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BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE TODAY – AN OVERVIEW*

To discuss the history of political and social concepts at the meeting at the Finnish Institute in London offers an unique international occasion in its subject, its location, and in the disciplinary and national diversity of those gathered. This gathering brings together participants from fourteen countries, including those involved in eight projects, some under way; others proposed, or being planned. All of them represent initiatives prompted by positive, if selective and qualified responses outside Germany to three great collective works, the *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe* (GG), the *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich, 1680-1820* (Handbuch), and the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*. Newer German lexicons using one or another version of *Begriffsgeschichte* include one on the history of rhetoric, and another on the history of aesthetic concepts in German-speaking Europe.

All five of these German works vary greatly in both method and focus, as no doubt will the projects about which we shall be hearing. Also on our agenda will be considerations of the relationship between *Begriffsgeschichte* and the disciplines and sub-disciplines to which it is related, as well as its potential contributions to such fields as political culture. All of us anticipate the discussions in other panels of several other themes crucial to our subject.

As for my own paper, I shall not recapitulate the schematic view of *Begriffsgeschichte* provided in my book *The History of Political and Social Concepts*. Instead I shall first address those great intellectual challenges and unusual opportunities offered by this meeting. The second section deals with the need to consolidate and extend the findings of the collective works in *Begriffsgeschichte* now completed or approaching their end. Next comes a consideration of what might facilitate the comparison of histories of political and social concepts in different natural languages, about which we shall be hearing. Finally, I survey and assess recent critiques and alternative formulations of our subject, including some redefining it, and one proposing that the very term "concept" (*Begriff*) be abandoned.

I

In more than one sense, it is significant that we should meet in London under the sponsorship of the Finnish Institute, rather than under the auspices of any analogous British or Anglophone organization. Two questions are in point: Why the interest in the history of political and social concepts represented by our hosts from Finland, as well as those of us from Denmark, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Russia, and Sweden? Why has there been relatively little response to *Begriffsgeschichte* in English-speaking countries? One obvious answer is the fact that because most of these countries have long had close ties to German thought, scholars from them are more apt both to work in the German language and to attend to intellectual developments there. Nor should we underestimate those differences separating the methods used by German, French, and English-speaking historians of political and social thought. Indeed, we shall see that the most recent discussions of these subjects tend to organize discussions in terms of contrasts among the approaches to the historical study of political and social language in these three cultures. Of course, scholars in other countries, notably the Netherlands and Italy, are both well acquainted with all these developments, and have themselves contributed significantly to the discussions of them. What is positive and encouraging is that not only has an international dia-

logue begun, but that attention now focuses on how differences may be reconciled and synthesized. We hope that in this regard, this meeting marks a significant step that will be continued by subsequent conferences.

Here we should consider that there is a new situation potentially favoring further developments of *Begriffsgeschichte*: the end of the Cold War, the dramatic changes brought by it, including intellectual freedom in the former Soviet Union and the countries once under its control; the globalisation of trade, industry, and communications; the movement towards creating more inclusive political and economic units such as the European Union and the North American Free Trade Association; attempts to enlarge membership in existing units, North Atlantic Treaty and the World Trade Organizations; and finally the incredible speed of developments in new technologies of information processing and communication, to mention only computers, data banks, analytical programs, and the internet.

Indeed the hypotheses investigated by the GG may be even more applicable to our present time than to the early modern and modern periods of what Reinhart Koselleck has called the *Sattelzeit*. We may anticipate an even greater acceleration of linguistic change, coinages of new political and social concepts indicating the increased acceptance of modes of thought premised upon the assumption that time, experience, and advances in knowledge are all speeding up. Such rapid change (*Beschleunigung*) may produce modes of political and social thought registering the loss in importance of past time, tradition, and other continuities in relation to the present, and even more, to the future. Thus, if the GG's hypotheses hold, the anticipation of future time (*Verzeitlichung*) will be increasingly built into political and social concepts. What of the other three hypotheses about the characteristics of modern political and social concepts: *Demokratisierung* (democratization) of political and social vocabularies, *Ideologiesierbarkeit* (the extent to which concepts may be incorporated into ideologies), and *Politisierung* (politicization) of concepts?

Michael Freeden, author of a recent important book on political ideologies is better situated than me to comment on the prospects for ideologies in the present conjuncture. In the perspective of his book we could, for example, consider whether ideologies in their 20th century forms will be less important in the next century, or

whether the situation will resemble that in the United States, where as overtly political ideologies recede, cultural and economic ideologies replace them, along with fundamentalist religious movements. As for the prospects for further democratization and politicization of political and social concepts, I here raise rather seek to resolve such questions.

II

Up to now the principal achievements of *Begriffsgeschichte* have been primarily German lexicons of political, social, and philosophical concepts, and secondarily, studies in books and articles of particular concepts in these domains. For these lexicons to achieve their greatest usefulness for future works, supplementary studies and research are needed. Such follow-up and evaluative work might well be done by graduate students, in theses and dissertations while they can still interview those who have directed and participated in major projects. Past sponsors of research in *Begriffsgeschichte* – research institutes and academies, foundations and publishers – might be approached to support such evaluative research and reflections.

What are the questions which might be most profitably addressed? Among others are the following: When projects have stated the specific problems they were meant to address, to what extent has the finished work done so? If hypotheses have been formulated as was done in Reinhart Koselleck's Introduction to the GG, to what extent have they been verified, verified in part, falsified, or can be said to have produced no useful conclusions? In short, what are the theoretical findings of the project? To what extent did contributors use the distinctive techniques specified, and make use of the full range of sources provided by the editors? Evaluations should include both internal self-critiques, as well as the judgments of outside analysts.

On balance, what do the editors, contributors, publishers, and readers of these works in *Begriffsgeschichte* perceive to be both their greatest achievements and lacunae? Which concepts should have been included; which omitted? Again evaluations should include auto-critiques, as well as those by outside analysts. Thus detailed ques-

tionnaires should be devised to record systematically queries to the editors. For example, if they were starting now, what would they do which was not done? What would they omit?

In addition to internal critiques, external analysts might usefully ask those who took part in these earlier projects what contributions could now be made by techniques and sources now available, such as computer analyses, and construction of data banks. Had any of the been available, how could their use have improved what was done in past collective works. To this end researchers should investigate the construction, analysis, and applications of such potentially useful works as the joint French-American data base, *Trésor de la langue française*, (ARTFL); the files compiled at St. Cloud; as well as existing programs for analyzing the *Oxford English Dictionary* and plans for expanding it. From this discussion by editors, participants, and evaluators, might come recommendations for designing computerized analytical programs specially designed for use in research on *Begriffsgeschichte*.

Now that so many projects in languages other than German are under way or being considered, the foci of each of them ought to be examined, and to the greatest possible extent, include the same concepts. Using one or more international language, a center should be established to house archives recording the processes used to select the method and subject matter of the different projects by their editors, as well as their reasons for their choices.

It would be no less important to create a file of applications made for support of projects, including those dating back to the 1960's. This archive would contribute to the history of knowledge by recording the changing goals set for scholarship in our subject, it would provide an array of arguments needed for making persuasive cases for new projects, and would also help identify foundations, as well as governmental, non-governmental and international organizations willing to participate in such efforts, particularly if they fit into a comparative agenda designed to facilitate international understanding. For example, Profs. Kopossov and Khapaeva have formulated a rationale for their project, which, *mutatis mutandis*, may be applicable to other countries recently within the former Soviet bloc. What they emphasize as the prequisite for communication among scholars and statesmen, is the need to establish a clear understanding of

the disparate meanings carried by key social science and historiographical concepts in Russian, French, German, and English.

Above all, we need to make a case for both minimum and maximum programs comprehensible and persuasive to our colleagues, governmental and non-governmental, and not least to publishers and the educated public which constitutes their market. What might this case look like? As a minimum, we should argue that just as the goal of lexicography is defined as the preparation of dictionaries; so that of *Begriffsgeschichte* is to prepare lexicons of political and social concepts. This is a minimum but still honorable and justifiable objective. Indeed one of the strongest arguments for *Begriffsgeschichte* is that if pursued on the level attained by its German models, it produces lexicons of a kind previously nonexistent but certainly highly desirable. Where such lexicons of *Begriffsgeschichte* exist, they are widely used by both scholars and by the general public, and help raise the level of political and social discourse. That they do not tell us all that we want to know about intellectual, political, and social history scarcely counts as a criticism. The distinction between necessary and sufficent conditions for knowledge is in point here, as it is for all forms of inquiry. Instruments must be evaluated in terms of what they are meant to do. We must clarify the questions and problems to which *Begriffsgeschichte* is relevant, and point out the advantages of knowing the history of past usages of concepts still very much at the heart of contemporary discussion. Comparison of such usages reveals much both about ourselves and others.

III

Now that we have the prospect of a number of projects in different natural languages and diverse political cultures, the time has come to raise the hitherto little examined question of what might come from comparing the findings of these studies. This would be greatly facilitated by the analyses recommended earlier of the findings of those lexicons already completed or nearing their end. As for new projects, it is self-evident that subsequent comparison of them will be facilitated by discussion in advance of their respective agendas.

This means that we ought to consider establishing an organization which could serve as a forum for discussing critically alternative sets of both metatheories and working methods. While there must be some degree of variation among projects in disparate settings, such differences should be minimized as much as possible.

How could this be done? One way would be through establishing a forum for discussing both the methods that would be used and the concepts to be covered. The second is more easily dealt with. For example, while the GG and Handbuch differ in their theoretical frameworks, there is a considerable overlap, if not identity, of the concepts covered. When resources are limited, as is usually the case, there will be the need to choose those concepts most important for the individual project. But if there is some room for going beyond a bare minimum, then the negative question can be raised of why some concepts so crucial for one unit of comparison are not so for others. This apparently abstract issue is open to resolution in more than one way.

One promising approach to comparison is the systematic study of conceptual transfers from one culture to another. Because of its empirical dimensions, the study of transfers should be given a high priority. Analyses of which concepts were taken, modified, or ignored tells much about the mechanisms at work in the important process of selection performed by the intellectuals, institutions, and media, which together create public opinion. The Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft is supporting a study of the concepts taken from France by German authors from 1700 to 1815. The directors of this work have worked out a research agenda applicable in principle to other conceptual transfers. By using and modifying these methods to borrowings in other national or cultural settings, it might be possible to draw upon both the resources internal to states, such as national academies, libraries, and archives, and in addition, national and international research organizations such as the European University and Central European University, and research programs sponsored by the European Union and NATO.

For purposes of comparison, it is preferable to consider conceptualization as a process, usually contested, rather than to emphasize the content or final forms of the concepts produced. For example, it may be generally agreed that something new and im-

portant is taking place, such as the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century; population movements or globalisation in the twentieth. However, different persons and groups make discrepant analyses of what they regard as the component strands constituting the phenomenon; they disagree about its present effects and future consequences. The diagnoses, prognoses, and evaluations of the phenomenon by these different persons and groups diverge greatly, as do their prescriptions for what should be done on the basis of how they view this new development. Because they have conceptualized the phenomenon in contested forms, they may, depending upon the political system, debate the merits of their respective formulations. Or else only one form of the concept may be imposed and made authoritative under penalty of sanctions, as exemplified by the Bureau of Formulations which in the People's Republic of China since 1949 has regulated every public use of political concepts in the media.

Very general comparisons should be avoided. Instead attention should be centered on conceptual coinages, changes, and transfers. Comparisons should be among nations or cultures at given moments, and conducted with common foci, that is taken from the same domain. Much will depend upon the period or moment chosen. In the 18th and 19th centuries, comparative analysis of political and social concepts should not ignore "nation," "state," "bureaucracy," "liberty," "equality," "suffrage," "representative government," "the rule of law," "freedom of expression and religious worship," "revolution," "civil society," "human rights" and regime types, including "republic," "democracy," and "Bonapartism." Finally, may I add the recommendation that we should not assume that the concept of "comparison" means and has meant the same thing everywhere and at all times? While preparing a chapter on the "The Comparative Study of Regimes and Societies in the Eighteenth-Century" for *The Cambridge History of Eighteenth-Century Political Thought*, I discovered that the methods of *Begriffsgeschichte* enabled me to identify important 18th century senses of "comparison" differing considerably from 20th century understandings. It is also to identify the terms such as *moeurs* and *manières* used in comparative analyses in one time and place but not in another.

IV

What direction should be taken in writing the history of political and social concepts? I shall not attempt to recapitulate all of the most recent literature in German, French, and English, as has Rolf Reichardt in his extraordinarily thorough, well-informed, and thoughtful introduction to *Beiheft 21* of the *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung, Aufklärung und Historische Semantik*. Instead I shall offer some reflections and comments on his account and recommendations, along with two others who have offered their own reviews of studies in more than one language and national style: Günther Lottes's "'The State of the Art.' Stand und Perspektiven der `intellectual history;'" and Peter Schöttler's "Mentalitäten, Ideologien, Diskurse," as well as his earlier "Sozialgeschichtliches Paradigma und historische Diskursanalyse."

Recent comparative discussions of alternative methods have been phrased in three sets of terms: German, including both the varieties of *Begriffsgeschichte*, and historical semantics from the standpoint of linguists such as D. Busse critical of *Begriffsgeschichte*; French, *Annales* studies of *mentalités*, discourse analyses such as Robin's, and the lexicometry of the St. Cloud school; and in English, the study of political languages or in his own special sense, "discourses" by Pocock; or of "ideologies" again in a stipulated sense by Skinner, and most recently, the "new cultural history," and post-modern "cultural studies," largely, although not exclusively, by North Americans.

I shall comment briefly on proposals that "historical semantics," "history of mentalities," or "history of discourses" replace that type of *Begriffsgeschichte* concerned with the history of political concepts or terms. Such critiques are of two kinds. One, originating in social historians, and sometimes combined with French discourse analysis and/or quasi-Marxist assumptions, uses a strategy resembling that of other theories which deny any degree of autonomy to the political process. All such critiques subordinate government, politics, and political thought to some deeper structure or whole, variously located in the economy, society, culture, or language. A second type of critique represents hegemonic aspirations on the part of one or another discipline to impose its *Fragestellungen* and methods, as with

the program of positivism or behavioralism in the social sciences. The dominant impulse here is an obsession with exact measurement, quantification, statistics, in short, incontrovertible proof. Existing procedures for studying the history of political and social concepts are deprecated as merely verbal, arbitrarily interpretative, inconclusive because contestable, and hence always relative to the values of investigators, and never establishing unquestionable criteria for intersubjective validity.

By contrast, the methods of other sciences, in this case modern structural linguistics and semantics, are presented as the model for the new discipline meant to replace *Begriffsgeschichte*. This critique, originating with a group of German linguists, and subsequently embraced by some social historians, has convinced Rolf Reichardt, among the most impressive practitioners of what he now wishes to call "historical semantics." He has accepted their conclusion that the very term "concept" (*Begriff*) should be replaced by *Schlagwort*, meaning by that, if I understand him correctly, a sign or group of signs constituting a semantic unity. He also accepts their denial that there are any defensible criteria for choosing *Grundbegriffe* or *Leitbegriffe* to serve as the subjects of a conceptual history. This is not the place, nor do I have the competence, to state and evaluate the precise case made by this group of German linguists against the procedures of *Begriffsgeschichte* as hitherto practiced. I shall confine myself to making several observations, which presumably will be discussed by either the commentators or in the question period.

First of all, there is the question of what degree of exactitude is appropriate to our subject of inquiry. Aristotle's commonsensical answer is that it is the kind of study in question which determines the extent of possible precision: "it is obviously just as foolish to accept arguments of possibility from a mathematician as to demand strict demonstrations from an orator." In the *GG*, Professor Koselleck has made selected and pragmatic use of linguistic techniques, while disclaiming strict conformity with present-day linguistics and semantics. Certainly it is possible to achieve exactitude in detail by omitting any consideration of the larger significance of the data. This was Reichardt's dismissive verdict in the *Handbuch* on *lexicométrie*, a judgment which our French guests may wish to contest. But before accepting as a standard that version of historical semantics derived

from linguistics endorsed by critics of *Begriffsgeschichte*, it would be prudent to await detailed historical studies along the lines they advocate. Thus far there has been little to show for treating political concepts, *Schlagwörter*, or *Schlüsselwörter* as nothing more than a subset of linguistics, as a form of language or discourse differing in no significant respect from any other. The same could be said of efforts to treat political concepts as subordinate parts of mentalities, the "third level" of the *Annales* school; or as nothing but symbolic expressions of a single unified culture; or as determined exclusively by the social or economic membership of those possessing and using such concepts.

My second point is that it is always a mistake to treat political terms exclusively as units of language. Without specific reference to the type of political regime under which these terms are used, many, if not all conclusions about their use are at best misleading, and at worst, clearly wrong. Purely linguistic treatments of political language in China since 1949 are meaningless without referring to the fact that under this political regime, a "bureau of formulations" has regulated every public use of political concepts in the media. Books such as Viktor Klemperer's *LTI* demonstrate the extent to which the Nazi regime controlled and manipulated the use of political concepts, reversing for its own ideological purposes the meaning of terms such as *Fanatismus* (fanaticism, *fanatisme*). Nor was the case any different in the former DDR, or in its Soviet master and model. Thus a history of political terms cannot be adequately formulated without specifying a theory of politics and a classification of regimes. Purely semantic theories make no room for theories of politics and regime types. I shall make this point again when referring to the "contestability" of political terms, surely one of their defining characteristics.

What is meant by the "contestability" of political concepts? First, the term indicates that disputes about such concepts as "democracy" involve their central, rather than their marginal meanings. In short, is a direct, participatory system such as ancient Athens the paradigm of democracy, or should the model be modern constitutional, representative governments such as the Bundesrepublik, the United States, and the United Kingdom? Second, in "contestable" concepts, disagreements form an indispensable part of the meaning. Anyone failing to realize that fact does not understand the way the term is used.

This would be true of anyone holding that the meaning of "freedom" is so clear that it is difficult to understand why so many people and governments use it wrongly. "Freedom" is not the type of concept which carries one incontrovertible meaning. Third, this is to suggest that the value of some concepts derive from the controversy they engender rather than from any consensus about their meaning. Certain concepts are valuable, not despite disputes about their meaning, but just because of such disagreements. Thus debates about the meaning of "democracy" or "free speech," or the right to political asylum may enrich public understanding of the issues involved without ever providing a single correct or agreed concept of any of them. While conceptual contestation may or may not occur in different types of regimes, there is much to be said for those who argue that conceptual contestation is crucial to the practices of constitutional and representative democracies. On this view, conflict, not consensus, is crucial to regimes that are both free and democratic. For in such governments, despite legislative, judicial, and intellectual disagreements about concepts, principles and their application, it is usually the case that policies are adopted and put into place. The assumption that only consensus on a single set of views can produce social order and effective political decision is highly questionable.

I further contend that the history of political terms should be linked to agents, both individuals or groups, as well as to reception of these terms by their targets or audiences. The notion of agency, that is the systematic consideration of who takes or has taken political action, and for which reasons, is crucial to understanding how political terms are constituted and function. Such theories of agency, whether individual or group, tend to be ruled out *a priori* by purely linguistic, social historical, or cultural analyses. This is especially true for the distinction made in structural linguistics between *langue* and *parole*, which by its emphasis on language as a synchronic system precludes attributing any role to agency in language change. Much the same point holds for post-structuralists like Foucault.

Another point, which I shall state here but not develop further, challenges the blanket dismissal as mere *Gipfelwanderungen*, going from peak to peak, the consideration of the part played in political language by major political theorists. Here Saussurean linguistics converge with the *Annales* school of social history focused on

mentalités in denying that the political vocabulary may be affected by individual contributions. I agree with the non-controversial assertion (made among others by Lovejoy, Pocock, Skinner, Koselleck, and Reichardt) that histories of political concepts and language should not be based exclusively, or even mainly on canonical thinkers. Yet I conclude that it is unjustifiable to engage in sweeping categorical rejections of the part played in political language by major theorists such as Montesquieu and Rousseau in the eighteenth century, or by lesser known individuals such as Nicole Oresme who contributed more than five hundred political terms to French during the fourteenth century, or by an analogous figure, Sir Thomas Elyot in England during the sixteenth. And at the end of the twentieth century, how plausible is it to assert that the writings of Marx and Engels, Lenin, Stalin, and Mao have been irrelevant to the political languages of peoples subject to regimes that regarded one or more of them as canonical?

My final conclusion is that we should beware of assuming that there is one and only one correct method and theoretical objective for those concerned with the history of political and social concepts. Everything depends on what is the question being addressed, and upon the purpose of a given work. While the minimal purpose of Begriffsgeschichte is, as has been suggested, to produce reference works on the history of political and social concepts, there remains ample room for other types of projects. These, depending on the problems addressed by the investigator, may and should vary greatly.

Perhaps the greatest and most exciting challenge confronting historians of political and social concepts is to demonstrate by example how the application of their approach can illuminate their subject. It was above all by *The Great Chain of Being* that A. O. Lovejoy scored his success in founding the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, and establishing the movement, which for two decades was to dominate American studies in that field. Similarly what ultimately convinced Anglophone historians to abandon Lovejoy's history of ideas were Pocock's *The Ancient Constitution and the Feudal Law* and his *The Machiavellian Momen*t, as well as Quentin Skinner's *The Foundations of Modern Political Thought*. It remains to be seen whether anyone now writing Begriffsgeschichte can rival these precedents.

Notes

* Opening address at the meeting Conceptual Change and European Political Cultures at the Finnish Institute in London, 18-20 June 1998

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