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HOW HISTORICAL IS *BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE*?

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Begriffsgeschichte and the History of Political Discourses

On several occasions Melvin Richter has sought to open a dialogue between the history of political "languages" and "discourses" that has been attempted, over the last several decades, in the writings of John Pocock and Quentin Skinner and the *Begriffsgeschichte* practiced by Reinhart Koselleck and others, most notably in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, the "historical lexicon" of German "political-social discourse" edited Koselleck in collaboration with Otto Brunner and Werner Conze.[1] It has not been an easy discussion to sustain. Pocock, who does not read German, knows of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* only from Richter's summaries, while Skinner has remained "unrepentant" in the belief that "there can be no histories of concepts; there can only be histories of their uses in argument."[2] Pocock allows that it is "a genuinely interesting possibility that there might come to exist a historical lexicon of principal terms and concepts … in the fields of discourse that I study, in which the history of each separate item was severally set forth and made available for my instruction."[3] But he goes on to raise the difficult questions of to *which* history the terms collected in the such a lexicon are "basic" and *what* morphology of "life-forms" is being brought to light when

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[1] See Melvin Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts: A Critical Introduction* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) 124-42 and Richter, "Reconstructing the History of Political Languages: Pocock, Skinner, and the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*," *History and Theory* XIX (1990):38-70.

[2] John Pocock, "Concepts and Discourses: A Difference in Culture? Comment on a Paper by Melvin Richter" in Hartmut Lehmann and Melvin Richter, eds., *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts: New Studies on* Begriffsgeschichte," (Occasional Paper No. 15, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, 1996) 47. Quentin Skinner, "Reply to My Critics" in James Tully, ed., *Meaning and Context: Quentin Skinner and his Critics* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988) 283.

[3] Pocock, "Concepts and Discourses" 50

one traces the history of these concepts.[4] Skinner has been even more resistant. Following Wittgenstein, he insists that there can be no understanding of a concept without a comprehension of the "range of things that can be done with it."[5] For this reason, he emphatically rejects "that type of history which assumes that we can treat the morphology of concepts in isolation from questions about agency and explanation."[6]

In response Richter has maintained that the approach of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* is not a history of ideas of the sort that Skinner and Pocock have rejected. Koselleck, he argues, has "deplored the absence of context in previous German histories of ideas" and has "insisted on identifying changes in language with human agents."[7] Yet, while this may well have been Koselleck's intention, it is not at all clear that the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* fulfills this intention to a degree that would overcome the reservations of Pocock and Skinner. Indeed, the ambitious claims Koselleck makes about the general rules of development of concepts during the period between 1750-1850 suggest that the accommodation Richter is attempting to work out may be plagued by considerable difficulties. Koselleck argues that political and social concepts during this period (which he has dubbed the "*Sattelzeit*") exhibit four general tendencies: (1) "temporization" [*Verzeitlichung*] — the insertion of concepts into teleological philosophies of history, (2) "democratization" [*Demokratisierung*] — the extension of specialized political and social vocabularies to a mass audience, (3) "ideologization" [*Ideologiesierbarkeit*] — the generalization of particular concepts and ideas into universal, organizing ideologies, (4) "politicization" [*Politisierung*] — the incorporation

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[4]   Pocock, "Concepts and Discourses" 52, 54.

[5]   Skinner, "Reply to My Critics," 283

[6]   Letter to Melvin Richter, cited in Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* 135

[7]   Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* 135.

of concepts into "propaganda slogans and terms of abuse."[8] To the extent that *Begriffsgeschichte* is directed towards tracing the ways in which concepts develop according to rules that are independent of the intentions of specific agents, Pocock's question of "which history" is being traced and "what morphology of life forms" is being illuminated takes on a new force. If the ultimate goal of *Begriffsgeschichte* is the testing of hypotheses about the *general* development of concepts across the period from 1750-1850, then it is hard to see how this undertaking is historical at all. We would appear to have left behind a study of particular languages, agents, and events for a set of generalizations about conceptual development that work behind the backs of historical agents.

To clarify the problem that Pocock and Skinner may be having with a *Begriffsgeschichte* of this sort, we would do well to consider the question of what actually *happens* in a *Begriffsgeschichte*. In what follows will distinguish between three different types of conceptual changes that Richter mentions in the course of his explanation of the sorts of things that *Begriffsgeschichte* does. I will suggest that while two of these sorts of changes would qualify as historical for Pocock and Skinner, the third does not. I will further argue that, at least on the basis of my own experience with the lexicon, *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* tends to provide accounts of conceptual change that, for the most part, fall into this third category.

How Concepts Change

Richter's book provides us with a number of examples of the ways in which concepts change over time. At the risk of some schematization, we can group them into three different categories. First of all, concepts sometimes become explicit objects of discussion and debate. Richter provides an example of this sort of change in his

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8   Koselleck, "Einleitung" in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (Stuttgart: Klett, 1972) Vol. 1, xvi-xviii. See the discussion in Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* 37-8

discussion of Roger Chartier's entry on "*civilité*" in the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in France, 1680-1820*, crucial parts of which involve explicit attempts to answer the question "what is *civilité*."[9] Other examples could be found in the extended debate over the question "What is enlightenment?" in German periodicals and pamphlets between 1784 and 1795,[10] or the discussion during the French Revolution of the famous question of the Abbe Siéyes, "What is the Third Estate?" In cases such as these (and it bears emphasizing that we should not overestimate the number of such cases that we can find) concepts have become expressly thematized by agents. It is *they*, not *we*, who ask the question "What is enlightenment?" or "What is *civilité*." Among the things that these agents are doing is trying to get clear on how certain concepts should properly be used. Any conceptual change that results from discussions such as these would seem to be unproblematically "historical" even under the strictest requirements of Pocock and Skinner. For here what is happening is that agents are explicitly reflecting on their concepts and recommending alterations. In this case, perhaps uniquely, conceptual changes is something that agents *do*.

Richter notes a second way that conceptual change occurs: individual political and social theorists "have sought to alter thought and practice by coining or radically redefining concepts, or redescribing practices."[11] This is the sort of conceptual change that is most often invoked by theorists of political thought. As an example we can take Hegel's altered use of the term *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in his *Rechtsphilosophie*. Where earlier thinkers (and, indeed, Hegel himself in his earlier works) had used the term as a synonym for "political society" or "state," in the *Rechtsphilosophie* Hegel sharply

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[9] Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* 99-123, esp. 105-7.

[10] On this debate, see my collection *What is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth-Century Questions* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996).

[11] Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* 153.

distinguishes state and civil society, much to the confusion of some of his first reviewers.[12] While this second case closely resembles the first in that we have an identifiable agent explicitly redefining concepts or redescribing practices, there is still a crucial difference. Hegel's transformation of "*bürgerliche Gesellschaft* " does not occur in the course of an ongoing discussion of the question "What is *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* ?" He is not, like Kant in his contribution to the discussion of the question "What is Enlightenment?", joining others in the discussion of a concept that has come under scrutiny. For this reason, the question of what Hegel is doing when he starts to use *bürgerliche Gesellschaft* in a different way than his predecessors is a bit more difficult than the question of what Kant is doing in responding to the question "What is Enlightenment?" Kant is, unproblematically, making a contribution to an ongoing discussion (indeed, he even informs us of what parts of the discussion he has missed: his essay closes with a footnote that indicates that he was not able to get a copy of Moses Mendelssohn's response to the same question). It is not immediately clear, however, what discussion Hegel is joining and the term "*bürgerliche Gesellschaft* " would appear to have been in good working order prior to his proposed definition. This makes the change that he brings about in the use of the concept all the more obscure. Why does it happen? Why was his proposed redefinition so compelling to subsequent thinkers? Indeed, can we speak of this as a "redefinition" at all, since Hegel takes no notice of how the term had been used before him and gives no indication that he is aware that he is using the term in a different way? In attempting to understand what is happening when thinkers like Hegel begin using old terms in new ways our focus shifts from the history of the term "civil society" — which may not necessarily provide clues as to why *Hegel* is doing what he

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[12]   See Manfred Riedel's discussion in his entry "Gesellschaft, bürgerliche" in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* II. For my own sense of what Hegel was doing, see "*Paideia* for the '*Bürger als Bourgeois* ': The Concept of 'Civil Society' in Hegel's Political Thought", *History of Political Thought* , II:3 (1982) 469-493.

does — to consider the development of Hegel's views on politics and society. In attempting to understand why Hegel's innovation had such an impact on subsequent thinkers (after all, many other innovations may have no impact at all), we need to trace out the history of the reception of the *Rechtsphilosophie*. This sort of history, once again, is not that far from what Pocock and Skinner would view as the proper task for historians of political thought. At first glance, it would also seem to be the sort of history of concepts that is offered in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. On closer examination, however, the latter is often not the case.

What we typically encounter in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* instead is a third sort of conceptual change in which a concept changes its meaning, perhaps subject to Koselleck's hypotheses regarding temporization, democratization, ideologization, and politicization or perhaps because of the broader set of transformations associated with the *Sattelzeit*. The progressive redefinition of the concept may be documented by looking at the usage of the concept in the writings of various thinkers, but the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* also makes use of such sources as contemporary dictionaries and encyclopedias, suggesting that it is concerned not so much with what individuals are doing to a concept but rather with what a concept is doing, behind the backs or above the heads of individual agents. The use of contemporary dictionaries and encyclopedias as evidence for this process bears particular notice here. Richter has suggested that the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* is notable for its inclusion of evidence from such sources, implying that the addition of such materials is an important supplement to the sources typically used by Pocock and Skinner.[13] But such sources would have only a limited utility for Pocock and Skinner, since sources such as these can give us little in the way of insight into the uses to which these concepts have been put in actual arguments — and

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[13]   Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* 139.

the history of the uses of concepts in argument is, for Skinner, the only real history that concepts can have.

What Happens in Begriffsgeschichte*?*

Most of the entries in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* with which I am familiar (and let me immediately confess that there is a good deal of it that I have not read) provide accounts of conceptual change of this last sort. Examples are provided from a diversity of sources to show how the meaning of a concept changed over the period between 1750 and 1850. In some of these accounts, special emphasis is place on particular thinkers who were instrumental in altering the way in which concepts were deployed. On occasion, the thinkers cited will have been engaged in debates with other thinkers over the use of the term, but the authors of articles in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* sometimes do not seem to find such debates of much importance. Thus, Horst Stuke's ninety-nine page entry on "Aufklärung" provides a typology of "typical" formulations of the concept in the last third of the eighteenth century, but curiously offers no account of the origin of the public debate over the concept in the *Berlinische Monatsschrift* or of the private discussion of the concept within the Berlin Wednesday Society, a secret society of "Friends of Enlightenment" linked to the journal. Both discussions provide us with remarkable cases of particular thinkers reflecting on a concept and seeking to define what it means in the face of a host of political and social challenges. But none of this makes it into Stuke's survey. Nor is his discussion particularly concerned with the impact of the shifting political fortunes of enlightened reformers in Prussia on attempts to define what enlightenment is. Andreas Riem's impassioned pamphlet *Über Aufklärung*, perhaps the most widely read of the pamphlets published in response to Frederick William II's attack on the enlightened approaches to

Christian doctrine embraced by the leading figures within the Berlin clergy,[14] is given

cursory treatment and described as providing an "undifferentiated, global unified concept

of philosophy, natural science, intellectual power, and rational life-conduct."[15] It would

be difficult to think of a way of characterizing Riem's essay that had less to say about its

historical importance. Certainly Frederick William himself understood the import of the

pamphlet somewhat differently. Once it became known that Riem was its author, he was

forced to spend the rest of his life in exile.

This is not, of course, to say that there are not things to be learned from Stuke's

article or from the other entries in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. Despite the rather

Olympian distance they keep from the scruffier history of arguments and counter-

arguments that makes up the history of political thought, the entries in the *Geschichtliche*

Grundbegriffe remain helpful starting points for making sense of how terms are being

used. But it is difficult to see how they provide a "history" in any immediately

recognizable sense. Suggesting that there is "much in both the metatheories and practices

of Pocock and Skinner that should be applied to the analyses" of the *Geschichtliche*

Grundbegriffe and the *Handbuch*, Richter argues

> Pocock's identification of political languages used in early modern
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> and eighteenth-century Britain is a particularly valuable technique
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> of analysis and comparison. With it as a model, the data in the
>
> *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* could serve as a base for mapping
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> the principal political and social languages used in German-
>
> speaking Europe. … Thus the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*'s

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14   For discussions of Riem's essay see Werner Schneiders, *Die wahre Aufklärung* (Munich: Karl Alber, 1974) 95-100, Fritz Valjavec, "Das Woellnersche Religionsedikt und seine geschichtliche Bedeutung," *Historisches Jahrbuch* 72 (1953) 395-396, and Klaus Epstein, *The Genesis of German Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966) 116-117.

15   Horst Stuke, "Aufklärung," in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* 1:275.

findings could be reanalyzed synchronically in terms of the political languages employed during the *Sattelzeit* at intervals selected in terms of their significance in German history.[16] Likewise, Richter suggests that Skinner's view of political thought as a form of "linguistic action" could be helpful for the "reanalysis" of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.[17]

It may be misleading to speak here of a "reanalysis" of "data." That would imply that the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* offered historians of political thought a massive data-set of the sorts that our colleagues who study voting behavior employ. We need only think about the analogy for a moment to realize why it miscarries. In "reanalyzing" a data-set, our colleagues in the area of voting behavior are freed from the labor of collecting data. They can call into question the use that other scholars have made of a particular data-set without having to redo the work of assembling it. I doubt that it makes much sense to think of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* in this way. Impressive through the labors of Koselleck and his colleagues may have been, they have not freed us from the chore of having to read again the texts that they read and to try to reconstruct the local contexts that they have all too often overlooked. The *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* will remain for a long time a helpful starting point for those seeking to trace the complex interplay between agents, contexts, and languages that makes up the history of political concepts. But its articles should not be mistaken for examples of such a history.

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16   Richter, *The History of Political and Social Concepts* 139.

17   *Ibid*. 140.