CONCEPTUAL HISTORY BETWEEN *CHRONOS* AND *KAIROS* - THE CASE OF "EMPIRE"

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In innumerable articles on and around the discipline of *Begriffsgeschichte*, Reinhart Koselleck has developed a theory of historical times and temporal experiences unprecedented in recent historiography. Moreover, the principal vehicle of these temporal experiences is language, more precisely, the "key concepts [*Grundbegriffe*]" of political and social discourse (Koselleck 1979, 111f.). Due to this conceptual and semantic approach to history, the dominating historical temporality in Koselleck's work, as well as in *Begriffsgeschichte* more generally, are the long diachronic lines, as opposed to the sudden breaks or ruptures inherent in the notion of the historical moment. Traditionally, the conceptual historian is retracing the paths of social and political concepts through history, from Antiquity to the present, documenting permanence and slow transformation rather than abrupt changes and fateful events (Koselleck 1972, XV).

In this article I will ask if a one-sided focus on long-term historical temporality, on the *longue durée*, to use the Annales school concept, might not deprive conceptual history of an important tool of describing and understanding the element of change inherent in the history of concepts. Can there really be a history of social and political concepts without an idea of the historical moment in terms of an instance of discontinuity, or a rupture? Or to put it differently: might not the history of a concept just as well be described as a succession of moments, influencing profoundly or even changing the semantics of the concept? Far from pretending to introduce something new and

unexpected into the scope of conceptual history, however, I will explore what role the idea of the historical moment plays in the project of *Begriffsgeschichte*, as laid out by Koselleck and as practiced in the eight-volume encyclopaedia *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, as well as to look for ways of emphasizing and theorizing this role further. But first I need to clarify what I mean by evoking the idea of the historical moment.

The historical moment: Pocock revisited

How do we define and describe a historical moment? According to the *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies*, the "moment" – in the temporal, not the technical sense of the word – "separates a before [*un avant*] from an after [*un après*] irreducible to each other" (Balibar/ Büttgen/ Cassin 2004, 813). As philosophically relevant as this definition might be, it does not tell us much about how we might approach the specifically *historical* moment, the moment as part of a historical process or chain of events. To learn more about this idea of the moment, I suggest that we turn to one of the foremost classics of intellectual history in the post-war era, J. G. A. Pocock's *The Machiavellian Moment* (Pocock 1975).

As the readers of this journal will know, the topic of this book is the rise of Florentine republicanism at the beginning of the sixteenth century, in the works of political thinkers such as Machiavelli, Savonarola and Guicciardini, among others, as well as the influence of this tradition on "Atlantic", meaning English and American, political thought in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In a theoretically rather inexplicit work, Pocock nevertheless begins with some basic reflections on his own use of the terms "moment" and "the Machiavellian moment". In his opinion there are two ways of interpreting this idea. In the first place, it denotes "the moment, and the manner, in which Machiavellian thought made its appearance". Far from a general presentation of political thought in the last years of the Florentine republic, "the 'moment' in question is selectively and thematically defined":

> It is asserted that certain enduring patterns in the temporal consciousness of medieval and early modern Europeans led to the presentation of the

> republic, and the citizen's participation in it, as constituting a problem in historical self-understanding, with which Machiavelli and his contemporaries can be seen both explicitly and implicitly contending. […] Their struggle with this problem is presented as historically real, though as one selected aspect of the complex historical reality of their thought; and their "moment" is defined as that in which they confronted the problem grown crucial. (Pocock 1975, viif.)

Thus, "moment" can be understood as referring to "manner of appearance", "presentation" and "historical self-understanding", i.e. to matters of language and experience. These matters, however, are not to be regarded as secondary to or derivative of historical reality; on the contrary, Pocock adds, they are "historically real". However, in spite of his insistence on the historical reality of language, he wants to distinguish the linguistic structure of "the Machiavellian moment" from what he refers to as "the problem itself":

> It is a name for the moment in conceptualized time in which the republic was seen as confronting its own temporal finitude, as attempting to remain morally and politically stable in a stream of irrational events conceived as essentially destructive of all systems of secular stability. In the language that had been developed for the purpose, this was spoken of as the confrontation of "virtue" with "fortune" and "corruption"; and the study of Florentine thought is the study of how Machiavelli and his contemporaries pursued the intimations of these words, in the context of those ways of thinking about time explored in the earlier chapters. (ibid., viii)

In this second sense, the "moment" is primarily a moment in political history, at the beginning of the sixteenth century, as the Florentine republic was threatened by all kinds of destructive forces, internal as well as external. Nevertheless, just as the linguistic representations of "the Machiavellian moment" must be regarded as "historically real", the political situation manifests itself as linguistically mediated, in words such as "virtue", "fortune" and "corruption".

In the context of this article, the most interesting aspect of Pocock's theory of the historical moment is the way in which he explicitly draws on two different perspectives and approaches: one temporal and one rhetorical. Firstly, the historical moment appears against the

background of a specific "temporal consciousness", of "conceptualized time". The specifically temporal quality of "the Machiavellian moment" consists in a conflict between the "enduring patterns" of mediaeval and early modern European history and the "finitude" of the Florentine republic. Secondly, the historical moment constitutes itself rhetorically, through and by means of language, linguistic intervention and action. Thus, Machiavelli and other contemporary Florentine authors are, in Pocock's words, "explicitly and implicitly contending", "struggling with" or "confronting" the problem posed by this experience of finitude, contingency and irrationality.

Indeed, if we want to explore the role of the historical moment in the theory and practice of conceptual history, Pocock's brief but poignant analysis should give us a good starting point. Taking his description of "the Machiavellian moment" as a possible model, every historical moment – at least within the scope of conceptual history – can be studied both from a temporal and from a rhetorical perspective.

Kairos between the temporal and the rhetorical

In a ground-breaking article from 1999, Kari Palonen discusses the difference between rhetorical and temporal perspectives on conceptual change, as featured in the works of Quentin Skinner and Reinhart Koselleck, respectively. And he concludes that whereas Skinner's rhetorical approach "turns the history of conceptual changes into a history of sudden and successive *kairos*-situations, which are more or less successfully captured and used by political agents", Koselleck gives priority to "the slower, long and medium term history of the *chronos* time". And he adds that he himself is sympathetic to Skinner's – in Palonen's and later also Skinner's own words – "pointillist view" (Palonen 1999, 55).

This is, in my opinion, a correct assessment of the two thinkers and their differences. However, it is interesting to note how Skinner in his *Foundations of Modern Political Thought* from 1978 has pointed at another, slower and more long-term temporality – one we might refer to as *chronos* – coming to fore in this work, in terms of a history of the modern concept of the state (Skinner 1978, x). Similarly, we might turn the perspective around and look at what role the instances

of *kairos*, the situations, the ruptures, the "right time" or the "wrong time", play or might play, explicitly or implicitly, in the works of Koselleck as well as in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. Hence, I am not sure if I agree with Palonen when he says, concerning the temporal and rhetorical perspectives, that "it is hard, if not impossible, to use both of them simultaneously" (Palonen 1999, 43). It might be hard, but in my opinion this is exactly what we need to do.

Furthermore, in introducing into the framework of conceptual history the ancient Greek notion of *kairos*, traditionally defined as a decisive or possibly fateful moment (Kinneavy/Eskin 1998, 837), Palonen – I will argue here – also presents us with a possible way to proceed if we want to combine elements of temporal and rhetorical analysis into a theory or even a methodology of studying historical moments, in the framework of conceptual history. Indeed, the dual reference to both temporal and rhetorical qualities constitutes a recurring topic in the theories of *kairos*, as exemplified by the definition by the American scholar James L. Kinneavy: "right time and due measure" (Kinneavy 1986, 85f.).

Correspondingly, *kairos*, as a figure of thought at work in the human sciences generally, has been used and developed primarily within two different traditions, on the one hand within the rhetorical, or more precisely the new or practical rhetorical tradition, represented among others by Kinneavy, Lloyd Bitzer and Carolyn Miller, on the other hand within the German tradition of *Geschichtsphilosophie*, often of a theological or even messianic character, as in the case of Paul Tillich and Walter Benjamin. In the following I shall refer to both traditions, in trying to establish *kairos* as an interface between rhetoric and *Geschichtsphilosophie* as well as between rhetorical and temporal approaches to the study of conceptual history and conceptual change.

However, his theoretical achievements notwithstanding, one of the main insights offered by Koselleck has to do with the impossibility of giving a comprehensive theoretical representation of the complexity and contingency of historical reality. Thus, I intend to begin this discussion of *kairos* as interface between the temporal and the rhetorical with an example, one which has already attracted some attention in the fields of politics and history: the return of the concept of "empire" into the debates on American foreign policy. Taking up one of Koselleck's main claims from the introduction to the first volume of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, that conceptual history should always be

"relevant to present times [*gegenwartsbezogen*]" (Koselleck 1972, XIV), I would like – by means of this example – to point at our own historical moment as a possible scene of conceptual and thus political change.

"Empire" strikes back!

On July 17th 2003, the NAI (New Atlantic Initiative) and the AEI (American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research), two influential neoconservative think tanks, staged a public debate between British historian Niall Ferguson, author of the book *Empire: The Rise and Demise of the British World Order and the Lessons for Global Power* (Ferguson 2003), and US foreign policy commentator and leading figure in the neoconservative movement, Robert Kagan, author of *Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order* (Kagan 2003). The title of the debate was a fairly simple, yet controversial claim: "The United States is, and should be, an empire".[1] By summer 2003, this claim, in spite of its controversial and rather anachronistic ring, "had become a staple on talk shows and had spurred writers to produce a flurry of op-eds, essays, and books", if we are to believe one of the main discussants, author and publicist Andrew Bacevich (Bacevich 2003a, xi). Before we consider the debate itself, it will be instructive to review some of the semantic and conceptual processes and innovations that led up to it.

Already in 1999 David Rieff claimed that only a new sort of imperialism would be able to deal with the humanitarian crises of our age, in Kosovo, Somalia or Rwanda. Presuming that only the United States could fill the role of the empire, he argued that US foreign policy should adopt a "liberal imperialism" (Rieff 2003, 10). Similarly, in 2002, Deepak Lal, Professor of International Development Studies at UCLA, gave a lecture entitled "In Defense of Empires", arguing for the need of a "Pax Americana" and for the United States to face up to its imperial obligations (Lal 2003, 29). Additionally, the historical roots of the semantics of "empire" and "imperialism" have been discussed in several articles, proclaiming the United States to be "the New Rome" (Bender 2003, 81; Bacevich 2003b, 93) or, on the other hand, vehemently dismissing this parallel. In an essay from 2002, Bacevich points at the "providential significance" characterizing the United States as a

political enterprise from the early beginnings, summed up in the poetical phrase "a New Jerusalem". However, given its present political, economic, cultural and military dominance, "the New Jerusalem [has] become the New Rome" (Bacevich 2003b, 95).

A closer look at some of these contributions would effectively illustrate to what extent the issue at stake in this debate is a linguistic or, more precisely, a semantic and conceptual one. Hence, in his introduction to the anthology *The Imperial Tense. Problems and Prospects of American Empire*, in which several of these essays and lectures are collected, editor Bacevich bemoans how "the familiar language" of political debate "does less to illuminate than to conceal", serving mostly as "a veil". However, he concludes, "the idea of 'America as empire' has the potential to change all that":

> Embracing a new vocabulary, shedding hoary old axioms, and entertaining thoughts once thought to be unthinkable may make it possible to see America's global role in a new and clearer light. Examining US foreign policy through the prism of empire may promote greater candor and seriousness and, in doing so, may bring ordinary Americans into the discussion of matters from which they have too long been excluded. (Bacevich 2003a, xiii-xiv)

As an illustration of this point made by Bacevich, the main issue at stake in the debate between Ferguson and Kagan is indeed not the current state of affairs in American foreign politics, but the historical and semantic contents of the concept of "empire". Ferguson, on the one hand, has dedicated much of his work as a historian to bringing out the advantages and positive sides of imperial reign, most notably the British. Kagan, on the other hand, belongs to a long tradition of American conservatives regarding the United States as the true home of freedom on earth and as the traditional enemy of all imperial power, British and other. Hence, it should come as no surprise to us that their disagreement to a major extent is a conceptual one.

As we have already seen in the case of Pocock, however, the focus on the linguistic or rhetorical elements constituting a historical moment does not by any means make it less "historically real". Obviously, the occasion for this conceptual reorientation in the essays and lectures about "American empire" is the end of the Cold War and the new world order, the American military, worldwide economic and

cultural engagements, the humanitarian catastrophes in Africa and the former Yugoslavia and, not least, the era of global terrorism. In this new political situation the old and well-known term "superpower" appears rather outdated and almost meaningless, mostly because we are used to thinking of two "superpowers" balancing each other. Now, however, there is only one. Together with the weakened position of the UN and the doubts concerning NATO as a military force, these factors create a new global political situation where the United States is the supreme dominating force, which we need to come to terms with, politically as well as conceptually.

Over the last years there has been no lack of suggestions of what to call this new hegemonic power. In 1998 the French foreign minister Hubert Védrine famously suggested that the US should be seen as an *hyperpuissance* (Védrine 2003). Recently, the editor of the liberal German newspaper *Die Zeit*, Josef Joffe, came up with another alternative concept: *überpower* (Joffe 2006). Obviously, these terms are neologisms, and even though they have made a certain impact in academic spheres, there is no reason to believe they will ever become a part of everyday political language. Furthermore, as neologisms and conceptual innovations they do not activate or tap into the collective historical experiences contained in concepts with a long history of political and social use. Both "empire" and "imperialism" are such concepts. They have a long and complex history, going back to the Romans and to the Latin word *imperare*, "to command", and reaching its peak in the nineteenth century, when both "empire" and "imperialism" are frequently used in political debates in most European countries. Hence, we have good reasons for counting "empire" and "imperialism" among the "key concepts" of the modern world, among those expressions, which, to quote Koselleck, "in their range and use give access to structures and comprehensive chains of events" and which are both "factors" and "indicators" of historical movement and change (Koselleck 1972, XIV).

That the debate between Ferguson and Kagan is in essence about the contents and uses of a particular concept is made clear at the very beginning, when the moderator, Radek Sikorski, lists a number of definitions of "empire" from different dictionaries. Niall Ferguson, the first speaker, picks up where the moderator left off, first addressing the semantics of "empire" and the hesitance of most Americans to accept this concept as a description of their country, both for politi-

cal and for historical reasons. Then he introduces his famous phrase "empire in denial". The meaning of the concept "empire", Ferguson argues, cannot be established solely on the basis of definitions in dictionaries, but has to take into account the entire history of the British Empire and other past empires. According to this broader definition of "empire", the United States is "one of the most powerful empires in all history, and the only remarkable thing about this is that so many Americans are unaware of the fact". To prove his point, moving from a more linguistic to a more historical register, Ferguson uses what he calls his "quack like a duck" argument: "If it quacks like a duck, it probably is a duck. If it quacks like an empire, it probably is an empire".

Robert Kagan, on the other hand, starts by warning against descending "into a definitional argument". Still, he sets off criticizing Ferguson's semantic distinctions. As soon as he starts formulating his own views on United States foreign policy, however, it is not a question of semantics anymore, but – rather emphatically – of political reality: "I won't call it 'empire' because I don't believe it is an empire, but the most successful global hegemon, the most successful global power in history". Thus, Kagan has no problem admitting to the fact that after the end of the Cold War the United States is indeed the supreme global power, but he strongly objects to the idea that it can or should be termed an "empire" in the old, European sense. Instead, he prefers "hegemon", originally a Greek term, referring to the dominant or leading city-state, which doesn't have the same aura of oppression and exploitation as "empire". On the contrary, Kagan states, significantly quoting the second *Godfather* movie, "America always made money for its partners".

In considering the debate between Ferguson and Kagan, together with the essays and debates that both preceded and succeeded it, the relevant question is how we – from a conceptual history perspective – are to understand the reappearance of the particular concept of "empire" at the beginning of the twenty-first century. At first glance this return has been made possible by at least two important conceptual shifts: firstly and most obviously, "empire" has moved from being a merely historical concept, used with reference to past power structures, such as the Roman and British empires, to becoming a contemporary name for a contemporary political situation; secondly, but no less important, "empire" and the corresponding ideology, "imperial-

ism", have gone from being purely negative "counterconcepts" used to criticize the foreign policy of another nation or another political party, to becoming self-descriptions or self-definitions (Koselleck 1979b). The struggle of a certain group of people in finding a name for themselves, for their own identity as well as for their relation to others, is a recurring topic in the history of political and social concepts. In this case the collective subject of this process of self-naming is the United States of America. To put a name to what they consider the new identity of their country, American neoconservatives have turned to a concept that seems both anachronistic and in direct opposition to the whole spirit of freedom and independence that is such a vital ingredient in the American myth. Hence, at present the concept "empire" is tried on for size as a way of legitimizing American claims for power in different parts of the world.

"American Empire": understanding conceptual shifts

Among the political advisors, commentators and scholars participating in the debate on "American empire" – on both sides – there is an awareness of taking part in a decisive and possibly fateful historical moment, of witnessing and possibly contributing to a change in the political as well as the conceptual architecture of the world. Undoubtedly, and as could be observed in the example above, this change is linked to a semantic shift in the concepts of "empire" and "imperialism". To understand and describe this historical moment – not a Machiavellian, but an Imperial one – we must first understand and describe this conceptual shift. This question leads us to consider different ways of analyzing and describing conceptual change in general, which are, again, imbued with different conceptions of time and history.

One way of approaching the question of the shifting meanings and uses of "empire" and "imperialism" would be to go backwards in history, find an origin or at least a starting point, and retrace the paths of these concepts in social and political discourse from the beginning until today. By such an approach we would gain knowledge on how these concepts have been used prior to our own time, in very different historical and political contexts. Furthermore, we would be able to say something about how political and social forces and conceptual

meanings are mutually dependent and how they converge. However, because words and realities do not necessarily change at the same speed (Koselleck 2006b, 86-89), a "time lag" – to use a word from the postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha (Bhabha 1997, 185) – might open up between conceptual meanings and political realities: at every point in history there will be realities we have no word for, as well as words without a reference.

This is the approach adopted by *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, whose third volume contains a 65-page article on "empire" and "imperialism" (Fisch/Groh/Walther 1982). One of the main finds of this article, and typical of its way of arguing, is that the concept "imperialism", used as a political slogan and not as a scholarly term, could never really rid itself of the negative connotations of Bonapartism, despotism and militarism, or, in the words of the German political commentator Constantin Frantz, of *Säbelherrschaft* (ibid., 175), that characterized the increasing use of the concept in the 1850s and 1860s. At the beginning of the twentieth century, "imperialism" was turned into a Social Democrat slogan directed against the latent despotism and warmongering of the Conservatives. For this reason every later attempt to use "imperialism" and "imperialist" as positive self-descriptions, at least in Germany, failed:

> In spite of the loud attempts to give a positive definition of the concept "imperialism", thus turning it into a slogan of the nationalist Right, there are no signs that this language regulation had any chance of succeeding. On the contrary, the prospects were as bad as they could have been, because in the last years before the war "imperialism" was turned into a central concept of struggle in the hands of the German and international worker's movement. (ibid., 202)

Hence, when the German nationalist Right tried to appropriate and redefine the term in their campaign for an aggressive foreign policy, they failed completely and instead "imperialism" henceforth became a part of Socialist and Communist propaganda. According to the article, from 1850 and onwards the concepts "empire" and "imperialism" are characterized by more or less the same semantic structure and function. They remain "counterconcepts", serving to vehemently attack the political strategies of others as being despotic, undemocratic, militant and oppressive. Thus, the history of these concepts is to a

large extent a history of permanence and continuity, of long historical lines, not of ruptures and moments.

In probably the most important research programme for *Begriffsgeschichte* in general, published as an introduction to the first volume of the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, Koselleck refers to this approach as the "diachronic principle", constituting, in his opinion, the main methodological contribution of conceptual history to the historical disciplines (Koselleck 1972, XXI). Obviously, doing conceptual history also presupposes traditional critical and philological work, to analyze the meaning and use of a specific concept in a specific context, but the main task consists in tracking the slow, almost unnoticeable long-term changes, relating them to social and political processes.

Against this background we must ask if the sudden shifts in the semantics and pragmatics of the concept "empire", as they can be observed in the debates on American foreign policy, do not in fact lie outside the scope of *Begriffsgeschichte*, of the study of conceptual permanence and long diachronic lines, as outlined by Koselleck. Indeed, it seems that if we focus solely on the long-term, continuous history, we will be at a loss explaining how, by what processes or changes, "empire" or "imperialism" can be reappropriated and reintroduced into public debate as positive concepts and self-descriptions. For the concept of "empire" to become eligible as a slogan for a new Conservative movement, in the struggle for an active and aggressive foreign policy, this time in Federalist America, a conceptual shift must have taken place, both on a semantic and a pragmatic level. To put it simply, I would like to suggest that to understand the semantic shifts taking place in the history of the concept "empire", as observed in the debate between Ferguson and Kagan, we need to consider another kind of temporality, a different temporal horizon from Koselleck's "diachronic principle", his long-term structural changes.

From *chronos* to *kairos*

In short, I suggest that if the dominant temporality in the theory and practice of conceptual history can be identified with the Greek *chronos*, indicating a chronological, diachronic and continuous time, it might be useful to bring in its conceptual twin or counterpart, *kairos*, pointing at a totally different experience of time, temporality and historic-

ity. As opposed to the slow, long-term temporality of *chronos, kairos* refers to a particular and exceptional moment, a rupture or a turning point, either in the sense of the right or the favourable moment, to speak or to act, or with reference to a particularly decisive, fateful or dangerous situation (Smith 1969, 2; Cassin 1995, 466f.). According to *Vocabulaire européen des philosophies, kairos*, the way it is normally used, refers to "the opening of a discontinuity in a continuum [*l'ouverture d'un discontinu dans un continuum*]" (Balibar/ Büttgen/ Cassin 2004, 815; see also Onians 1954, 345). Examples of this can be found in the medical vocabulary, going back to Hippocrates, in which *kairos* designates a moment of crisis in the development and the treatment of a disease, or in politics or history, where it describes a moment in time when different circumstances coincide or converge (Kinneavy/ Eskin 1998, 839f.). In both cases the word has a double meaning, referring, on the one hand, to the situation or the occasion itself, its inherent possibilities and dangers, and, on the other hand, to the proper way to act, or mostly, the proper things to say in this situation. Hence, *kairos* refers to "a decisive moment that must be caught in passing" (Balibar/ Büttgen/ Cassin 2004, 815) represented in art as a young man, shaved bald at the back, but with a long lock of hair at the front, by which the swift or foresighted could catch him (Kinneavy/ Eskin 1998, 841).

Even in Greek Antiquity the concept of *kairos* had two related, but still separable meanings, one temporal and one rhetorical. Thus, to study the historical moment by means of a theory of *kairos* means to study how temporal and rhetorical elements converge and impinge on each other in different ways, opening up "a temporal hole" (ibid.; Miller 1992, 313) in the continuous time of history.

However, before I go on to discuss some of the different definitions and uses of *kairos* in the field of the human sciences, I shall return for a moment to the debate between Ferguson and Kagan. In the course of the debate, Ferguson reasserts his claim that the United States is indeed the true successor of the British Empire, only unable and unwilling to admit it. Kagan, on the other hand, strongly opposes this idea of a *translatio imperii* from the British to the Americans, pointing at the ways in which the US exerts its global power in a much more peaceful way than the British ever did. But Ferguson returns:

> Now, there is no surer sign that you are an empire than the invasion of Afghanistan. It's something we tried, it's something the Russians tried, and there you go again, as Ronald Reagan used to say.

This remark by the British historian, in its subtle combination of flattery and criticism, perfectly measured and uttered at the right time, thus provoking laughter in the audience, might serve as an illustration of *kairos* in the strictly rhetorical sense – in the way it has been defined by Kinneavy and others, drawing on different sources, mainly of Greek and Roman origin, as "right time and due measure" (Kinneavy 1986, 1994; Kinneavy/ Eskin 1998; Thompson 2000). To seize the moment or the opportunity, as it presents itself, in the span of chronological and quantitative time, is a question of choosing both the right time and the right or rather the appropriate words. It follows that *kairos*, in the tradition of practical rhetoric, constitutes a point of convergence between temporality and rhetoricity, crucial to the understanding of the historical moment.

Returning to Ferguson's remark on Afghanistan, we could analyze how it is spoken at the right and favourable time and uses due measure of drama, humour and irony in order to appeal to the audience. In this context, however, I would like to move one step further and ask if understanding the return of the concept "empire" as an expression of *kairos* could not also enable us to say something about the temporality and historicity of this rhetorical event, as a kind of rupture, a turning point or an instance of discontinuity. To answer this question, we have to look more closely at the ways in which both the rhetorical and the philosophical tradition are struggling to come to terms with the complex issue of *kairos*, incessantly moving and searching beyond the limits of their own presuppositions. This shared ambition can be seen as a double quest: a quest for the transcendental in the field of rhetoric and a quest for the historical in the field of philosophy.

The quest for the transcendental

In the introduction to an interview with Kinneavy from 2000, Roger Thompson reflects upon what he refers to as "the transcendental aspect of *kairos*", best articulated by Tillich, but which Kinneavy has failed to address. In reaction to this perception, Thompson writes,

"Kinneavy asserted that *kairos* was transcendent […] in that it offered a subtle way of addressing the situations in which rhetoric is born". Furthermore, "he felt the term expressed how certain cultural movements and conditions united with special moments to create ripe times for the rhetorical act" (Thompson 2000, 73). Later in the interview Thompson returns to this issue, condensing it to a simple question: "Do you believe *kairos* is beyond the rhetor's control, or can the rhetor manufacture or create *kairos*?" (ibid., 77). Undoubtedly, this is a key question if we want to understand the relationship between the temporal and the rhetorical elements inherent in the historical moment, and it is also a question that has been, and still is, widely discussed among scholars on the field. On the one hand, Lloyd Bitzer insists that the rhetorical situation, his equivalent of the Greek *kairos*, exists independent of the rhetor, as "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations presenting an actual or potential exigence" (Bitzer 1968, 6), the task of the rhetor being to completely or partially remove this exigence through discourse. On the other hand, Richard Vatz suggests that *kairos* situations are created by rhetors, or to put it another way, that any moment in time has *kairos*, as a unique possibility that can be grasped by the rhetor (Vatz 1973).

In reference to this debate it seems to me that if we want to understand the historical moment and its specific temporal qualities, we need to see *kairos* as something that exists independently of individual intentions and ambitions. In spite of its objectivist leanings, Bitzer's notion of "exigence" might prove an important tool for analyzing the return of the concept of "empire" in the twenty-first century. However, an even more precise description of the relationship between the rhetorical situation and the rhetor can be found in an article by John Poulakos, analyzing two of Gorgias' speeches, in which he argues that *kairos* is at once "a prompting towards speaking and a criterion for the value of a speech" (Poulakos 1983, 39). Thus, *kairos*, he claims, refers to the need for language to "take into account and be guided by the temporality of the situation in which it occurs" (ibid., 41).

To a certain extent these reflections by Poulakos seem to echo Koselleck's reference to language as both "factor" and "indicator" of historical change and might thus be useful for understanding and conceptualizing the *kairos* element of *Begriffsgeschichte*. Turning to Koselleck, there is no way that a historical situation can be created by a rhetor. On the contrary, the situation or the moment in history will

always be "a complex of persons, events, objects, and relations", in Bitzer's words, beyond the rhetor's control and often even beyond the rhetor's horizon. In the use of certain "key concepts", however, the rhetor will necessarily take the temporality of the situation into account and be guided by it. In this way – and as we shall see at the end of this article – the concepts develop their own internal temporal structure, at the same time representing and performing a moment of *kairos*.

The quest for the historical

To designate the temporality of a situation – of a moment, of a now – has been the main function of the Greek word *kairos* within the philosophical and the theological tradition. Probably the most important contributions to this strand of thinking has come from Paul Tillich, the German theologian and Socialist, who in several essays and articles discusses the difference between *kairos* and *chronos*, programmatically proposing "a historical consciousness in the sense of *kairos*, a struggle for an interpretation of history in the perspective of *kairos*, a demand for thinking and acting in the present in the spirit of *kairos*" (Tillich 1963a, 9). He also contrasts *kairos* with *logos*, the dominating pattern of Western thought, emphasizing timelessness, form, law, stasis and method, as opposed to change, conflict, fate and individuality, which are the characteristics of *kairos* (Tillich 1961). In spite of his theological background, Tillich's influence on German historical thinking should not be underestimated. To mention only one important example, key thoughts from his works have made their way into the writings of Walter Benjamin, who is known to have been influenced by Tillich and his circle of Christian Socialists, often referred to as the *Kairos-Kreis*. One obvious link between the two is Benjamin's emphasis on the importance of being aware of the *Jetztzeit*, the "now-time", and thereby of the potentials for change inherent in the historical situation (Benjamin 1977, 261; Lindroos 1998, 43-46).

Hence, it could be argued that Tillich seeks to develop exactly "the transcendental aspect of *kairos*", which Thompson was missing in the works of Kinneavy. However, this parallel immediately raises the question if and to what extent Tillich wants to transcend not only the specific historical situation, but also the social and political realities

as such. The idea of *kairos*, he writes, "contains the eternal breaking into the temporal" (Tillich 1963b, 35), hence highlighting the religious and eschatological elements. In another article, however, Tillich sees *kairos* as a concept referring to "a historical moment of an epochal nature" (Tillich 1963a, 25), thus pointing at the actual historical situation as a context for political action. To cope with this dichotomy of the religiously transcendent and the politically and historically immanent, Tillich introduces the distinction between *kairos* and *kairoi* – the singular form referring to the revelation of God in Christ, the plural to moments within human history (Tillich 1963c, 138). It is the second and, in Tillich's thought, secondary variant, the *kairoi* within human history, that is of interest here. Defining the *kairoi*, the historical moments, Tillich arrives at insights which in the context of this article might prove to be both original and highly relevant. In the first place, Tillich excludes from his theory of the historical moment "both the nostalgic and the prognostic perception of time as well as combinations of both [*die rückschrittliche und die fortschrittliche Zeitbetrachtung und Mischungen von beiden*]". Furthermore, he asserts, to look at time as *kairos* means to look at it in the form of "an unavoidable decision, an inescapable responsibility" (Tillich 1963b, 33).

Similarly, in Koselleck's works on *Begriffsgeschichte* time itself has something unavoidable and inescapable, linked to the *kairoi*, in Tillich's sense, to the decisive moments in human history. Thus, one part of Koselleck's ambition, as it is laid out in his primarily theoretical as well as in his primarily historical texts, has been to identify these *kairoi* and the temporal structure inherent in them, by means of analyzing their "key concepts". However, as we shall see, the nostalgic and prognostic elements, which Tillich wants to exclude, are very much a part of this structure and thus are essential for understanding the historical moment.

Kairos and *Begriffsgeschichte*: Koselleck and Koebner

From what I have said so far about the two *kairos* traditions, the rhetorical and the philosophical, it follows that the attempt to develop a theory of the historical moment needs to combine two different concepts of *kairos*: on the one hand, we have to do with a rhetorical concept, bringing with it, more or less openly, the question of tran-

scendence, and, on the other hand, a philosophical and theological concept redefined, in the plural, in political and social terms.

Indeed, Koselleck's work can be said to place itself at the very crossroads of these different traditions, drawing on both rhetorical and temporal perspectives and combining a quest for the transcendental with a quest for the historical. To put it another way, in his theoretical programme we find a pragmatic and rhetorical view of language *embedded in* a comprehensive philosophy of historical temporality. Thus, on the one hand, the "key concepts" are defined pragmatically and rhetorically in the way they distinguish themselves from mere words. Both might be ambiguous, but whereas a word can be given an unambiguous definition with reference to a specific historical context, the concept will remain ambiguous to the extent that it reflects the conflicts and paradoxes in history itself (Koselleck 1972, XXIIf.). On the other hand, however, the key concepts such as "liberty", "democracy", "state" etc. are scenes of a great historical drama, where moral, political and even anthropological conflicts are played out in the form of semantic paradoxes (Koselleck 1979a, 112f.). Thus, at work in Koselleck's thought is a duality of rhetoric and *Geschichtsphilosophie* which is similar to the one inherent in the idea of *kairos*. The ways of identifying a certain crucial situation and choosing the right words to achieve one's goal is indeed bound up with a philosophy of how such crucial situations occur, for which reasons and under which circumstances.

In one of his later articles on *Begriffsgeschichte*, from 2003, entitled "Die Geschichte der Begriffe und Begriffe der Geschichte", Koselleck explicitly addresses this issue, in his discussion of the German-born Israeli historian Richard Koebner. In his works on conceptual history, for instance in the article "Semantic and historiography" (Koebner 1953), Koebner places himself in the tradition of German *Begriffsgeschichte*, going back to Hegel and "*die Arbeit des Begriffes*", but at the same time making it clear that he has a far more pragmatic and rhetorical view of language than some of his later German colleagues (Koselleck 2006b, 57). Thus, in trying to understand the *kairos* structure inherent in *Begriffsgeschichte*, Koselleck's remarks on Koebner's work, which represents an alternative approach to conceptual history by combining temporal and rhetorical perspectives in a different way, might be of vital importance.

In Koebner's *Nachlass* notes, texts and articles belonging to his unfinished *magnum opus* were put together according to his original plan by his assistant Helmut Dan Schmidt. Published in 1964, the work was called *Imperialism. The Story and Significance of a Political Word, 1840-1960*. As the title already gives away, the topic of Koebner's book is the same as in the already discussed article in the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. Both works offer a history of the concept "imperialism", focussing mainly on the period from the middle of the nineteenth century and onwards. But in fact these two presentations of the same historical material could not have been more different. As we have seen, the article in the lexicon tells the story of how the concept "imperialism" was unable to rid itself of negative significations and connotations, originating from the historical and semantic connection to different kinds of despotism and militarism. Thus, it is a story of permanence and continuity. In Koebner's work, however, focusing mainly on English history, "imperialism" goes through several semantic changes, often radically transforming the meaning and use of the concept, e.g. "Colonial crises and the new meaning of empire", "Imperialism – the national desire for Anglo-Saxon union" and "Hate-word of world struggle against Anglo-Saxon domination" (Koebner/ Schmidt 1964, xi). In Koebner's conceptual history of "empire" and "imperialism" there are approximately twelve such transformations, some of them quite sudden, others rather slow, but all of them can be said to mark instances of discontinuity or rupture.

"In this way," Koselleck comments, "we recognize to what extent the use of language is dependent on changing party formations, conflict situations, class interests and prejudices, of national and international engagements, of distinguishing enemies and friends" (Koselleck 2006b, 56). In other words, we recognize to what extent language use is dependent on the "rhetorical situation", with its exigence, its constraints and its audience (Bitzer 1968). In Koebner's pragmatic approach to conceptual history, all semantic elements belong in an argumentative or discursive context and must be analyzed in this perspective. In this way the history of "imperialism" is in fact turned into a history of sudden and successive *kairos* situations.

Two histories of "imperialism"

Before proceeding to examine how Koselleck deals with the challenge of *kairos*, I will give a brief example of the methodological implications of these theoretical differences by comparing Koebner's book with *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. This comparison is made even more interesting by the fact that the book by Koebner and Schmidt presents the main source for Anglophone examples in the article on "imperialism" in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*. Hence, the two presentations use many of the same examples, which, are analyzed in very different ways. Here I can only look at one of them.

The example in question is taken from the *Fortnightly Review* of the British Office for Home and Foreign Affairs, from April 1876, just after the British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli had launched his "Royal Titles Bill", giving Queen Victoria the title "Empress of India". The parliamentary opposition was very sceptical of this new title and of public support of the bill: "This assent was due to carelessness. People had not realised that sycophants would be likely to transform the customary titles into the phrases of imperialism." To understand this use of "imperialism", *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* reminds us of the connection to Bonapartism and concludes: "In this way the old expression was inseparably connected to new problems of the empire" (Fisch/ Groh/ Walther 1982, 186). Hence, the function of this concept is to create continuity between the old and the new, between Bonapartism and the new problems of empire. In contrast, Koebner is neither interested in the old nor in the new, but in the rhetorical situation itself, i.e. in the conflict between the supporters and adversaries of Prime Minister Disraeli: "The whole thing was a hypocritical mockery, the journal claimed. Everybody knew that the title was introduced to gratify a personal wish of the Queen and all the reasons of state cited in support of the title were fictitious." (Koebner/ Schmidt 1964, 123) This was the immediate context when the term "imperialism" came in wider use for the first time in spring 1876.

Hence, the use of the concept is seen by Koebner as an expression of *kairos*, of a break with continuous time: "It served as an anti-Disraeli slogan of the Opposition and was meant to underline the alien character of the Royal Titles Bill." In the introduction to the work, Koebner describes this approach to conceptual history and the work of the conceptual historian in the following way:

> From interpreting words in the context of specific situations, he passes to inquire what these situations have meant to the men concerned in them, and from here he must go on to show how the word became partner of the action which grappled with the situation, what objectives the men had in mind who uttered the word, what future world they hoped to create, what new age to enter. (ibid., xvi)

It is easy to recognize how this way of framing the challenges of conceptual history, emphasizing situations, actions and objectives, might indeed contribute to giving a more precise analysis of the return of "empire" and "imperialism" in the present debates on American foreign policy, according to a more flexible and historically sensitive perception of the concepts than the one featured in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*.

Does this mean then that in the end it is solely the rhetorical and at the same time historical aspect of *kairos* that will prove useful for the theory and practice of *Begriffsgeschichte*, whereas the temporal and transcendental elements, still at work in *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, should be abandoned, as late remnants of a rather outdated metaphysical tradition? I don't think so. In the last part of this article I will show that conceptual history needs to combine both rhetorical and temporal, both historical and transcendental aspects of *kairos*, and to what extent Koselleck's work has found a way of doing this.

Koselleck and the multi-layered present

Returning to the debate between Ferguson and Kagan, it is obvious that a rhetorical approach alone will have difficulties explaining why the issue at hand is not primarily the material and political realities, but in fact, as we have seen earlier, the concept itself – the past, present and future meanings and uses of "empire" and "imperialism". In my opinion, what Ferguson and Kagan are struggling to come to terms with, is what Koselleck has called the concepts' "own linguistic contributions [*die sprachlichen Eigenleistungen*]", forming "a specific, language-immanent history [*eine eigene sprachimmanente Geschichte*]" (Koselleck 2006b, 57). In another article he refers to it as "the diachronic thrust [*die diachrone Schubkraft*]" of the concepts (Koselleck 2006a,

47). In the context of the discussions on "American empire", however, it is obvious that this "work of the concept", according to the phrase by Hegel, is not equivalent to the linear progress of reason in history. Indeed, there is nothing linear or teleological or even rational about the history of "empire" and "imperialism" in the Western world. On the contrary, the concepts appear as unstable constellations of meanings and references featuring different and often conflicting temporalities.

In place of the Hegelian homogenous, one-layered, linear time, the theory of *Begriffsgeschichte*, revised by Koselleck in the wake of *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, explores a heterogeneous, multi-layered and paradoxical temporality, at work in specific historical and rhetorical situations. In an essay from 2000 Koselleck introduces the geological metaphor *Zeitschichten*, "layers of time", as a way of conceptualizing this kind of temporality. This metaphor, he claims, "allows us to make analytical distinctions between different temporal levels, where people are living, events are taking place, or their more long-lasting preconditions are to be found" (Koselleck 2000d, 19). Obviously, this alternative concept of historical temporality will also fundamentally change the idea of the present, of the particular historical moment, to the effect that it is neither just a point – one of endlessly many – on a chronological scale nor a completely transparent and thus manageable now. By consequence, a more complex notion of *kairos* is taking shape, in which rhetorical and temporal, historical and transcendental, synchronic and diachronic approaches are converging.

In the introduction to his article "Stetigkeit und Wandel aller Zeitgeschichten" from 1988, Koselleck turns to the concept *Zeitgeschichte*. To scholars well versed in German historiography, it is clear that *Zeitgeschichte* simply means the history of our own time, of the present. In the article, however, this historiographical concept serves Koselleck as an occasion to ask a much more general question: "What is meant by 'present [*Gegenwart*]'?" (Koselleck 2000b, 247) As far as Koselleck is concerned, there are two possible ways of answering this question, yielding very different, even opposite answers. On the one hand, it is possible to claim that the present is solely a point of intersection, an interface between the past and the future. Hence, it has no positive existence of its own, but is the "absolute zero of a given time scale", a "speculative nothing". On the other hand, this claim can be inverted: as the past is gone and the future hasn't arrived yet, all time must nec-

essarily be seen as present time. Thus, Koselleck continues, "the future exists only as present future, the past only as present past" (ibid., 248). According to this argument there can be only one dimension of time, the present of human existence, past and future existing only to the extent that they are a parts of this present. This claim, however, should not be mistaken for a kind of presentism (Hartog 2003, 18), because the present is in itself temporal and historical. Hence, to the notion of a present past, a past contained in the present, corresponds the notion of a passed present, a present that lies behind us, that is gone. In this way we arrive at a complex temporal structure which – and this will be my final claim in this article – can be said to constitute the *kairos* of conceptual history.

The Koselleckian *kairos*

Indeed, when first reading Koselleck's works, we might be led to believe that he is preoccupied solely with the past and the future, with the continuous diachronic time of *chronos*, rather than with *kairos*, the structure and shape of the present. Furthermore, I should add that Koselleck, as far as I know, never uses this Greek term in any systematic fashion. Upon closer inspection, however, it becomes obvious that his entire work, from the dissertation *Kritik und Krise* (Koselleck 1973) to the polemical articles on the Holocaust memorial in Berlin (e.g. Koselleck 1999), is imbued with a continuous reflection on the temporal and rhetorical structure of the historical moment, of the present, of the now. Thus, Koselleck's preoccupation with *kairos* surfaces in his defence of the political as an open, rhetorical conflict (Koselleck 1973, X), in his studies of the concept of "crisis" (Koselleck 2006d), and in his theory of anthropological oppositions, such as outside/inside, friend/enemy etc., which constitute what he terms *Historik*, an investigation into the preconditions for history (Koselleck 2000a, 99ff.). Far from going into all these different aspects of Koselleck's work, I will just point briefly at how the idea of *kairos* comes to the fore in the theory of *Begriffsgeschichte*, as a point of convergence between language and time, between the rhetorical and the temporal.

In a way, Koselleck's reflection on the historical moment starts with the familiar hermeneutical idea of "the contextuality of linguistic usage [*die Standortbezogenheit jeglichen Wortgebrauchs*]" (Koselleck

1972, XVIII). It follows from this idea that the meanings of words originate in specific rhetorical situations and must be studied in reference to these situations. To analyse such specific historical moments has always been an indispensable part of historical method as well as the method of conceptual history. At the same time, however, this methodical approach contains an awareness of the *kairos* of these moments, an awareness which might be developed further as soon as it is expanded by means of a theory of time, temporality and temporal experience.

In his programmatic essay "Über die Theoriebedürftigkeit der Geschichtswissenschaft", Koselleck claims that conceptual history cannot do without "a theory of historical temporalities [*eine Theorie der historischen Zeiten*]" (Koselleck 2000c, 302). One of the first steps in his development of such a theory is "the destruction of natural chronology". "Chronological succession", Koselleck argues, "[…] can relatively easy be exposed as fiction" (ibid., 306). Henceforth, a primary ambition in Koselleck's work consists in replacing this natural chronology as well as the Hegelian notion of linear time, "history as such", *Geschichte als solche*, as Koselleck calls it, with the notion of *Zeitschichten*, of multi-layered time. At the centre of this theoretical ambition is a reflection upon different aspects of the historical moment, of *kairos*, as I use it in this article. In the following I will just give three short examples: the surprise, the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous [*die Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen*] and the conflict.

In the essay "Zeitschichten" Koselleck discusses the relationship between uniqueness [*Einmaligkeit*] and repetition in historical processes. One of the phenomena he considers is the surprise, not only as an empirical manifestation of exactly this kind of uniqueness, but also – and in this context more importantly – as a *kairos* experience:

> Suddenly one finds oneself facing something new [*einem Novum*], in the sense of a temporal minimum [*einem zeitlichen Minimum*], appearing between before and after. The continuity of previous experience and expectations for the future is interrupted and must form itself anew. It is this temporal minimum of irreversible before and after that drives the surprises into our body. (Koselleck 2000d, 23)

This "temporal minimum", however, is not in itself homogenous or transparent. On the contrary, the experience of contemporaneity cre-

ated by this *kairos* situation is at once an experience of the contemporaneity of the non-contemporaneous. All the elements that make up this historical moment, the entire "complex of persons, events, objects, and relations", to repeat Bitzer's phrase, do not belong to the same time, but exist within different temporal horizons – or, as Koselleck puts it, "we have contemporaries who live in the Stone Age" (Koselleck 2000c, 307; see also Jordheim 2004; Jordheim 2005). Finally, to these two characteristics of the *kairos* experience – obviously there are many more – Koselleck adds a third: the conflict. Obviously, the temporal asymmetry caused by the experience of non-comtemporaneity, and intensified by the experience of an interruption of the continuity between past and present, might very well lead to a historical conflict between two or more parties. However, Koselleck argues, these parties, these "historical subjects", are themselves products of temporal processes. Thus, the real *kairos* situation, the real historical moment never contains just one single actor [*Handlungsträger*] and one single unity of action [*Handlungseinheit*], but a whole scope of "temporal differences, interruptions or tensions pointing towards a new structure of reality" (Koselleck 2000c, 307f.).

Finally, what Koselleck's reinterpretation of *kairos* in the context of *Begriffsgeschichte* amounts to is a reintroduction of diachronic, chronological time, of *chronos*, into the historical moment, into *kairos*, by means of multi-layered temporal and conceptual structure. Hence, "the nostalgic and the prognostic perceptions of time" that were excluded from the idea of *kairos* by Tillich are reintroduced by Koselleck as inherent parts of the historical moment, by means of its conceptual architecture.

The linguistic representations of this kind of multi-layered, ever-changing temporality, are the concepts. As points of convergence between rhetoricity and temporality, concepts are vehicles for different temporal experiences and horizons. In this way a temporal structure is created, within the concepts, directed at once at the past, the future and the present. Every concept, Koselleck claims, has "its own internal temporal structure" (Koselleck 1992, VI), including both a polemic element, directed at the present, a prognostic element, directed at the future, as well as a nostalgic element, directed at the past (Koselleck 1979a, 111). Even though concepts belong to the present, or better, to *a* present, they still retain what Koselleck refers to as their "Janus faces" (Koselleck 1972, XV), one part facing backwards, towards a nostalgi-

cally reconstructed past, the other facing forwards towards a prognostically envisaged future. Hence, the *kairos* of conceptual history is constituted by, on the one hand, a specific and possibly exceptional historical moment, as described in the rhetorical tradition, and, on the other hand, by a diachronic temporal movement *through* this moment, from the past, through the present and into the future, as reflected in the threefold temporal reference of the concepts themselves.

Finally, this way of presenting the *kairos* of concepts and conceptual history might indeed explain why a debate on American foreign policy all of a sudden – as we have seen – turns into a discussion on the semantics of the concept of "empire". Both Niall Ferguson and Robert Kagan refer to the empires *of the past*, the Roman, the British, the Russian, which at the same time are presented as models – or in the Kagan's case, as countermodels – *for the future*. Together, these two perspectives, the retrospective or even nostalgic reference to the past and the prognostic or even utopian reference to the future, effectively point to the present as a place of decision and action, as a fateful moment and a moment of possibility, as *kairos*.

NOTES

1. All quotes from this debate are taken from a transcript published on the AEI website: http://www.aei.org/events/filter.,eventID.428/transcript.asp

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