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THE PRACTICAL USE OF BEGRIFFSGESCHICHTE

*By an Historian of European Pre-modern Political Thought: Some Problems**

I have just put the final touches to the text of a rather large book that is the result of a very long-term project on *A History of Political Thought from the Ancient Greeks to the Renaissance* (Blackwell, forthcoming). Because courses in European and Anglo-American universities often treat the history of political thought as a study of canonical great theorists and their texts, I have taken into account students' needs and primarily focused on Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Cicero, Augustine, Aquinas, a selection of medieval theorists, and I end with Machiavelli and his contemporaries. But this is no *Sophie's World* with footnotes. I have treated these thinkers' political theories or political philosophies as embedded within as much socio-political history as I could include to elucidate why the texts say what they do (and don't say something else) without, I hope, drowning the reader in the minutiae of different and other times. I have taken these individual theorists to be representatives of groups, parties, all of them positioned in structures not of their own making. I do not treat them merely as individual linguistic agents in speech situations, but rather, as representatives of local kinds of arguments set in contexts that

were not purely linguistic. But these contexts survive for us through texts which *re*-present the nonlinguistic circumstances in which concepts were developed and experiences had. Crucially, these selected philosophers or theorists are not taken to be, because they were not in their own times, representative voices *of* their times. Rather, they were judged by later Europeans to have been exemplary of the best of the past. Hence, they are the winners, judged or misjudged as such, retrospectively, by later Europeans who actively reconstructed their own pasts, in part by establishing a canon of great and inspiring thinkers who, if properly understood, they thought could be essentially imitated later down the historical road.[1]

On the one hand I have looked at selected political theories and discussed their genesis in their own socio-political contexts, but my principle for inclusion of one as opposed to another thinker has been founded on a retrospective examination of which texts Europeans, in the course of their construction of their own identities, themselves deemed worthy of actively adopting and necessarily misinterpreting to serve their own present. Past concepts for such Europeans in the pre-modern period were not antiquarian curiosities; they judged these texts which expressed past concepts to be usable or else, they ignored them and did not have them recopied for future generations. Unlike post-19th-century historians, earlier Europeans looked for answers to what they took to be unchanging questions, and they thought they could engage unproblematically in dialogues with philosophers across time and re-use their solutions to what they took to be eternal problems about human governance. Of course, from our point of view, what they did was construct continuities with their selected pasts, believing themselves to be able to learn from and indeed, repeat the virtues of the past because they held that the past was filled with men who were just like them. In fact, they were only able to sustain this essential continuity by completely transforming past concepts to suit their own circumstances and experiences. They thought they were living within a tradition but actually were in the extended process of constructing one.

Instead of focusing on lesser contemporary texts, although I have sometimes included them to show parallels or differences with what came to be considered the more famous texts, I have focused on what has become for Europeans a canon because I think there actu-

ally has been one established by Europeans which is remarkably stable and it has undoubtedly wiped out a variety of past contemporary voices and perspectives from our view. I think this in itself has tremendous consequences for the success or otherwise of a synchronic mapping of key concepts that comprised a complex past society's political and social vocabulary. The canon is a collection of evolving European prejudices about themselves and others, and has been forged precisely as women and minority groups have today claimed, through a process of exclusion and selection which has determined which voices from the past were, in fact, taken seriously. I have not looked for the genesis of modern concepts, like 'the state', in these earlier periods because I think teleologies can only be constructed retrospectively, and in the construction they tell us perhaps more about ourselves than about past peoples' self-understandings. But I have tried to identify certain conceptual configurations through languages used at the time in order to alert readers to, say, a notion of *ius* or right, whose meaning is perhaps related to some of our uses of the notion of right but which, when situated in another context, implies a range of other ideas, some of which seem distinctly strange to us.

Throughout this project I have attempted to use some of the methods of Reinhart Koselleck's *Begriffsgeschichte*. As a classicist and medievalist, and not simply as a historian of classical and medieval *political* theory, my training ensured that I was much influenced by Otto Brunner's work, without however, coming to similar conclusions about the benefits of national socialism! But I admit to having found it often much easier to sustain the theoretical discussion especially of Brunner's heirs and successors than to engage the theory in practice as I've moved from the ancient Greek world through that of the Romans, early Christians, medievals – early and later – and that of the renaissance theorists.

First of all, there is, of course, a huge problem of just who we can call a political theorist in a period when there were many literary genres which *we* might not recognise as expressing political or social concepts. And there were many men with very different professional trainings who wrote about the social and political ordering of human life but perhaps couched their views in biblical and theological terms. Is every surviving text capable of revealing social and political

concepts? In some sense the answer must be yes. Is every author then, a political and social theorist? This is not simply a problem for 'medieval' so-called (by us) political thought. It raises the question about the criteria we use which enable us to privilege political and social concepts which both *GG* and I wish to do, not least because this privileging of the political as an exclusive realm of (usually male) public values is a notable European practice. Furthermore, it raises the problem of our capacity to recognise what distinguishes political and social from other kinds of concepts in pre-modern societies.

Then secondly, for my kind of book, aimed at advanced undergraduates and postgraduates, who are interested in coming to some understanding of coherent *whole* political theories of the past, I found it insufficient to track say, the antithetical dualisms, e.g. hellenes/barbarians, Christian/heathen as Koselleck does in his 'The historical-political semantics of asymmetric counterconcepts'.[2]

Hence, first I want to suggest that there is a problem with the use of *Gegenbegriffe* which seems to be rooted in an unspoken epistemological theory of the bi-polar or the binary mind. It is not that there is some fixed ontology of concepts with which Koselleck and his colleagues are working, but there does appear to be a submerged theory about the genesis of contingent frames of meaning that is based on presumed psychological polarities which get filled up, as it were, by contested words which signify concepts. Hence, diachronic transformation is for Koselleck, *necessarily* polar. In discussing the concept *Bund*, for instance, Koselleck offers us a religious and a political sense, and while the religious sense was never completely abandoned, he seems to have a notion of mind as dependent on binary contradictions.[3] Koselleck has written that 'without the invocation of parallel or opposed concepts, without ordering generalised and particular concepts, and without registering the overlapping of two expressions, it is not possible to deduce the structural value of a word as 'concept' either for the social framework or for the disposition of political fronts'.[4] Koselleck affirms that expressions are multiple but it seems that concepts get transformed diachronically only through polar opposition. This looks to me to be a statement about how our recognition in sources of parallel or opposed concepts allows us to infer a theory of mind's workings: that humans only have limited perspectives on things and they achieve self-definition as it

emerges through distinguishing who is in and who is out. There is not a problem of the relation between words and things but between a limited perspective on things framed by the polarities of either/or, good/bad, hellene/barbarian. Now I do not wish to deny that there is a transformation of meaning of words and a transformation of things, but I am unclear about what appears to be the motor of these transformations. For Koselleck it appears to be the presupposition that a certain kind of exegesis of sources will reveal to us no more than two conceptual opposites as possibilities.

Furthermore, I think that Koselleck and his colleagues go further than their open claim that epistemologically nothing can occur historically that is not apprehended conceptually. Koselleck believes that the history of the translation and reception of concepts shows that concepts are more than linguistic evidence of social continuity and change. Concepts, by defining extralinguistic structures, condition political events.[5] I happen to agree with this. But I also think it implies something that a current Anglo-American orthodoxy which takes a view on the relation of thinking to speaking, must reject, I presume following Wittgenstein: the rejected assumption is that thought is not simply constituted by language but in some sense thought is the prerequisite for language which is itself only a partial reflection of thinking. To hold this view as I do and as I think Koselleck and his colleagues do as well, is to hold a view that is not widely favoured in the Anglo-American world and it may, in part, be a reason for *Begriffsgeschichte* not having been taken up widely there. J.G.A. Pocock, for instance, believes that humans communicate by a language system which helps them constitute their conceptual worlds and authority-structures. He appears to have no room for what was, in effect, a pre-modern theory of language, which argues that language reflects rather than constitutes a mental world. On the contrary, for Pocock and others, past (and present) theorists must and always do tailor their projects to fit the available normative languages which in turn constitute their mental worlds. As I tried to show in my discussion of various ancient and medieval thinkers[6], pre-moderns had a theory of language which not only is not 'ours', that is, the Anglo-American version that it is the *uses of language* which constitute our thinking, but rather, they argued that there is a universal language of thought which is selectively and partially externalised

by conventional languages which reveal shifting conceptualisations in contingent circumstances. For them, our world is thought before it is (inadequately) revealed in speech and therefore, the meaning of an idea is not simply reducible to its referential use.

At any rate, to tell one or more of the stories of the western European reconstruction and use of earlier ethical and political theories, especially during that pre-*Sattelzeit* period when it was held that *historia magistra vitae*, and for my book not to become the size of the encyclopedic *GG* project, I simply could not trace the semantic field of selected words. This was not simply a problem of time and space however. The selection of words also seems to harbour unspoken problems of exegesis of texts where these terms are used. Therefore, secondly I want to indicate a problem in selecting words and providing a critical exegesis: my worry is that this depends on uncontested but highly contestable readings of the whole theories in which such words might be found. Instead, I have opted to look at whole theories in their own socio-political contexts and have tried to determine what they could have been taken to mean by contemporaries, and perhaps even more importantly, what they were taken to mean by those who reinterpreted, indeed misinterpreted these 'exemplary' theories of the past when they were in socio-historical conditions, and conceptualising and living according to localised norms, that were not similar to the ones in which the theories were themselves first generated.

Koselleck has, of course, very interesting things to say about how one treats words as insufficient indicators of stable contents and that contents themselves undergo long-term change, expressible in numerous and different ways. I too have tried to shift between synchronic and diachronic analysis. I have set a premium on the synchronic and largely affirm the diachronic by including examples of say, the use of the classical Latin concept *respublica* and I have charted its changed meanings in the middle ages and the renaissance in order to show that despite later thinkers' references to reviving the Roman *respublica*, medieval and renaissance city-states and their theorists did something else.

I have fewer problems with changed concepts than I have with those taken to be stable. Therefore, I am less optimistic than Koselleck that I can disclose a persistence of past *experience* – experience is precisely what does not persist over large tracts of time even in pre-

modern societies; while I do, on the other hand, think one can come to some understanding of the possible viability of past theories. My third problem, therefore, is with Koselleck's belief that many concepts from an earlier period continue to be applied in almost unaltered forms. It is not clear to me how we could ever know this. Past traditions do, of course, persist in the present but I do not think we could ever assert that what we take them to mean in the present is what they meant in the past. My reason for saying this is that as readers of past texts, interested in the evolution of political theorising as an activity, philosophical questions and answers are transitory and historical rather than permanent. But some questions and answers still appear to be alive for us because they have entered our thought in an evolved state, a reconstructed state, having already been taken up, rethought and reinterpreted by earlier thinkers who thought it important to keep *their* interpretation of the thought of 'their fathers' alive. The old questions and answers are part of our tradition of rethinking, of making intelligible, in different intellectual and social contexts, these wide-ranging matters. In this way, the past necessarily penetrates our present lives. But concepts from the past are not universal or transhistorical; they have a history but not on their own. Their history is due to their having been re-thought, reconsidered and rendered intelligible and therefore *changed* by historically-situated thinkers, and we are simply the latest in the queue. It is not therefore, clear to me how one could confirm that past concepts continue to be applied in almost unaltered forms today or at any other time. In other words, I am not convinced that the religious sense of *Bund* in the 19th century was the same religious sense it had during the early Reformation.

Given what I take to be the above problems, my interest at this conference is to discuss with you how one might incorporate the theoretical principles of *Begriffsgeschichte* into a narrative about the use and abuse of whole past political theories. This is an acknowledged problem, noted by Mel Richter, about how we characterise patterned relationships amongst concepts. There is an unresolved problem of how to proceed from a lexical arrangement of individual concepts in *GG* to the reconstruction of integrated political and social vocabularies at crucial points in the development of European political and social languages.

Problems 1 and 2: *Gegenbegriffe* and Selection of Concepts

When we provide or extract the meaning of political and social concepts, the words designating them and the semantic fields within which they have functioned, we set before ourselves a range of contemporary sources. Even if we start by extracting a concept from one type of source, e.g. a political theory text, to understand *how* a concept is used we have to understand or have an interpretation of the whole political theory. Take the concept 'obligation' in Hobbes. For someone to try to grasp Hobbes's meaning requires that he already has some working interpretation of *Leviathan* and we all know that the historical profession is based on new or different interpretations of Hobbes as the first liberal, of Hobbes as an absolutist, of Hobbes as Protestant theorist of man's construction of the state as the divine will. There are plausible reasons for adopting any of these perspectives when we read Hobbes's text and try to get at what he means by 'obligation'. But which one we choose is crucial. In studying past political thought *Begriffsgeschichte* may enable students of past political theories to avoid anachronisms in attempting to interpret texts written at a time when the use of key terms differed from our own. But this is only to assert that we can minimally establish what say, a 17th century theorist could *not* have meant. How we get closer to a 17th century meaning and use of words – say Hobbes on obligation – depends on how we understand the *whole text* in which such a word or its inferred concept is embedded.

Because concepts are ways of thinking we can only infer them from language. Concepts are ambiguous, contingent universal meanings with capacities for potential experiences. But in his 'Historical-political semantics of asymmetric counterconcepts' Koselleck actually provides us with his very literal interpretation of Aristotle's *Politics* book 1 in order for him to show that the Greeks operated with the counterconcepts Hellene-barbarian. He tells us that Aristotle designated the barbarians as natural slaves and that he supported his view by reference to a verse by Euripides.[7] Now this is an exceedingly contentious reading of what Aristotle is doing in his ethics and politics. It is a reading of an ethical discourse as descriptive history.

Aristotle explicitly tells us that he starts with how Greeks in *ordinary language* tend to speak of barbarians and natural slaves and then goes on to preserve the truth, *if there is any*, in common views. Furthermore, the distinction is not between Hellenes and barbarians but the more abstract one between freemen and the unfree. Aristotle's method is to analyse, dialectically, common speech and test it against the 'facts' of lived life. There is indeed a concept of the *naturally* slavish but whether it actually and legitimately can apply to any living or past human example is very problematic for him and for others in his society. He tells us that some refuse to accept slavery to be natural and that others think that it is acceptable simply because it is expedient. Aristotle does not, of course, argue that *de facto* slavery does not exist in his society nor does he pretend that Greeks have no prejudices either about barbarians or non-Greeks or indeed, about other Greeks. The prejudices are much more varied than the dualism Hellene-barbarian and Aristotle tells us what they are. But his aim in both the *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Politics* is to test the prejudices revealed in the use of common ascriptions to see whether they are justified or not.

The *Politics* in particular is a testing of the common view about what the good life consists in by examining what it is said to consist in by a variety of men with a wide variety of views, against the true or at least the best definition so far of *eudaimonia*. And it is clear from his own account that Greek ethical discourse is much messier than a presumed structure of dual counter-concepts because ascription is dependent on a near-overwhelming number of contingencies. Indeed, he makes it clear that even the ascription of natural slavishness is contingent for ordinary Greeks, and they never know to whom they ought to apply it if at all, not least because it is meant to be a statement about a certain kind of person's inner disposition and Aristotle affirms that we have no direct access to any human's intentions. We can only infer them from practices and we can get it wrong. Hence, his observation that although one would think that one could simply see a natural slave by his physique and contrast it with the obvious characteristics of the master, there is great confusion here because men who are presumed to be masters should have bodies that are serviceable to the life of political agency, both in war and peace. *But in fact*, Aristotle tells us the very opposite often comes

about, that is, that slaves have the bodies of free men and freemen have the right soul but not the body[8].

Without going further into the details here, one emerges from Koselleck's reading with a concept and its counterconcept whose meaning is dependent on what many classicists would argue is a *literal* and therefore, contentious understanding of these concepts both in Aristotle's text and more globally in ancient Greek society. Furthermore, in tending to read language literally in order to display concepts, there appears to be no capacity to respond to irony. My concern, therefore, is that in selecting concepts, an uncontested but highly contestable reading of the sources from which they have been extracted, can be offered us.

Furthermore, it is not enough for the *GG* to include extensive passages from texts, both primary and secondary sources from periods where the sources for past conceptual usages are not only difficult to obtain but are either self-selecting or they survive because they were allowed to survive by later rememberers of past usages deemed useful to them in a later present. Indeed texts that survive for *us* say, from the 14th and 15th centuries, have histories that do *not* necessarily relate to their contemporary importance. Cultures preserve and destroy texts so that the history of texts is a history of their reception by later generations with other things on their minds. Medievalists are overwhelmed by the loss of texts which the Protestant reformation sold or burned. The *GG* assumes it is possible to map synchronically the key concepts that comprise a complex society's political and social vocabulary especially for a time of rapid changes in its structure. For the pre-modern period I find this overly optimistic. We are dependent on later generations' decisions about what they thought important to preserve for their own reconstructive uses. Important and representative texts, I would even suggest for the early-modern and modern periods, are retrospective nominations. Subsequent orthodoxies actively kill off what they perceive to be past heterodoxies which might not have been heterodox in their own times.

Let me provide an example from Mel Richter's *The History of Political and Social Concepts. A Critical Introduction* (Oxford, 1995)[9]. In presenting the distinction applied in the *GG* to the analysis of concepts between semasiology and onomasiology, that is, the study of all the

meanings of a given word, term or concept, and the linguistic study of all names or terms in a language for the same thing or concept, he describes the work of the influential Jost Trier. Trier distinguished between lexical semantics and the semantic field within which concepts function at a given time. He looked at three concepts designating 'knowledge' that were current around the year 1200: *wisheit*, *kunst* and *list* and then he looked at them around 1300. He supposedly found by 1300 the linguistic field had been transformed especially with regard to what *wisheit* meant. By 1300 it had a religious sense and was no longer used as a simple alternative to *kunst* and *list*. *Kunst* by 1300 is said to have lost its courtly and social senses and *list* acquired pejorative connections with magic and low cunning.

What texts did he look at and compare? Undoubtedly *wisheit* took on a religious sense amongst those who were university-trained authors and we have these texts now in abundance. It is impossible for us to tell whether the older usages were replaced or survived. What did occur is that later generations actively destroyed texts from the past which did not suit their way of reading their present. Patrick Geary has done some extraordinary work on how modern historians of the so-called 12th-century renaissance are entirely at the mercy of an 11th-century generation which self-consciously destroyed whole libraries and engaged in picking and choosing what they thought ought to survive from and about their pasts.[10] In short, Trier simply told us about other texts rather than proving a real shift in the meaning of concepts and a transformation of the linguistic field. At best one can argue for a range of new voices appearing around 1300 and unfortunately for medievalists, they happen to have been the ones that survive for us in dominant numbers.

I have found the *Begriffsgeschichte* projects enormously stimulating and useful, indeed more so than several other methodological candidates that have been proposed, not least amongst Anglo-American analytical political theorists. Perhaps the chief attraction for me is that it takes the past seriously because it takes conceptualising seriously. And yet it is troubling for the reasons I have already mentioned above. Let me summarise them:

1) What criteria do we use to privilege social and political concepts and how do we recognise such concepts, distinguishing them from other concepts in the pre-modern world?

2) The location of *Gegenbegriffe* seems to be based on a submerged theory of mind based on bipolarity. I need a more explicit demonstration that it is proper to deduce from oppositional language a universal, cognitive approach to human understanding.

3) The selection of words and the providing of a critical exegesis can be based on an uncontested but highly contestable interpretation of the whole theory text from which the words are selected.

4) The survival of sources from any period is not necessarily a reflection of their importance for the time in which they were written: past texts of all sorts are retrospective nominations by later generations of what is allowed, even inadvertently, to survive from the past. This presents serious problems for establishing synchronicity of key concepts.

5) The transformation of linguistic fields is harder to determine than one might at first think from simply looking at dominant surviving sources.

6) Even if we were not troubled by what appear to me, at least, to be problems, how do we get from lexically arranged concepts to the patterned relationship amongst concepts? How do we provide a narrative which adequately reconstructs an integrated political and social vocabulary for a moment in the past development of political and social languages? This last step, if we could achieve it, would replace my attempts to provide a history of European political theories.

Notes

* This is a slightly expanded version of a twenty-minute intervention at the conference: 'Conceptual Changes in European Political Cultures', 18-20 June, 1998, The Finnish Institute in London.

1 I have dealt with this further in J. Coleman: *Ancient and Medieval Memories: Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge, 1992).

2 *Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. K. Tribe (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1985). pp. 159-197.

3 In '*Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History', *Futures Past*, *on the semantics of historical time,* trans.K. Tribe (MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., 1985, pp. 73-91.

4 *'Begriffsgeschichte* and Social History', p. 87.

5 R. Koselleck: 'A Response' in *The Meaning of Historical Terms and Concepts, new studies on Begriffsgeschichte*, eds. H. Lehmann and M. Richter (German Historical Institute, Washington D.C., Occasional paper 15, 1996), p.67.
6 J. Coleman: *Ancient and Medieval Memories. Studies in the Reconstruction of the Past* (Cambridge, 1992).
7 *Koselleck: Futures Past. On the Semantics of Historical Time,* p.167.
8 Aristotle: *Politics* I, 1254b 33f.
9 pp. 48-9.
10 P. Geary: *Phantoms of Remembrance. Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, 1994).