begriffsgeschichte* from the ontological framework of philosophical hermeneutics, as well as connecting *Begriffsgeschichte* to social history (Richte, 1995: 35). In this regard, the study of *Begriffsgeschichte* must consider the use of the concept in historical context, that is, it must consider political and social changes.

Another extreme is the "event history" that overemphasizes trivial details. Koselleck did not deny the research value of incidental individual events, but he stressed that from a long-term perspective, any individual event is embedded in a complex network of relationships. Therefore, the *Begriffsgeschichte* integrated with social history should be particularly concerned with the long-lasting and effective conditions that make individual events possible, that is, it should focus on exploring "structures and their transformation" (Koselleck, 1998: 31). It indicates that although Koselleck did not reject historical context analysis, he was not interested in Skinner's approach of exploring the specific intentions of a specific writer on a specific occasion. He showed interest in the structured conditions that develop in long-term political-social changes, and which guide individual perception of existence. This is why Koselleck attached great importance to the years of the *Sattelzeit*.

Broadly speaking, the *Sattelzeit* comprises the transition from premodern to modern. When writing his doctoral dissertation, Koselleck noticed that a series of modern political concepts proposed by

Enlightenment thinkers were gradually spreading through social communication. Political concepts such as "liberty", "equality", "democracy", and "republic" all imply some degree of future-facing orientation (Koselleck, 1988: 182). In political and social life, perception, and evaluation based on such orientation entail tension between ideal and reality. This greatly increases the weight of individual emotional experience, and the intensity of appeals to values. However, given that the recognition of the Enlightenment's leading role in the French Revolution is commonly accepted, it is necessary to explain why the futuristic orientation of the basic concepts is defined as "temporalization", in order to accurately grasp the essence of Koselleck's study of *Begriffsgeschichte*.

In the 20th century, there were many German works on the concept of "time", the most important of which was Heidegger's *Sein und Zeit* (Being and Time). Heidegger argued that time is not a long river that flows evenly, but a creative process of constant *Ekstasen* being there (*Dasein*). In this process, *Dasein* develops towards *Seinknnen*. Therefore, the 'for...' that elaborates the meaning of existence indicates that the "future" of "antecedence" constitutes the comprehension of *Dasein* (Heidegger, 2002: 398-402). As a student of history, what did Koselleck have in mind when he considered Heidegger's philosophical theory of being and time? Was it possible for him to make an analogy between "concept" and *Dasein*?

Heidegger held that *Dasein* is presented as a means of "comprehension". Hence, the future-oriented *Zeitigen* shows the *Horizont* that *Dasein* moves towards. It is what Koselleck's *Erwartungshorizont* means, however, *Erwartungshorizont* is used to describe the characteristics of basic concepts. Furthermore, it is the basic concept of modernity, especially basic political concepts such as "liberty", "equality", "democracy", and "republic" which present an idealized future. As these concepts gain widespread recognition through dissemination, they gradually form the shared *Erfahrungsraum*, which is in turn used as the framework to guide people's perceptions and evaluations, thus becoming the motivation of political-social change.

In this way, Skinner's criticism can be answered. On the one hand, by integrating conceptual history with social history, Koselleck agreed with the general requirements of historical context analysis. In fact, the exploration of the establishment and change of conceptual meaning in the historical development of public debate is not only a theoretical proposition but also a practical operation for the study of German *Begriffsgeschichte*. On the other hand, based on long-term structural analysis

of the *Sattelzeit*, Koselleck eliminated the fragmented specific context and pioneered a new way to illustrate history of concept. During that long period of political-social change, Koselleck observed, rich historical information was gradually incorporated into specific concepts, akin to the accumulation of sediment on the land, or the growth rings inside a tree (Koselleck, 2011: 18). In an analogical sense, the concept is alive and has its own history. Once the living concept gains recognition, it can form stipulations on the direction of individual actions by closing or opening up specific options. For example, in today's world, political views with various standpoints advocate people-centered thinking. Doesn't this mean that politicians who use the concept of "people" in their debates, have in turn been unconsciously influenced by a highly-abstract concept of "people"?

III. RECONSTRUCTION OF VALUE ORDER

The study of *Begriffsgeschichte* involves a host of disciplines. In terms of presenting knowledge, *Begriffsgeschichte* can be perceived as a kind of historiography that emphasizes empirical research. Given the teamwork involved in the dictionary compilation project, collection and use of data involves basic methodology. Koselleck divided *Begriffsgeschichte* research sources into three categories: (1) classical texts, including representative works concerning philosophy, theology, history, and other humanities and social disciplines; (2) popular language-based materials, such as official documents and conference reports, newspapers, magazines, brochures, along with private letters, diaries, and memoirs; and (3) reference books, including dictionaries, manuals, and influential encyclopedias from various periods.

As classic texts have always been valued by researchers on the history of thoughts, one of the major features of research on German *Begriffsgeschichte* is a balance between the citation of "grassroots" popular materials and "elegant" works. It is easy to understand that such a requirement for the use of documents is bound up with the "democratization" hypothesis of conceptual evolution. Some commentators have pointed out that important political-social terms had been coined before the Enlightenment, but were only used by priests, nobles, judges, and other elites who received formal education. By the 18th century, the improvement of printing technology enabled more people to

read and become literate. Furthermore, reading fashions among ordinary people gradually changed from deep thinking on classical texts to rapid browsing of newspapers, magazines, pamphlets, and so forth. As a result, the number of readers familiar with political-social terms greatly increased (Richter, 1995: 37-38). This is an analytical approach to verifying the concept of "democratization" from the perspective of the popularization of knowledge.

Views may differ, however, when a political philosophical perspective is applied, not least on account of the low proportion of the European population in formal education up until the mid-19th century. To take a step back, even assuming all grassroots civilians were literate, provided the social hierarchy distinguishing higher and lower classes still exerted a robust influence, they would only use stereotypical language enunciated by nobles and priests. In this sense, the collapse of the hierarchical system and reconstruction of the value system play a more important role in democratization than the popularization of knowledge (Koselleck, 2011: 11). Alexis de Tocqueville described it as a movement towards "identity equality".

The two types of conceptual evolution in Koselleck's *Sattelzeit* can be understood accordingly. One type is fading out; under the legal framework of the old system, the concepts *Ehre* (honor) and *Würde* (dignity) were used exclusively by the nobility, but with the collapse of hierarchy, these concepts lost their prominent position in the value system. Another type of conceptual evolution becomes increasingly popular. For example, the concepts *Volk* (folk) and *Nation* were on the fringe of dynastic discourse, but after the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, they moved from the fringe to the center and were widely used.[2] The conceptual use of "republic" is also a typical example of reconstruction of the value order. Koselleck pointed out that for a long time, the Aristotelian theory of regimes, classifying monarchy, aristocracy, and republic was sufficient in dealing with political practices. In Koselleck's *Sattelzeit*, this elastic classification of regimes was broken down by the inevitable "either-or" choice between "autocracy" or "republic". On this conception, "republic" means a break with the "autocratic" past, to secure a monopoly on the future (Koselleck, 2011: 11-12).

Koselleck claimed that from the perspective of language, the hierarchical system's collapse and the reconstruction of the value order represented by democratization is "the semantic struggle to define

political or social stance" (Koselleck, 2004: 80). In Europe during the *Sattelzeit*, this struggle was initially launched by the intelligentsia and elites, with a series of complex factors subsequently leading to large-scale participation by members of all social strata. As such, relevant research consists of two parts. First, the political stance that aims at confronting or subverting the old order must be expounded theoretically. Conceptual exploration of "democratization" must thus be based on analysis of classic works on the history of ideas. Secondly, it is necessary to clearly explicate the core ideas underpinning complex theoretical systems, and to popularize them, in order to construct a new political stance that is widely understood and supported. The analysis of grassroots materials, such as newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets are therefore an important step in assessing the degree of democratization.

IV. THE "SEMANTIC STRUGGLE" IN THE HUNDRED YEARS OF CONCEPTUAL UPHEAVAL

Many factors contributed to Koselleck's academic growth. His spiritual mentor, who he rarely met, was the political philosopher Carl Schmitt (Olsen, 2012: 72, 135). Schmitt was well-known in German intellectual circles before World War II for criticizing the theory of the liberal state, as well as proposing and expounding theories of "political decision-making" and "friend-enemy distinctions" in crisis and conflict situations (Schmitt, 2003: 6-7, 138-139). The nature of Koselleck's concept of politicization, which refers to the "semantic struggle" between rival classes, social strata, and groupings in debate, was influenced by Schmitt. The question is, how can this semantic struggle be interpreted within the framework of *Begriffsgeschichte*?

According to logical rules, no concept can define itself in a closed manner, lest it fall into tautology. As a result, Koselleck placed special emphasis on the importance of the concept's "relationship structure". In this regard, the examination of a particular concept requires the analysis of other concepts related to, similar to, and opposed to it (Bodeker, 1998: 55). For instance, in Koselleck's framework, "revolution", "rebellion", "riot", and "civil war" constitute a group of concepts with internal relations. According to neutral historical description, violent conflict within a political community is deemed to be civil war; however, if value judgments are introduced, the term may be understood differently. In the

traditional era, terms such as "rebellion" and "riot" were often used to accuse the ruled population of illegal acts of violence that undermined peace, endangered the monarch, or subverted the orthodoxy. During the *Sattelzeit*, "revolution", the original meaning of which was "circulation", connototed progressivism, and the political actions it referred to were interpreted as righteous acts against "despotism", "dictatorship" and "tyranny", in pursuit of ideal goals such as "republic", "democracy" and "freedom".[3] Based on this example, might it be possible to say that the mutual construction of basic concepts in the "relational structure" is like the comprehensive struggle for legitimacy in linguistic dimensions?

One of Koselleck's core views is that conceptual change during the *Sattelzeit* was not only the "representation" that reflected political-social change, but also a "factor" that drove political-social change (Koselleck, 2004: 251). In terms of the occurrence mechanism, conceptual upheaval can result in drastic political-social changes because the future expectations it expresses can regulate popular perceptions of reality and strengthen specific individual emotional experiences and value appeal. In a period of great social change, emotional experiences and value appeal are often framed within a concept of the "friend-enemy distinction". Therefore, they are always defined and used for fighting against, resisting, or uniting somebody, or something. As Bodeker stated: "Every time the word is repeated, the thought is revived." (Bodeker, 1998: 56) Enlightenment thinkers believed that the semantic struggle to challenge the old order took the form of debate; with the outbreak of the French Revolution, complex debates on philosophical connotations were transformed into vulgar slogans and catchwords in political mobilization. Ritualized and high-frequency propaganda, retelling and shouting, acted like collective brainwashing to instill new concepts among the general public.

Koselleck argued that ideologicalization occurs when concepts become increasingly abstract and are widely used in political debates as values and creeds with multiple meanings. In terms of language form, an important characteristic of ideologicalization is the transition of key concepts from diversity to oneness, resulting in the formation of "collective singulars" (Koselleck, 2011: 13). Koselleck cited the example of "history", among many other examples. For instance, in the old European institutional framework, the term "liberties" usually referred to the legal privileges enjoyed by different social strata and therefore took the plural form.

However, in the *Sattelzeit*, usage evolved to favor the singular form, namely "liberty". Its meaning was understood in an abstract way as "free from irrational domination" or "free from irrational interference", thus realizing transcendence over specific daily experience. Similarly, well-known political concepts such as "republic", "democracy", "people", and "nation", as well as "constitutional government" and "state" all take collective singular form. From a long-term structural perspective, a concept taking the collective singular form means that profound and diverse meanings evolve into simple language symbols in the context of historical change. Conversely, once the practical application of such language symbols is finalized, it serves as a prerequisite and acts as a framework for the practice of popular discourse. Focusing on some of the political rhetoric with which we are well-acquainted—the inevitable choice of "history" and "people", the supreme interests of "nation" and "state"—it is not difficult to understand how these basic concepts have achieved transcendence over long periods of structural change, which, in Hegel's words, is "in-itself/for-itself".

Many scholars have noticed that it is tough to understand some of Koselleck's important arguments from the perspective of linguistics. Another example would be that, the meaning of a word can be clearly defined, while the meaning and understanding of the concept can only be interpreted (Scholz, 1998: 136-137, 78-79). However, this issue can be easily clarified from the standpoint of political science. Take the concept "democracy" as an example: through reforms during the *Sattelzeit*, "democracy" has become a popular term in today's world, well-known to political elites, the intelligentsia, and the general public alike. Is it possible, however, to explain the rich political implications that evolved into this language symbol through the process of completing a definition alone? No one can say for sure. What is certain is that as "democratic legitimacy" replaced "dynastic legitimacy" in modern political discourse, strong "democracy" rendered the forms of political system that oppose it "illegal" (Schmitt, 2015: 36-37). Thus we have the construction of political correctness and political taboo in the modern sense. On the one hand, occupying the moral high ground obliges individuals to accord totemic status to "democracy"; on the other hand, different classes, social strata, and groupings have distinct or ambiguous understandings of "democracy" based on their stances and needs. In this case, the ideologicalization of the concept is reflected in the struggle for an authentic definition and

endorsement of "democracy", and in the labelling of opposing viewpoints in the discourse, "anti-democratic" or "non-democratic". It also indicates that the interpretation of the concept, "democracy" is not only theoretical but also political. In response to relevant academic criticism, Koselleck reflected on the relationship between *Begriffsgeschichte* and the "history of discourse", emphasizing that, "although basic concepts are always expressed with discourse, they are the core of discourse, and all the arguments are centered on them." (Koselleck, 1996: 65) In this sense, the discourse theory proposed by Michel Foucault can help us better understand Koselleck's intellectual concerns.

Notes

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[1] The scholars of German *Begriffsgeschichte* select "basic concepts" from a large number of "words", which is not only related to the setting of research objects and scope, but also to the establishment of research purport and style.

[2] *Ehre* (honour) and *Würde* (Dignity), *Volk* (People) and *Nation* are all entries in the dictionary on German *Begriffsgeschichte*.

[3] "Revolution", "rebellion", *aufruhr* (riot), *bürgerkrieg* (civil war) are entries in the dictionary on German *Begriffsgeschichte* written by Koselleck. For related comments, see Richter, The History of Political and Social Concepts, pp. 58-59.

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